

## MY GOALS IN WRITING THIS BOOK

I wrote this book with four goals in mind: to inform, affirm, encourage, and motivate. I want to inform every educator that the demographics of a school don't have to determine its academic destiny. I want to affirm those educators who have led and been part of teams who have created effective schools. Their work is difficult and they do not always get the affirmation they deserve, especially from some of their colleagues in nearby schools or districts. I want to encourage those educators who are in the often long and difficult process of improving a low-performing school. The examples from schools around the country will give you renewed hope. And finally, I want to motivate those who are still hesitant about committing to a compelling mission in their own school. You will never regret the adventure. Students will thank you. Parents will honor you. And you will carry the feeling of having made a difference with you for the rest of your life.

## WHO THIS BOOK IS FOR

I have written *Ten Traits of Highly Effective Schools* for the following audiences:

- Principals at every level who desire to lead highly effective schools
- Professional learning communities (PLCs), leadership and school improvement teams who are engaged in study and reflection regarding the effectiveness of their schools
- Central office administrators who desire to evaluate the effectiveness of the schools in their districts
- Educators who aspire to become schools leaders and want to know more about how to lead a team in building an effective school
- College and university educators who train educators at every level

## WHAT IS A TRAIT?

As in my earlier books on the ten traits of teachers (McEwan, 2001) and principals (McEwan, 2003), I have taken some literary license with the meaning of the term *trait*. *Merriam-Webster* defines it as “a distinguishing quality (as of personal character)” (*Merriam-Webster*, 2003, p. 1326). My goal in writing this book is to identify and describe the critical attributes, distinguishing qualities, and unique characteristics of effective schools—those institutions that enable all students, regardless of their demographics or categorical labels, to attain academic excellence. The traits that are

described in the chapters ahead are multidimensional, complex, interactive, and synergistic. They refer to the individuals, behaviors, values, processes, and systems that are found in highly effective schools.

## OVERVIEW OF THE CONTENTS

The Introduction briefly summarizes the effective schools research (ESR) beginning with the early studies in the late 1970s and continuing to the present. You will learn how current researchers are substantiating the findings of older studies as well as breaking new ground by identifying the critical variables (traits) that distinguish more effective schools from those that are less effective, both in the United States and across other countries and cultures.

Each of the 10 chapters in the book describes one of the following traits: (1) strong instructional leadership, (2) research-based instruction, (3) a clear academic focus, (4) relational trust, (5) collaboration, (6) high expectations, (7) opportunities to learn, (8) alignment, (9) achievement, and (10) accountability. You will find the following features in each chapter:

- A comprehensive description of the trait
- Research supporting the part that each trait plays in raising the achievement bar
- Snapshots of the trait in schools and districts as well as longer vignettes
- Reflections about the trait in the words of teachers, principals, and central office administrators who are or have been involved in creating effective schools
- Observations and opinions from a wide variety of noted thinkers, theorists, and scholars regarding the trait
- Tools and processes to help facilitate the development of the trait in schools

Finally, a brief conclusion presents a Ten Traits Audit for use in your school or district and suggests how readers can use the ten traits to change and improve their schools.

## A MATTER OF DEFINITION

The following terms are used interchangeably throughout the book to refer to highly effective schools: *successful*, *effective*, *equitable*, and *excellent*.

The principal charts the course for the school. Whether the ship of learning reaches its destination or goes aground to ultimately sink depends largely on the navigational skills of the captain—the principal. A report by the Arthur Andersen (1997) consulting firm made the following recommendation in the late 1990s, and it is even truer today:

The key factor to the individual school's success is the building principal, who sets the tone as the school's educational leader, enforces the positive, and convinces the students, parents and teachers that all children can learn and improve academically. Our overall assessment is that the school principal has the greatest single impact on student performance. As a result we believe that increased attention and funding needs to be directed towards programs that attract, evaluate, train and retain the best principals. (p. 27)

## INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP RESEARCH

Determining the precise relationship between student achievement and strong instructional leadership is challenging for three reasons: (1) Researchers are unable to design experimental studies to investigate the question and so we must settle for correlational studies, (2) the vast majority of correlational studies are simple doctoral dissertations that do not lend themselves well to sophisticated statistical analyses, and (3) only with the arrival of accountability has instructional leadership been a topic for study in educational leadership programs.

