

# aim high, achieve more

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## Part 1

### Preparation

Few people set off on a journey without first asking some essential questions, such as, “What is there to see and do where I am going? What is the best way to get there? Will I need a passport or a visa? What should I pack? Do I need insurance? What is the weather like? What kind of currency do I need? When is the best time to go?”

The three chapters in this first section provide ways of thinking about three similarly key questions to prepare you and your team for this journey:

- What is fearless leading?
- To what are fearless leaders committed?
- Why are fearless leaders needed?

The journey to becoming a fearless leader is not a simple one. These grounding questions will enable your team to come to a common understanding about the essentials before you embark on your journey.

# 1

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## What Is Fearless Leading?

You may feel afraid. You do not have to act afraid.

—*Dan Millman*

### Key Considerations

- What does a school on its way to becoming an oasis of success look like?
- What does it mean to AIM for high intellectual performances?
- Who are the key players in transforming a school?
- What are the vital signs of fearlessness that, when confidently implemented, block power leaks?

### Snapshot: One School's Journey

At 7:00 a.m. on February 11, 2011, more than 30 New York City educators boarded a bus in the Bronx to travel to Bridgeport, Connecticut, where they would visit the Beardsley School. This K–6 school has the dubious distinction

of having been on the Schools in Need of Improvement list before the advent of No Child Left Behind (NCLB).

Despite being located in one of the richest counties in one of the richest states in the United States, Beardsley School, like many of its sister schools in the city of Bridgeport, serves a community saddled with the ravages of poverty. Close to 100 percent of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. Forty percent of students identify as black, and just below 60 percent of students identify as Hispanic or Latino/Latina, many of them coming from homes in which English is not the primary language. The school building is well over 100 years old and is sandwiched between a car repair shop and a ramshackle clapboard house. Teachers whose classrooms face the house often have to close their shades to shield students from whatever is happening on the front porch.

In 2002, when Amy Marshall came on as principal, Beardsley students' families were doing all they could to find other schools for their children. Yet even with the continual flight, occupancy was at 135 percent, a condition that contributed to short tempers and long suspensions. One prominent community member, echoing a widely held belief, told the new principal, "This school is failing, and it's your fault!" Meanwhile, the faculty was fractured and hurting and convinced that the school's failure was the fault of the students, whose parents obviously did not share the school's values or support their children in any meaningful way. Teacher turnover was high, and morale was low. For four of the last six years, the district budget had seen no increases, resulting in a significant decline in staff and services at the district and building levels. In short, Beardsley was viewed as a prime example of failed schooling.

Amy Marshall bought none of this. Instead, she recognized that the fate of the school and the future of her kids rested with her and her staff. No magic bullet would fix the school's poisonous reputation or miraculously change the conditions of students' lives. Help from the district, the state, or the federal government? Not likely, when well over half of the district's 30-plus schools fell afoul of NCLB just as steep cuts in revenue were taking place. Not likely, considering Beardsley is located in a state reputed to have one of the largest achievement gaps in the nation but that has failed to provide ailing schools with adequate funding or transformative know-how. Not likely, when the federal government

turned the tap on NCLB accountability at the same time it turned its back on the financial commitment needed to sustain transformation.

Not an auspicious start for a success story. Yet it was because of this school's success and the fact that it was named a demonstration school by the National Urban Alliance for Effective Education (NUA) that colleagues from a neighboring state came to Beardsley. Since 2006, NUA has been providing professional development activities for teachers, administrators, and students in several Bridgeport schools, including Beardsley.

Today, Beardsley boasts impressive student gains. Between the 2005–2006 school year—when NUA began its partnership with Beardsley School—and the 2011–2012 school year, the improvement rate of Beardsley students has garnered much attention and recognition. In 2010, the school made Safe Harbor in both math and reading. In this year, 94 percent of Beardsley 6th graders scored at or above proficiency in math, and 85 percent scored at or above proficiency in writing. On the same day as the New York City visit, Beardsley was recognized as a “Success Story School” by the Connecticut Coalition for Achievement Now, a statewide education reform and advocacy group better known as ConnCAN. In May 2011, the school was featured on *Anderson Cooper 360°*, CNN's nightly news broadcast. The feature captured the excitement and power of students learning with their teachers in shared professional learning sessions as well as of students leading professional learning sessions for teachers. The topic? The neuroscience of learning. Their grade levels? Fifth and 6th grade. In 2012, the school was awarded the National School Change Award by the National Principals Leadership Institute. Beardsley is one of six schools to win this award and the only elementary school in the group.

