BUILDING A CULTURE *of* HOPE

ENRICHING SCHOOLS WITH OPTIMISM AND OPPORTUNITY

ROBERT D. BARR & EMILY L. GIBSON

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Introduction

In our schools, we have done everything in our power to confront the single greatest challenge that confronts our poor and minority students: their sense of futility and helplessness. In the midst of so many family difficulties and negative outlooks, we are not just focused on teaching and teaching well, we are also cultivating hope. Come see our schools. We think we have developed a curriculum of hope. We think we have a Culture of Hope.

—Karla McCarty and Misty Cox, Johnson County, Kentucky

This book is about schools that are cultivating hope one student at a time, replacing helplessness with hopefulness. It is about hope for some of public education's most vulnerable and challenging students: the children of poverty.

It is also about building what we call a Culture of Hope in schools, based on a distinctly different instructional approach being used by a growing number of schools, an approach that emphasizes social and emotional growth to help children of poverty succeed in the classroom and ultimately find a pathway to a better life.

This Culture of Hope appears to truly be a grassroots movement, evolving simultaneously in a variety of rural, suburban, and urban school districts. Although a few federally funded programs, known as the TRIO Programs (U.S. Department of Education, 2008), provide support for students from low-income families to successfully transition from middle to high school and then college and both the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development's (ASCD) Commission on the Whole Child (2007) and the National Urban League (2011) have recommendations that emphasize some aspects of the Culture of Hope, no federal policy, national program, major professional development effort, or published book has yet championed this approach.

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Similarly, while a number of important research reports and scholarly papers in the fields of psychology, educational psychology, and neuroscience have explored the concept of hope and its implication for schools (Commission on the Whole Child, 2007; EdVisions, 2010; Jensen, 2009; Maslow & Lowry, 1973; Newell & Van Ryzin, 2009), for the teachers and administrators experimenting with this model, it is simply a commonsense response to the daily problems and challenges in their schools and classrooms. It may represent some of the best work being done in public education—yet it could be argued that, at least in part, it is what good schools have *always* done.

Over much of the first decade of the 21st century, observations and discussions in high-poverty schools in more than twenty states indicated that high-performing schools went far beyond academic success as measured by achievement tests, and provided a "value-added" education that focused on students' social and emotional growth. In other schools, there was something missing: even though teachers seemed to be applying the standard protocol of effective schools, their students remained disengaged from learning. Interviews with teachers and students revealed that many students from low-income families did not believe they *could* learn; for others, especially those who experience a clash of cultures with the public school, it seemed to be a point of honor to *not* exert effort for some middle-class teacher. These students simply chose not to learn. Even more dramatic was the discovery of the low expectations in failing schools, where no one, it seemed, not teachers, students, or even parents, truly believed the students could be successful. This was particularly evident in low-achieving high schools.

Value-Added Schools

When the authors questioned educators from different districts in different states about the observed value-added strategies (focusing on what educators had traditionally called whole-child education), it became evident that these widely separated schools were wrestling with similar questions:

- How can schools help students overcome the debilitating learned helplessness and hopelessness that so often accompany poverty, especially generational poverty?
- How can schools soften the cultural conflicts that so often characterize the encounters of poor families and their children with middle-class schools?
- How can schools help students reflect on their social and economic situations and develop reasonable long-term goals?
- What can schools do to develop poverty-level students' pride and personal efficacy?

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- How can educators help poverty-level students and their families feel a sense of belonging to the students' school?

At the high school level, discussions often focused on these questions:

- In addition to effectively teaching the basics, how can schools provide organization and support that will help students develop talents and interests, succeed in school, graduate, and find success beyond high school?
- Why are so many students who achieved effectively at the elementary and middle school levels struggling, failing, and dropping out of high school?
- How can schools better integrate the world of jobs, careers, and professions into the academic curriculum to make school more relevant?

A central question in nearly all of these conversations is whether schools have a role in helping students find a pathway out of poverty. If so, what is that role?

Culture of Hope Schools

Visiting schools that embrace a Culture of Hope is an energizing experience. Like all public schools, they have difficult problems and challenges, but they seem to approach those challenges from an optimistic, positive perspective. Such schools have an atmosphere of excitement; a can-do spirit is everywhere. High expectations and optimism seem to permeate the building. A powerful expectation of academic success and personal encouragement permeates the building, and visitors feel a welcoming spirit and enthusiasm about teaching and learning. Mutual respect among teachers, students, and parents is evident; the school feels safe and orderly. Charts showing assessment data are displayed in every classroom, as well as in the hallways.

Everyone seems to feel fortunate to be part of such a school. Students exhibit personal pride in their accomplishments and want to talk about and share their successes. They are excited about learning and reflect personal confidence. In high school, they think and talk about the future. Teachers, too, are enthusiastic and involved in ongoing collaboration. The school in turn collaborates with parents to help their children find the way to a better life.

On paper, these descriptors seem embarrassingly Pollyannaish, if not downright corny, like some idealistic writer's view of what public education would be in a perfect world. They seem especially off the mark during, at this writing, a spate of teacher layoffs and budget cuts. Yet, remarkably, these descriptors accurately depict real life across the United States—in high-poverty, high-unemployment Appalachian school districts or at urban or inner-city Title I elementary and middle schools; in the KIPP Academy and Harlem Children's Zone sites, as well as at schools aligned with the Coalition of Essential Schools (2006). All these schools are achieving the essential academic goals of any other high-performing public school, but they are

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also accomplishing much more: they are building students' personal pride and sense of belonging. These students stay in school, graduate, and find a purpose and plan for their own lives.

Structure of This Book

This book consists of ten chapters divided into three parts. Part One, "An Apartheid of Ignorance," comprising the first three chapters, describes the problem and introduces the solution. Chapter 1, "Poverty Is No Excuse," reviews how changes in the world outside of school affect the lives of students and the schools that serve them. Chapter 2, "The Tragedy of High School Dropouts," illuminates the failure of our public school system, culminating in the dropout crisis. Chapter 3, "A Culture of Hope" introduces the key elements found in Culture of Hope schools and reviews the foundational research.

Part Two, "The Four Seeds of Hope," consists of chapter 4, "A Sense of Optimism"; chapter 5, "A Sense of Belonging"; chapter 6, "A Sense of Pride, Self-Esteem, and Self-Confidence"; and chapter 7, "A Sense of Purpose." Together, these seeds of hope lay the foundation for the transformation of schools as experienced by children coming from high-poverty environments.

Part Three, "Implementing a Culture of Hope," consists of the final three chapters. Chapter 8, "The Power of We," provides a template schools can follow to begin or expand upon a schoolwide Culture of Hope. Chapter 9, "A Culture of Hope at the High School Level," reviews fundamental changes that contribute to success, continued enrollment, and graduation for students from low-income families. And chapter 10, "Hope Fulfilled," outlines a series of academic and social benchmarks that students must meet during childhood and adolescence to set them—and keep them—on course for postsecondary success.

The two appendices contain supplemental information about the *Newsweek* and *U.S. News & World Report* surveys, and links to a number of other resources mentioned in the book. Finally, a glossary defines some of the terms and concepts we have employed.

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