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Values and Practices in Low-Performing Schools: Virginia School Turnaround Specialist Principals and Comparison Principals

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To better understand the dynamics of change efforts in 20 underperforming Virginia schools, this study compared school-level efforts to improve student achievement. Interviews were conducted with the first cohort of 10 principals participating in the Virginia School Turnaround Specialist Program (VSTSP) and 10 principals in comparison schools. All of the principals expressed some understanding of the values and practices that underlie school improvement, but the schools led by VSTSP principals attained better student achievement results. Findings suggest that a rich mix of both values and practices creates the positive culture that is conducive to successful student learning in challenging schools.

Introduction

Despite substantial concerns regarding the unintended consequences of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), the legislation has brought unprecedented attention to "low-performing" schools and identified the sometimes substantial discrepancies in the achievement levels of students living in poverty, with disabilities, and of color (Jencks & Phillips, 1998). The general public has become acutely aware of this achievement gap (Rose & Gallup, 2005) and the education community has been challenged to build upon the effective schools research (Edmonds, 1979, 1982) and deepen its understanding of how to accelerate the achievement of students in underperforming schools (Carter, 2000; Cawelti, 1999; Mintrop, 2003; Skrla, Scheurich, & Johnson, 2000). While a majority of schools have been deemed acceptable under the performance standards of NCLB, 26% of schools across the nation did not make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), based on the 2004-2005 data, and 14% were identified as in "need of improvement" (Editorial Projects in Educational Research Center [EPERC], 2006). In Virginia, 19% of the schools did not make AYP (EPERC, 2006). These schools have come under increasing scrutiny, and states are implementing a variety of interventions to address low performance.

The current study was undertaken to better understand the dynamics of change efforts in 20 underperforming Virginia schools by examining principal interview data regarding school-level practices in the improvement process. In 10 of the schools, principals had participated in the Virginia School Turnaround Specialist Program (VSTSP) and a comparison group of principals had not. What happens in these underperforming schools as they struggle to improve performance and meet the expectations for state and federal accountability?

Rationale

It is assumed that raising student achievement in low-performing schools requires change of various practices in multiple domains (Cawelti, 1999; Hoachlander, Alt, & Beltranena, 2001; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstron, 2004; Lezotte & Jacoby, 1992; McGee, 2004; Newmann, Smith, Allensworth, & Bryk, 2001; Skrla et al., 2000). The existing research identifies a combination of the following characteristics within schools that are

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high-performing despite multiple risk factors: (a) strong educational leadership, (b) teamwork and collaboration, (c) clear curricular and instructional goals that are aligned with tests, (d) frequent monitoring of student progress, (e) professional development for teachers, and (f) community engagement.

Strong leadership is particularly important in low-performing schools because, as noted by Leithwood et al., the "greater the challenge, the greater the impact of [leaders'] actions on learning" (2004, p. 3). Despite the methodological challenges of measuring the indirect effects of leadership practices, empirical evidence suggests that leadership accounts for approximately 25% of student achievement (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005). Furthermore, "there are virtually no documented instances of troubled schools being turned around without intervention by a powerful leader" (Leithwood et al., 2004, p. 5). Consequently, there is wide recognition that strong and capable leadership within schools and districts is a cornerstone of systematic efforts to improve student achievement (Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Simmons, 2006; Skrla et al., 2000).

The explicit purpose of the VSTSP has been to capitalize on the importance of strong leadership by providing advanced training, coaching, and support to a group of principals who work in some of Virginia's lowest-performing schools. The VSTSP was one component of Governor Mark Warner's Education for a Lifetime Initiative, which included

> a set of targeted reforms aimed at improving the Commonwealth's schools. Borrowing from his background as a venture capitalist and successful businessman, Governor Warner wanted to develop a cadre of specially trained principals who would be the equivalent of turnaround managers in business. These individuals would have a skill set and training geared directly to the task at hand, improving student achievement in Virginia's lowest-achieving schools (Fairchild, 2005, p. 5).

