

# Introduction

This book tells real stories, with actual names, of five principals in urban public schools who recognized that they had the potential to raise every student's performance to grade-level proficiency and above. These are stories of successful leadership against enormous odds. With few precedents to follow, the five leaders crafted innovative structures within their schools and empowered their faculty to collaborate to improve student learning. These principals, operating in the Boston Public Schools (BPS), instituted many new practices that today are regarded as "musts" in meeting the requirements of 2002 No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation. Their remarkable accomplishments provide leadership lessons beneficial to anyone interested in public school reform.

## Principals Accountable for Student Performance

The stories of the five principals portrayed here have special relevance for educators. These leaders were chosen because of their success in creating schools that graduated students with high levels of achievement under some of the most trying and problematic conditions. Success in the challenging environments they inherited frequently yielded leadership lessons not found under more supportive conditions. Their tenures as principals extended over an average of ten years, ensuring that their records were not chance events. Most significantly, these principals were on the vanguard, confronting not only the requirements of the NCLB legislation but also a law with similar impacts and consequences that arrived in Massachusetts four years earlier, in 1998. The Massachusetts legislature passed a far-reaching Education Reform Act in 1993 that anticipated and exceeded many of the requirements of the NCLB legislation. It mandated the creation of a grade-level performance test for all fourth, eighth, and tenth graders, the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS). By 2003, a passing score on the state's high-stakes student performance test became a requirement to graduate from high school with a diploma recognized by the state. MCAS scores received widespread news media attention,

putting pressure on educators, especially principals, as comparisons were drawn between schools with similar demographic profiles.

Four of the leaders began their principalships in the 1990s and the fifth in 1987, all prior to the first administration of the MCAS. It turned out that unlike most of their colleagues statewide, however, these five principals were ready for the MCAS. In 1998, the five principals had already begun to reshape their schools to focus more on raising their students' academic performance, the outcome demanded by MCAS and the subsequent goal of the 2002 NCLB legislation. Kim Marshall, whose story is described in detail in chapter 2, wholeheartedly welcomed the test because it finally gave him a standard to work toward in aligning his teachers' instructional efforts.

The administration of the MCAS test, which Massachusetts would use as its performance measure on 2002 NCLB legislative requirements, sent a wake-up call to all principals in the state. They, not the teachers in their schools, were now ultimately accountable for the academic achievement of their school's students; there was now a measure calibrating the success of each leader's performance. Now, the school as a whole, not the sum of each teacher's instructional efforts, was thought to make the difference in student learning. The principal's job was given increased significance.

Principals had always held some accountability for student achievement, but it had been indirect and, at best, ambiguous. For high schools, the percentage of graduates accepted into higher education and the status of the university, college, or junior college was of some importance. But these results were rarely calculated and even more infrequently used to confront poor principal performance. SAT scores were often the boast of high-achieving students and the embarrassment of low performers. But these scores were seen as reflections of individual student performance, not the product of a particular school.

Prior to the MCAS and NCLB requirements, there were no agreed-upon measures of middle and grade school performance. If a school appeared to be graduating less-than-adequately prepared students, this could be conveniently attributed to poor teaching. Schools were implicitly viewed as, and most frequently were, assemblages of classrooms linked by corridors. Principals had no direct role in mediating student achievement. The MCAS and NCLB legislation, for better or worse, changed all that. A school's performance would still be a function of

good or poor teaching, but now the effect of each grade level on the next and all successive grade levels could be measured. The whole could be greater or less than the sum of the parts, and that outcome could be attributed to the leadership of the principal.

## Can Schools Make a Difference?

Early on in their long tenures, the five principals embraced the concept of a total school making a difference in student achievement. Conventional wisdom, however, attributed these effects to student background—with some influence from individual teachers in their separate classrooms—taking credit and responsibility away from the schools themselves.

