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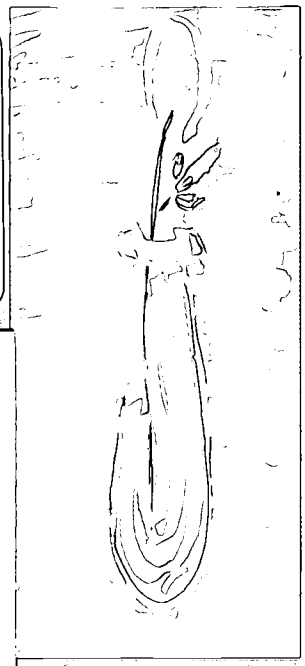
ABSTRACT

This report follows two elementary and two middle schools in Kentucky where educators not only talked about what they needed to do to meet the needs of the state's educational reform program, but also acted on their ideas, creating a "no excuses" atmosphere. Images of reform suggest that resource decisions are often based on human relationships among faculty members, and that these, in turn, influence the desire to go out into the community to get what is needed to propel learning forward. These schools characterized themselves as "lighthouses" and "universities" where ongoing learning was key. However, the business side of things was less critical than the emphasis on "family." The report demonstrates how four different exemplary schools took on the question of "What is it we need to do?" and formed a shared vision through their dedication to students, staff, faculty, and school. (SLD)



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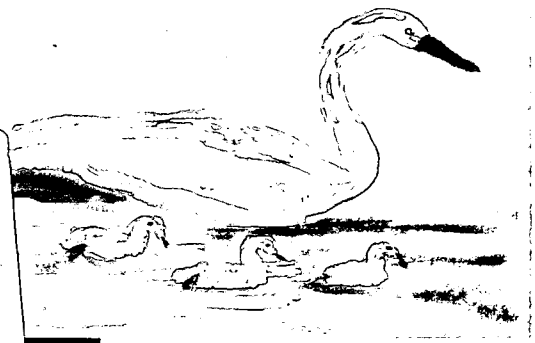

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"NO EXCUSES": SCHOOL REFORM EFFORTS IN EXEMPLARY SCHOOLS OF KENTUCKY

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Abstract

In our initial discussions with Kentucky Department of Education administrators about exemplary sites, one educator suggested we look for schools that had a "'no excuses' approach": Schools where "you don't say why things can't be done. You say, 'What is it that we need to do?'" In this technical report we will follow two elementary and two middle schools where they not only talked about what they needed to do to meet the Needs of the state reform effort, but they acted upon it, creating a "no excuses" atmosphere.

Our images of reform suggest that resource decisions are often based on human relationships among faculty members, and that these, in turn, influence the desire to go out into the community to get what's needed to propel learning forward. Our schools characterized themselves as "lighthouses" and "universities" where ongoing learning was key. But the business side of things was less critical than the emphasis on "family." Thus in this report, we will demonstrate how four different exemplary schools took on the question of "What is it that we need to do?" and formed a shared vision through their dedication to students, staff, faculty, and school.

On one of our first trips to Kentucky, we sat in the Frankfort offices of the Department of Education and discussed our research plans with the administrators who watch over the workings of Kentucky's educational reform movement. We were interested in finding exemplary schools—with the word *exemplary* defined by Kentucky educators as places where "good things were happening" particularly in light of the reform movement.

We cautioned them that we were not searching for what we called "no wonder" schools—schools with student populations from high socioeconomic status communities, schools too close to universities, or magnet schools for the gifted and talented. We didn't want the schools we selected to invite comments like, "Well *no wonder* they can do all that! Look at their population. Look at their resources! Why that teacher won the educator of the year award. No wonder!"

No. Instead, we wanted schools that served more diverse populations of children, and where we would have to look deeper than surface explanations for *why* good things were happening.

During our conversations, one educator suggested we look for schools that had a " 'no excuses' approach": Schools where "you don't say why things can't be done. You say, 'What is it that we need to do?' " In this technical report we will follow two elementary and two middle schools where they not only *talked* about what they needed to do to meet the needs of the state reform effort, but they *acted* upon it. In our classroom observations and interviews with children, teachers, and principals we saw and heard about process writing, mathematical problem solving, sound modeling, and students engaged in substantive work. But how does a school go about creating such a "no excuses" atmosphere?

