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Michael J. Salmonowicz

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Scott O'Neill and Lincoln Elementary School

Preventing a Slide From Good to Worse

Michael J. Salmonowicz

University of Virginia, Charlottesville

This case was developed for use in courses on the study of organizations, with a focus on school administration and supervision. It focuses on the challenges—most notably, changing demographics and a resistant faculty—faced by a new principal whose school has a record of success but is in danger of sliding into mediocrity. Varied data are presented about the school and its students, the district, and the community. Students must analyze the data and begin to develop a plan for working in a new leadership role to improve instruction, student performance, and school culture.

Keywords: *demographic change; diversity; educational change; instructional leadership; organizational change; principals*

Case Narrative

When I look for ideas, I don't read about suburban schools. I read about Boston or Chicago or New York City—I read about urban schools. Because that's what we are, even though we're in the middle of a suburb. We are an urban school. So what's successful in those places is different from what was successful here before. If we want to maintain that success, I'm convinced that we've got to make those changes. How many people actually believe me or not, that's a whole other question.

—Principal Scott O'Neill

In June 2004, Southern School District named Dr. Scott O'Neill as principal of Lincoln Elementary School. "My goal is to enhance the excellent reputation of Lincoln," he said following the announcement of his first principalship. "We, faculty, parents, and administration must maintain programs and practices that are currently successful while discovering ways to share those successes with our increasingly diverse school community. It is a wonderful opportunity, and I hope to meet everyone's expectations." Accomplishing this goal would be a challenge. The school was adjusting to a demographic shift that affected both the racial and the economic makeup of the community. Since the late 1990s, the school's Hispanic population had steadily increased while the White population had decreased. During that same time, the school's percentage of

low-income students rose substantially. Additionally, the school's veteran faculty appeared unwilling to make the changes necessary to support this new population.

O'Neill needed to formulate his action plan as soon as possible. He suspected that his school had management and organizational problems. He also understood that having a strategy and implementing it were two very important but different things. Where would he begin, and how could he help Lincoln Elementary School maintain its high standard of performance?

Lincoln Elementary School

Lincoln Elementary School opened in the late 1970s as a K–6 building with nearly 800 students, and it was now a K–5 building with nearly 700 students. It was one of five elementary schools in the Southern School District. There were five classrooms in Grades K, 1, 2, 4, and 5 and four classrooms in Grade 3. Inclusion teachers assisted students with disabilities who were mainstreamed at each grade level. The special education program had two self-contained autism classrooms and one self-contained learning disabilities classroom. Special classes included art, computer lab, music, physical education, library, science lab, chorus, band, and strings. Other instructional resources available to support students included reading and math resource rooms, English for speakers of other languages (ESOL), speech, adaptive physical education, and a gifted and talented program. School programs included safety patrol, student council association, yearbook, basketball, literary magazine, conflict mediators, after-school remediation, and broadcasting.

Lincoln had 32 classrooms in the main building and 6 temporary classrooms outside the main building. Three playgrounds and several open fields provided space for the physical education program and general recess. The instructional staff included 2 administrators (1 principal, 1 assistant principal), 50 teachers, and 12 instructional assistants. The faculty was filled with veteran teachers, many of whom had taught for 10 to 20 years at Lincoln at the same grade level and under the same principal. Perhaps because they were seasoned educators, there had been no site-based professional development at Lincoln Elementary School for the last 5 years.

School Accountability

Educational accountability—including formal external assessment to increase school and teacher accountability and, subsequently, reform instructional practices—had increased at the federal and state levels during the past 5 years. The No Child Left Behind Act, signed into law in 2002, created a federal system of accountability. With passage of this act, Congress reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the principal federal law affecting education from kindergarten through high school. No Child Left Behind represented a change in the way that the federal government supported public education in the United States. The federal government

Table 1
Percentage of Students Passing State Tests in Adequate Yearly
Progress Categories, 2003–2004: Third Grade

	Reading / Language Arts	Mathematics	Social Science / History	Science
1. All students	69	85	92	91
2a. Hispanic	65	82	90	90
2b. White	74	92	92	94
2c. Asian	NA	100	NA	NA
2d. African American	68	74	100	86
3. Economically disadvantaged	55	76	76	100
4. Disabled	26	64	65	74
5. Limited-English proficiency	59	78	68	68

now measured school success by means of adequate yearly progress (AYP), which consisted of separate, measurable annual objectives for achievement within five categories of students: all students, racial/ethnic groups, economically disadvantaged students, students with disabilities, and students with limited-English proficiency. Progress was measured with annual tests aligned to state standards, with the goal being academic proficiency among all students by 2014.

