

TURNING HIGH-POVERTY SCHOOLS INTO HIGH-PERFORMING SCHOOLS

Foreword by Michael Copland..... v

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Introduction: We Must Keep Asking the Questions

The work of improving schools is about thinking... and asking questions.

—*Andres Alonso, chief executive officer,
Baltimore City Public Schools*

As a nation, are we content that 70 percent of our entering 9th graders read below grade level? Is it acceptable that one out of every three minority students attends a high school where 40 percent of the students drop out? Are we willing to continue spending \$2.6 billion a year replacing teachers, half of whom choose to leave the profession before they begin their sixth year in a classroom? Can we excuse the fact that kids are twice as likely to be assigned to inexperienced or uncertified teachers in schools with large enrollments of poor and minority students? As a country and as a profession, we have not systematically asked these questions, let alone answered them. The Alliance for Excellent Education (2010) and many others would say public education is in crisis, and we agree.

Overcoming the Crisis

Yet our crisis is one that is being successfully countered in hundreds of public schools across the United States. These schools enroll high proportions

of underachieving children and adolescents who live in poverty but have reversed long-standing traditions of low achievement and high dropout rates. They are “models of the possible,” where the mind-set of “it’s impossible” has been proven wrong. They provide blueprints for improvement from which other high-poverty schools can learn. More important, these schools are places where students who live in poverty experience success, which leads to optimism, hope, and self-efficacy. In these schools, the crisis *has* been overcome, because the educators sought to control what they could, held high expectations for student learning, and supported their students in surmounting the debilitating effects of poverty on learning.

Still, what of the thousands of other underachieving students living in poverty and failing in schools that have yet to transform? The plight of these children and adolescents *should* surely capture our attention. Their plight *should* become a priority of policymakers, parents, taxpayers, and other stakeholders. And it *must* capture the attention of educators, whose profession is arguably paramount to preserving our democracy. As a profession, we are poised to significantly improve all of our schools; we know enough and possess the capacity to do so. The question of whether we do is not one of knowledge and skill, but of will.

Improving schools alone can make a significant difference in reducing poverty. Yet systemically eliminating poverty is a *both/and* proposition, because transformation must occur in *both* the broader society *and* in schools. Educators must *both* become knowledgeable about issues related to poverty in the broader society *and* take action where they can have the most influence—in their own schools and school systems. As a profession, the question we must consider is not “Can schools solve all of society’s perpetual problems, chief among them high rates of poverty?” Rather, the question is “Are we doing our part?” Must we, as a society, address poverty before we can improve schools? High-performing, high-poverty (HP/HP) schools demonstrate that successfully educating students who live in poverty significantly counters many barriers posed by poverty and improves children’s life chances. Isn’t that proof enough to compel us to act?

How to Use This Book: Learn Together, Lead Together

High-poverty schools do not become high performing by tinkering their way to success. As Harold Ott, former superintendent in Lapwai, Idaho, described

his elementary school's journey: "We could not continue to do what we knew would at best only minimally raise student achievement... and for only some of the kids. We simply had to fundamentally change the way we did business."

We have written this book to support schools in "doing business differently." Those in high-poverty schools can benefit from the information provided in this book, as can anyone working in a school where an achievement gap exists between students who live in poverty and their more advantaged peers. For your school to become high performing and to close the achievement gap, all of the theory, research, and practical ideas in this book must be applied to your unique context. Learning to do business differently in your school entails applying the information provided here to your situation. Throughout the book we have provided tools to help you do so.

The book is organized in three parts. Part I, Learning Together: Getting Ready to Lead Underachieving Students in Poverty to Success (Chapters 1 through 4), lays the groundwork for informed conversations among colleagues and future action planning. Although an individual can gain valuable knowledge, we encourage school stakeholders to learn together. These chapters provide information about poverty and the optimistic message that schools can and do make a difference.

In Part II, Leading Together: Taking Action to Lead Underachieving Students in Poverty to Success (Chapters 5 through 10), we provide specific examples of the actions that leaders in HP/HP schools have taken to build leadership capacity, foster the necessary learning environment, and improve learning. Integrated throughout these chapters is the manner in which these actions appear to influence the school's culture (values, beliefs, and norms). For each arena of action, we provide a chapter related to what leaders *stopped* doing or eliminated and a chapter focused on what they *started* doing or improved. Each of the six chapters includes a self-assessment rubric that can be used to assess your school's current situation, as well as to guide your reading and discussion. Additionally, a planning template is provided at the conclusion of each chapter to help you determine your next steps.

Throughout the six chapters of Part II, a number of inserts highlight the practical applications of strategies used in HP/HP schools. These highlights include Uncommon Sense (novel approaches to problem solving), School Culture Alerts (strategies for improving the culture of a school), and District "Ad-vantage Points" (successful supportive practices that a district could initiate to assist low-performing, high-poverty schools). In addition, end-of-chapter lists of recommended actions appear as Action Advice.

