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ABSTRACT

This paper presents findings of one in a series of case studies designed to study leadership in schools committed to reform. Gavin Elementary School in Chicago Heights, Illinois, serves a predominantly African-American, low-income, neighborhood. In 1988, the school's achievement test scores were the lowest in the lowest-achieving Illinois school district. This paper describes the school's attempts to shield students from the surrounding harsh conditions while engaging in a mutually supportive relationship with the community. It examines the leadership structure at work within the school and how it successfully creates a healthy, caring, learning environment. The school's affiliation with the Illinois Network of Accelerated Schools is also described. Conclusions are that a school's mission develops from real-life experience rather than from workshop exercises and that intrinsic rewards drive staff commitment. In the final section, the researcher describes the personal lessons she learned from the experience and offers reflections on the relevance of her white-liberal philosophy for the realities of poverty. The case study methodology included onsite observation, interviews with stakeholders, and informal discussions. (LMI)

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ED 360 686

**Dr. Charles E. Gavin School  
A Case Study**

**The National Center  
for  
School Leadership**

**Project Report**

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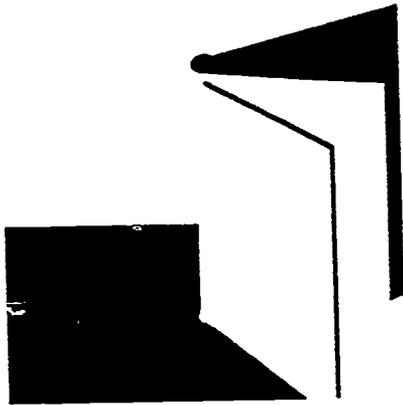
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***Dr. Charles E. Gavin School  
A Case Study***

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## **Cases in Distributed Leadership**

### **A General Introduction to the Study**

In order to broaden our understanding of leadership in schools committed to reform, we selected four buildings which were committed to one of three types of educational reform: the network of Accelerated Schools (Levin & Hopfenberg, 1991), the National Association of Middle Schools (Quattrone, 1990), or the Coalition of Essential Schools (Sizer, 1988). Each of these reforms respects the contextual differences across districts; each of these reforms espouses a set of principles which are central to their thinking about reform; and each of these reforms values collaboration among teachers and administrators. We chose four schools in three states to collect information which could better inform us about the role of leadership in schools striving to make changes.

Researchers developed a case study report for each site after reviewing background reports; interviewing faculty, administrators (in some cases), students and parents; and observing meetings and classes. The case studies and the cross case analysis will enable the reader to

- 1) Examine and evaluate the warrant that each of the cases deserve the label "having made progress" toward their commitment to reform.
- 2) Explore the nature of leadership, including the process of distributing leadership, among the school participants.
- 3) Speculate upon the interaction between leadership, the schools' commitment to change, and the schools' culture.

The case study methodology allowed us to observe the schools' social structures and leadership structures within the context of one year in the life of the change effort. A variety of rich resources are available to the researcher who spends extended time at a research site thus, "permitting a holistic study of complex social networks and complexes of social action and social meanings" (Feagin, Orum, and Sjoberg, 1991). Additionally, the time spent in the schools allowed for an historical overview of the change processes. Looking at the schools across cases offered the opportunity to look for common themes, theoretical underpinnings, and beliefs and decisions that guided the schools through their evolutions.

During Summer and Fall 1991, the NCSL research team met to establish criteria for site selection and systemize procedures for contact with each potential site. The selection criteria included four elements: a) the school must be publicly committed to a set of guiding principles for reform; b) the school must have local and, if possible, a state or nation wide reputation for having made progress toward putting these principles into practice; c) the school must be located near enough to a site researcher's home to permit regular visits to the school; and d) the school must agree to serve as a site. NCSL staff informally contacted school staff to determine possible interest in participating in the study while, at the same time, making inquiries into schools' reputations for making progress in their individual reform efforts. Schools were aware that they would be identified by name, but all staff members would be identified by pseudonym.

The NCSL staff ultimately chose four schools that met all of the selection criteria: Hollibrook Elementary School in Spring Branch, Texas; Dr. Charles E. Gavin Elementary School in Chicago Heights, Illinois; Cross Keys Middle School in Florissant, Missouri; and Roger L. Sullivan High School in Chicago, Illinois. Following the informal contact, the school principals were asked if they would like to be a site for a study of school leadership, defined broadly to include both teachers and administrators. In three of the schools, Hollibrook, Cross Keys, and Gavin, the principals agreed to participate after members of the school staff consented to become sites early in Fall 1991. At Sullivan the process took longer, in part because of a threatened teacher strike in the Chicago area. The principal initially agreed that an NCSL staff member could visit the school, but official permission to become a part of the study was not granted until early in 1992, once the school staff began to feel comfortable with the researcher's presence.

Data collection began in September 1991. During Fall 1991 site researchers visited the schools, observed meetings, sat in on classes, and talked informally with administrators and teachers. Data collection during Spring 1991 focused on semi-structured interviews with the school faculty, staff, and administration, and (in some cases) district administrators, parents, and students. Informal observations and discussions continued throughout the year.

The interviews were designed to accomplish two objectives: a) to gather information on participants' perceptions of change at their school, including their own roles in the change

process; and b) to identify people perceived to be school leaders, whether their leadership had anything to do with the change process or not. The informal observations and discussions served as points of triangulation (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) for information obtained in the interviews, and also provided insight into the current status of reform in each school.

The resulting data were analyzed independently by each site researcher and also by two NCSL research assistants. As data became available the NCSL staff coded fieldnotes and interview transcripts into seven categories. In monthly research team meetings, the site researchers and the NCSL staff discussed both the categorization of fieldnotes and the themes that might be inferred from the data. These discussions enabled all researchers to review and reformulate a collective understanding of themes relating to school leadership and school change.

Once all data were collected (April 1992), each site researcher wrote an individual, narrative summary of his or her school case. The entire research team met three times to share internal drafts of the case studies. Each draft was read, questioned, and debated by all team members. To prepare the cross case analysis, two NCSL research assistants reviewed the entire corpus of fieldnotes and interviews. Data for each school were categorized according to statements related to mission, change, decision making, administrators, teachers, instruction, psychological environment, district relations, and community/family relations. These data were then summarized in paragraph form for each school, followed by a discussion of trends across schools as they related to each of the nine categories. The NCSL staff then condensed the categories into the three areas discussed above: a) the warrant for progress; b) the nature of leadership; and c) the interactions among leadership and school culture. The third drafts were shared with two external consultants, as was the second draft of the cross case analysis. Following these external reviews, the cases and the cross case analysis were revised for distribution as technical reports.

