LEADERSHIP

The vital role of school leadership in the improvement of student achievement is well documented. After teacher quality, school leadership is the single most important factor in student achievement (Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). Further, the impact of leadership tends to be greatest in schools where the learning needs of students are most acute (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson & Wahlstrom, 2004). Leaders impact student learning both directly and indirectly by setting direction, developing people, and making the organization work (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson & Wahlstrom, 2004). Leadership is a complex process involving a wide variety of skills. Individual leadership styles differ based on personality and the context in which their leadership occurs. School leaders must often adapt their style to the specific needs of the school population they serve. While there is generalized agreement on what leaders do, present research lacks specificity as to what leaders do in the urban environment to improve schools and classrooms.

The senior administrators of the five schools interviewed for these case studies come to their positions from different backgrounds and at different times within the life of the school. The principals of BGCS were both teachers in the school before being promoted to their leadership roles. The executive principal of MCPS helped to found the school after serving as a principal of a private school. The principal of SOHE helped to found the school after a long career as a curriculum director in a suburban school district. The principal of WLS was a teacher at the school, then left to take a position in a private school. She was then asked by the WLS faculty to return to be their principal. The principal of the YLA founded the school after a career as a teacher in the Milwaukee Public schools.

The leadership teams serving the five schools also have somewhat different compositions. BGCS is lead by two principals (elementary and middle school) and an assistant principal/curriculum director. Back office support is provided through the United Community Center, the sponsoring organization. The leadership team of MCPS is composed of an executive principal, curriculum director, principal, two academic deans, and a business administrator. The executive principal, curriculum director, and business manager also oversee the two additional Milwaukee College Prep schools. SOHE is lead by elementary and middle school directors. Back office support is provided by the Seeds of Health, Inc. that also runs two high schools and a social service program. Woodlands is lead by a principal, dean of students, and a part time business administrator. The YLA is lead by a principal and assistant principal. Back office support is provided by the YMCA, its sponsoring organization.

The leaders have different personalities and as individuals approach their roles somewhat differently. There are, however, elements of leadership that they share. They effectively blend these leadership elements to create the high achieving urban schools they serve. As a group, the administrators:
• Are highly mission directed with a strong interest in student outcomes.
• Have high academic and behavioral expectations for students and staff.
• Show a willingness to share control by putting the right people in the right positions, giving them responsibility, and trusting them to accomplish the jobs assigned to them.
• Extend themselves to enable others to do their jobs better, encouraging them, and showing respect for them.
• Are committed to the professional growth of everyone within the organization, acknowledging staff, listening with empathy, and facilitating teachers’ needs.
• Create and maintain a feeling of community for both students and staff.

Each of the elements does not and cannot stand alone. They are tightly interwoven, one dependent on the other to create the successful leadership that results in high student achievement.

The leaders of the five schools are “mission driven.” Senior leaders, administrators and teachers are very conscious of their end goal. The mission of YLA is “College bound, character strong” and MCPS’s is “Knowledge plus character paves the way to college and beyond.” Administrators and teachers recognize that they must build strong character and academic prowess via a rigorous differentiated curriculum if they are to meet their goal of gaining entry for their graduates into Milwaukee’s better high schools and give the students the opportunity to go on to college. SOHE uses “Capturing Kids Hearts” to build character and a strong academic program while BGCS seeks to move all students into the best high schools so they are able to become part of America’s middle class. For Woodlands it is the “Woodlands Way,” a belief system that allows teachers to teach, students to grow and learn, and comes together through leadership to create high expectations, trust and commitment to the mission.

The leader’s emphasis on obtaining knowledge and developing positive character is transformational for each of the schools. The development of positive student character makes it possible to create a culture where academic learning is important. The leaders of the five schools lead by example and expect teachers to do the same. At BGCS the principal tells teachers that they must “have the utmost respect for each child.” “I need you to see not 22 different faces but I need you to see your own children. How you treat your own children is how you should treat them. Does anyone here wish his or her children not to succeed? You love them and you care for them and you care about their academic achievement.”

At MCPS the principals tell teachers “Practice what you preach. If you want students to be self-disciplined, goal oriented and proactive, you must live it yourself.” “You have to erase or at least delete the tapes you have playing in your head (from prior experiences).” “You have to change your language and your reactions to get positive results. Initially it may take more work and added effort to tell a student, ‘You are too wonderful to be making this bad choice,’ rather that ‘Stop running down the hallway.’ But eventually it will become natural and like a second language for you.”
Each morning, the elementary and middle school directors of SOHE greet each student by name at the door as parents drop them off. They comment positively about the student and let them know that they are glad to see them. This same respect is shown to staff members and, in turn, staff members are expected to show respect and concern for each child in their class.