The VSTSP was based on the assumption that bringing about change in a low-performing school is a complex task requiring highly committed and competent principals to undertake change on multiple fronts. These include:

- the assessment of what needs to be changed,
- mobilizing and targeting resources on the implementation of appropriate changes,
- development of plans for achieving necessary changes,
- communication with various stakeholders about the need for change,
- implementation and monitoring of plans for achieving change, and
- facilitation of ongoing collaboration with those responsible for achieving change (Duke, 2004).

These functions are described by various authors in different terms but, in general, constitute what is regarded as change leadership (Fullan, 2001; Havelock, 1973; Kotter, 1996; Sosik & Dionne, 1997).

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In 2002, a University of Texas Dana Center study identified seven common dimensions of successful turnaround efforts in schools, including: setting high expectations of students, creating collaborative environments, focusing on individual needs of students, and understanding larger contextual issues. To what extent are these practices manifested in schools led by trained turnaround specialists and those that are not, and what are the student achievement outcomes?

Purpose

The primary purposes of this descriptive study were to: (a) determine the actions taken by principals to raise student achievement in their schools, (b) examine measures of student achievement in VSTSP schools and a sample of comparison non-VSTSP schools, and (c) identify any differences in how the change process is described in underperforming schools that were served by trained turnaround specialists and in schools that were not.

Methodology

Understanding the actions that contribute to raising student achievement is critical to replicating successful turnaround efforts. To explore the leadership practices of principals in underperforming Virginia schools, 20 principals were interviewed twice during the course of the 2004-2005 school year using a semi-structured interview protocol. Student achievement data were collected on the performance of each school at the end of the year using state assessment data. Sampling, data collection, and data analysis are described below.

Sampling

A total of 20 principals were interviewed for the study including all 10 principals in the first cohort of the VSTSP and 10 principals from a purposive sample of underperforming schools. VSTSP pricipals attended three residential training programs that addressed: turnaround leadership skills for the specialists (5 days), school improvement planning with district leaders (1 day), and school improvement planning with school-based leadership teams (3 days). In addition, VSTSP principals attended a midyear check-up program (2 days) and had six site visits by a turnaround coach (Fairchild, 2005). Four of the VSTSP principals were newly assigned to an underperforming school in 2004-2005, while others had been working in their schools for 1 to 3 years prior to the VSTSP training.

Principals in the comparison schools received no training beyond that available as a normal part of professional development in their school divisions, with the exception of one whose school had received a federally funded Comprehensive School Reform Grant. One of the comparison school principals was new to his school, but the others had been in their schools 1 to 7 years prior to the 2004-2005 school year. Comparison schools were selected to provide a convenience sample of underperforming schools that had failed to obtain full accreditation based on Virginia standards and/or did not meet AYP under NCLB legislation. The schools represented three levels of student enrollment found in Virginia school systems and wide geographic distribution.

Table 1 provides a profile of the two sets of schools, including size, percentage of students qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch, and percentage of students passing the state tests in English and math. While the comparison schools were slightly larger, 478 versus 428 students, they had a slightly lower percentage of low-income students, 70 versus 75. The percentage of students passing the state tests in English and math were slightly higher in every case for the comparison schools. To achieve AYP in 2003-2004, 70% of students were expected to pass the state tests in English and math at the 3rd-, 5th-, and 8th-grade levels. One notable difference in the two sets of schools was the inclusion of only one middle school in the comparison group of schools while four of the VSTSP schools were middle schools.

Table 1. Demographic and Achievement Data for 10 VSTSP Schools and 10 Comparison Schools, 2003-2004[1]

	10 VSTSP Schools		10 Comparison Schools	
	Mean	Range	Mean	Range
Student Enrollment[2]	427.7	127-599	477.7	197-663
% Low-Income Students[2]	74.5	33-96	69.5	56-81
% Students Proficient on State English Test[3]				
Grade 3	55.8	32-79	59.2	43-87
Grade 5	67.7	43-94	74.0	64-88
Grade 8	54.5	43-66	60.0	54-66
% Students Proficient on State Math Test[3]				
Grade 3	73.2	67-91	81.0	74-93
Grade 5	61.3	42-90	65.4	52-83
Grade 8	62.8	52-80	67.0	57-77

[1] AYP, accreditation, and achievement data were gathered from Virginia Department of Education's "School Report Card" Web site (http://www.pen.k12.va.us/VDOE/src). Demographic data were gathered from http://www.schoolmatters.com.
[2] Demographic data reflect student populations in the fall of 2003-2004 (the year before the schools' involvement with the VSTSP).
[3] Proficiency data reflect state test scores from spring 2004 (the year before the schools' involvement with the VSTSP).