At the state level, annual assessments had become the criteria under which local school effectiveness and, subsequently, individual student achievement were measured and monitored. Grades 3 and 5 were tested in the elementary school. Third- and fifth-grade students were tested in reading, writing, math, science, and history/social science.

Lincoln Elementary students had traditionally performed well on state assessments. The school was fully accredited by the state and had met the requirements for AYP in 2003–2004 (see Tables 1 and 2 for student test scores in the five AYP categories).

Community and District Context

Five years ago, Lincoln Elementary School was considered to be the most affluent of the five elementary schools in Southern School District. It was now the district's newest Title I school.¹ At Lincoln, the number of children from low-income families had increased from nearly 14% during the 1999–2000 school year to over 33% during 2004–2005.

Lincoln no longer had a majority ethnic group; the Hispanic subgroup had become the largest at the school over the last 5 years. The number of Hispanic students had increased from over 10% of the student population in the fall of 1999 to over 40% in the fall of 2004. Many of these Hispanic students did not speak English at home. Consequently, the number of students needing ESOL services grew. The number of children from non-English-speaking families had doubled in the past 3 years, increasing

Table 2
Percentage of Students Passing State Tests in Adequate Yearly
Progress Categories, 2003–2004: Fifth Grade

	Reading / Language Arts	Mathematics	Social Science / History	Science
1. All students	91	94	98	94
2a. Hispanic	78	85	84	78
2b. White	99	100	100	99
2c. Asian	100	100	100	100
2d. African American	84	76	100	92
3. Economically disadvantaged	81	89	90	79
4. Disabled	90	92	100	100
5. Limited-English proficiency	80	87	84	78

from over 20% of the student population in 2001–2002 to over 45% in 2004–2005. Many teachers expressed frustration over decreased home–school communication because of the language barrier. Other staff members cited as a major concern the need for more instructional space for the ESOL staff and Title I teachers.

Even with the changing demographics (see Table 3), Lincoln's academic achievement looked good. Because state accreditation was based on the average passing rate of students from the third and fifth grades, strong performance from one grade level could offset poor performance from the other. And given that most ESOL students were still in Grades K–2, they had not yet taken part in the standardized tests used to determine AYP.

Many in the surrounding neighborhood failed to support the needs of a multicultural community. During city council meetings held at Lincoln, some expressed sentiments such as “They don't need to be here” and “Why are we spending money if they can't speak English?” O'Neill also received angry phone calls from members of the community who were upset that messages on the school's marquee were now presented in English and Spanish.

Scott O'Neill

O'Neill, 35, had spent the past 13 years as a teacher and administrator. He was well educated, having attended an elite undergraduate institution and earned a doctorate in education. Although this was his first time leading a school, he had spent the previous 3 years as an assistant principal in the district. He had no prior experience as an elementary school teacher or administrator, which was one of his reasons for applying for the position. His goal was to be a superintendent, and gaining experience at this level would combine with his middle school and high school experiences to make him a uniquely qualified candidate to run a school system. Another reason that O'Neill

Table 3
Student Demographics, 1999–2004

	Asian	African American	Hispanic	White	Total Enrollment	Free and Reduced Lunch	ESOL
Fall 1999	47	88	81	502	718 ^a	100	NA
Fall 2000	44	93	105	401	643	124	85
Fall 2001	39	92	133	379	645	122	144
Fall 2002	31	79	176	337	623	131	172
Fall 2003	29	93	212	297	632	237	223
Fall 2004	30	81	290	287	681	230	316

Note: ESOL = English for speakers of other languages.

a. Includes sixth grade. School became K–5 beginning in fall 2000.

applied for Lincoln’s principalship was his love of challenges. He came to Southern School District specifically to take on the challenge of working with a diverse student population; the position at Lincoln gave him a chance to do so. When the position had opened, the district superintendent had suggested that he apply. He had known that O’Neill was interviewing for principalships in other districts, and he wanted to keep him in Southern.

Getting Started

As the year began, O’Neill got a clear idea of how daunting his challenge was. Lincoln traditionally had the highest scores in the district, and they remained very impressive in 2003–2004. The subgroup scores considered in AYP were from the third and fifth grades, which were mainly composed of Lincoln’s White (and more affluent) students. “If you go into one of my fifth-grade classrooms, it is still predominately White,” O’Neill said. “In my kindergarten class, though, 75 of 115 students are ESOL.” According to test results at the end of the 2003–2004 school year, full-day kindergarten (and the reading program that was a part of it) made no difference in student achievement levels. In fact, scores from the posttest in the spring were actually lower than those from the pretest in the fall. In 3 years, their test scores in reading would determine whether the school made AYP.

