# A Mission Of The Heart

### WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO TRANSFORM A SCHOOL?

Preliminary Insights Based on Interviews and Focus Groups with Principals and Superintendents from High-Needs District

PUBLIC AGENDA

The Wallace Foundation®

# A Mission Of The Heart

**WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO TRANSFORM A SCHOOL?**

Prepared for the Wallace Foundation by Public Agenda

**IN POLITICS, BUSINESS, EVEN IN WAR,**
bringing in new leadership is a time-tested way to fuel change. Today communities across the country are looking to school principals and superintendents to transform troubled schools. Nearly half of the nation's school superintendents say that they have moved a successful principal into a low-performing school in an effort to turn it around. The vast majority of those who have done this say the principal was able to make genuine progress.[1]

But what exactly does it take to transform a troubled school into one where students thrive? What do the leaders actually do? What kinds of skills do they need? Where should we be looking for leaders who have the right combination of talent and skills, and once we find them, how do we sustain and support them?

> "It's not just going in there and managing it all. It's 'Where can we take it?'"
>
> *Principal, High-Needs School*

As part of the Wallace Foundation's long-term commitment to re-energizing and supporting effective leadership in the nation's districts and schools, the Foundation asked Public Agenda to conduct a small-scale study designed to listen carefully to principals who are currently working in high-needs schools and to leaders with experience working with effective principals.

Public Agenda has studied attitudes among schools leaders nationwide in a series of studies conducted with Wallace. It has also examined attitudes among teachers, parents, students and other key groups in education for nearly two decades. See **www.wallacefoundation.org** and **www.publicagenda.org** for more information.

## Methodology

In summer and fall of 2007, Public Agenda completed five focus groups with principals in high-needs districts and sixteen one-on-one interviews with superintendents and other high-ranking education officials including a state superintendent of education. Principals included individuals who had completed traditional training programs in school administration, along with those completing special training and/or professional development through groups such as the New York City Leadership Academy, the Principal Leadership Institute of the University of California at Berkeley and the Wallace Foundation. All the principals held leadership positions supervising schools where more than half of students received free or reduced price lunch. A complete list of focus groups and individual interviews is on page 9. All interviews followed a systematic interview guide revolving around two broad questions: What makes an effective leader in a high-needs school, and how can we attract, train, retain and support more effective leaders of this kind?

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[1] "Rolling Up Their Sleeves," Public Agenda, 2003.

# Some Preliminary Observations

In preparation for the Wallace National Education Conference, *Education Leadership: A Bridge to School Reform*, Public Agenda has outlined ten insights from the interviews as a way to promote discussion about effective leadership for high-needs schools – how we define it, how we advance it, how we find more of it. What emerges from the interviews is often fascinating. It offers a concreteness and level of detail that are sometimes missing in broader analyses of leadership issues. We believe these interviews provide crucial clues to the mixture of skill and strategy most likely to ramp up school effectiveness and improve student learning. This document is a preliminary analysis of the research. Public Agenda will issue a more detailed final report at a later date.

It is crucial to acknowledge that this study has important limitations. First, although the interviews capture what school leaders *say* they are doing — and how they think and talk about their jobs – it does not include an independent analysis of student achievement in their schools and districts. Many were at work in schools designated as outstanding by well-known educational leaders. Some were selected because they were well-regarded graduates of the New York City Leadership Academy or professional development programs of the Wallace Foundation, but this study cannot independently confirm that all are obtaining the results they are aiming for.

Second, this project is a small-scale, exploratory study. It offers intriguing hypotheses and, we hope, useful insights, but it should not be read as a definitive picture of what is happening among effective leaders in high-needs schools nationwide. One important caveat is that leaders in middle schools and high schools are somewhat under-represented in this round of research, and we believe the field would benefit from additional research with significant samples of leaders in both elementary and secondary schools.