The multi-age classroom structure at Woodlands is all about sharing. Classrooms are constantly abuzz as students in cooperative learning groups discuss lessons and work on projects. This sharing extends to cross-grade activities where older students assist younger students with projects. This assistance expands beyond the academic to the precepts of the “Woodlands Way” to build character. Thus, the lessons are as much about social cooperation and the willingness to help others with respect as they are about academics.

The principal of YLA teaches one class of middle school students so that he is closer to the needs of the teachers and students. He also uses this classroom as a demonstration for teachers who may need additional help. At other times he is found stopping in different classrooms to quiz students on how they are doing, asking them to recite the schools mission statement or their class mission. He uses these visits to reinforce the mission for both students and staff.

The leaders of the five schools are quick to point out that “great teachers are the reason for their school’s success”. The great teachers, however, are not there by accident. The school leaders practice what the executive principal of MCPS refers to as “mission based hiring.” This begins with the selection of staff committed to the mission in both their beliefs and their cooperative efforts to facilitate the mission. Selection of staff who “buy in,” allows the leadership to advance an agenda for creating a culture of behavior that facilitates the “opportunity for teachers to teach” and “students to learn.”

Just as the leaders do mission based hiring, the reverse is true if they believe that a teacher does not fully share the school’s beliefs or is not able to consistently meet instructional expectations. While the school leaders endeavor to make every teacher successful and at times make extraordinary efforts to help a teacher, if the teacher does not measure up, their employment is terminated. Teachers support administrators in this practice with one interviewee stating: “If they don’t believe as we do they just have to go.”

Once a teacher is hired the schools provide extensive staff development that inculcates the teacher into the culture of the school. Teachers have the opportunity to participate in many activities that establish practices throughout the school. Once these practices are agreed upon, they are supported through staff development, colleague mentors, and direct assistance from administrators. Administrators conduct both formal and informal observations throughout the year. If improvement is needed both the administrator and veteran teachers are enlisted to help a teacher. Administrators seek more than compliance from teachers. They seek internalization of the mission, beliefs, and practices. At Woodlands it is becoming part of the “Woodland’s Way.” At Seeds of Health Elementary it is “capturing each child’s heart.”
Senior leadership also practices what the executive principal of MCPS terms “deficit hiring.” This means that he seeks out individuals with talent in specific areas in which he is not an expert or chooses not to exert full control. Behind this action is the belief that when teachers are given the opportunity to lead and accept responsibility a positive environment can be achieved that promotes both positive social behaviors and supports a pro-learning climate. This allows the administration to extend leadership beyond the administrative team to teachers and others with demonstrated ability. Once these assignments are made, individuals have the ability to grow the assignment and reach for excellence. This creates a feeling of trust and inclusion that helps to build the community.

Through their administrator’s instructional leadership, each school has developed a program of high expectations for student behavior and academic achievement. Each school has a rigorous curriculum and instructional methodology to bring the curriculum to the students in an engaging manner. Classroom instruction is set up to create what MCPS call the “joy factor.” Lessons are presented in a manner that involves the learner as a participant, not an observer. Whether it is the cooperative group challenges at Woodlands or the Socratic methodology utilized at MCPS, teachers engage students in the lessons, ensuring that they understand concepts and can put knowledge into practice.

As one moves about each school the consistency from class to class and grade to grade is very noticeable. The school leaders have created common processes and practices that all teachers use as part of the instructional routine. The use of these common processes and practices provide a very stable learning environment for students. As a result, students always know what is expected of them. The school’s leaders constantly move about the school, stopping in classrooms for quick visits. At MCPS they leave notes termed “Glows and Grows.” These notes let teachers know what they are doing right and what areas they can improve on. The same process is seen at BGCS as one teacher stated, “They are very nice but very vocal about what is expected.”

Administrators meet with teachers on a regular basis to review individual student progress. One school leader stated that it is her responsibility to know each student as well as their classroom teachers does. This serves to hold the teacher accountable for each child’s progress and provides the opportunity to seek assistance with students who are not progressing appropriately. At MCPS administrators and teachers state unequivocally that “students don’t fail, schools and teachers do.”

Administrators realize that the creation of a feeling of community is key to success. Both students and staff must buy in for the program to be successful. The sense of community is created through the morning assemblies, classroom identification with a college, consistent expectations, and common practices. As one principal stated, “The same language is heard throughout the building.” “It becomes contagious and everyone wants to be part of it.” This feeling of being part of the school and the resulting pride increase the desire of students to meet the social and academic expectations.