Theoretical Framework

In their study of school districts involved in substantive change, Spillane and Thompson (1997) borrowed from the work of an economist, J. Coleman (1988), to suggest that "local capacity" is based on (a) physical capital (meaning financial resources), (b) human capital (which entails commitment to reform and disposition to learn by administrators and teachers), and (c) social capital (which encompasses the relationships internal and external to the district). Ball and Cohen (1995, citing Coleman, 1990) further described this triad. They explained, "Physical capital is wholly tangible, being embodied in observable material form; human capital is less tangible, being embodied in the skills and knowledge acquired by an individual; social capital is even less tangible, for it is embodied in the *relations* among persons" (p. 7, emphasis in the original). Although both human and social capital are considered less and less tangible, they are certainly not tangential. Instead, they are essential elements in understanding what makes a school exemplary in the face of strong state reform movements.

Looking at the human relationships both within and outside of a school is gaining increasing credence in the research literature. For example, Muncey and McQuillan (1996) looked closely at the role of the principal in the Coalition of Essential Schools and concluded that principals were not only "central to the school change process; they were often *the* central person" (p. 270, emphasis in the original). Still, they cautioned that "the principal's role was often less directive than traditional conceptions of this position would suggest [, for the role] involved a

balancing act, one that required knowing when to be directive and assertive and when to back off and allow faculty to direct change efforts" (p. 270).

Other researchers have focused on teachers—especially their attitudes towards teaching and learning. For example, Peterson, McCarthey, and Elmore (1996) suggested that "changing practice is primarily a problem of learning, not a problem of organization. Teachers who see themselves as learners work continuously to develop new understandings and improve their practice" (p. 148). And Schmoker (1996) argued that teachers will "perform more effectively—even exponentially—if they collaborate" (p. 7)

Still other researchers focus on the relationships among teachers and students, believing that teachers working together work best when they are moving towards a common goal—the education of children. For example, Louis, Marks, and Kruse (1996) suggested that "although taking responsibility for student learning may be thought of as an obligation inherent to the profession of teaching, until lately the notion has received little research attention." They suggested that there are strong positive results when teachers take "collective responsibility for student learning" (p. 764).

With this research reflecting some of the theoretical company we are in, we will now briefly turn to our methods of data collection and analysis.

Methods

Data Collection

Our schools were selected through an exemplary sampling procedure recommended by Heath and McLaughlin (1993). Beginning with advice from administrators in the Kentucky Department of Education and continuing with conversations with Regional Service Center directors, cluster leaders, and principals, we looked for names of schools that came up again and again. Once we had a list of possibilities, members of the team made site visits to observe teachers and informally interview them and their principals about their schools. From there, we narrowed the numbers to our final six selections—three elementary schools and three middle schools, with one each in urban, suburban, and rural areas of Kentucky. In this report we focus only on our urban and rural sites.

After selecting our sites, we made three 2-day visits to each site—once in the spring of 1997, then in the following fall, and finally, in the spring of 1998. During

each visit we observed writing and math teachers in the accountability grades and conducted formal interviews with teachers, students, and principals about their writing and mathematics programs as well as their views of the Kentucky reform.

Data Analysis

Following these trips we fully fleshed out our observational fieldnotes and then summarized them in condensed cover sheets that followed a specific set of categories that emerged from the data. We transcribed all audiotapes and coded them using a computer software program entitled NUD*IST. Figure 1 provides an illustration of how we coded the principal interviews. The codes served to highlight practices that were deeply connected to the current Kentucky reform, as well as those that were more distanced from the reform. Many points in the interviews were double- and even triple-coded. For example, a principal's comment on the shared vision of the school might have centered around the leadership of his/her teachers. We devised similar coding systems for our fieldnotes as well as our interviews with teachers and students.

Once we coded the data, we ran NUD*IST reports of specific coding categories as well as categories in relationship to develop "cases" of the individual schools. Each of the co-authors of this report was responsible for an individual case—combing the data for unique characteristics of her site as well as how the information from her school matched or veered away from patterns across sites.

Two of our sites were in rural areas located in Eastern Kentucky.[1] While a range of economic classes were represented in the student populations, the figures for free and reduced lunch—with 80% at Bluejay Elementary and 70% at Eagleview Middle—are indicators of the high poverty in the area. Indeed, at Bluejay, the unemployment rate was 80%, and the school district was the largest employer in the county. Our two urban sites were more economically diverse with approximately a quarter of their children on free and reduced lunch. They were also more racially and ethnically diverse, whereas the rural sites were nearly 100% European American.