O’Neill had to convince his faculty to adopt changes—despite its current success. He recalled,

I had to somehow frame the conversation in the sense of “I’m not questioning what you’ve done in the past. You’ve had good scores. But I’m sharing information with you to say this train’s coming down the tunnel at us. We need to change the way we’re doing some things here because what we’ve done in the past is not going to be successful for

the new student population that we have." This school succeeded because of the children who were in front of the teachers, not necessarily because of the quality of instruction. The school was full of students who learned despite the teacher in front of them. It almost reminds me of the book Horace's Compromise. It's where the average teacher basically says to a group of average students, "I'll give you minimal work if you put forth minimal effort and don't rock the boat, and we'll kind of both exist here. Neither of us really wants to be here so we'll make this compromise, this unwritten agreement, and we'll get through the year."

Adopting new strategies to help struggling students, many of whom were classified as ESOL, was something that many teachers refused or were unable to do. After the sixth week of school, in two separate instances, teachers told parents that their children would be retained at grade level the next year. During a private meeting with one of the teachers, O'Neill was told, "We need to give him the gift of retention."

Some teachers were not comfortable with Lincoln's increasing cultural diversity, and they spoke of these new students in derogatory terms:

There's some inherent racism in this school district, and that's one of the challenges in trying to change the culture in this building. That's the easy excuse for teachers: "I've got all ESOL kids." "I can't teach them." "I've got all Hispanic kids and they don't speak English."

Parents also noticed the changes at Lincoln, and they brought their concerns to the new principal. O'Neill held several one-on-one meetings with White parents at the beginning of the year, many of whom had had one child at Lincoln for a few years and now had a second child in a lower grade. They saw their younger child in a kindergarten or first-grade classroom with 20 Hispanic children out of 25, which was very different from their fourth or fifth grader's classroom make-up. O'Neill was upbeat when telling these parents that he believed that the school could serve both populations effectively, but he understood the seriousness of these meetings. "They're basically asking me, 'Why should we stay here and not move?'"

Another concern for O'Neill was the dynamic between teachers and administrators. The previous administration had micromanaged policies and practices, creating an environment where teachers were not included in decision making. O'Neill saw the effects of this when attempting to recruit faculty members to be part of three action teams. Some teachers were willing to be on a team, but no one volunteered to lead one. At a strategic planning session, the top-down management style of previous years was again evident:

At one point a teacher turned to me as we were working on the mission statement and objective and tactics and said out loud in front of everybody, "Well, is that what you want?" And I stopped and said, "It's not what I want. Is that what *we* want? I'm only 1 of the 20 people here, so my voice is no more important than the other 19. It's what *we* want to do, and you're going to guide me as much as I'm going to guide you."

Teachers also had enjoyed little access to the former principal and assistant principal; the front office door had been locked when teachers arrived in the morning, and again at four in the afternoon. But although O'Neill and his assistant principal were visible around the building and had instituted an open-door policy, teachers did not take advantage of this change. O'Neill attributed their reluctance, in part, to gender and age differences. Whereas the school's previous administrators had been women in their mid-50s, close in age to many of the teachers, O'Neill and his assistant principal (a female) were both 35. Also, the majority of teachers in the building were female. O'Neill felt that his communication and leadership styles were distinctly different from what the faculty had grown accustomed to with a female principal.

Yet another challenge involved dealing with the district office. The superintendent, in O'Neill's estimation, was in a politically sensitive position. The superintendent realized that the "new school" leaders in the district were needed to effect change. At the same time, he deferred to "old school" leaders who were still in some of the key power positions. When speaking to O'Neill, the superintendent was clear in his expectations, but he did not communicate those expectations to district-level personnel. Therefore, they did not necessarily understand why O'Neill took action or made decisions in some areas. As a result, O'Neill's relations with many district-level personnel was often strained, and he sometimes was reprimanded or left unsupported. One member of the district office, the director of instruction, had never been a teacher, further frustrating O'Neill:

When she calls me into meetings and tries to tell me what I need to do about instruction in my building, I really struggle with that. I feel that's a strength of mine, and I have a hard time getting past that fact when we're sitting together and she's trying to tell me something. I don't care how many classes you took; if you have not been a teacher, you don't know what it's like.

O'Neill openly complained about the lack of a mentoring or induction program for new principals, where procedures, policies, and expectations could be explained. District personnel, used to having a veteran principal at Lincoln who knew all the schedules and routines, failed to notify O'Neill about the superintendent's planning meeting in September. The phone call he received as the meeting began was the first he had heard of it. He often received e-mail from the district office that made reference to events and issues of which he was unaware.

