

A Matter of Principal

A good manager can turn a failing school around, despite numerous roadblocks.

By Peter Cowley

Every year, the Fraser Institute releases a report card on all the secondary schools in BC and Alberta. And every year, we get angry calls from principals venting their rage at the injustice of their school's low rating. They care because the rankings are taken very seriously.

Last year, for example, Salmo Secondary School ranked dead last out of 262 schools, and the principal, Mike McIndoe, took a lot of heat. In a recent interview in *BC Business* magazine, he candidly admitted that if his school didn't rank higher this year, he'd "be run out of town."

During the course of our conversations with school principals, we usually hear that principals:

- don't always have the authority and resources they need to make improvements;
- are hamstrung by rigid collective agreements that have been negotiated and agreed by others;
- have to fight for every dollar of funding from their school district;
- must adhere to district policy even when that policy may be disadvantageous to their students.

In short, they say it's not fair to make them responsible for running the school if they aren't given the tools.

To all of which I respond, "Of course the principal is responsible. Each principal is his own school's Chief Operating Officer (COO). As such, he is the school's manager and leader."

As managers, principals must marshal considerable human and physical resources to accomplish the school's mission. They must maintain a skilled and highly motivated teaching staff while managing a large resource base. They must gain the trust and respect of thousands of clients.

And they must accomplish all this while operating in the onerous environment of collective agreements and government regulation.

Principals can work miracles in the face of all the usual constraints.

- Under principal Irwin Kurz, the 6th grade at PS 161 in Brooklyn, New York, has the second-highest reading scores in all of New York State. Ninety-eight percent of his students qualify for the free or reduced-price lunch.
- KIPP Academy in Houston, Texas, under Michael Feinberg, is 90% low-income and 90% Hispanic. Within one year, students who enter the middle school with passage rates of 35-50% on the state assessment test are passing by more than 90% in math and reading.
- Despite the fact that 78% of her Inglewood, California students are low-income, for 20 years Nancy Ichinaga's school has been one of the highest performers in all of Los Angeles County.
- A neighbourhood school that is 45% black and 55% Latino, David Levin's KIPP Academy in new York City's South Bronx is housed in the same building as the lowest-performing school in the district. Math scores at KIPP average in the 79th and 82nd percentile after two and three years, respectively.
- At Earhart Elementary in the southside of Chicago, Illinois, 82% of the children come from low-income families. Between 1991 and 1998, under the leadership of Hellen DeBerry, the national percentile ranking of the 6th grade shot from 40th to 78th in reading and from 27th to 85th in math.
- Led by Gregory Hodge, the middle school at the Frederick Douglass Academy in central Harlem ranks 12th in all of New York City, 32 points higher than the city average in reading and 26 points higher in math. There are 79% black students, 20% Latino, and 80% receive a free or reduced price lunch.

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Principals face many of the same challenges that confront their business sector counterparts. In order to succeed, both must possess a comprehensive set of management and leadership tools. Successful leaders have well-honed skills in communications, negotiating, and relationship-building.

When principals run into obstacles that make it hard for them to keep their school on track, they must go through or around those obstacles. If there is no way around, they must not simply accept the situation. Principals who believe that their school's students are being poorly served because of a union contract provision or a district regulation should be willing to fight for change at every opportunity. Advocacy comes with the territory.

Annual measurement and reporting of school performance such as that found in the Fraser Institute rankings is evidence that principals can use to fight for improvements in their schools. There are many practising principals who are undoubtedly skilled COOs. Their success is reflected in our rankings — we rarely hear from them.

These principals regularly use their own analysis of school performance data to design and implement improvement plans that address areas of concern. When our report cards come out, they no doubt study them to find indicators suggesting new areas where they can improve. These principals serve as an inspiration and an example to others whose management and leadership skills need honing.

And Mike McIndoe? Happily for him, Salmo improved its rating in this year's report card. Much more improvement is possible at Salmo, and we hope that Mr. McIndoe will have the chance to make it happen.

(Mr. Cowley is the co-author of the Fraser Institute's annual report cards on Canada's high schools. This article was adapted with permission from one in the March 2000 Fraser Forum.)