Data Collection Procedures

Much of the work on schools that have succeeded despite the challenges, like the Dana Study findings (Charles A. Dana Center, 2002; Skrla et al., 2000), has been derived from retrospective case studies of turnaround schools that have successfully stabilized strong student achievement. The turnaround research described in this study was initiated by the VSTSP in 2004 and employed a prospective view of academically underperforming Virginia schools during the first 9 months of the turnaround process. Principals from cohort 1 of the VSTSP and the 10 comparison schools who had not gone through the program were selected and interviewed during the same time period, 2004-2005, to determine their perceptions of the change process in their schools as it was unfolding.

Principals were interviewed twice during the year using a standardized open-ended interview protocol (Patton, 1980). This systematic approach was chosen to "minimize interviewer effects by asking the same question[s] of each respondent" (Patton, p. 202). In general, questions focused on how principals were undertaking the change process and dealing with its challenges. More specifically, information was elicited regarding the principals' major objectives; use of data, including target-setting, benchmark testing, and analysis; and strategies used to address the needs of low-performing students.

The protocol was developed to ensure that all respondents addressed the same issues. Open-ended questions were used to allow respondents to elaborate on their perceptions of the change process in their schools. Interviews were conducted at each principal's school and lasted approximately one hour. All interviews were audio-taped and transcribed. To confirm the accuracy of the narratives, member checking was used. When ambiguities and unclear responses were encountered, research team members contacted the principals and requested clarification and confirmation of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Student achievement data for the 20 schools were analyzed once they became available in late 2005, months after the interviews had been completed. The testing program in Virginia consists of multiple-choice assessments aligned with the Standards of Learning (SOL), which describe the commonwealth's "expectations for what teachers are expected to teach and students are expected to learn" (Virginia Department of Education, 2000, p. 1) in grades K-12 in English, mathematics, science, history, and social science. Assessments in 2005 were administered at the end of 3rd, 5th, and 8th grades in the four core subjects of English, mathematics, science, and history. The Virginia Department of Education reports the percentage of students passing each content area and grade level assessment by school and releases the information on the Internet. The percentage of students passing in English and mathematics at the respective grade levels for each school was used for this study.

Data Analyses

Transcripts were coded using NVivo, a qualitative software tool, and a predetermined coding structure, Characteristics of Successful Turnaround Schools (COSTS) developed by Duke (2005). In COSTS, Duke identified the most frequent types of changes made in low-performing schools that were able to increase student achievement despite challenging student populations and circumstances. COSTS is a sophisticated coding structure with 8 major domains, 4 to 5 subcategories, and 3 to 10 items within each subcategory. Items in COSTS were used as the themes for the analysis of the 20 interviews. All of the interviews were coded by the same individual to ensure consistency across participants.

Once the interviews were coded, summary reports were generated to identify themes that emerged more frequently than others and those that characterized more successful principals in both the VSTSP and comparison schools. Based on initial trends in the data, interviews were reviewed again, using a more intuitive approach referred to as "subsuming particulars into the general" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 255). This process highlighted the distinction among the coded themes that were concrete and action-oriented, such as "benchmark testing," and items that were more value-oriented, such as "commitment to schoolwide change." As a result, the data are presented within the overarching categories of "values," to indicate those "standards of goodness, quality, or excellence that undergird behavior and decision making" (Deal & Peterson, 1999, p. 26), and "practices," which are actions taken by professionals within the school. A second generalization that was discerned by reviewing the interview data more holistically was the identification of the references to the cultural atmosphere in the schools. To verify the representativeness of the cultural finding, all interviews were reviewed for descriptions of the nature of interactions among the faculty. Secondarily, outliers were used to test the hypothesis (Miles & Huberman, 1994) that there were qualitative differences in the nature of interactions in the schools with greater and lesser improvement in student achievement.