## Observation No. 1:
## Transformers versus Copers

The superintendents and principals interviewed for the project were men and women from different backgrounds working in different high-needs districts in different parts of the country. As individuals, they were of course unique, but most fell into one of two distinct categories – they were either "transformers" or "copers." The "transformers" had an explicit vision of what their school might be like and brought a "can do" attitude to their job. As one interviewee told us, a high-needs principal has to have "a vision… *It's not just going in there and managing it all. It's, 'Where can we take it?'…Vision for the kids. Vision for the staff. Vision for the school."*

Another talked about the need to avoid *"sending a message that the kids can't do it,"* or taking an attitude of *'Woe is me,' and 'Look how difficult this is,' and 'This is an impossible task,'— that's a really bad model. It's really important [to say] clearly these things can be done, and we're not going to focus on how bad the central office is, or we can't get our request covered."* Transformers focused intently on creating a culture in which each child can learn. Giving up is not an option.

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The "copers" in contrast were typically struggling to avoid being overwhelmed. They didn't have the time or free-dom, or, for some perhaps, the inclination to do more than try to manage their situation. One described his situation this way: *"I find myself wearing so many hats… it's unbelievable. I just cannot free myself up."* The circum-stances facing some of the copers were daunting to say the least: *"They burned down part of my school in January,"* one

told us. *"They destroyed all my textbooks and all my games equipment and everything. It took five fire engines to put it out. They stole four teachers' cars, and they set fire to them… If you suspend a child, you have to be careful because they usually bring the father, the mother, the grand-mother, and the two brothers to come and sort you out…"* Whether due to circumstances beyond their control, or limitations in their own drive and sense of efficacy, there is little doubt that the copers were distracted from missions like strengthening teaching or solving academic problems.

> **"If we're not able to be in the classrooms to observe instruction and make sure… students are receiving high-quality instruction, then… moving the budget is not going to do anything."**

They were basically just trying to get through the day without having the situation deteriorate.

### Observation No. 2:
### Instructional Leadership — Talk versus Action

Nearly all the leaders we interviewed – transformers and copers – talked about the importance of "instructional leadership." But the transformers and copers differed markedly in what they did on a daily basis to advance it. Most transformers saw instructional leadership as their top priority. Typically, they were devoting the majority of their efforts to evaluating, coaching and supporting their teachers to do a first-rate job. In contrast, although copers talked about instructional leadership as part of their jobs, most didn't seem to actually do much of it. Most were just too distracted or overwhelmed by day-to-day problems.

One of the transformers talked about instructional leadership this way: *"I think it's the instructional leadership that makes a difference. The bottom line is we're there to improve instruction so the kids can learn. We do all those*

other things too, but we're there… to be able to go into a teacher's class, and, if it's a new teacher, identify [whether] this teacher [has] what it takes?"* Another said, *"At the end of the day, with high-needs schools, it's really about student achievement and the instruction. If we're not able to be in the classrooms to observe instruction and make sure… students are receiving high-quality instruction, then… moving the budget is not going to do anything."* Another described a school culture that focuses on *"how can I have kids achieve — not whether kids [can] achieve. As you walk into the school, the dialogue is around what to do with the given child, how do we help that child, how do we help one another as adults in the schools?"*

Meanwhile, the copers were rarely able to get down to the instructional leadership business: *"You have to do so much,"* one said. *"At any given time you could be walking down the corridor, and you get seven different things hitting you at one time, and you were initially going to a classroom…"*

### Observation No. 3:
### "Walking the Halls"

The transformers we interviewed were focused squarely on working directly with teachers on academic problems and committed to "walking the halls" to stay in touch with what is going on in the classrooms. Even if they walk the halls for no more than a few minutes a day, transformers see this as an invaluable way to stay in touch. *"You can't be a closed door administrator,"* was how one of the transformers put it. *"You can't go in and hide."* Another told us that he does all of his deskwork before school begins, or after it ends, and spends the bulk of his time out of his office, walking the halls, in the lunchroom, or sitting in classrooms observing instruction. A third portrayed the principal's role the way some of us might think of general going to the frontlines to inspire and build morale among the troops: *"[A] teacher's going to be sitting there watching that principal deal with conflict… and they're going to see that that principal is there when they get [to school] in the morning, that principal is there when they… leave. They're*