Some thirty years earlier, in the context of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the United States Congress commissioned James Coleman, of the University of Chicago, to research and report back to Congress and the president on “the lack of available opportunities for individuals by reason of race, color, religion, or national origin in public institutions.”<sup>1</sup> The report’s well-publicized findings asserted that schools accounted for only about 10 percent of the variance in student achievement; the characteristics of student background were purported to account for the other 90 percent. Madaus et al. explained that the Coleman Report had two primary effects on perceptions about schooling in America. First, it cast schools as an ineffective agent in equalizing the disparity in students’ academic achievement due to environmental factors. Second, it suggested that differences between schools had little, if any, relationship to student achievement.<sup>2</sup>

The five principals presented in this book were unconvinced of Coleman’s claims, and they were not alone in questioning family background as the sole determinant of student performance. While a collection of studies, loosely labeled the School Effectiveness Movement and championed by Ronald R. Edmonds, provided counterevidence to Coleman, these findings were not well publicized except in academic circles.<sup>3</sup>

In the 1990s, with the help of large sample size and statistical meta-analysis, Robert J. Marzano published a major synthesis of other research: *What Works in Schools: Translating Research into Action*. This work provided convincing evidence that schools, properly organized and led, could have a powerful influence on student achievement and pointed to those elements of schools that made a difference.<sup>4</sup> By the time this

affirming statistical work was published, the five principals were already deeply engaged in their change efforts.

## The Local Context

The five principals worked within the Boston Public Schools, a district that was, until the arrival of a new superintendent in 1996, largely dysfunctional. The district regularly graduated inadequately prepared students and, according to the results of the Metropolitan Achievement Test (MAT), a norm referenced test that allowed Boston to compare its student achievement to that of the national population, students performed well below average.

Despite the well-intentioned change efforts of the four superintendents over the preceding twenty years, the Boston school system was effectively paralyzed. Traumatized by a radically altered student population and economically abandoned by paltry city budgets, BPS was neither recruiting new teacher talent nor shoring up veterans. The administration at both the school and district levels lacked the leadership necessary to chart the course for a new education plan in Boston.

In 1974, court-ordered busing to address segregated schools caused “white flight” and an exodus of middle-class blacks and Hispanics from the system. This migration severed the community bonds fostered by local schools. Over the next two decades, newly arrived immigrants from Asia and Central and South America filled the void left by the fleeing population and radically shifted student demographics. When veteran teachers began their work in Boston, most students entering school spoke English as their first language, and their parents were able to provide them with assistance when they were struggling. Many students walked to school on their own or with their parents. By the mid-1990s, however, few students and families matched this description. The majority of students were black or Hispanic, and many came from families where no English was spoken in the home. Parents whose children were systematically bused out of their communities no longer had the same opportunities to be actively involved in their children’s schooling.

Some innovative teachers worked hard to change their practices and ensure that they were still reaching their students. Many teachers continued to rely on methods that had served them well in the past,

but those methods were inadequate to meet present challenges. Isolated in their classrooms, most Boston teachers did not know how to change their practice to effectively educate the students sitting before them. Racism and socioeconomic discrimination became a covert norm in many Boston schools. The district in the early 1990s simply could not tap into student potential.

## Who's in Charge?

Even in the mid-1990s, Boston's schools were predominantly run by the teachers. Principals by and large stayed out of classrooms, and teachers chose their curriculum with little more than a nod toward district prescriptions, subjectively determining which of their students would pass. Teachers resided in one building but taught in their classrooms without communicating with each other. They were the monarchs of their classrooms, and there they reigned supreme. The five principals featured in this book did not question whether great teachers existed, but they were also confident that *schools* could make an impact on student learning for all children. They believed that schools, not just individual teachers, could be the driving entity of educational reform.

At the time, principals were seen not as instructional leaders but as managers nominally in charge. They managed outside the classrooms: safety in the lunchroom and on the playground, bus scheduling, issues of health and welfare, and discipline for bad behavior. They had very little to do with what happened *inside* the classrooms—even who was teaching. The teacher's union, in its agreement with the district, had designed a process by which time-consuming observations and elaborate documentation protected all but the most egregious performers from dismissal. Aware of the tremendous obstacles to dismissing a tenured teacher, many principals gave up on attempting to rid their schools of poor educators. When vacancies did arise through retirement, transfer, or rare dismissal, principals were severely limited in the hiring choices available to them. All hiring was done centrally, and the pool of tenured faculty who did not have a guaranteed position for the coming year had to be exhausted before a new hire could be considered. Boston Public Schools' principals had little formal organizational power to control the destiny of their schools.