End-of-year achievement results were obtained from the Virginia Department of Education Web site. Data from the previous year were used to determine increases in the percentage of students passing the state assessments in English and math on the grade levels tested at the respective schools. This is admittedly a crude measure of

academic improvement, as the group of students being tested each year is different; but at present, there is no means of conducting cohort analysis of student achievement in Virginia.

Findings

Leadership Responses

Principals in both groups described overwhelming challenges in their schools, including tremendous pressure to improve student achievement and in some cases, academic reviews by the state. VSTSP principals had the unique experience of being watched by the governor's office as they began their first year in the program. Although it might be assumed that classroom teaching practices would be a focal point of change efforts in low-performing schools, responses from the principals interviewed for this study did not reflect that line of thinking. Their focus was on organizational changes that involved teachers but did not necessarily affect day-to-day teaching strategies. Both groups of principals described an exhausting combination of efforts to identify and address student academic needs. Some adjusted their daily schedules to spend more time on reading, and others organized a variety of intervention programs for students who needed the most academic assistance. It was clear that principals were trying a broad range of strategies that have been found, or are alleged, to be successful for low-achieving students (Cawelti, 1999; Hoachlander et al., 2001; Leithwood et al., 2004; Lezotte & Jacoby, 1992; McGee, 2004; Newmann et al., 2001; Skrla et al., 2000).

Based on the analysis of the interview data, there were numerous leadership themes identified by both VSTSP principals and comparison principals that were similar, some of which can be viewed as values and others as practices. The most frequently voiced beliefs or values were (a) high value on teamwork and collaboration, (b) commitment to raise test scores, and (c) commitment to data-driven decisions. The leadership practices frequently noted were (a) benchmark testing, (b) active involvement of principal in analyzing data, (c) after-school remediation, and (d) regular communication by the principal with faculty. While these leadership practices are fairly straightforward and well understood by educators, brief descriptions of how the principals' values were manifested are given below.

In almost every case, principals in both groups (19 of 20) voiced the high value they placed on teamwork and collaboration. A VSTSP principal stated,

> Learning how to build a team has been invaluable. We have made significant changes at [VSTSP school T3], and I have said from the beginning that my goal is for my colleagues to be a turnaround staff. Very often the focus is on the principal, but I want this to be viewed as a team effort (principal, VSTSP school).

Likewise, a principal in one of the more successful comparison schools noted,

> A very wise principal friend of mine in the district told me, "You can't do a thing about scores this year until you build your team, until you build relationships," and she was exactly right. So the first good half year into my first full year, it was about building that trust and relationships, dialogue, communicating, giving affirmation (principal, comparison school).

To foster greater collaboration, principals employed a number of specific practices, such as the creation of a common planning time (12 out of 20), to be used for grade-level teaming and vertical teaming. These team efforts were brought together at the school level through the creation of leadership teams, which focused on schoolwide efforts to improve student achievement (11 out of 20). To further enhance a sense of a collective effort, principals made concerted efforts to communicate regularly with teachers about student achievement as well as organizational matters (14 out of 20).

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In addition to the emphasis most of the principals placed on collaboration, they were committed to raising test scores and making data-driven decisions (18 out of 20). One of the more successful comparison principals was particularly passionate about the use of data to drive instructional planning.

> Well, I have a leadership team that meets every week and we look at the data, we talk about instruction, we look at lesson plans, we talk about what best practices we're using. We take it back to the grade levels. It's a constant dialogue of what

> we do, it's not just that we have it and we put it in the drawer and forget about it, but the data is what drives our program here, so it drives our lesson plans, it drives how we design our tests to meet the needs, it drives our remediation program or our after school program, so it's an ongoing dialogue. It brings about accountability (principal, comparison school).

One of the VSTSP principals shared similar thoughts with regard to using data.