*going to see that principal going to PTO meetings …"* Unfortunately, this leader continued, the commitment to being there was not universal in the district; *"We have a number of people in our school district who are certified principals who don't principal."*

For the copers, the concept of "walking the halls" often seems like a luxury — either they didn't see it as vital or far more often, they just didn't have the time. One said every time she tried to leave the office, she'd be hit with a new problem within ten feet of her door. Others reported continual distractions such as problems with the heating in the building or having to help mop-up the floor after a storm caused the school roof to leak. Transformers often did not have time during the school day as well, but they often stressed the importance of finding the time.

### Observation No. 4:
### Drinking in the Data — Not Drowning in It

Many of the principals and superintendents said that reviewing and analyzing data on student learning is now a key component of their job, but they often described the task in very different ways. For many, including a number of the transformers, reviewing data on student performance and drawing insights from it was a means to an end — a way to set goals, analyze problems, and allocate resources where they can do the most good. One principal described the process: *"At first… all you see is, 'Oh my goodness, 70% of our children are failing.' Gloom and doom start to come down on you as an educator in a building. [But] when you get into the data, [when] you start delving into the data, you see that the reason why there's a 70% failing rate is because across the board, children have holes in their ability to read or decode."*

Another talked about the importance of helping teachers understand and work with data as well: *"We're doing a lot with data right now, and we're getting the buy-in from teachers, so that they want to get the data. They want to use the data to drive instruction."* Another tied data collection

and analysis directly to the ability to personalize instruction, *"Now, we're looking at the child. We're… looking at data again. We're going back to that data and looking at what specific needs that child has and how we can focus on that child and address those specific needs."*

Others however saw data (at least in the form they received it) as a burden, not an asset. To some – a group that included both transformers and copers – dealing with data was yet another task eating up time that could be better spent elsewhere. One said: *"We're sitting here trying to—where are the AIM scores? Where's the language scores? That's ridiculous, and that will take you two weeks to compile all that together. What has happened to the child?"* Another complained: *"A lot of teacher time is spent trying to take the data from here to put it over here."*

> "You can't be a closed door administrator… You can't go in and hide. "

A number of those we spoke to, transformers included, saw test scores as an imperfect and sometimes overrated measure of their school's success. One transformer said: *"Sometimes you see the test scores and go, 'Wow, they're low.' I challenge anybody to come into the school and see what our students are doing in the classroom to get a quality education. Yeah, the test scores are down. We're going to try to get them up, but these kids are working hard. The teachers are working hard. Everybody is working to give them a quality education."*

## Observation No. 5:
## Shaking Things Up versus Consensus-Building

Many of the interviewees talked about the idea of a "turnaround specialist" – a leader who comes in and seizes control of an extremely troubled school, often replacing staff, establishing new rules, and applying a firm hand to everything that happens there. Some leaders saw a place for this kind of top-to-bottom shake-up coupled with "command and control" leadership. Severely dysfunctional schools can sometimes benefit from this kind of drastic measure, many believed. But for nearly all, consensus-building rather than shake-up was seen as the better long-term answer. Most believed that winning over the staff and community and working with them to carry out a plan for change is the way to genuinely transform a school.

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*"It's about communication,"* one leader told us. *"It's about having a vision — that principal seeing in their mind what that school ought to look like and getting [others to] buy into that vision."* Another said consensus-building is the essence of great leadership. It *"means you have a planning process where you use data and build capacity with your staff. You're your community … It means being able to identify a high-performing team and empowering them to get the work done. You create the vision, the motivation, the plan, and the culture, and you don't try to make decisions that can be much more effectively made by teams and those that are implementing the work."* Most of the leaders we interviewed acknowledged that this approach takes time and demands staying power. What's more, most admitted, it is not always successful. Even so, many saw it as the only way to ensure that progress is not dependent on charismatic leaders and that student learning continues to progress even when leadership changes.