Searching for terms that are descriptive of these schools’ leadership, what one arrives at the insight that these schools have a congruent environment where the blend of leadership, staff and students works to achieve common goals that are understood by all the participants. The elements of character development and academic rigor are very evident in the defining of the school
culture. The culture becomes a way of living for the entire school community. Positive behavior and the joy of learning become the norm.

The leaders of the five schools model the character development they want to see in students. The values of respect, integrity, quality, hard work and responsibility are not only posted on the wall, they are spoken about, recited, and acted on. These values become the foundation for leaders to support teachers and for teachers to make it possible for students to reach their academic goals.

**Mission and Values**

It has become commonplace to say that successful organizations are mission driven. And that is precisely the case with the five successful charter schools involved in this study. The mission statements, and associated statements of philosophy, values and goals, guide the long-term and daily activities of the schools. Perhaps more importantly, the mission, values and goals have been embraced by everyone in the school—Board, administrators, teachers, staff, parents and students.

The formal mission statements, although stated in different ways, point to two interrelated goals. This is most explicit in these two statements: “Milwaukee College Prep is a free, K-8 public charter school that every child in the city of Milwaukee is eligible to attend, whose mission is ‘Knowledge plus character pave the road to college and beyond.’”

“Young Leaders Academy, a public, free charter school, is committed to developing the leadership capabilities of our students through an innovative curriculum, high expectations, and a character-based approach to learning.” The tag line is “College Bound, Character Strong.”

At the other three schools, the mission statements are not quite as explicit but they address the same two goals: high academic expectations and high character expectations.

“The Seeds of Health Elementary mission is to work in strong partnership with parents and community to fully develop physical, emotional, social and intellectual potential of each child in a safe and supportive learning environment.”

“Woodlands offers an innovative educational program of excellence for the whole child in a multicultural environment that prepares the child for lifelong learning in a rapidly changing society.”

“The mission of Bruce-Guadalupe Community School, a non-sectarian, nonprofit, community-based charter school is to create an environment that fosters high expectations and excellence for all students.

The mission and values of the schools are alive and shared within the school communities. The Seeds of Health Elementary Principal stated:
The mission holds us together. It is the common thread that binds the staff into developing learning strategies that help, understand and individualize learning opportunities for each child that enters the school. It is underneath all decisions in the agency as well as filtering down into the classroom.

In interviews with Milwaukee College Preparatory School Board members, administrators, and teachers, every individual explained the mission in almost the same words. “We will do everything in our power to see that our students are prepared to enter a strong college preparatory program in high school and that they have the moral character and determination to be successful in life.” Almost to a person, teachers stated, “If a student does not learn it is my fault.”

A founding member of the Young Leaders Academy teaching staff says, “Our mission and core values set the tone for the school and are at the center of the school’s culture.” Another long term YLA teacher says that everything the school does revolves around mission and vision of the school. All employees, he states, “believe that every child in the school has a right to a first-class education and those who don’t believe that don’t last long. Some have been terminated in their fourth or fifth weeks into the school year.”

As articulated by the Bruce Guadalupe Community School administrators and teachers, the formal mission statement becomes much more specific: in the words of the elementary school principal, “get kids to the best high schools, get kids to have success in the high schools and move kids to the middle class.” Even a first grade teacher says the mission is “To prepare students to go to the best high schools and colleges.” She sees first grade as a foundation for that goal.

Woodlands School staff and administration refer constantly to the Woodlands Way: a set of guiding principles used to organize and express the culture of the school. The Woodlands Way is captured in the mnemonic device—RESPECT.

Respect for Learning

Education that is integrated (collaborative and connected)

Set up life-long learning (meaningful learning)

Pride in diversity (value and honor for all)

Excellence (growth to reach potential)

Creative discovery based learning (problem solving, learning by doing)

Time for living (respect and responsibility to others)

The RESPECT device is used to prompt focus in both learning and behavior interactions.

The power of a school’s mission and values is realized in the daily activities of the administration and teachers.
The leaders at MCPS practice what they term “mission based hiring,” carefully screening potential candidates. They rely heavily on recommendations from teachers and parents. They never hire someone without seeing them in action. If a hiring decision turns out to be wrong, they are quick to remedy the situation. As the Executive Principal pointed out, a new hire was let go after participating in two days of the teacher pre-school staff development program because, “We could see that she was just not going to make it.” Teachers support this action. One teacher interviewed stated: “We just couldn’t have people who do not believe in our mission.” They would just have to leave.”