## **Abstract**

**This is a story of an elementary school battling the odds. Gavin's principal and teachers work side-by-side to provide educational experiences for their students amidst the influence of poverty. The harsh surrounding conditions are described as well as the school's attempts to shield the students from them while engaged in a mutually supportive relationship with the surrounding community. The report describes the leadership structure at work within the school and how it successfully creates a healthy, warm learning environment for its students. Additionally, the school's affiliation with the Illinois Network of Accelerated Schools is described.**

## Table of Contents

<b>PART ONE: Introduction.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>PART TWO: Setting . . . "The Oasis" .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Gavin Lowest... Test Scores .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Do What You Have To Do... Illinois Network of</b>	
<b>Accelerated Schools.....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>The Gavin Family.....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>PART THREE: Leadership .....</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>How Will We Do It?... Decision Making.....</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>Challenges and Changes.....</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>The Goals .....</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>The Vehicle .....</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>The Commitment .....</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>The Lessons.....</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>PART FOUR: My Personal Lesson by Irene Diedrich-Rielly .....</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>References.....</b>	<b>37</b>

## GAVIN SCHOOL—CASE STUDY

"I mean, we're all stuck here for a while. Let's try to work it out. Let's try and work it out." (Rodney King, Chicago Tribune, 5/2/92, p. 1)

### PART ONE: Introduction

The themes of "being stuck" and "working it out" are played out in the story of Dr. Charles E. Gavin School, an elementary school serving a predominantly African-American population. This case study tells about how a community experienced extreme social change and how the members of the community worked to address those changes. More than that, it is a story of how community leaders have taken on and have been working to master the challenge of influencing, even directing, major change.

While memories change with the passage of time, the members of the Gavin School community share recollections which weave and blend to form a picture of what the community has been like over the years. The East Side of Chicago Heights wasn't always a place where people were "stuck." Not so very long ago the neighborhood was filled with homes with yards where children played happily and safely. Memory's eyes see Poles, Blacks, Germans, Jews, and Italians sharing cross-cultural bonds of cohesive families and a strong American work ethic as witnessed by dads who headed off to work each morning at the area industries, and at the many neighborhood stores and businesses. The school, like the church, was the visible presence of shared values, beliefs, and hopes for the fulfillment of the American dream—the glorious unifying symbol of community. Teachers entering school each day found, as did the eager children, that

the climate was very calm. People were all very amicable, everyone was friendly. It was really fun to teach and you didn't have to prepare yourself psychologically for the job. You just came in and taught because it was fun to teach.

Days passed for the children in the way of all golden days of childhood, with swiftness and with timelessness. The children of the community lived a life of working to succeed at the child-job of education, eagerly followed by the after-school playtime of running in and out of each other's homes, where door locks either didn't exist or just went unused.

I can remember my dad, he used to keep the key in the ignition, and if you ever took it out of there, he got mad. And we never—I grew up in the Heights—locked the door; if you did, the key was right above the door and everybody knew the key was above the door.

On the East side of town, the kids who gathered around kitchen tables for after school snacks were usually of different colors and ethnic legacies. Difference didn't matter, for they shared the great childhood unifier of being playmates, of accepting and delighting in human differences. The fact that across town diversity was curtailed by the conspicuous absence of any children of color was not an issue to these children. Places where their families were not welcome was a remote issue relegated to the world of adult discourse.

The real issues of childhood were school, play, chores, church, and family. Were parents to put it into words, most would probably have said that their goal "was to rear their children in a Christian environment and to afford them an education that would equip them for whatever the future might present to them" (A Brother's Perspective of the Life of Dr. Charles E. Gavin., p. 2.). The children of this time and place stood at the mid-century crossroads between a legacy of pain, hope, and oppression and futures of strife, hopelessness, and suppression.

The social changes of the post-World War II era were visited fully upon this community. Despite mixed views, the public housing was built and the flowers and trees remained on the paper of the architect who drew the sketches. Before long, years of industrial recession took increasing tolls on families, individuals, community institutions. Industries and businesses closed, houses were torn down to be replaced by overgrown lots serving only as refuge to wind-tossed debris. People who were able to find work and better homes elsewhere left the area. As one participant noted, "You can't blame them. If they could find a chance to better themselves, they moved out of the community. The less fortunate are the ones

who are still here." The social evils which inevitably attack the most vulnerable and defenseless among us began a harvest of humanity in the increasingly homogenous community, visibly unified by race and bound by poverty.

Community change is rarely immediate; it is a slow, evolutionary process. This is the case with the East Side of Chicago Heights. "Over the years I started seeing more and more single parents, more and more young people, young girls, having children. It seemed that the problem was starting to perpetuate. You'd see the grandmother, her daughter, and then her child, that kind of thing." The school remained central to the area and, as in better times, continued to reflect its environment. "What happened was that we had a lot of businesses close and then people were out of work. Of course that means a lot of pain as they are unable to maintain. A lot of people were never really able to get into the mainstream again."

Signs of that pain became increasingly plentiful. Unemployment grew until just about every potential worker had been consumed. Welfare checks became the major source of income. Drug dealing became a new local industry, with drug buying the main motivation bringing white visitors to the area. Abuse of various legal and illegal substances often served as a refuge for the hopeless. The prevalence of drugs in the area directly contributed to a rise of violence. "About three years ago, there was a problem with shootings in the area, not at the school, but somebody chasing people in the neighborhood. We had to teach our kids that when they hear a shot, they hit the floor." This is a dramatic contrast to the experiences of students who attended Gavin a few years earlier.

This case study focused on school leaders, their commitment to renewal, and the resulting impact on students. Although the principal was a strong force in the building, a central office administrator, many teachers, and other staff members were also key players in the leadership structure at this school.

We saw the principal, teachers, and other staff members contribute to a program that allowed everyone to use his or her abilities, talents, and skills to the maximum extent possible. The Gavin family helped all members to realize their strengths and discover the contributions they could make to the school. The principal modeled this philosophy for Gavin School, and the staff members rose to the challenge;

teachers focused on the abilities of their students and on the belief that all children could succeed.