In building our case studies, we tried to find a theme to represent the school—as signified by a hypothetical "school motto"—as well as the role of the principal (see Table 1). The staff at Bluejay, for example, consistently talked about

[1] The school site names as well as the names of all of the principals and teachers are pseudonyms chosen by the participants themselves.

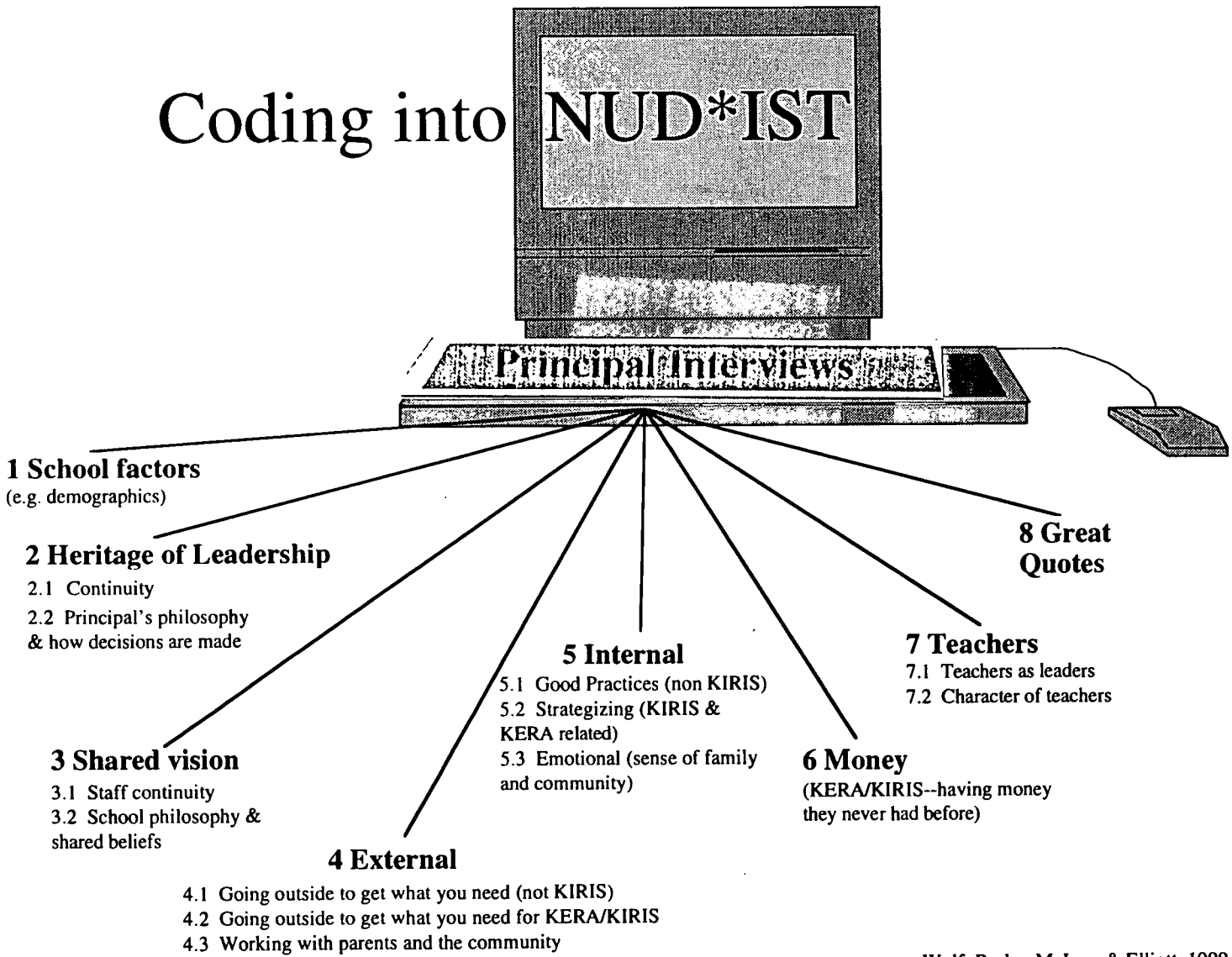

Figure 1. Coding scheme for principal interviews.