## Observation No. 6:
## Recruiting from the Farm Team

All of the Public Agenda interviews included questions about how to recruit more top-notch leaders to high-needs schools and where to find good candidates. And nearly all of the principals and superintendents interviewed believed the best source was young teachers or vice principals already in the schools – an education farm team so to speak. Many voiced doubts about whether it is possible to be an effective education leader without experience in education. Asked to comment on the value of recruiting from within education versus recruiting from the corporate world, one principal told us: *"The difference is, in the corporate world, if you're shipped a box of defective blueberries, you can always send them back. In education, if you have a defective child—per se, for the sake of what I'm saying—you can't send them back. You must educate the child. You have to know how to get a defective child to the point of proficiency, as opposed to defective blueberries, send them back. Teachers too, we can't send back."* The marked preference for culling new leaders from within education rested on a couple of concepts. Working educators were seen as having a commitment to schools and an expertise in how children learn and what good teaching means — qualities "outsiders" may not possess (at least in their view).

One leader told us that he was always on the lookout look for young teachers with leadership qualities *"even though this might cost me my very best teachers."* Of course, leaders weren't always just eying their own staff: *"A superintendent has to be willing to steal from other districts,"* one admitted, *"and that's what I've done."*

Not all of the leaders ruled out the potential of effective people coming in from outside education. One told us that someone with a business background might be promising if he or she possessed certain characteristics: *"They've got the business background for a start, but they also have to have the personal characteristics like the compassion, the connection with children. They can't just have one. There's got to be a balance."*

### Observation No. 7:
### What Money Can Buy — and What It Can't

Most of the leaders believed that more money – higher salaries and signing bonuses – would help entice effective leaders into school administration and keep them there, but few thought that money by itself would seal the deal. Providing the kinds of support necessary to allow a school leader to be successful was seen as even more important. *"Salary is always a problem,"* one superintendent said. *"You're competing, and the other states pay better… We've been fortunate. I've been able to entice them to come over… I ask them, 'Does your district have a statistician? How good is their bilingual educator? Do they have grade level maps?' I say 'I'll have the data broken down for you; I'll give you the bilingual support you need. This is my commitment to you, my support to you. We'll support you if you do these things.'"* At the end of one focus group, the principals unanimously said that the most important element needed to attract and keep top-notch people in leadership in high-needs schools is providing the support they need to do their jobs.

A few of those we interviewed even saw a danger to waving too much money around: *"$50,000? Yeah. So that might attract more. One question I would have though is: How good would they be?…Are they really only doing it for the money?"* Another pointed out that *"most educators aren't dollar driven. There is also the inherent problem if you get a big bonus for teaching in X school, what kind of message does that send? The job's impossible?"*

### Observation No. 8:
### Most Current Training? Irrelevant

As the school leaders defined it, effective training provides technical assistance such as learning about budgeting and compliance issues; it offers counsel on how to handle conflict and other challenges, and it gives principals and superintendents the opportunity to network and learn from each other. Very few had much positive to say about traditional training in its prevailing forms. *"Training in universities is irrelevant,"* one said bluntly. *"Too much lecture, too little action research, too little formation of groups, coming together and solving real problems. University teachers are too far removed from the realities of working in education. They are gifted at research, but off-base [about] what is actually going on in schools."*

Others talked about how much the job of school leadership has changed and how little training there is once leaders are certified and on the job: *"We always think of training at the front end of the job. There's very little training… [at] the other end of the principalship. I'm a senior principal. I've been doing it for 28 years, 29 years, something like that… The stuff that I learned… really isn't that relevant now because the principalship is so much different today than it was 15, 20, 25 years ago… Think of the data. I still need training in that, and some other areas."* Though many agreed that leadership in high-needs schools presents special challenges; some said that the skills it demands benefit administrators everywhere: *"I think everybody should be groomed for a high-needs*