At all five schools relatively low teacher turnover maintains a staff that is committed to the mission and values. Teachers are active in the staff selection process. Potential new hires are often recommended by current staff members. In some cases, prospective teachers have to teach a lesson as part of the selection process.

The mission and values of the schools are kept in front of students throughout the day. At Milwaukee College Preparatory School each day begins with a “community” gathering through which the mission and beliefs are highlighted. Each classroom is named for a college, often the one the teacher graduated from. Students learn school cheers and chants about the school. The college becomes part of their identity within the school. The classroom develops its own mission in concordance with the school’s mission. Each student develops a mission statement relating to college attainment.

At Seeds of Health, in accord with the mission and values, empathy and encouragement are demonstrated on a daily basis, intentionally and constantly. Messages of personal best drape the hallways. Teachers discuss students and their learning and personal needs at team meetings. Numerous expressions of gratitude for teachers and the quality of their teaching are made at staff meetings.

Each morning at Young Leaders Academy begins with a whole school assembly held outside on the playground in warm weather or in the gymnasium if it’s cold or rainy. A limited number of announcements are made, student poetry or short stories may be read or their songs may be sung, grade level initiatives may be started, and an occasional academic challenge with a travelling trophy going to the winner initiated. Student leaders lead most of the activities.

At Bruce Guadalupe Community School two students have roles in the morning announcements, leading the Pledge of Allegiance or reading a portion of the day’s announcements. The school’s mission is front and center as each student starts his or her portion by saying something like “My name is Javier, my teacher is Ms. Corbett and when I go to college I will study to be an FBI agent” (or a veterinarian or a nurse or whatever.)

The Bruce Guadalupe Community School curriculum is guided by the Common Core State Standards but also by the Explore test of the ACT suite of tests. According to the Explore website, “Taking Explore in 8th or 9th grade tells you things you need to know—to plan your high school courses, prepare for the ACT, or choose a career direction.” At BGCS, students take the
Explore test in 6th, 7th and 8th grades, in part because it is the entrance exam for a number of the best high schools.

As part of the Woodlands Way, the school uses a multi-grade approach (1/2, 3/4, 5/6, 7/8). The older students, those who had stayed with the teacher, set the tone for academics and behavior for the new students. As a result a climate is developed in which teachers can teach and students can learn.

The realization of high academic expectations and high character expectations for students is enabled by a fundamental value that was evident in each of the schools. Essentially it is that the administrators and teachers have accepted responsibility for the academic and social development of the students.

Young Leaders Academy teachers see children as they would their own child and “we have to make things work for our kids” as one primary grade teacher said. “If we don’t do everything we can to assure that child learns, who will?” he asked. He went on to note, with emphasis, that a group of like-minded YLA teachers use the phrase “make it happen here” often to emphasize that at YLA they will go the extra mile for “their kids” to be successful “because that’s what we’re about here at YLA.”

The principal of Bruce Guadalupe Community School tells the teachers “You need to have the utmost respect for a child. If you have children of your own, or maybe nieces or nephews, I need you to see not 22 different faces but I need you to see your own children. How you would treat your own children is how you should treat them. Does anyone here wish his or her kids not to succeed? You love them and you care for them and you care about their academic achievement. When I see our 1000 kids, I see (and he says the names of his own four children.)”

One element of the Woodlands Way that is stressed is promoting to students and staff that students have unique aspects in their learning style and as students mature they need to manage their own learning moving toward adulthood. Becoming responsible for ones learning is a desired outcome of the school.

Seeds of Health Elementary School provides numerous student activities that require extra time and effort from the staff. It is shown in the homework club, soccer club, or “Mad Hat” dancing club. During the staff interviews at Seeds of Health Elementary, the resounding expression was “we are in this together.” The staff not only models it but lives it, creating a strong foundation built upon this belief. The school also has practiced the “Capturing Kids’ Hearts” program for ten years. The program is based on the concept that “if you have a child’s heart you will have his/her mind.”

In talking with Milwaukee College Preparatory School board members, administrators, and teachers one consistently hears three refrains: “all children can learn”, “we will do everything possible to see that all children learn”, and “children don’t fail, schools and
teachers do.” Teachers build close relationships with students by constantly showing that they care about them. Teachers learn about the student and his/her family. They listen to student concerns. They follow through to address student needs both academically and emotionally. They embody the often-heard phrase: “Failure is not an option.”