Table 1

Descriptors of Four Exemplary School Sites

Setting	School name	SES	School motto	Principal's role
Rural Kentucky	Bluejay Elementary	High poverty in a "rural, remote area" 80% qualify for free and reduced lunch	*"Here at Bluejay University...* we really take advantage of any professional development that's offered."	*Ms. Chief as a "teacher helper"* who "can help teachers to keep growing so that they can keep helping kids."
	Eagleview Middle School	High poverty to middle class 70% qualify for free and reduced lunch	*"Pride & Respect"* "Have a great day at the best middle school in Kentucky!"	*Mr. Push as Coach:* "You make a decision based on what you see out there."
Urban Kentucky	Eastend Elementary	"Federal housing to half million dollar homes" 30% qualify for free and reduced lunch	*"TEAM!"* "It's that team approach, that we're in this together..."	*Ms. Conner as "part of the team"* who is willing to "set the tone from the very first day that we will do what's best for children."
	Mt. Vernon Middle School	"While 60% are upper-middle SES" 24% qualify for free and reduced lunch	"If we are going to be a *Fortune 500 Company*, you don't wait. You jump on it."	*Mr. George as CEO:* "I'm an instructional leader," "a facilitator," a "protector," and a "salesman."

their elementary school as a "university." They focused on the need for constant learning, through formal professional development as well as through their own curiosity. The principal, Ms. Chief, characterized herself as a "teacher helper" who worked to "help teachers to keep growing so that they can keep helping kids."

At Eagleview, the steadfast theme was "Pride and Respect." The administrators, teachers, and students all used this phrase—and some characterized it as the "two watchwords" of the school. Mr. Push, the principal in the second year

of our study, closed the announcements every morning with the following phrase: "Have a great day at the best middle school in Kentucky!" and he perceived himself as a Coach who made decisions based on what he saw in his team of teachers. Indeed, he was a former baseball coach and often used sports metaphors in characterizing his role.

Turning to our urban elementary school, Eastend, the consistent theme was TEAM!—but not in the sense of sports. Instead, it was more of a focus on collaboration, and the principal, Ms. Conner, saw herself as "part of the team," yet also someone who was willing to "set the tone from the very first day that we will do what's best for children."

Our last urban site, Mt. Vernon Middle School, characterized itself as a "Fortune 500 Company." They took pride in their leadership in the district as well as in the state, and Mr. George, the principal, was the CEO. Indeed, he was a Jack-of-all-trades for he used a number of different terms for his role including "instructional leader," "facilitator," "protector" of his teachers, and a "salesman" for the new reform. He had been in the military in the past, and sometimes found himself "frustrated" with the slow pace of change, but he was willing to wear any number of hats to make sure his school was out in front.

Results

Although our results reveal a number of features that mark our selected schools, for the purposes of this report we'll discuss what we see as the four *major* features: first, a strong sense of history and heritage; second, a view of leadership that is cooperative rather than singular; third, strong alignment with the Kentucky reform that is reflective rather than lockstep; and finally, an emphasis that all curricular, instructional, and assessment decisions will be based on the children in their schools. Indeed the first three features are enfolded in the overarching school motto for all four sites: "It's all for the kids."

History and Heritage

The first feature is shared history and heritage. Although each of our schools varied in how this feature played out, all had a very distinct legacy which was discussed again and again in our interviews with teachers and principals. This was particularly true in our rural sites. At both Bluejay and Eagleview, the teachers and

administrators were from the area—often raised in the counties of Eastern Kentucky where they now taught.

At Bluejay, one of our target teachers, Ms. Jazz, went to grade school at Bluejay as a child, and her mother was an elementary school teacher there. When Ms. Jazz first began to teach at Bluejay she taught in her mother's old classroom for seven years, though now she taught "in the room right above it." Indeed, families of teachers were common in the school, and the principal made it a practice to hire people from the local county. As Ms. Chief described the school and community: "It's a family unit, not just in this building but in the community also because everyone knows everyone. And we're all different families who know each other. And our families have been here for years and years and years" (P97S).