Uncommon Sense

As noted earlier, there is an extensive knowledge base from which we as educational leaders can gain insight into our own school improvement work, *and* there is no silver bullet. Leaders in the schools we studied consistently considered the research base in the context of their own schools. They also used strategies that were uncommon but made sense in the school context. We call this out-of-the-box thinking “uncommon sense.” In the following chapters, we share specific examples of leaders using uncommon sense, which may prompt others to think creatively about how they might apply the Framework for Action described in this chapter to their unique setting. For example, the principal at Lapwai Elementary School used uncommon sense by hiring a local school bus driver to tutor students in reading.

School Culture Alerts

Because changes in a school’s culture are inextricably linked with changes in action—and because culture is difficult to see—we use School Culture Alerts in Chapters 6, 8, and 10 to highlight actions taken by leaders in HP/HP schools that seem to lead to change. These alerts may provide insight into the opportunities other leaders have to improve their school’s culture.

The District’s “Ad-vantage Point”

Although research has begun to provide needed insight into the district’s role in supporting high performance systemwide (Knapp et al., 2003; McFadden, 2009), the vast majority of our information regarding what works for educating students who live in poverty continues to originate from the school level. The Framework for Action takes an “inside out” look at effective practices at the school level that have implications for leadership needed at other levels of the system (district, state, regional, national). These implications are especially important for those education leaders who serve at the district level.

In many instances, school-level leaders have the authority to create the structures and processes needed to build leadership capacity within their school. Then again, in many other schools, school-level leaders report that district personnel, as well as district policies and procedures, place limitations on their authority, pose unintended barriers, or create inefficiencies. As one principal in an urban, high-poverty school described the problem in her context, district-level leaders continued to send pallets of workbooks linked to the district-adopted curriculum although the school had adopted a comprehensive school reform model with an altogether different set of curricular

materials. Several pallets of shrink-wrapped, unused workbooks were stored in the school's basement. The principal explained, "It was less trouble to store the workbooks in our basement than to fight the system and send them back to the central office." Throughout Chapters 6 through 10, we have inserted ideas, talking points, tips, and considerations for those who lead from the vantage point of the district office. Such a vantage point, as we see it, is an "advantage" that district-level leaders could use to support site-based leaders.

In Part III, *Working Together: Continuing the Commitment to Lead Underachieving Students in Poverty to Success*, we briefly reiterate the interactive, dynamic nature of the components of the Framework for Action and challenge all of us—educators and other stakeholders—to confront the reasons we have not yet ensured that every high-poverty school is high performing. Finally, we foreshadow the current research focused on moving beyond improvement in individual schools to improvement of entire systems at the district, regional, state, and national levels.

Begin by Taking Stock: What's Your School's Story?

Allow time to reflect on your unique situation as a school, department, grade-level team, collegial cluster, or individual by completing the self-assessments, *Assessing Our Ability to Take Action*, that appears in Figure I.1 and *Assessing Our Willingness to Take Action* in Figure I.2. The self-assessments are based on what we know about how leaders facilitate organizational change. We hope the assessments will provide support in two ways—first, by generating data related to your school's readiness to undertake an improvement effort, and second, by guiding your use of the resources and information provided in this book.

A school's readiness to benefit from a change initiative refers to how committed people are to the change and how capable or efficacious they believe themselves to be. In other words, the current state of a school's readiness to benefit from any change effort can be examined by assessing two factors: ability and willingness. There are many ways to evaluate both. The assessments elicit beliefs about an individual's *ability and willingness* to work with students who live in poverty, together with his beliefs about his colleagues' *abilities and willingness* to do so. It is a tool that provides leaders with information about the gap, if any, between an individual's beliefs about himself and beliefs about his colleagues. It also gauges stakeholders' beliefs about specific topics and issues presented and discussed in this book.

Although the questions in the assessment are designed to help you assess your school's readiness to benefit from change, this does not mean

FIGURE I.1

Assessing Our Ability to Take Action

Please rate each statement from highly unlikely (-3) to highly likely (3).