This is the story of that school, a school where many people feel "stuck" by conditions that they didn't create. Others are "stuck" by choice, a choice grounded in the active, dedicated belief that this community and its children "can work it out." A belief in the ability of teacher, school, community, and student to succeed regardless of the conditions and circumstances in which a child grows up. A belief that does not excuse anyone from a profound sense of responsibility to that success. A belief that fully acknowledges that this school's battle for human dignity and survival represents the spearhead of the larger society's challenge.

This is a story of the people who serve the school and who are served by the school. As people were able to move from the community to find better lives elsewhere, many did so without looking back. For others the choice was not so simple, and for those who moved into the area to fill the vacant homes the subsequent mobility became an economic impossibility.

Life in the sixties placed many people of conscience in a painful quandary, particularly African-Americans whose sense of social responsibility was inextricably intertwined with personal responsibility. What was the right thing to do? Integration was the call of the day, and many saw it as their responsibility to take initiative in making the way with their lives. But, what about the "old neighborhood"? What would become of it? Could the process of decay be halted by staying there? Did integration every really occur?

Answering the "what ifs" is the work of historians and philosophers. The story of the leaders of Gavin school is a story of those people in the community whose choice was to leave and yet to stay, to go out in order to bring in. This report tracks the story of the process of ongoing improvement at Gavin School.

The biases brought to this study and which grew in the course of it are that:

1. Values are important in organizations and in the educational process. Neither can be value-free.

2. When workers participate in making decisions directly affecting their work, productivity and satisfaction increase.
3. Every human being can be a contributing member of society.
4. A school reflecting cultural and socioeconomic diversity has the potential for riding a better learning environment than one which is homogenous.

### **PART TWO: Setting . . . "The Oasis"**

The Dr. Charles E. Gavin School is located on the East Side of Chicago Heights, a far southern suburb of Chicago. It appears to be a good place for a family to move when trying to get ahead in life. Though there are signs of decline, they are few in the heart of town. Public buildings and stores are in good condition. The business district has very few vacancies. People on the street are ethnically and racially diverse, most appearing to be middle-class working people going about their business in routine fashion. In addition to the diversity of people, there is an evident diversity in housing. A family could move into Chicago Heights and buy a relatively inexpensive house, then trade up over the years into the areas of very fine and expensive residences. Although 75.1% of the students in the district come from low income housing (State Report Card, p. 2), this is not reflected in an overview of housing in the community. Demographically, the school district reflects the racial diversity of the town. Among the total enrollment of 3,371 students, 19.5% are White, 52.1% African-American and 28.2% Hispanic/Latino (1991 School Report Card, p. 2).

After crossing a maze of railroad tracks, one approaches the Gavin School neighborhood, passing closed industrial plants, empty lots where homes once stood, and a large ring of public housing which partially encircles the school. For the most part, there's little activity on the streets in this neighborhood. Few people come and go, though there are often groups of two or three young men standing in the doorways of the apartment buildings. Everyone is African-American, and a White driver is often called to or approached by the men near the street in the likely event that a White driver in the neighborhood is there to buy drugs, which are openly sold curbside.

students, non-classroom personnel are scant. The basic school staff is classroom teachers, school secretary, custodians, and principal.

The Dr. Charles E. Gavin School stands in stark contrast to the neighborhood it serves. The yards around the school are free of debris, not a small feat when one sees the clutter of all other ground spaces. The walls and windows of the school are absent of graffiti and vandalism, unlike some neighboring residences. While the half windows at the entrance don't let in a lot of light, the foyer of the school is bright in both light and atmosphere. When entering the school one's eyes fall first on the banner of greeting—"Welcome to Dr. Charles E. Gavin School—AN OASIS FOR LEARNING."

#### Gavin Lowest . . . Test Scores

Those who have been a part of the school for many years, and most teachers have, readily admit that things now are not as they were a few years ago. The facts surrounding the change are fairly simple and direct. In 1988, the State of Illinois issued its first Illinois School Report Card. "Public Act 84-126 requires all public school districts to report on the performance of their schools and students through report cards" (1991 School Report Card, p. 1). Further, it is required that this report include data regarding students, finances and, most importantly for Gavin, performance on tests including the Illinois Goal Assessment Program tests and the locally-determined achievement tests. Long characterized by dedication and commitment, the faculty was increasingly finding the uphill battle for student achievement and well-being to be a lonelier and wearier struggle in recent years. The local newspaper headlines in the fall of 1988 struck a devastating blow, proclaiming that the district scored very low and Gavin, the lowest of the low. Looking back, the Superintendent reflects that he has seen more commitment now to educating the boys and girls at Gavin. This is my feeling. Not only do I see it at Gavin, I see it at all schools, even when I talk to people from districts bordering 170—the report card did that. I honestly and truly believe that. See, we would go along and we would give reports. We were doing well here and we were doing well there and I really feel we were. But there was no comparison and now that comparison is made. You see the good and bad in this report card and when

The demographic profile of the community begins to make some sense when one comes to this part of the town. In the heart of Chicago Heights, it doesn't seem that the community is 52% African-American; when one sees that the Gavin School neighborhood is over 95% African-American, the profile makes sense. The community doesn't seem to reflect a low-income level of 75% until one recognizes that this neighborhood is a part of the statistic, though not part of the mainstream (State Report Card, p. 2).

Drugs are often considered the biggest underlying problem in the community, though other social ills such as poverty and family decomposition run stiff competition.

I didn't realize how very much that neighborhood has changed. On the street corners, before the children come to school, they're passing these people with drugs. I didn't realize they were making sales right there in front of the children. The children had really grown up long before their time. They knew much more about life than even I knew, as an adult. So these are the kinds of things we are dealing with at Gavin School—the fear of the children, shooting on the playground. . . Unless you go there and unless you see it, you can read about schools in the ghetto, but you have to be there to believe it.

About 370 children come to Gavin School each day, although enrollment fluctuates considerably. While the state report card reported a mobility rate of 36.2% for the 1990-91 school year, that tells only part of the story. The principal comments that her worry isn't so much for the children who move out as it is for those who stay. Moving away means going to a better life; staying means having nowhere else to go; moving in means coming from someplace worse.