Being a county insider was also true of many teachers and administrators at Eagleview. As the principal told us, "A lot of the teachers are Eagleview County graduates." Yet, Eagleview Middle presented a unique case because the school itself was young—only three years old. In the first year of our study, Mr. Push was assistant principal and the principal was a fellow baseball coach and close friend, Mr. Driver, who explained how the school began:

> We put together a staff that wanted to be here. We asked for teachers around the county who wanted to come . . . [and] I went out and interviewed and observed . . . and the only ones that I wanted to come in here got to come. That makes for a very hard working group of people that want to work together. (P97S)

Our urban sites were not as closely tied to the community, but they had very little turnover. The principal of Eastend Elementary had been there for 20 years, and her husband was principal there before her. Still, despite this longevity, Ms. Conner had a particular view when it came to hiring: "It's almost my rule of thumb to take people right out of college, fresh new people. And the reason for that is we want to train them. It's more difficult to bring somebody in here who has already developed habits of what they think teaching is and then try to retrain them" (P97S). Thus, Ms. Conner and her staff worked to develop a sense of history and heritage by bringing in new people and indoctrinating them into the existing school culture.

Mt. Vernon Middle School presented a different kind of case with very few young teachers. Still, as Mr. George explained, "This is a real desirable area in Kentucky to teach so teachers hang on to their positions. [There's] not a lot of turnover" (P97S).

Cooperative Leadership

Indeed, when we turn to the second feature of our exemplary schools—cooperative leadership—Mt. Vernon Middle was again a unique case. The shared vision of the school was often Mr. George's vision, for as CEO of his Fortune 500 Company, he was used to setting the goals as well as designing ways to achieve them. When it came time for students to take the KIRIS testing, Mr. George brought in motivational speakers. One year he brought in Tubby Smith, a coach at the University of Kentucky who had just won the Nationals. The previous year he had the UK cheerleaders come and have a pep rally for the kids. Mr. George just as carefully selected candidates for his staff's professional development, and when he couldn't find what he wanted, he did it himself.

Still, Mr. George's strong leadership style was appreciated by his teachers, for he was open to their ideas as well as their complaints. As the math teacher explained to us, "Mr. George's the kind of person [who] gives open invitations to the faculty. 'If you want to come in, shut the door and tell me what you don't like. You can walk in that office, rant, rave, curse, carry on. You know. But let's get it out in the open.' And that's the way we do things. . . . So everything you've heard me say, Mr. George has already heard" (Mr. Perry, T97S02).

In our urban elementary school, Ms. Conner did not take command in the same way. Instead, she implied that she "set the tone" for the teamwork inherent in her building. The school itself is divided into six complexes—each containing four classroom teachers for approximately 100 ungraded students. Decisions were made within these complexes as well as through a strong site-based council. Ms. Conner characterized her teachers as doing an "excellent job of identifying problem areas and then correcting them" (P97F), and this expertise came from distributed and highly cooperative leadership: "There is very strong leadership and the leadership isn't just my leadership. It's coming from staff. So I think change is a little easier here. And I've been told that if it takes five years to make the change happen, Eastend can probably do it in two. And that's true. So true" (P97S).

Much of this ability to shift so quickly came from Ms. Conner's willingness to "roll up her sleeves" and work side by side with her staff. And the same was true at Bluejay. Teachers we talked with consistently pointed to Ms. Chief 's fluid ability to model new practices in their classrooms as well as lead the front office. But when addressing reform as complex as Kentucky's, Ms. Jazz pointed out: "It has to be a

group effort. It can't be just one person in a building. It has to be—everybody needs to get sold on the idea" (T97S01).

Still, selling people on ideas and drawing people into complex reform is often easier with a charismatic and caring leader at the fore. At Eagleview, this was particularly true. Interestingly, Mr. Push was not the "instructional leader" that our other three principals were. He did not do model lessons or lead professional development seminars. But when he "rolled up his sleeves," it was highly strategic. He knew his team members' talents and knew where best to position them for success. Sometimes he made decisions that staff members would have resisted if it hadn't been Mr. Push doing the asking. For example, when Mr. Push shifted Ms. Crabtree, the eighth-grade language arts teacher to the seventh-grade accountability slot, she didn't want to go. But Mr. Push convinced her. When I asked him how he did it he said:

> I brought her in and sat her down, and told her I thought it was the best thing for the school. And she felt that she had the expertise. Ms. Crabtree's been involved more with writing process than anybody I've ever been around . . . You know you are sitting there with a pitcher, you got a 20-game winner. And you got one that's *going* to be a good pitcher, but they don't have the experience. That 20-game winner is going to go out on the mound. (P97F)

Reflective Alignment With Kentucky Reform

Another common feature of our exemplary schools was their reflective alignment with the Kentucky reform. In general, they were strong advocates of the reform, and although each school had its own dilemmas and issues with different aspects, for the most part they believed in the reform. A part of this belief system stemmed from the fact that the elementary schools in particular felt that the changes the reform demanded were things they had been doing all along. Ms. Chief told us that Bluejay was the "first school in this part of the state to have an ungraded primary" (P97S), while Eastend Elementary's ungraded program had been in effect for more than thirty years. And both Bluejay and Eastend had inclusion programs for their special needs children long before the state recommended it.