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*school. There is nothing in terms of the skills needed for a high-needs school that wouldn't also benefit a low-needs school."*

Many of our principals and superintendents questioned whether it is actually possible to teach all of the abilities a high-needs principal needs in a training program, even a very well-designed one. From their perspective, there is a set of basic character traits that an effective high-needs principals simply must bring to the job – and either you have them or you don't. One principal told us; *"A lot of people ask me now, 'What is it like? I'm thinking about becoming a principal.' I always say to them, 'If you don't know who you are as an individual, and if you're not centered, you will crumble in this position.' It tests every core of your being, every belief system that you've ever had."* Another emphasized the importance of having strong core beliefs that are compatible with leading a high-needs school: *"When you're dealing with personal belief systems, like compassion and some of the things we've talked about, it's so hard, if not impossible, to alter or change them. It's like racism or anything else. If you're a racist, there's not any amount of training… so the compassion to me… somebody may be trained in those areas, but eventually they fall back upon their old habits and the ingrained characteristics."*

> " You have to have the courage to stand by the conviction. Sometimes you have to have courage when you have to stand up to an angry parent. You just have to say, 'Your child is not safe. He cannot stay in my school…' Sometimes you have to have the courage to say to a teacher, 'Perhaps this is not the vocation for you.'"

Another named "courage" as an indispensable job requirement: *"You have to have the courage to stand by the conviction. Sometimes you have to have courage when you have to stand up to an angry parent. You just have to say, 'Your child is not safe. He cannot stay in my school…' Sometimes you have to have the courage to say to a teacher, 'Perhaps this is not the vocation for you.'"*

### Observation No. 9:
### Want to Help Me Out? Cut the Red Tape

Public Agenda also asked the school leaders what kinds of changes would help them do their jobs better. Not surprisingly perhaps, the answers from the transformers were somewhat different than the answers from the copers. For example, nearly all of the leaders complained bitterly about bureaucracy and paperwork, but transformers were more likely to have developed ways to handle it and still meet their goals. For transformers, the chief obstacle was the continually changing nature of "the rules"—not so much the rules themselves. One talked about how she handled the hurdles associated with removing ineffective teachers: *"I can at least speak on behalf of our district. We're no longer doing the dance of the lemons… If you've got somebody who's ineffective at a Title I school, if they need to be moved for any reason… usually you can get them moved…. They do not go into another Title I school where they can do more damage… I've got the autonomy that I need. It's just making sure that I clearly know my union contract [and] making sure that I'm doing the required documentation."*

But for one of the copers, the problem seemed overwhelming: *"The time it takes to evaluate and document a bad teacher is unbelievable… Following the legal process, the due process… Three years is nothing, and then you still aren't guaranteed to get them out because of the strong union. It's very time consuming."* Yet even though most transformers had found ways to work around the red tape, nearly all thought their time and energy could have been better spent.

### Observation No. 10:
### Just Let Me Focus on my Job

Both the transformers (who had often found ways to work around problems) and copers (who were often barely treading water) offered multiple examples of the overwhelming challenge of trying to run a school effectively without administrative, clerical and other kinds of support. Among the problems our interviewees noted: being overworked, not having anyone to do the books, not having secretarial help; having to manage the buses, having to oversee the janitorial staff, even having to "clean up puke" themselves, as one told us. Asked what would help them make progress in their school, one said: *"Take [away] some of [my] responsibility. … Transportation, I mean, give me a break – how am I responsible for a bus driver being rude at a bus stop?"* Asked what would help most, another commented: *"Allowing us to get into the classrooms a lot more, allowing us to really observe instruction a lot more, taking away those clerical tasks."* As we noted in Observation No. 6, the vast majority of those we interviewed also considered more administrative help and support staff an essential ingredient in attracting and keeping top-notch people in high-needs schools.