With the exception of a few White and Hispanic/Latino children who attend a district preschool program housed at Gavin, all students are African-American. Staff is lean at the school. There are no "special" classes of art, music, and physical education. While there are two full-time Chapter 1 teachers, a part-time counselor, a family literacy program director, a part-time librarian in the sparsely stacked library, and an itinerant learning disabilities teacher who serves two

you see that comparison . . . it really makes you think. "Good grief, we have to do something." It's too bad it had to happen that way because I feel it puts pressure on us.

More than pressure resulted from that first news story, which shouted to the world that Gavin didn't measure up. Pain, still more pain, was inflicted—the pain of being told that what you're working beyond your human limits to accomplish is really not working, that it really doesn't matter.

Understanding the impact of the publication of test scores depends on having a sense of what the school was about before and since that significant day. The principal describes the school as often being an answer for everything in the community, a multi-purpose institution. It is to the school that parents (94.7% of whom are welfare recipients) come when they run into problems with their welfare checks. It is to the school that a father came on parade day to seek a solution to a bullying problem his child had been experiencing all summer in the neighborhood. It is in the school where children learn there is an alternative to debris-cluttered streets as they work with custodian and staff to clean school grounds. It is a school where children can learn about ice fishing and about how to run a small business. It is a school where children experience the meaning and taste of a formal meal, the thrill of athletics, the joy of a roller skating party, the satisfaction of growing vegetables in the school garden and plants in the school greenhouse. It is a school where children can become "young medics." The faculty knows that students are learning, but they believe that standardized tests do not reflect the gains made by Gavin children.

But it was the test that captured public attention and sorely tested the dedication of the school faculty. To people long accustomed to working for intrinsic reward, the blow of extrinsic condemnation struck hard. When, in early 1989, a central office person came to Gavin and mentioned that the state was beginning a Network of Accelerated Schools, a program in which Gavin might fit and find benefit, the faculty was ready for it.

Do What You Have To Do . . . Illinois Network of Accelerated Schools

The Illinois Network of Accelerated Schools has supported programs and ideas to serve at-risk students in 25 elementary schools throughout the state since 1989. The Network links the schools, the State Board of Education, and the Educational Service Centers in a partnership to improve services for these students. The concept of accelerated schools was developed by Henry Levin of Stanford University.

**Assumptions of Accelerated Schools:**

- Unity of Purpose
- Building on Strengths
- Empowerment

**Principles of Accelerated Schools:**

- School-based governance
- Goals (school vision)
- Pupil and school assessment
- Curriculum
- Instructional Strategies
- Community Resources
- Parental participation/training
- Extended daily session

(Dr. Charles E. Gavin School, Strategic Planning Document, August, 1990—folder cover)

When several Gavin teachers attended the formation meeting for the network, they felt there was a fit between what they heard from the state and what their experience at the school had been.

When we first came together, it seemed like we had been revived. We had been getting kind of stagnant for a number of years. We knew that we had been doing our best, and yet the newspaper had been saying things about the test scores being down, and this was rather deflating to our egos and even to the kids. It seems like we were always at the bottom of the barrel, as far as the district was concerned. Then, when the Accelerated Schools program came

along, it was like we were special. We had a new identity for Gavin School. And the teachers were very enthusiastic.

The effect of the much-needed lifting of spirits which was provided by joining the Illinois Network of Accelerated Schools is frequently echoed by staff. Even a newcomer to the faculty displays a sense of its significance, saying that

Being an Accelerated School, you feel that there's a calling, there's more of a need. Things aren't just going to work themselves out. You have to become a part of the school and you have to make it work. There's a pride in being here.

The Illinois Accelerated Schools program is not a recipe for school management or for instruction. Its significance to the school is best described by the principal who noted that being part of the Illinois Accelerated Schools program gave a legitimacy to the school's doing what is considered the right thing. It provided a "window of opportunity," and established a setting in which people felt less confined. The principles of this program blended with those of the school leadership. The principal notes that typically there is a top-down management system in a school. While Gavin people didn't want to totally reverse that, they arrived at a system of lateral decision-making—"we rallied around Accelerated Schools because it fits our style."

Further, the Illinois Accelerated Schools program, perhaps, served to balance some of the negative impact of earlier publicity, such as that surrounding the 1988 test scores. Gavin teachers believed that in providing that balance, the program offered them an opportunity to build their own professional self-esteem.

When I first started teaching, I felt like I had a lot of creativity, a lot of ideas. But as the years waned on and you have to finish this, finish that book . . . that kind of went out the window. . . . But when Accelerated Schools came, it said, "Here it is. You know the kids better than everybody else. You do what you have to get them where they want (to go). You have the freedom. If they fail, you failed."

The Assistant Superintendent echoes this impact, saying that the role of the Illinois Accelerated Schools has been to make teachers feel important. What they think matters; what they do matters; they have some input in what really will affect the lives of children. Nobody is just dictating to them what they have to do. They can become more creative. It has brought together parents, the community, the business world, and the school. They all come in to focus on the objectives and goals and what's best for the children.

Participation in the Illinois Accelerated Schools includes the generation of certain documents, among which is a statement of mission or vision. Gavin School's vision statement proclaims that "The students of the Dr. Charles E. Gavin School will be educationally successful regardless of pace, with the help of parents, community, the central office, and business partners" (State Profiles of Accelerated Schools, p. 22).

#### The Gavin Family

School change is motivated by a variety of factors—awareness of new educational ideas, methods, and programs; the belief that all children can succeed and will; and an identity with the children and the conditions of their lives.

Gavin is like a shelter for the community. The children come here, not only to learn, but often the children seem to be here for protection, for love, just to feel like somebody cares about them. And that's because we have the kind of staff that's basically a warm staff, 99% women, 97% of those women have children and . . . that plays an important part. Just all but two of our staff members are black. Why is this important? The staff has experienced some of the background that the children at Gavin have. Maybe five people on our staff were reared in the Gavin School area. One or two actually lived, even though it's changed, in the project area in front of the school, and they aren't ashamed of it. Now when these teachers come into the classroom and when parents come up, children come in sharing, many of these teachers can relate.

The faculty is a community within a community, sharing values, convictions, and life experiences. In the lounge one day, several teachers reminisced about the day the faculty got a call that a co-worker had gone into labor; the child is looked upon

by all faculty as a cherished niece. The feeling of the staff is that personal sharing makes working together easier. Teachers describe a staff unity which grows from and through the sharing and mutual response to each other in terms of life experiences—birth, death, marriage, divorce. Many come to the neighborhood each Sunday to attend the churches of the children, and most share a common spiritual dimension which affirms and strengthens the values of their daily activities. This unity within the school family makes every child everyone's child, and an understanding of that prefaces and concludes an understanding of how the school happens to be the place that it is.