Even more important, however, was a willingness to grow and change. At Bluejay "University," for example, both Ms. Jazz and her colleagues described themselves as "reflective thinkers." And in describing two hypothetical teachers, Ms. Chief explained:

> Teacher A goes out and learns all she can, and she keeps learning and she keeps growing and she uses the knowledge and puts it to use with her students and her classroom. But Teacher B teaches in the same mode, the same way, year after year after year. And you've got Teacher A continuously changing and adding on and growing and growing. And both those classrooms are going to be two completely different environments in my opinion. And classroom Teacher A, like all the teachers here at Bluejay Elementary, that's where I would want my child to be. (P97S)

The willingness to grow and change was also reflected in the leadership roles teachers and administrators took both inside and outside of school. They didn't just attend professional development seminars, they led them. At Bluejay, Ms. Chief was both a Distinguished Educator and the writing coordinator for her region, training clusters of fourth-grade writing teachers from 11 counties. At Eagleview, the language arts teacher was involved in writing reform at almost every level, and their math teacher was similarly involved. Indeed, when he transferred to another school, he, too, qualified as a Distinguished Educator. Our urban school faculties took on leadership roles as well. This aspect of leadership was particularly important in aligning the goals of the schools with the goals of the state, for the schools were in the position to influence the direction of the reform itself.

The state's emphasis on assessment aligned particularly well with Eastend Elementary's philosophy. While some schools in the state were startled by the new emphasis on assessment, many of Eastend's decisions were evaluation-based. Each summer they took on a new content area and looked carefully at how their curriculum could be enhanced, as well as how it could be assessed. As Ms. Conner, the principal, explained:

> We've been very, very strong into assessment and that has driven our entire program. Determining what the needs are determines what we're going to do. After we've determined what it is these children need to learn, then that determines what we're going to teach. So we've done a lot of work on how to assess students and what instruments to use. (P97S)

Still, the alignment that our exemplary schools share with the state reform does not mean that they follow the state's suggestions lockstep. Because they were early leaders in the state, they often worked to step out even further ahead. At Eagleview, for example, the teachers were doing more and more of their professional development in-house, because they sometimes found the state's workshops to be "old news." As one language arts teacher, Mr. Bass, explained about a Kentucky

Department of Education writing workshop, "They were doing a good job with what they gave us. The only problem was it was information that had been around for a while" (T97F01). Because of this, he and his language arts colleagues asked Mr. Push if they could work together and come up with their own plan for six hours of professional development. They used the time collaboratively to create notebooks of ideas on each of the three kinds of state-assessed writing.

As far as reflective alignment with reform, Mt. Vernon Middle School was especially strategic. In keeping with the Fortune 500 Company theme, Mr. George looked closely at the school's KIRIS scores each year, sought advice from experts, and made very deliberate programmatic decisions intended to improve these scores. He also kept reminders of KERA and KIRIS prominent throughout the building. For example, a card on his office door—entitled "Middle School Comparison"—listed the most recent KIRIS scores for the top ten middle schools in Kentucky, and where his school stood. Still, beyond the multiple strategies used to improve scores, Mr. George and his teachers didn't just "teach to the test." Instead, they believed in the reform. As Mr. George said, "I think KIRIS has really helped schools. It has a lot of mistakes. We have to make some adjustments. But it is raising achievement level in Kentucky. . . . It has given education a focus point" (P97S).

"It's for the kids!"