> I believe that planning time during the school day is essential to ensuring that teachers are constantly looking at data to gear instruction. In order to help my teachers with this goal, I participated in the grade-level meetings. Each week the teachers generated a weekly test for science, social studies, math, and reading, and data sheets showing the results of the previous week's tests. The previous week's data was used as the foundation for the team planning for the current week (principal, VSTSP school).

See Table 2 for a comparison of the most frequently discussed practices and values by VSTSP and comparison principals.

Measures of Student Achievement

Aggregated student achievement results in the two sets of schools are compared in Table 3. Despite the comparability of past achievement levels and the percentage of economically disadvantaged students, the magnitude of increases in the percentage of students passing the SOL assessments in the core areas of English and math were markedly different. The 10 VSTSP schools made double-digit gains in some cases, while the comparison schools achieved minimal gains. The pass rates in the VSTSP schools exceeded those of the comparison schools in both English and math at the elementary level. Eighth-grade test results were mixed but must be considered with caution because there was only one middle school in the comparison school sample compared to four in the VSTSP sample.

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Table 2. Leadership Responses Described by a Majority of Both VSTSP and Comparison Principals

Leadership Responses	# of VSTSP Principals	# of Comparison Principals
Values		
High value on teamwork and collaboration	10	9
Commitment to raise test scores	9	9
Commitment to data-driven decisions	8	10
Practices		
Benchmark testing	8	10
Active involvement of principal in analyzing data	9	8
After-school remediation	7	9
Communication by principal regularly with faculty	7	7

Table 3. Comparison of Student Achievement Indicators in the 10 VSTSP and 10 Comparison Schools

	10 VSTSP Schools	10 Comparison Schools	State Average
Average change in percentage passing rates on the 2005 English SOL tests			
3rd grade	15.5	4.0	6
5th grade	5.4	-4.6	0
8th grade	4.0	8.0	4
Average change in percent passing rates on the 2005 Math SOL tests			
3rd grade	11.5	-1.6	0
5th grade	12.4	5.3	2
8th grade	6.0	1.0	0

Note: Gains and losses were calculated from data obtained at: http://www.doe.virginia.gov/VDOE/src.index.shtml

The pass rates of the VSTSP schools also equaled or exceeded the state averages for the year, sometimes by a factor of two or three.

Further analysis of the performance at individual schools, however, suggested substantial variation. Some schools led by comparison principals were able to achieve solid gains in test performance. The results of most comparison principals were mixed, with decreases in pass rates for some areas and increases in other areas. There also was variation in the performance of VSTSP principals in all cases but one, principals achieved gains in most categories, often in the double digits.

Differences in Leadership Responses

Despite concerted efforts by all of the principals in this study to enhance student achievement through an espoused commitment to collaboration, raising test scores, and data-driven decision making, success was highly variable as indicated by the achievement results. More consistent and positive results were achieved by the VSTSP principals. What differences in leadership responses to the contextual circumstances of the low-performing schools distinguished the successful principals?

While there are similarities in both values and practices of all the principals, there was a striking difference between the coded themes in the interview data of VSTSP and comparison groups. Tables 4 and 5 present the most frequently identified themes that at least seven principals in each group voiced during interviews. The major difference between the principal groups involves their relative focus on either values or practices. Whereas 60% of VSTSP principals' themes emphasized values and 40% related to practices, only 20% of comparison principals' themes emphasized values while 80% related to practices. VSTSP principals concentrated on the underlying beliefs and values when describing the change process as compared to the comparison group of principals who discussed their practices at length.

A majority of principals in each group noted four of the belief-based themes: (a) high value placed on teamwork and collaboration, (b) commitment to raise test scores, (c) commitment to data-driven decisions, and (d) focus on instructional improvement. In addition, VSTSP principals more frequently discussed other values, such as focus on student learning, commitment to high expectations for all students, and commitment to schoolwide change. The substance and meaning of these three themes are explored below in more detail.