The unique intermingling in the relationship between Gavin School and the surrounding community has been mentioned previously several times. Because it is such a basic component of school and community, it deserves special mention. As so many schools wrestle with the dilemmas of what parents should teach vs. what schools should teach, the role of the home vs. the role of the school, and many legal issues that regulate schools' relationships with parents and children, it is most interesting to reflect on the way in which these are all non-issues in this school. The distinctions between the home and the school have become so blurred as to be nonexistent, reflecting the unity of the community and Gavin's important position within it.

Early in the year, at the end of September, the children celebrate the birthday of Dr. Charles Gavin, for whom their school is named. One small room in the school is set aside for memorabilia from his life. Dr. Gavin grew up in the neighborhood and became a well-known physician and humanitarian. One of the classroom teachers has composed songs and produces a student program for this celebration. Dr. Gavin's brother wrote a children's book which each child receives. This event develops community pride and, more than that, offers the children a hero from their neighborhood, a model to emulate.

On one November weekend, a group of men worked through the three nights of the weekend to strip and refinish the gym floor with beautiful decorations. A dedication followed, with Craig Hodges (Chicago Bulls basketball player and former Gavin student) speaking to the children and giving them special sports clothes.

As Christmas nears, the school fills with traditional Christmas decorations. While being a homogenous community is negative in so many ways, especially here where poverty is the great unifier, the common religious heritage in the community enables a clear value message to be communicated regarding the holiday and its significance. While one might anticipate that this time of traditional giving and receiving might be particularly painful for children of poverty—and no doubt it is—the school celebration provides a clear focus which remains on the law's side while being an uplifting experience for school participants.

On the occasion of the birthday celebration for Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., again the children celebrate with song and program, the event including a freedom walk to a church bordering the school property. Again, a clear value message is expressed, along with a presentation of ideals for adult life.

In addition to these special events, which are clearly intended to present the children with alternatives to the many negative conditions in the environment, the school involves its larger community. This expansion includes a blurring of staff roles. One former community member served for years as a volunteer in the lunchroom and as basketball coach. Teachers routinely take on added roles such as cheerleading, pom pom club, and so on. The custodian has a clean up crew made up of students, and the secretary has a junior secretaries club for students. Community volunteers operate the school greenhouse. Area doctors and hospitals run a "young medic" program for the children. Area businessmen donate the money to send the children on an outdoor education trip as well as other field trips. They fund the purchasing of special materials. The vegetable garden behind the school, begun by the students, is maintained by families from the public housing who want that experience and are willing to make the commitment to maintain the garden. Grandmothers work as teacher aides and are called "grandma" by the children. Teachers describe the principal as a genius at gathering resources for the school, and this is so. But it's more than that. Staff are willing to open themselves to this much broader meaning of education, all the while feeling the pressure of test scores.

Residents of the community live lives characterized by poverty. As the principal once said, "You can't tell me that a person who can figure out how to support a family on \$4,000 a year in welfare isn't smart." Some Gavin School community

members might not feel comfortable in a school setting, but this discomfort is bridged by teachers who routinely visit the homes of students, by a school that has an important place for any parent who enters. Evidence of one of the effects of this nurturing relationship came in November when the school district again presented a tax rate increase referendum to the voters. Teachers and principal registered voters throughout the community, followed up consistently, and the vote from the Gavin area precincts was almost unanimously supportive.

### **PART THREE: Leadership**

The Gavin principal, by her unassuming presence, is an easy person to miss in the high activity so characteristic of the school. She can be found making banners to hang in the hall, driving home a sick child, and counseling parents. These behaviors and attitudes that she consistently models are replicated throughout the school. At the Illinois Network of Accelerated Schools conference in August, the principal could only be identified initially through a process of elimination—she's not a center-stage person. Teachers, however, agree that everybody recognizes her as being the school's leader, and that everything that goes on in the school is

probably subject to her . . . this particular group of co-workers are a mature group and, because of that, what has happened is that responsibility for power, or empowerment, has been dispersed . . . I think that she is directly responsible for that because she doesn't necessarily think that "I need to be in charge of everything."

Leadership operates within a culture reflecting the spiritual belief in and commitment to "doing for others." Through the person the principal is—her attitudes, values, and behaviors—staff are empowered to also do for others. One example of this is her trust in people, which others emulated and which began to characterize their actions.

Other elements of principal leadership are contained in the example the principal sets—she takes home sick children, visits homes, registers voters, works long hours, and focuses consistently on the strengths of others. One day, I found her in the hall with a group of boys checking plans for basketball practice. She was the "coach" for a time, in the absence of the regular coach. Laughingly, she told of

how she woke in the middle of the night, remembering that she had forgotten to put the boys' uniforms in the washing machine at home and then (later in the day) had to call home to ask a family member to take the uniforms out of the dryer and bring them to school in time for practice. While there surely is a kinship between the principal and those who also model these qualities, the leadership through modeling cannot be underestimated in importance.

The principal of Gavin has a vision. It does not seem to be a vision of the perfect school; rather, it is a vision of the quality of daily living in a school community coupled with a sense of what is needed for students to grow into happy, productive adults. Mired in so many daily challenges, teachers use their few free moments for hearing about new instructional ideas, problem solving to meet the immediate needs of children, and building their relationships with each other and the surrounding community. The continual reaching out to the community, the impetus for new partnerships, new resources, comes from the principal.

In discussing leadership at Gavin School, one teacher talked about the way that in a traditional structure, the principal tells staff what to do, based upon the directives received from the central office. She offered the example of required daily instructional schedules, which are common, and how they are sometimes monitored by administrators. She went on to talk about how that system changed at Gavin, saying, "It starts with a person with a very open mind, and that's our principal." But it doesn't end there. This particular teacher stated publicly what teachers have known for ages regarding their relationships with principals and with all administrators:

We make you look good. We do the work. We teach the children who take the test . . . I am responsible for you and if you want me to make you look good when you sit in the principals' meetings, then I need to be happy.