Beardsley School is well on its way to becoming an oasis of success, a school with a clear vision and a renewed culture.

## **AIMing to Become an Oasis of Success**

As we discussed in the introduction, this book lays out three routes to transformation: affirmation, inspiration, and mediation. When taken together, the initials of these routes spell out *AIM*, an acronym we have adopted to describe

how these three actions enable schools to foster self-directed learning and self-actualization.

We have purposely borrowed the acronym *AIM* from a special program we have encountered that is designed for those lucky enough to be labeled gifted. The implications of the name bothered us. If one set of students is in the AIM program, does that mean that the remaining students are in the aimLESS program?

This choice of words signifies the ways in which “the haves” continue to receive institutional gifts for which they do not have a particular birthright. These students and their learning are routinely affirmed, inspired, and mediated. School-dependent students, on the other hand, are often accused rather than affirmed (“It is their fault scores are low”); denigrated rather than inspired (“What can you expect from this population?”); and deprived rather than mediated (“Let’s give them a dumbed-down curriculum they can handle”) (Jackson, 2011).

As we looked more closely at fearless leaders, we discovered that a key to their success involved using the AIM values to guide every aspect of school decision making. These values were applied to everyone, not just a chosen few. We believe that real transformation requires a radical shift in focus that ruptures existing expectations and rallies *all* students and teachers around the goal of aiming for high intellectual performances.

Before embarking on a journey to instill a new set of values throughout the entire school, leaders need to understand the essential elements, specific manifestations, and unique merits of these values. Although we discuss each in depth in subsequent chapters, the following descriptions provide an overview of what is to come.

## Affirmation

Affirmations arise from the recognition of the innate worth of human beings. They acknowledge and remind us of our value, and, in so doing, work miracles on the psyche, unleash latent potential, and cultivate talent that could otherwise languish and atrophy. As a fearless leader, you deeply understand the power of affirmation. You take the time to assess and affirm your own merit. Buoyed by self-understanding, you freely and openly affirm others and deliberately create opportunities for students and staff members to affirm themselves and one another.

In schools where affirmation is firmly entrenched, students routinely applaud one another's efforts without being prompted, teachers and students proudly display and discuss their own strengths, and individual and group accomplishments are acknowledged and broadcast.

Chapter 4 discusses the importance of affirmation to fearless leadership and addresses how you and your leadership team can harness the power of affirmation to respond to a call to action and create a call to action that inspires others to follow.

## **Inspiration**

While affirmation serves as a reminder of self-worth, inspiration provides the energy that drives change. Inspiration paints a portrait of what is possible. It is the suggestive spark that fires up our courage to try something new, to take a risk, to hurl ourselves into places we never believed we could go. Inspiring leaders dig deeply into the wellspring of their core beliefs and attitudes, put them on display for others to see, and maintain unwavering confidence that others will emulate those beliefs and attitudes. Others, in turn, depend on inspiring leaders to provide the thrust that will propel them toward new vistas.

Leaders who inspire drive others to consider possibilities. They organize their schools to support the goal of continuous learning, putting in place such structures as study groups, peer-to-peer learning, examination of student work, and faculty meetings devoted to learning and teaching (otherwise known as "administrivia-free zones").

Chapter 5 explores the wellspring from which fearless leaders draw to inspire others and answers two fundamental questions: What is it that fearless leaders want? And how do they inspire others to share their aspirations?

## **Mediation**

As a fearless leader, you not only affirm and inspire but also mediate. Like affirmation and inspiration, mediation springs from positive beliefs about potential. Mediation is the means, the support, and the deliberate and targeted intervention and structure that enable transformation (Feuerstein, Feuerstein, & Falik, 2010). Mediation shreds the cloak of resistance that often stymies change efforts and replaces it with a sense of trust that someone is there to catch you if you fall.

Mediators are outwardly focused, inserting themselves between others and the desired state. In some instances, mediation translates to amassing the resources that enable others to achieve. In other instances, mediators facilitate interactions to expand understanding and develop the capabilities of students and teachers.

Whether your interest is in mediating individuals, groups of individuals, or an entire institution, you have a desired state in mind (reaching one's highest potential), a variety of means to get there, and a quiet confidence in your ability to assist others in the process of growth and change. Chapters 6 and 7 explore what fearless leaders understand about students' and teachers' needs, and how they use this understanding to propel schools to become oases of success.