Focus on Student Learning

Only one of the comparison principals focused on global student learning, while eight of the VSTSP principals made references to this value. A majority of the principals (18 of 20) discussed a commitment to raise test

Table 4. High-Frequency Themes Voiced by VSTSP Principals

Themes	# of VSTSP Principals
Values	
High value placed on teamwork and collaboration	10
Commitment to raise test scores	9
Commitment to data-driven decisions	8
Focus on student learning	8
Commitment to schoolwide change	8
Commitment to high expectations for all students	8
Focus on instructional improvement	7
Focus on order and safety	7
Belief in continuous improvement	7
Practices	
Active involvement of principal in analyzing student achievement data	9
Benchmark testing	8
Regular progress reports to parents	8
Regular communication by principal with faculty	7
After-school remediation	7
Encouragement of teachers to be target-conscious	7

scores but there can be a qualitative difference in higher test scores and increased student learning. At least 20 years of research has supported emphasizing the importance of learning through words, actions and relevant curriculum as the primary purpose of schools (Good & Brophy, 1986; Martens & Kelly, 1993; Zigarelli, 1996). The more successful principals seemed able to take this broader focus on student learning as their fundamental purpose while simultaneously raising test scores.

High Expectations for All Students

Again, only one of the comparison principals discussed this belief in her interviews, while eight of the VSTSP principals emphasized their commitment to raising the academic expectations for their at-risk students. High expectations were held for special education, limited English, and a variety of other students who were struggling. Holding high expectations for student learning was a basic tenet of the school effectiveness research in the 1970s and has been "one of the most consistent findings in the literature" (Reynolds & Teddlie, 2000, p. 148) on school improvement efforts over the years and across cultures. One VSTSP principal was particularly adamant about his commitment to all students.

> The state expects 70% of students to pass, which leaves 30% of students not passing. That is not good enough. There is always room for improvement, and I will not be satisfied until 100% of our students pass. Then, even at that point, there will still be room for improvement (principal, VSTSP school).

Schoolwide Change

Only three of the comparison principals discussed the need for schoolwide change, while this was a common theme for eight of the VSTSP principals. There was recognition that change could not be achieved by tinkering around the edges, but that it needed to be systemic and broad-based. Change is a "process through which people and organizations move as they gradually come to understand and become skilled and competent in the use of new ways" (Hall & Hord, 2006, p. 4) and one for which leadership is essential. The need for comprehensive change was particularly acute in one VSTSP school.

Table 5. High-Frequency Themes Found in the Interviews of Comparison Principals

Themes	# of Comparison Principals
Values	
Commitment to data-driven decisions	10
Commitment to raise test scores	9
High value on teamwork and collaboration	9
Practices	
Data-driven planning	10
Benchmark testing	10
After-school remediation	9
Active involvement of principal in analyzing student achievement data	8
Highly visible and accessible principal	8
Opportunities for teacher involvement in decision making	8
Soliciting of input from stakeholders by principal	7
Common planning time	7
Communication regularly by principal with faculty	7
Regular school improvement planning	7
Item analyses of tests conducted by teachers	7
Special events for parents	7

> The rest of my summer was spent in determining how to reconfigure the school, how to hire teachers that fit the criteria of the school's new structure, and grouping students and teachers properly. The schedule had to be redone. What the day looked like had to be redone. Who would be team teaching with whom had to be redone. What subjects teachers would be teaching had to be redone. The only constant was that I knew I had 125 students coming in September (principal, VSTSP school).

The principal in this case made major, simultaneous changes that were risky but had the potential to make a substantial difference in her school. Chambers (1997) notes that, while minor changes have a high likelihood of succeeding, their impact will be minimal. Large-scale changes, by comparison, are "difficult to control," "can provoke greater resistance," and "have the potential for major unintended consequences," but also "can meet a 'window of opportunity,'" and are "swift to have major impact," and "be highly visible" (p. 193).

Differences in Culture

In addition to the window on discrete actions and beliefs that principals employed in their efforts to effect school improvement, the interviews reviewed more holistic "patterns of basic assumptions—invented, discovered, or developed by a given group as it learns to cope with problems" (Schein, 1985, p. 9). In these 20 schools, not making AYP and/or not being accredited by the state was the most evident problem, and principals in all the schools were undertaking efforts of various kinds to improve student achievement. Although the original purpose of the study was to identify differences in the change leadership of principals who had attended VSTSP and those who had not, the distinctions were not clear-cut. While 9 of the 10 VSTSP principals achieved notable gains, 3 of the principals in the comparison group also achieved very good results and espoused similar values and practices. The most successful principals from both groups described school cultures that were quite different from those in the unsuccessful schools. In the following section, descriptions of the cultures in the successful and unsuccessful schools are compared.