This theme of happy employees carries many connotations—easy work, easy working conditions. The definition, in this setting, is clear: A happy teacher brings less (student) failure. A happy teacher stays in the classroom.

I don't want to sit in the front office. I don't want to be in the central office. My commitment is staying in that classroom, but I have to be happy.

Elaborating, she goes on to say that "teachers have good ideas. . . . Teachers know each other better than anyone else. We work together." At Gavin school, the vehicle people have chosen to facilitate their happiness is the steering committee.

Our principal needs to be happy, if the central office wants her to run a productive school. . . . How is she going to be happy? If her teachers are cooperating with her. Why are we cooperating with her? Because we have a steering committee and she gets one vote. We do the work and we work together.

Feeling that they have the power to run the school, these people seek happiness in meetings that last into evenings and run into Saturday mornings. They define their happiness as making "school better for the children and a better working place for us." They meet in hallways during stolen moments, feeling right about it and knowing that "if our principal sees more than three of us meeting in the hall at one time, she knows that there's a problem and someone's working on it. And, within 24 hours, she'll hear about it." No principal alone could have created this state of leadership, nor could any group of teachers, alone. It took all of the school participants working together to make it happen.

The theme of family was an important one when considering the nature of leadership at Gavin School. This was a family, one that shared history, relationship, crises, celebrations, and a vested interest in a successful future. The principal, as head of this family, assumed that all the members acted in the best interests of the family and encouraged input and directed actions from them. This family shared common goals and common backgrounds that enabled them to remain focused on a shared vision. Since all were committed to the family, all had an equal voice in the decision-making process. The matriarch of this family was a dominant force in guiding all members toward the shared vision.

A leader must be predisposed to work with a school faculty in the way that the Gavin principal had; she must be guided by some basic assumptions regarding

human nature and motivation. McGregor (1958) described administrators who believe in the intrinsic good of their faculty as Theory Y administrators. Specifically, McGregor suggested that Theory Y administrators (1) organize the existing system to encourage productive outcomes; (2) believe that people are intrinsically proactive and willing to accept change; (3) acknowledge that all people possess the motivation, the desire and ability for professional growth, the responsibility to direct personal behaviors toward the organization's goals, and that these dispositions are intrinsic and not imposed by the administrator, and (4) accept the challenge to organize conditions conducive to the achievement of the organization's goals. Thus, Theory Y administrators create opportunity, remove obstacles, trust the professional prerogative of their faculty members, encourage growth, and provide guidance. Ultimately, Theory Y administrators rely on the self-direction of their faculty.

The Gavin principal exemplified many of the traits of a Theory Y leader. She was comfortable not attending meetings when important decisions were made. Sometimes she was not there because she had other commitments; however, any time that she was not there she believed that the faculty would make sound decisions. The principal sought opportunities for teachers to share their strengths with others within Gavin School and with those outside—many teachers began to present at conferences for the first time in their careers.

Specific incidents demonstrating this trust included her absence when Gavin faculty were faced with the decision to accept or reject membership in the Illinois Network of Accelerated Schools. Another occurred when discussions were underway to select a teacher representative to act as building administrator during periods of the principal's absence. Both were decisions of great magnitude; however, this principal trusted her faculty. And her trust was not the manipulation of feeling that the faculty would do her bidding; it was the genuine trust that decisions would be made for the betterment of the Gavin family.

The Gavin family was freed of some constraints formerly imposed by a hierarchical administration. The assistant superintendent was a powerful force in championing the cause of Gavin School. She believed in the abilities of the Gavin staff; she put her faith in the faculty. The central office decided to allow the principal increased latitude in site level governance to initiate reforms to improve test scores. The

principal, in turn, relied on the faculty's self-direction to begin to make decisions to better serve their students' needs.

Etzioni might have described Gavin School as invoking "moral authority" (Etzioni, 1988) as a basis for its leadership decisions. He contended that commonly held beliefs, feelings, values, and cultural symbols are highly effective motivators. Etzioni posited that the desired outcomes of a morally cohesive group, such as Gavin, would exceed those outcomes realized by groups led by traditional, bureaucratic leadership styles.

The Gavin faculty succeeded in formulating a leadership design to reflect its beliefs, feelings, values, and common culture. How did this occur? What structures were formed to achieve the organization's vision?

#### How Will We Do It? . . . Decision Making

All organizations have structures for figuring out what to do, making and implementing decisions, and identifying outcomes and new conditions which renew the cycle. In keeping with the procedures for their membership in the Illinois Network of Accelerated Schools, the Gavin faculty developed an organizational profile describing these elements. The lead group in the system of organization is the steering committee.

The building level steering committee is composed of five teachers which represent both primary and intermediate levels; the principal and a parent. The building steering committee meets on a regular basis (once a month or when called) to discuss issues and problems that concern the school. These issues are presented to the entire faculty. From these important issues we have developed our cadres or committees. They are:

- I. The Parent Booster Club
- II. The Discipline Committee
- III. The Test Taking Committee
- IV. The Program for Special Holidays
- V. The Curriculum Committee
- VI. The Career Day Committee

(Document Prepared for State Audit, 10/91, p. 1)

While accurate, this documentary description does not reflect the operation, impact, and interaction of the steering committee in the life of the school. The steering committee was first formed when Gavin School became a part of the Illinois Network of Accelerated Schools in early 1989 and consisted of teachers who attended that first meeting in Springfield. Volunteers came forward following faculty discussion and their attitude was

. . . that there was no other way to go. I think we had gone every other way but the right way and this was the end of the way . . . We got back those bad test scores and everyone was looking at everybody and saying, "What more can we do? We've done everything." And then we said, "Here's an idea," and they said, "Well, look, we're tired of these ideas coming in here and they're not really working." But this is a concept. This is something that we can work on and we can make it into a program ourselves. We had to do a lot of selling to get people into it because, I think, as in anything, people are hesitant about something new."

Once sold on the idea themselves, the steering committee met with the faculty at a district institute day which the district allowed them to use for discussion of this program. The principal did not sit in on the discussion. A teacher who joined in leading discussion describes it this way,

We told them about this Accelerated Schools program. Let me tell you, we had a hard time selling teachers. They came up with a whole lot of good things that they had to say. And we thought we gave them dynamite answers to their questions. But they were still not satisfied, and I just finally said, "Look, we've tried everything under the sun. It has not worked. Here we are. We have a program that we can work up ourselves. Now, all of us, some of us, have thrown creativity out the window. We have dropped it away. It has collected dust. Now we can get that creativity out and we can do what we want. This is our idea for our kids. We can do what we want. Either we're going to do this or we can sit here and look at each other and blame each other about the kids not scoring."