## **Traveling Companions: Who Should Come Along on the Journey?**

What was principal Amy Marshall's role in the transformation of Beardsley? Although Marshall herself will tell you the transformation had little to do with her, the literature says otherwise. According to an extensive five-year leadership study conducted by the Wallace Foundation (Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010), leadership matters. It has the second-most profound influence on student achievement (after classroom instruction). Further, where the needs are highest, leadership's effect is greatest.

We believe that the journey to transform an underperforming school into an oasis of success involves multiple participants. As a result, it requires a leader—usually a principal—fearless enough to engage these multiple participants in examining and altering the beliefs, practices, structures, and outcomes that make up the life of the school. In the following two sections, we discuss the roles of these participants—teachers, students, families, and communities—in the transformation journey.

### **Teacher and Student Leaders**

There are many definitions and conceptualizations of leadership. When we talk about fearless leadership, we are referring to the shared leadership of a person at the helm with a strong set of beliefs, skills, and dispositions who mines

the strengths of others to direct the most meaningful aspects of school life: the instructional program focused on learning and high intellectual performances, the relationships that build cohesiveness and a sense of belonging, and the organizational structures that enable learning and relationships to thrive.

Shared leadership is not universally embraced. Several reports indicate that there is little correlation between distributed or shared leadership in schools and student outcomes (Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris, & Hopkins, 2006). However, our experience indicates that shared leadership helps ameliorate the strong sense of disengagement felt by many teachers in urban schools. This disengagement exerts a powerful influence on school culture, classroom climate, and student outcomes. Teachers in urban schools are twice as likely to report dissatisfaction with teaching as are teachers in suburban or rural schools. As the percentage of students from low-income families rises, the level of teacher satisfaction decreases (MetLife, 2011). Yet teachers who have frequent and satisfying interactions with administrators report higher job satisfaction. We have found that when urban leaders affirm teachers' commitment, effort, and loyalty, they create stability, foster program cohesiveness, and bring consistency to the chaos of wildly mixed expectations, values, and beliefs.

We have also witnessed the power of deliberate, authentic, and consistent inclusion of students in the transformation process, and we are convinced that without amplification of student voice, urban schools will continue to wear out teachers and lose students. Fearless leaders orchestrate meaningful ways to increase student participation in key functions of school life, especially in the instructional program. We offer a more detailed explanation of how you can amplify student voice in Chapters 6 and 7.

## **Families and Community**

Schools exist in complicated webs of communities and families. As our chief of staff Ahmes Askia says, "Families do not send us some of their children and leave their best children at home." Families send us the children they have, believing that we will provide them with what they need to succeed (Jackson, 2011).

Fearless leaders foster relationships between the school and the community. Families and communities have a vested interest in what happens in schools. If they are ignored, made to feel unwelcome, or otherwise left out of the life of the

school, families and communities are repelled, drawing their own conclusions and often badmouthing teachers and administrators. Communicating with and involving family and community members, on the other hand, breeds understanding and trust and often leads to community advocacy for teachers and administrators. Community strife over issues as contentious as school closings can be minimized with concerted communication efforts (DeWitt & Moccia, 2011) and by engaging families and the community as equal partners in a common cause: helping students to reach their potential.

Common sense, national policy, and local legislation all support creating ties among school, family, and community. Students, families, and communities benefit from engagement efforts that invite authentic conversations, shatter assumptions, and create avenues for sharing strategies and concerns (Henderson, Carson, Avallone, & Whipple, 2011).

Reaching out to the community reflects how school staff members view students. Those who view students solely as charges to be instructed erect an impenetrable wall between the aspirations, values, and culture of families and the community and the education of its children. Those who view students as children with hopes, innate intelligence, and motivation to learn recognize the value of partnering with families and the community to determine how best to foster children's development (Epstein, 1995). The cultural divide between urban educators and urban residents is widening with the ever-increasing influx of immigrant families, who tend to cluster in concentrated pockets of communities. Fearless leaders tap into the community as a leadership resource.

Fearlessly leading an underperforming school toward high intellectual performances does not happen by chance. The good news is that fearlessness can be cultivated. One of the first places to start is to reflect with your leadership team on your school culture, looking for signs of fearlessness and signs of elements that increase fearfulness—what we call power leaks.

## Points of Interest: Fearlessness Versus Power Leaks

In our work with schools throughout the United States, we have discerned three vital signs of fearlessness and three corresponding danger signs of power leaks. Figure 1.1 summarizes these signs.