

High-Poverty to High-Performing



How school leaders can foster a safe and supportive learning environment for students in poverty

Dr. William H. Parrett

William and his four siblings had been homeless for an entire year until they found stable housing. He had a tough transition when he came to our school ... but as he spent more time with his teachers, his achievement steadily improved and the year ended really well; he moved on to the middle school. I was blown away when he came into my office to apologize [for his behavior the previous year]. He told me, "I know that was wrong and that's not the way I want you to remember me." He knows his short time here turned him around, and not just academically. This tough kid now cares how he will be remembered. He knows we cared about him. It's great to be reminded that what we're doing here makes a difference. Every school could be doing this.

— **Andrew Collins**, former principal, Dayton's Bluff Achievement Plus Elementary School

THE KIDS AT DAYTON'S BLUFF ACHIEVEMENT PLUS ELEMENTARY, a Minnesota school where most of the students' families live in poverty, believe in their school. Once a place where low achievement prevailed, the school now is a model of respect, achievement, and optimism. Getting there wasn't easy. The school embarked on a goal-driven course to counter a host of long-standing obstacles to high achievement, and it succeeded.

Indeed, high achievement at Dayton's Bluff Elementary and hundreds of other high-poverty schools across the United States with a similar sense of mission has become what is expected. Yet in many schools, particularly those where a large percentage of the students live in poverty, low achievement continues to be the norm.

However, schools can disrupt the cycle of poverty, in both the long term and short term. An effective school can rescue a child from a future of illiteracy; it can save

hundreds of students from the grim reality awaiting those who exit school unprepared. An effective school can directly impact and improve our society, but to do so, it must have leaders who are oriented toward social justice.

Such leaders ask questions that cause themselves and others to assess and critique the current conditions in their schools. They identify whose interests are being served by the current conditions and whose are not. Although the administrators, teachers, school board members, and other leaders whom we interviewed did not use the words "social justice" to describe their mission or purpose, their professional practice was consistent with what others have identified as "social justice leadership."

■ Excellence, Equality, and Equity: Compatible Goals

These leaders and those in other high-poverty/high-performing (HP/HP) schools aim for three ideals:

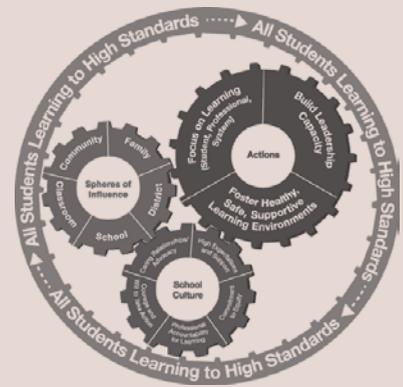
excellence, equality, and equity. What do we mean by this?

First, these leaders understand the distinction among the three words and the possible tension among them. Excellence is the expectation in HP/HP schools, and it is not sacrificed to attain the other two goals of equality or equity.

These schools are not places where curriculum is watered down, standards are lowered, or the pace of instruction is slowed to ensure equality in outcomes (for example, everyone gets an A). Rather, these schools strive for equality in outcomes (for example, all students meet high standards; all students graduate ready for college) by committing to equitable opportunity for learning. In the case of under-achieving students who live in poverty, providing such opportunity often necessitates equitable, in contrast to equal, distribution of resources (time, money, people). In HP/HP schools, all students do

A Framework for Action

In our **Framework for Action**, we have attempted to illustrate the complex interactions between the three arenas in which leaders take action, the nature of the culture found in high-poverty/high-performing (HP/HP) schools, and various spheres through which leaders influence the lives of students in poverty. The Framework for Action conceptualizes the core elements found in HP/HP schools. These schools have succeeded in their efforts to close achievement gaps and have done so while raising overall student achievement.



not get the same thing — all students get what they need to succeed.

■ Academic Achievement: A Key Element in Social Justice

Although many high-poverty schools are criticized for focusing too much on standardized testing, which has been perceived as narrowing the curriculum and emphasizing the “wrong” things, this was not the case in the schools we visited. They focused on multiple indicators of high performance, including (but not limited to) increased attendance, improved graduation rates, fewer discipline violations, increased parent and community involvement, improved pedagogy, and improved climate.

At the end of the day, however, there can be no social justice without addressing academic achievement. These schools both increased academic achievement overall and closed achievement gaps, but as the Framework for Action is intended to indicate (see “A Framework for Action” above), they did so by doing much more than simply focusing on raising standardized test scores. Our approach is one of understanding how schools transform to better meet the needs of children and adolescents who live in poverty, in contrast to “fixing” these students so that they can better “fit” in the current system of schooling.

■ Social Justice Leadership: The Importance of Place-Consciousness

Poverty looks different in every community. In a rural community where the formerly vibrant agriculture-based economy has struggled and the population is predominantly white, poverty will manifest itself

differently than it will in a suburban community that is, for the most part, working-class but also serves as a refugee relocation site, or in an urban setting with a racially diverse population and opportunities for employment that have been severely compromised for decades.

Leaders in the HP/HP schools that we studied were in tune with the neighborhoods and communities they served. Their leadership was informed by knowing the answers to questions such as these: What has happened in our community that has shaped collective experience? How have the demographics of the community changed over the years? What is the community’s social and political response to poverty? What support is available? Where do our families come from? How long have they been in the community? What is the economic structure of the community? How are educators viewed? What does our community believe to be the purpose of school?

■ Concluding Thoughts

In HP/HP schools, the development of leadership capacity serves as a catalyst for fostering a healthy, safe, and supportive learning environment that enables an intensive focus on student, professional, and system learning. As leaders take action in these domains, a confluence of caring relationships and advocacy, high expectations and support, a commitment to equity, and a sense of professional accountability for student learning, as well as courage and commitment, reshapes the school’s culture.

Moreover, high-performing, high-poverty schools are not insular and do not “go it alone.” Beyond taking actions that influence the

classroom and the school at large, leaders in these schools develop relationships with district office personnel, families, and community members to further support their mission of high expectations and success for every student. ■

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*This article is taken from William Parrett’s latest book *Turning High-Poverty Schools into High-Performing Schools* by William H. Parrett and Kathleen M. Budge, and published by ASCD. This content is printed with permission from the author. For more information or to purchase Dr. Parrett’s book, visit ASCD.org.*

Pre-Convention WORKSHOP

Dr. William Parrett will hold a Pre-Convention Workshop on **Tuesday, January 22, 2013** in Milwaukee. “Turning High-Poverty Schools into High-Performing Schools,” will offer strategies for providing a safe, supportive culture of high achievement for all students. Pre-Convention Workshops provide attendees an opportunity to tackle issues most important to school leaders in an in-depth workshop. Pre-registration is required. For more information, visit wasb.org/convention.