It was a hard argument to refute and, although not all staff entered the program offering enthusiastic support, neither was there organized resistance. As the program began, the steering committee began performing a variety of important functions. It served as the group that heard and responded to staff concerns of any and every type, the group that brought information and ideas from outside the school to the faculty, and the group that worked out ideas and recommendations for changes.

Though membership is open on the steering committee, except for the addition of two members early in its history, there hasn't been a change from the original. Though all meetings are open, rarely are they attended by more than the membership.

We even have a chance to make changes there, and we've been very content with who the spokespersons are. There hasn't been a problem. They've represented us—the steering committee—at the various meetings . . . they would come back and they would report.

The functioning of the steering committee is simple, straight-forward, and understood by all. If staff members feel a concern, they communicate it to a steering committee member either in writing (a sheet is passed around among teachers before each meeting) or through discussion. That issue then becomes an agenda item for the following meeting.

One faculty member urged the committee to consider the need for one teacher to be in charge when the principal was away from the school. Feeling that it was a good idea, the steering committee came up with some suggestions of who might be most readily accessible in the event of the principal's absence and offered this to the faculty. At the following faculty meeting, recommendations were offered regarding the most likely "senior teacher" substitute and her selection was confirmed by the faculty. The principal was not present for the discussion at the steering committee, but was fully supportive of the proposal when it was offered at the faculty meeting. The chair of the steering committee meeting (which rotates) was also the faculty meeting chair. The principal does not routinely chair either meeting.

### Challenges and Changes

Early on in their involvement with the Illinois Network of Accelerated Schools, one of the major issues facing the steering committee was the reassignment of 10 teachers, the majority of the classroom teachers. A teacher describes the impact of this saying,

I think it was one of the first acts of the steering committee. I'm not positive . . . they had devised a new plan whereby they would try something new to try to help the school and to promote learning. Well, it took a lot of maturity on the part of the teachers to accept the new challenge.

The steering committee provides consistent leadership in setting a direction for the school as well as managing all concerns. The principal serves as an equal member of the group. At the same time, illustrating the focus on education over bureaucratic procedures, the principal and faculty are comfortable with periodic meetings called and orchestrated by the principal, such as one called by the principal to review lunch ticket procedures in preparation for a government audit of the lunch program. The meeting was called by the principal, over the intercom, just before dismissal. No one knew of it in advance, she ran the meeting, all faculty were in attendance, the issue was resolved, and the meeting adjourned within fifteen minutes. Not one person saw this as being inconsistent with the regular process for meeting or decision-making.

Most teachers have been teaching, and most at this school, for a number of years. They've worked for many different principals in a variety of different organizational systems.

The current principal has garnered tremendous faculty support as a leader who listens to the faculty and acknowledges their professional decision-making abilities. Teachers make decisions that affect their classrooms, and the administrator, faculty, and staff make many school policy decisions collectively.

Summing up the rationale for a principal moving toward shared decision-making, a teacher shares her insight that "some principals have discovered—and those who

haven't, it's sad—that they cannot make a school work. There are no principals that can make schools work by themselves."

Although the changes are described in different ways, all lead to a picture of empowerment of faculty and flexibility in ways of making decisions. While the steering committee is the formal vehicle for change in the school, it is not the only one. Some teachers do not feel comfortable bringing their issues to the steering committee. In that case, they are welcome to go directly to the principal. "If I wanted something changed, I would write a note to the principal asking her to consider it. She would send me a note back telling me the possibility of it happening."

While this diversity might cause a problem for some faculties, it's not an issue at Gavin. There have been no grievances since the steering committee began and, as was pointed out, the grievance representative is a member of the steering committee, which enters the potential grievance instantly into the process that leads ultimately to its resolution.

At the same time, taking an issue to the principal, who is also a member of the steering committee, keeps that issue within the organizational framework for decision-making. The principal is comfortable with the diversity in ways that people approach decision-making in the school. She uses the analogy of family saying that, "it's like with your own children at home," and talks about how a family will "discuss issues around the dinner table. One child will bring everything up" and fully resolve an issue right there in the family group, while "another won't be comfortable" and will only come to a parent later to discuss privately what had been a dinner topic. While it would have been perfectly appropriate for him to express himself at dinner, he decided not to and that's okay." She also said that, "it's kind of like my church" which is an expressive and emotional-filled setting for most. Being highly expressive isn't the way of some people, and she believes that "making joyful noise unto the Lord" can take many forms, including silent dialogue. So, in relation to faculty, she concludes that "it would be entirely wrong for me to say that (an issue) can only come up in a meeting. The way to make [site-based management] work is to know your staff and develop a way to make it work with them."

While accommodating the different ways and needs of people "puts extra responsibility on the principal," this leader considers it essential. Beyond creating an atmosphere in which faculty are empowered and are more productive, this attitude and behavior create the model of human interaction in the school.

A characteristic more important than faculty committees is the spirit of openness shared among staff members.

When we have staff meetings, you always feel that there's room for negotiation. For example, this coming week we have parent-teacher conferences. I think they're scheduled on Thursday from 5:00 until 8:00 and then on Friday from 9:00 until noon. The reason was to accommodate the parents in some of the other schools who work. But we honestly don't have that many parents who are working outside the home. Most of the parents are right across the street and we thought, for our own safety's sake, why couldn't we meet earlier. So we were discussing it. That's how we are, we discuss things and sometimes a spokesperson will go in to the principal. We asked if we could have our conferences earlier, and she was agreeable. So usually, as a staff, if there's a major problem, we'll get together and we'll discuss things and we'll take it to her.

### The Goals

Like most vision statements, words don't fully communicate the life of their meaning. The words of Gavin staff members, however, are surprisingly uniform in communicating their understanding of school and professional goals.