Successful Schools

Principals of schools that achieved higher increases in student achievement were able to develop more collaborative environments based on regular dialogue, sharing of ideas and materials, and a belief in learning. In the case of one comparison school, the principal admitted how miserable the culture had been previously, but over a 3-year period, she was able to create the conditions for improved communication and dialogue about instructional issues.

> My first half year, the culture was awful in this building. People didn't talk to each, they didn't do anything with each other, they didn't want to collaborate with each other; it was awful. And so I knew I had to start building relations. Last year it was better, this year it's awesome (principal, comparison school).

Other principals in both VSTSP schools and comparison schools described the process of developing a constructive culture for student learning. In each case, they expressed pride in the progress that their school had made in terms of "collegiality, performance, and improvement" (Deal & Peterson, 1999, p. 116), which characterize positive cultures.

> Of all the recent changes at [VSTSP school], the one that pleases me the most involves the creation of a culture of teamwork. In the past, teachers pretty much did their own thing. Their concerns rarely extended beyond their own classrooms. Today teachers have embraced both horizontal and vertical teaming. For example, the two kindergarten teachers plan together. But they also form a team with the two first grade teachers. There are also teams composed of second and third grade teachers and fourth and fifth grade teachers. Teachers write their lesson plans together, they review their curriculum guides together, and they share instructional ideas (principal, VSTSP school).

Although principals describe their school cultures somewhat differently, the themes of collegiality and performance were integral to all.

Unsuccessful Schools

In contrast to the constructive cultures of the more successful schools, schools that lost ground in terms of student achievement had more negative or even toxic cultures. The cultures were focused on negative values and a lack of collegiality. Teachers were described by principals as pessimistic or resistant.

> There are a few school climate issues that we are going to be working on. Climate, that's a tough one for me personally because I'm sort of in the mindset that in life, you make your own happiness. And I just have challenges working with folks, their perspective in life is that the glass is always half empty (principal, comparison school).

> A second objective was to build a spirit of teamwork among staff members. They were accustomed to working as individuals. "I don't tell you what or how to teach, and you don't tell me." It was hard to imagine how we could undertake the curriculum alignment and remediation necessary to raise performance without a healthy dose of cooperation among the faculty (principal, VSTSP school).

In every case of declines in the percentage of students passing SOL assessments in the basic areas of English and math, principals cited cultural issues that typically involved fragmentation and isolation that were perceived by principals as counterproductive to student learning.

Conclusions

Our findings provide a window on the perspectives of principals as they undertook change efforts in their schools and suggest conclusions that focus on: how principals responded to external pressures for improved student achievement, the achievement results obtained, possible explanations for the findings, and broader implications. These conclusions are limited by the small number of schools involved in the study (20) and the unverified reports of actions taken by principals. As a result, the following conclusions are offered with caution.

In every case of declines in the percentage of students passing SOL assessments in the basic areas of English and math, principals cited cultural issues that typically involved fragmentation and isolation that were perceived by principals as counterproductive to student learning.

From the interview data, there emerged a constellation of both practices and values that principals viewed as contributing to the change process. A majority of principals instituted benchmark testing, various forms of remediation, and data-driven decision making concerning instructional changes; but they also worked very hard to facilitate cultural changes within their schools that focused the energies of the staff, encouraged peer interaction concerning curriculum and assessment, and pushed for instructional improvement.