## Resources for Change

Budgets were thin, and Boston had not yet awakened to the fact that its schools were intellectually bankrupt. The meager funding available to schools from local businesses was piecemeal and not necessarily connected to improving instructional practice. Scattered and unfocused funding spread across 130 schools did not make a sustainable impact anywhere.

Successful principals depended on their own entrepreneurial skills to generate extra resources for their schools. Foundations and local businesses that embraced a social mission could be convinced to offer funds to principals who were adept at casting their schools as the ugly duckling: “With just a little help from a generous benefactor, we could grow into a swan that you could feel proud of having nurtured.”

October 1996 proved to be a crucial turning point in public education in Boston. Dr. Thomas Payzant, an experienced urban reformer and a recent senior official in President Clinton’s Department of Education, became superintendent of the Boston Public Schools.<sup>5</sup> He quickly realized that in order to radically improve student achievement, major foundation support was needed to supplement the city’s education budget. Consolidating previously pledged funding with a grant from the Annenberg Foundation, Payzant created a professional development plan for the school system. The Boston Plan for Excellence (BPE) was explicitly commissioned to assist schools that were ready to participate in whole-school change. To be included, a school’s faculty had to agree by a 75 percent affirmative vote that they were ready to accept and implement the mandated change structures. Three of the principals discussed here encouraged their faculties to apply and were accepted to BPE’s whole-school change network. The partnership provided teachers with much-needed subject-area expertise to ratchet up instruction in their schools and guide them through standards-based reform efforts. A fourth principal sought extra funding on his own from the private business sector.

## Exemplars for School Transformation

The five principals we selected for inclusion in this study demonstrated leadership toward improving student achievement in their schools and exhibited a diversity of leadership styles in changing their schools. In making the selections, preference was given to principals who evi-

denced success in providing a viable platform for instructional improvement in the first two or three years of their principalships and who built on that success in subsequent years to order to achieve higher student performance.

The narratives, written as self-contained lessons in school reform, trace the leadership trajectories of the five principals. The cases are based on interviews we conducted with both the principals and staff members who worked under their leadership. The Glossary of Terms explains specific terminology used in these case studies. All principals reviewed their narrative chapters and allowed their names and the names of their schools to be used to highlight the accuracy of the account as well as to leave a personal legacy for future school leaders. Names of teachers and administrators in the five schools have been changed except that of Karen Loughran, a teacher and informal teacher leader at Charlestown High School (chapter 4).

Each of these five leaders developed and honed strategies and philosophies that would set a high bar for other principals in meeting the performance standards of NCLB legislation. All chose to draw on their gifts and talents to push through the various challenges the schools presented. In chapter 1, Casel Walker's moral authority, quiet determination, acute listening abilities, and capacity to speak the truth galvanize a sleepy, urban/suburban school into a self-sustaining, high-performing system. In chapter 2, Kim Marshall, educational innovator, designs and doggedly implements one of the first complete instructional systems to continuously improve student performance. In chapter 3, Muriel Leonard's powerful "tough love" challenges teachers and students, demanding them to give and be their best. Inheriting a chaotic situation, she builds a highly functioning school in under five years. In chapter 4, Michael Fung, a political strategist and power broker, succeeds in markedly improving the performance of his ninth and tenth graders by sidestepping union rules and hiring a new cadre of young, inexperienced teachers, placing them in an autonomous instructional unit where they flourish as an instructional team. In chapter 5, Kathleen Flannery brokers her extraordinary talent for listening and embracing the ideas of others to build a school community where teachers and parents genuinely feel accountable for student learning. Chapter 6 synthesizes the "Leadership Lessons" from the five narratives and places them in the context of relevant research and best practices.