Mr. George's comments bring us to the fourth, and most important, feature of our exemplary schools: "It's for the kids!" For later in the same interview, he began to discuss how much he believed that all students learn and all students can succeed. Indeed, he saw it as his responsibility and the responsibility of his teachers to help all students learn. He contrasted the bell-shaped curve, which he saw as "garbage," to the metaphor of a surgeon:

> Whenever you tell me that 25% of your kids are going to fail, that is the most awful thing I've ever heard. . . . You cannot call yourself a good educator and lose 25%. If you go to your surgeon and he says 25% of his patients died, you don't want to go back. . . . I expect you to use the same intensity as that show on TV, *ER*. When they get a patient in that *ER* room, they don't care how much money they have. They don't care what ethnic background they have. They blitz them. And they use every strategy. They consult with each other. They do every possible thing to save that patient and that is your job here, as teachers. If you lose one of them, . . . then part of you goes with it. (P97S)

Mr. George's attitude about the centrality of children was repeated again and again in our interviews with administrators and teachers. At Eastend Elementary, every decision was based on how it would affect the education of children. And at Eagleview Middle School, Mr. Driver (who had been principal in the first year of our study) exhorted his teachers with the same advice every year:

> I tell our teachers and I say it every year. I say, "When you teach, you teach just like it's your child. Your own child sitting on that front row every class period." And I said, "Now that's how you should teach. Don't cheat any kid. You know you want your child to have the best education they can possibly have, so you teach just like he's sitting on the front row every time you teach a class." (P97S)

Ms. Chief and the Bluejay staff were similarly inspired, and even used the same image to imply how teachers should think about the children in their classes—not as distant, unrelated children, but as their own, as kinfolk, who deserved every opportunity.

Whether born and bred in the county where they taught, or city folks who liked where they worked and stayed, our principals and teachers seemed uniformly inspired to do the hard work they did because of their children. And whether the principals described themselves as a "teacher helper," "a team player," or a "coach," their help and the plays they called were all for the kids. Even our self-described CEO viewed the business angle of the bell curve as "garbage," and though he cited numbers, his statistics were all about heart.

Discussion

In this report, our exemplary school descriptions suggest that willingness to meet the needs of a new reform are often based on human relationships among and beyond faculty members. These relationships in turn influence the desire to go out into the community to get what's needed to propel learning forward. Our schools characterized themselves as "Fortune 500 companies," and "universities" where ongoing learning was key. But the business side of things was less critical than the emphasis on "family." As Hargreaves (1997) explained, "openness, informality, care . . . and a willingness to face uncertainty together are the basic ingredients of effective school-community collaboration, not merely the emotional icing that adorns it" (p. 22).

In our final interview with Ms. Chief, we asked her what motivated her and her teachers to continue to do the best they could do. Her response was true to her beliefs about the community of Bluejay University and the children:

> Because this is our home. These are all our kids. We love this school. We have a school spirit here that cannot be equal to any other, anywhere else. I'm sure.... We're not perfect.... But we try all the time, each and every day to keep growing and keep learning. And in the face of any type of obstacle, we've always stuck together. We've laughed together. We've cried together. But the bottom line is we love these kids, we love this school, and there is NOTHING we won't do to make it a success. (P98S)

The nothing they, as well as their colleagues in our other exemplary sites, wouldn't do included full faculty planning meetings for curricular alignment, reconfiguration of afterschool programs to meet assessment demands, and collegial working relationships among and beyond grade level teachers. And when they found they didn't have the necessary internal resources, they initiated numerous programs of external professional development to get what they needed. Thus in this report, we have tried to demonstrate how four different exemplary schools took on the question of "What is it that we need to do?" and formed a "No excuses" vision through their dedication to staff, faculty, and school, and, above all, to their children.

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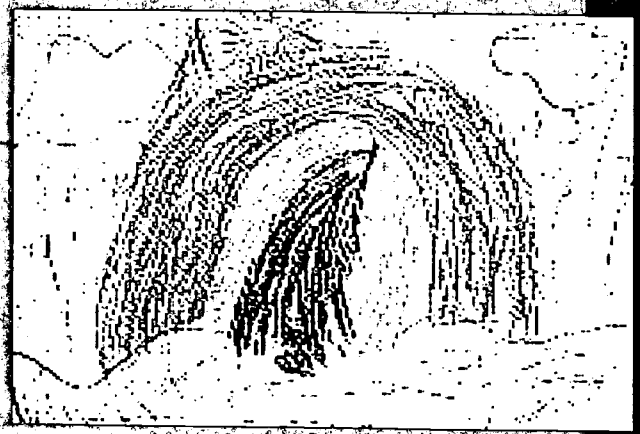

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