The universal element in the interviews was the espoused focus on teamwork and collaboration, which encompasses both values and practices. The principals believed that turning around a school required a faculty and staff similarly committed to the turnaround process. As one VSTSP principal stated, "It is crystal clear to me that a school cannot turn around as long as teachers function as individuals." A comparison principal explained, "I'm a firm believer that no principal can make a school successful by him or herself." Teamwork was encouraged and promoted in different ways and for different purposes but it was clearly the basis for school improvement in the minds of the more successful principals. Those who were successful in raising student achievement cultivated collaborative cultures of teachers working together for the benefit of students. As noted by Elmore (2004),

> One does not "control" improvement processes so much as one guides them and provides direction for them since most of the knowledge required for improvement must inevitably reside in the people who deliver instruction, not in the people who manage it (p. 58).

While there were basic commonalities in the themes expressed by the principals, there were substantial variations as well. These variations may have reflected the priorities of the principal, the needs of the school community, the level of dysfunction in the school, or a combination of the above. Some schools were in a state of free fall at the beginning of the year, while others were relatively stable but underperforming based on state accreditation standards. Principals who had to deal with a multitude of problems were at a distinct disadvantage and could not tackle instructional issues until more basic concerns like infrastructure, personnel, and facilities were addressed. Other principals had both the opportunity to adopt a new curriculum and the luxury of working with a group of teachers who were ready to tackle instructional issues. The range of responses described by these principals suggests that the turnaround process has some common elements but many distinctive features based on the situational variables found in each of the schools.

All of the principals expressed some understanding of the values and practices that underlie school improvement (see Table 2), but principals who had participated in the VSTSP appear to have achieved better results based on the 2005 SOL test results than most of the principals in the comparison group. It is likely that a combination of factors accounts for the disparity between the two groups' achievement scores, but one obvious difference that sets the VSTSP principals apart from the comparison group is their participation in the VSTSP cohort. These 10 principals were designated "turnaround specialists" and very publicly charged by Virginia's governor with turning around their schools. The case method-driven curriculum for the three VSTSP summer training programs included, among other topics, "leading change, data analysis, decision making, instructional leadership, target-setting, and creating action plans" (Fairchild, 2005, p. 10). In addition to making numerous site visits, turnaround coaches "were also available for email, phone calls, and Web conferences" (Fairchild, 2005, p.10) to support the VSTSP principals. This combination of clear public mission, specialized training, and continuous support almost certainly had an effect on the success attained in schools led by VSTSP principals.

While there was an emphasis in the executive training of the VSTSP principals on practical skills for turning around low-performing schools, VSTSP principals were much more likely to describe the change process in terms of values and beliefs, the basic building blocks of school cultures (Deal & Peterson, 1999). Perhaps this was due to the high-stakes position in which these principals found themselves and their understanding of the necessary coupling of values and actions to make changes within schools. Other studies (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Lewin & Regine, 2000) have confirmed that "the culture of an organization drives high performance…[it] is composed of the accumulated values, beliefs, and behaviors that shape how people treat each other and how they work together" (Simmons, 2006, p. 40).

While exploratory in nature, the findings of this study suggest that advanced training programs such as the VSTSP do have a positive influence on leadership activities and outcomes. It is unclear what aspects of the program or the candidates themselves contributed to the success of these principals but they were able to accomplish greater than expected achievement gains in challenging schools. Similar to studies conducted in other states (Charles A. Dana Center, 2001; Kannapel & Clements, 2005; Manset et al., 2000; McGee, 2004), principals reported a strong focus on instructional improvement, high expectations of students, and substantive teacher collaboration. They employed practices associated with improvement efforts elsewhere (Hoachlander et al., 2001; Leithwood et al., 2004; McGee, 2004), such as benchmark testing, data analysis, parent engagement, and remediation programs. Their approach to school improvement included a rich mix of both values and practices intended to create positive cultures that were conducive to successful student learning in challenging schools. Leitner (1994) found a similar relationship in his study of instructional management behaviors related to student achievement. He noted that while instructional practices were useful in improving student achievement, they became more powerful in concert with efforts to develop the cultural context of a school.

The findings of this research seem to support the complementary nature of values and practices in addressing the challenges of low performing schools and emphasize the critical role of values in contributing to the positive and successful school cultures that foster student learning. In the rush to adopt practices associated with improving student achievement, educators must be mindful of the importance of building school cultures to support and give meaning to those practices.

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