1	I have a good understanding of what is meant by “living in poverty” in the United States and in my local school. -3 -2 -1 0 1 2 3	My colleagues have a good understanding of what is meant by “living in poverty” in the United States and in my local school. -3 -2 -1 0 1 2 3
2	I know the percentage of students in my school who live in poverty and who, of those students, are underachieving. -3 -2 -1 0 1 2 3	My colleagues know the percentage of students in our school who live in poverty and who, of those students, are underachieving. -3 -2 -1 0 1 2 3
3	I know how poverty affects lives and learning. -3 -2 -1 0 1 2 3	My colleagues know how poverty affects lives and learning. -3 -2 -1 0 1 2 3
4	I can provide a research-based answer to the question “How do schools make a difference in the lives of students who live in poverty?” -3 -2 -1 0 1 2 3	My colleagues can provide a research-based answer to the question “How can schools make a difference in the lives of students who live in poverty?” -3 -2 -1 0 1 2 3
5	I know how high-performing, high-poverty schools develop the leadership infrastructure necessary for improvement. -3 -2 -1 0 1 2 3	My colleagues know how high-performing, high-poverty schools develop the leadership infrastructure necessary for improvement. -3 -2 -1 0 1 2 3
6	I know how high-performing, high-poverty schools develop a safe, healthy, and supportive learning environment for students and adults. -3 -2 -1 0 1 2 3	My colleagues know how high-performing, high-poverty schools develop a safe, healthy, and supportive learning environment for students and adults. -3 -2 -1 0 1 2 3
7	I know how high-performing, high-poverty schools improve student learning, support adult learning, and “work smarter” as a system. -3 -2 -1 0 1 2 3	My colleagues know how high-performing, high-poverty schools improve student learning, support adult learning, and “work smarter” as a system. -3 -2 -1 0 1 2 3
8	I know which mind-sets, practices, policies, and structures perpetuate underachievement and how high-performing, high-poverty schools eliminate them. -3 -2 -1 0 1 2 3	My colleagues know which mind-sets, practices, policies, and structures perpetuate underachievement and how high-performing, high-poverty schools eliminate them. -3 -2 -1 0 1 2 3
9	I can describe the beliefs, values, and norms that constitute a school culture conducive to the success of students who live in poverty. -3 -2 -1 0 1 2 3	My colleagues can describe the beliefs, values, and norms that constitute a school culture conducive to the success of students who live in poverty. -3 -2 -1 0 1 2 3

FIGURE I.2

Assessing Our Willingness to Take Action

Please rate each statement from highly unlikely (-3) to highly likely (3).

1	I believe I make a difference in the lives of my students, despite the challenges some of them face. -3 -2 -1 0 1 2 3	My colleagues believe, as teachers, they make a difference in the lives of students, despite the challenges some of those students face. -3 -2 -1 0 1 2 3
2	I believe I am professionally responsible for learning and all students can meet high academic standards in my classroom, despite the challenges some of them face. -3 -2 -1 0 1 2 3	My colleagues believe they are professionally responsible for learning and all students, despite challenges, can meet high academic standards in their classrooms. -3 -2 -1 0 1 2 3
3	I believe redistributing resources schoolwide would help us better meet the needs of students who live in poverty. -3 -2 -1 0 1 2 3	My colleagues believe redistributing resources schoolwide would help us better meet the needs of students who live in poverty. -3 -2 -1 0 1 2 3
4	I believe learning more about how poverty influences life and learning would help us better meet the needs of students who live in poverty and are underachieving. -3 -2 -1 0 1 2 3	My colleagues believe learning more about how poverty influences life and learning would help us better meet the needs of students who live in poverty and are underachieving. -3 -2 -1 0 1 2 3
5	I believe working more collaboratively would help us better meet the needs of students who live in poverty and are underachieving. -3 -2 -1 0 1 2 3	My colleagues believe working more collaboratively would help us better meet the needs of students who live in poverty and are underachieving. -3 -2 -1 0 1 2 3
6	I believe our school has an organizational climate that encourages innovation, risk taking, and professional learning. -3 -2 -1 0 1 2 3	My colleagues believe our school has an organizational climate that encourages innovation, risk taking, and professional learning. -3 -2 -1 0 1 2 3
7	I believe our school staff is open to new ideas and willing to make changes, even changes of significant magnitude. -3 -2 -1 0 1 2 3	My colleagues believe our school staff is open to new ideas and willing to make changes, even changes of significant magnitude. -3 -2 -1 0 1 2 3
8	I believe in our ability, as a school, to succeed in making changes, even changes of a significant magnitude. -3 -2 -1 0 1 2 3	My colleagues are confident in our ability, as a school, to succeed in making changes, even changes of a significant magnitude. -3 -2 -1 0 1 2 3
9	I believe our school staff feels a sense of urgency about meeting the needs of all our students, particularly those who live in poverty. -3 -2 -1 0 1 2 3	My colleagues believe our school staff feels a sense of urgency about meeting the needs of all our students, particularly those who live in poverty. -3 -2 -1 0 1 2 3

that if a school isn't ready to change, it should do nothing. Rather, assessing readiness helps leaders tailor their actions to the needs of those whom they lead. For example, if school stakeholders score more positively in terms of their willingness than their ability, leaders may want to initiate conversations and professional development to build knowledge and skills. If the opposite is true, leaders will likely need to address the factors that are influencing a low level of willingness to step up to the challenge of successfully educating their students who live in poverty.

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