## Some Final Thoughts, Some Crucial Questions

Public Agenda's research touches on other themes that will be addressed in greater depth in our final report. For example, the school leaders had thought-provoking comments on involving parents and community, on the importance of having mentors (especially the transformers), and the need to be able to network and consult with others in the same boat. Public Agenda moderators noted that in nearly every focus group, the principals lingered after the session talking and exchanging cards. It's a relatively rare occurrence in the focus group trade. After talking with a moderator for couple of hours, respondents typically can't get to their cars fast enough. But not in this project. Nearly all of these leaders wanted to continue the conversations they had started.

The research also raises two important questions for policymakers, experts, and researchers. One is the degree to which "transformers" and "copers" are "made" rather than "born." In our view, many of our transformers were astonishing human beings, passionate about their cause and bringing an array of values and skills to a very difficult task. But many also had the advantage of being in circumstances in which their district (or some other entity) had made some attempt to give them the autonomy and support need to be effective. And while some of our copers did seem a little too ready to go with the flow, others were also astonishingly committed people doing daunting, almost overwhelming jobs. With better support and more reasonable circumstances, could they become transformers too?

> How long we can expect the transformers to continue with the sheer hard work and ferocious schedules they keep now?

A second question is how long we can expect the transformers to continue with the sheer hard work and ferocious schedules they keep now. We've called this report "A Mission of the Heart" because that is what we saw while we were conducting this research – inspiring people who were putting heart and soul into their mission. Most seemed to be working many, many hours a day at very stressful, albeit rewarding jobs. Our question is how long human beings can be expected to keep this up – even those as gifted and committed as our transformers. What are they giving up to be able to do the jobs they are doing? Are they making personal and family sacrifices that simply cannot be sustained? Is it reasonable to believe that they can maintain this level of energy and sparkle and passion years into the future? These leaders deserve a thoughtful answer, as do the children and communities that they serve. ■

## Superintendent and Administrative Interviews

Dennis Loftus, Program Director at The Delaware Academy for School Leadership: Completed May 14, 2007

Diane Rutledge, Superintendent of Springfield (Illinois): Completed May 14, 2007

Sandra Stein, CEO of The New York City Leadership Academy: Completed May 14, 2007

Wendy Robinson, Superintendent of Fort Wayne Community Schools (Indiana): Completed May 17, 2007

Terry Grier, Superintendent of Guilford County Public Schools (North Carolina): Completed May 17, 2007

Elizabeth Everitt, Superintendent of Albuquerque Public Schools (New Mexico): Completed May 17, 2007

Peter McWalters, Commissioner of Education, Rhode Island Department of Education: Completed May 29, 2007

Arne Duncan, CEO of Chicago Public Schools (Illinois): Completed June 4, 2007

Mark Freeman, Shaker Heights/Cleveland (Ohio): Completed July 31, 2007

Art Rainwater, Madison Metropolitan (Wisconsin): Completed August 2, 2007

Dr. Joseph Rudnicki, Superintendent, Sunnyvale School District (California): Completed August 7, 2007

Michael Gottlieb, Superintendent in Roswell (New Mexico): Completed August 7, 2007

Sandy Husk, Salem-Keizer School District, (Oregon): Completed August 8, 2007

Dr. Jack Dale, Fairfax County Schools (Virginia): Completed August 10, 2007

Kent Barnes, Holly Area School District (Michigan): Completed August 14, 2007

Dr. Pascal Forgione, Austin Schools (Texas): Completed August 15, 2007

## Focus Groups

1. New York City Leadership Academy: Thursday, June 28, 2007

2. Sunnyvale, California: Tuesday, July 10, 2007

3. Fort Wayne, Indiana: Wednesday, July 11, 2007

4. Phoenix, Arizona: Thursday, July 12, 2007

5. Providence, Rhode Island: Thursday, August 30, 2007

## Public Agenda

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