Andrews and Soder (1987) were among the first to publish research describing the relationship between principals' instructional leadership behaviors as perceived by their teachers and student achievement. Although correlational in design, their study motivated educators to expand their understanding of educational leadership to incorporate issues of teaching and learning into principals' job descriptions along with the traditional administrative responsibilities. The study also examined the intensity or amount of instructional leadership exercised by principals, describing a range from strong to weak as indicated by the scores they received from their teachers.

Schools operated by principals who were perceived by their teachers to be strong instructional leaders exhibited significantly greater gain scores in achievement in reading and mathematics than did schools operated by average and weak instructional leaders.

—Andrews and Soder  
(1987, p. 9)

## DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION

The seven essential teaching skills are generic and essential for teachers at any level and in any content area. Individual teachers may vary widely in exactly how they execute these various styles. But their students learn. However, when faced with particularly challenging students who need differentiated instruction, educators in highly effective schools recommend adding recursive teaching or mastery learning approaches to your repertoire.

### Teach for Mastery

If too many students are failing to learn in your school or classroom, consider an alternative instructional mindset—one that can simultaneously meet the needs of both struggling and gifted students. I recommend *mastery learning*, an approach we used in our district with astounding success in the early 1980s, after reading the work of Benjamin Bloom (1971) and working with James Block (1971).

Regrettably, at some point during the past two decades, mastery learning was reconceptualized as a rigid, teacher-directed approach suitable only for dishing up rote skills and trivial information. This may have resulted in some measure from the descriptions given to it in popular educational psychology textbooks: an anticonstructivist, behavioral management technique in which instruction proceeded in a lockstep manner at the pace of the slowest students in the class (R. Gentile, personal conversation, November 17, 2005).

In reality, mastery learning combines the critical attributes of standards-based learning and differentiated instruction in one of the few instructional formats that works at any level or for any content area *and* can truly promise that no student will be left behind (Gentile & Lalley, 2003). Here are the four basic principles around which the reconstituted mastery learning is organized:

1. Explicit instructional objectives, hierarchically sequenced, which all students are expected to attain
2. Criterion-referenced assessments to evaluate and provide feedback on the achievement of those objectives
3. Remedial instruction for students who do not achieve the desired standard of performance
4. Enrichment activities and a corresponding grading scheme to encourage students to go beyond initial mastery of essentials to higher-order thinking that includes a variety of applications of their newly acquired knowledge and skills. (p. 156)

(Continued)

Louise Sekula describes a typical professional development session:

In our weekly professional development meetings, Mr. Skinner would teach a lesson focused on a particular standard. We would then discuss it and suggest how to adjust his lesson for our specific grade level. During the week, he would be in our classrooms helping us do the things we had learned at the Monday meeting. If needed, he would model for us with our students. Then once again, we would create lessons to teach that kind of writing, thinking, or problem solving to our students. We were expected to constantly reflect on the effectiveness of our lessons and talk with each other almost daily about what was working best in our classroom. It was an entirely different approach to teaching than any of us had ever experienced.

## **SUMMING UP**

Working together is essential to raising the achievement bar for all students. Scholar Philip Schlechty (2005) suggests that without it, schools may not survive the competition from education entrepreneurs and online learning options that they will face in the 21st century. In the opinion of Principal Dave Montague, the power of collective knowledge can solve any problem his school might face. Researchers have weighed in with evidence regarding the power of collaboration and cooperation to build instructional, academic, and leadership capacities in schools. Collaboration is a hallmark of highly effective schools.

## **WHAT'S AHEAD?**

In Chapter 6, we explore the role of high expectations in raising the achievement bar. Teri Fleming spoke of eliminating the language of low expectations from biology classrooms. Educators with high expectations not only believe their students are able to master the standards, they are confident of their own abilities to teach them.