At the end of the first quarter, in mid-November, Scott O'Neill sat in his office after school and rubbed his temples. He thought about the many challenges that Lincoln Elementary School faced and about his role as the building's instructional leader. He knew what he wanted the school to be:

It would truly be a learning community—a building where teachers and parents and students, everyone, knew that our number one job was instruction. It would be quality instruction. Teachers would learn from each other, parents would learn from teachers,

teachers would learn from parents, students would learn from any adult. And most importantly, we would care and recognize children as individuals, help them become successful and realize they're more than a piece of data to be disaggregated, they're not just a test score. It would be a building where I don't drop recess in order to get test scores, where I don't cut music to get test scores. It would not be about individuals. It would not be about blaming. We would have shared responsibility. Ultimately, I would like that to become the culture of this organization so that I could walk out of this building and it wouldn't happen because of me; it would happen because that's the culture that I helped create. That culture would endure beyond me, and the next interview panel would recognize that and would want to find the person with the qualities to continue that. They would realize that it's not just because of me. What I would hope is that what's created is much larger than an individual.

He wondered how he could make this vision a reality. What goals should he set? What should his priorities be? How could he prevent his school from sliding from good to worse?

Teaching Notes

Discussion Questions

1. It has been said that when a leader enters a turnaround situation, one third of the staff will embrace change, one third will be on the fence, and one third will resist. How can O'Neill make a compelling case for change to those faculty members who are fence-sitters or resisters?
2. Which of Bolman and Deal's frames of organizations (2003) is most pertinent to the challenges that O'Neill faces? Why?
3. Hall and Hord's third change principle (2001) is that "an organization does not change until the individuals within it change" (p. 7). Assuming that this is true, what, if anything, can O'Neill do to influence the way that his school, district, and community approach the area's changing demographics?
4. In his review of the turnaround literature, Duke (2006) identified 11 characteristics commonly found in low-performing schools that turned around:
 - Assistance
 - Collaboration
 - Data-driven decision making
 - Leadership
 - Organizational structure
 - Staff development
 - Alignment
 - Assessment

- High expectations
- Parent involvement
- Scheduling

How can O'Neill assess the degree to which these characteristics are present at Lincoln Elementary? Which characteristics are needed most at the school? Why?

5. Hall (1997) suggests that one way to reduce inequality in the education that students receive—specifically, those belonging to minority racial or ethnic groups—is to restructure schools. This includes, among other things, the willingness of teachers to “adopt high expectations . . . and then use multiple methods and forms based upon knowledge of student backgrounds that allow students to use multiple interests, resources, perspectives, and strategies to learn and demonstrate learning” (p. 212). In weighing the apparent necessity for such changes against O'Neill's short time at the school, is it feasible for him to attempt such a restructuring at this point? If so, how should he go about doing so? If not, when should he begin?

Classroom Activities

The following activities should be done in groups of three to five students.

1. Each group should use one of Bolman and Deal's frames of organizations (2003) to suggest the different ways that O'Neill can address Lincoln Elementary's challenges.
2. Groups should identify the three most important issues that Lincoln Elementary faces and determine how O'Neill should prioritize his time in dealing with them. Students should provide a rationale for their responses.
3. Given the responses to Activity 2, each group of students should, in one to two pages, outline O'Neill's action plan for the second quarter. Students should be prepared to defend their plans.
4. One of the guidelines that Fullan and Hargreaves (1996) suggest that principals follow when working with teachers for school improvement is “express what you value” (p. 88). Keeping in mind that many Lincoln faculty members are resistant to change and hold biased attitudes about Hispanic students, groups should devise strategies that O'Neill can use to advance his support for changes that benefit Hispanic students and their families.
5. Employing differentiated instruction appears to be one way for teachers to address the unique needs of Lincoln's more diverse population and meet O'Neill's goal of recognizing children as individuals. Using Tomlinson and Allan's guide (2000) for leading differentiation in schools and classrooms—especially chapters 4, 5, and 6—groups should develop a plan for introducing differentiated instruction to Lincoln's teachers and supporting them in its implementation throughout the rest of the school year.

Note

1. Title I is the largest federal program in K–12 education, with funding at more than \$11 billion during the 2003–2004 school year. It sends money to school districts per census counts of children from low-income families and children in several smaller categories, such as foster children and those living in correctional institutions. The number of children from low-income families is determined by a school's enrollment in free and reduced lunch. The money is intended to improve the quality of education in high-poverty schools and to give extra help to struggling students.

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Michael J. Salmonowicz is a doctoral candidate in administration and supervision at the University of Virginia's Curry School of Education and researches *turnaround principals* with the university's Partnership for Leaders in Education. As a Teach for America corps member, Salmonowicz taught high school English in Chicago Public Schools from 2001 to 2003. He can be reached at msalmono@virginia.edu.