This sense of a mission, unified on the dual fronts of self-esteem and academic achievement, echoes beyond the school to the central office, as well. Without hesitation, the policy leader of the district, whose role removes him from the immediacy of children's lives, states, "the education of the boys and girls" as the obvious priority. Summing up the many fronts of individual and group action within the school, one teacher shares that

there are a number of things we're trying to accomplish. First of all, having reliable young people go on into our world, into this global world . . . we're

trying to show our community that Gavin School is a good school, it's a viable school, kids can learn here. And just because they're in a lower income area does not mean that they cannot learn anything. And I think we're trying to show our community that if they get involved and if they help, look how fast our kids are progressing. I think we're trying to show that we're a body that really works hard for our kids as part of our family . . . . It might be tough out there in the world that they have, but they have a secure place in the world that they have right here. We love and we care about them and we want them to succeed.

Discussions of school mission are important, and there are programs available which can be used with a group in order to arrive at a statement of mission after playing a few parlor games. That is not where the mission of Gavin school was formed. It was formed through a set of life experiences which were remembered and which resulted in empathy for the children of the community, which in turn resulted in a deep human commitment to help children raise themselves into better lives than those to which they were born. This didn't happen in the last months or years, as teachers reported that human commitment as an historical element of the school. The more recent revival of commitment directly focused on raising academic achievement as measured by test scores and was prompted by the negative publicity which confirmed staff suspicions and challenged their self-worth.

An important element coupled with these factors is the conscious decision of the staff to focus on building an atmosphere that is warm, nurturant, and encouraging. They did this realistically, knowing that their human resources were not limitless and they had to decide where to invest their emotions. This sense of mission focusing on preparation for adult life and academic achievement is confirmed in the way that staff identify the satisfiers they find at work. When asked what made them feel happy or satisfied, no one pointed to anything material. Without exception it was the human element that emerged. Teachers are satisfied by the learning, the accomplishments, and the growth of children. Furthermore, they have learned to define these in terms of each child's individual pace.

### The Vehicle

Changes in staff assignments, accommodations of preferences of staff in areas of working conditions are enablers; by themselves, they mean nothing in the life of the classroom, the learning of children. The heart of learning is in the classroom and the heart of empowerment is the actual control teachers have over their instructional day—what they teach, when, how, and with what.

Like most school districts, Chicago Heights has a district curriculum system. Academic programs reflect district adoptions. The Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction describes the process:

Well, basically, the district is set up where we have the district office and the administrators and, of course the Board of Education sets policy. We like to include our staff—the principals and their staffs—in decision making.

Using the example of the reading/language arts adoptions, she relates that the district establishes committees,

and the committees have determined what publishers' materials we want to review . . . we take turns to have those materials sent to all buildings. We have representatives from all the schools on the district wide committee and . . . we ask the teachers in the buildings to look at the materials . . . and complete evaluation forms. These give us an idea of the level of the materials, whether or not they have the strengths that we need in terms of our children. And then we meet and we discuss those evaluations, and we determine whether or not those are materials we want to consider for the district, whether they are materials that will satisfy our needs. Once we have a number, it may be eight or nine publishers, we then will nail that down to approximately three, and they will have representatives from those companies come in and demonstrate and talk about those materials. Based on what we found out at that time, we will then vote to adopt one or another . . . we will recommend to the Board of Education that we adopt. And that is the way we determine what materials will be used. That takes approximately a year.

The faculty of Gavin school embraced participation in the Illinois Network of Accelerated Schools, in large part because it promised them control over curriculum and instruction. Yet, the district system seems to preclude that possibility. The assistant superintendent resolves this apparent contradiction, explaining that,

what happens is that they will meet, or they've attended a workshop, or they have looked at materials and talked about doing some things. During the year there are evaluations done about what works, what has not worked for the children. Based on that they will contact me usually and they will ask whether or not they could look into some other materials or another strategy. And because of the fact that Gavin is somewhat unique in the problems that they have—we know that the population has changed there, some of the problems in the neighborhood, drugs and one parent families, there are some special kinds of problems—so what we like to do is that if we feel that there is something else we can do that may help the children and will help the teachers get whatever it is they need to get across to the children, if they tell me they believe they can do the job with whatever it is, we look into it. Especially because of the fact that they have gone into the Accelerated Schools program, they deserve that right.

### The Commitment

As with diversity in decision-making within the school, reflecting the importance of both district continuity and teacher-child sensitivity, this district leader has worked out an effective way to maintain both. Her decision, though, is more than a technical one; it is born as well from the knowledge and understanding of the Gavin School community and faculty.

The commitment they have is extraordinary. They have a commitment that is unlike any other. It's always been that way, but we've found that some of the special problems (of) the children have (increased), and they've experienced changes in the last few years. There's not a big turnover of staff and so, therefore, they have grown up with the parents there. Many of the parents of the children they've had as students or they know them. They really care about what happens to those children. They have been willing to spend time, during

the summer, to look into what they can do. They've had training and they've (had) people come out and talk to them about some of the different things they can do to work with the children and the families. And, therefore, we know that they're serious about what they're doing, that they want what's best for the children and that they're willing to put forth the effort that's needed to bring about the changes that are desired. Based on that, we're willing to allow them to try different things, and we've found that the morale there is very high. When you go into that building, even though it is in the neighborhood where there are so many things happening, once you walk into that building, people are surprised. You could eat off the floor. There is a commitment on the part of everyone there and it's a good feeling. It's a good feeling to know they are there and they feel what they're doing is important. And it is! We give them every kind of support we can—that's what it's about.

Within a climate that presupposes that there is a better way of doing whatever is presently being done, change is constant. Given the focus on children, instructional and program changes are a primary focus. While the first dramatic change signaling the revived spirit prompted by the move into the Illinois Network of Accelerated Schools was the reassignment of many teachers, ongoing change has followed.

Here at Gavin School we have curriculum committees. One year . . . we decided that we wanted to change the spelling book because we felt that the Houghton Mifflin spelling series better correlated with the Houghton Mifflin reading program. We were able to get that . . . that's a part of what the Accelerated Schools is about, making changes in the curriculum and textbooks, do whatever you feel is beneficial.

In the summer of 1990, faculty engaged in a strategic planning process which included the statement of student outcomes per grade, providing a framework in which continuity is provided while allowing for diversity in specific programming. Teachers value their decision-making role in matters of curriculum and instruction and refer to these changes frequently.

Because teachers feel that they are empowered and decision-making is shared, there isn't a formula which people follow in generating ideas. The intermediate

grades developed a cooperative teaching arrangement and implemented it during the 1990-1991 school year. One teacher describes the process by which this change occurred in this way:

We talked about the team teaching and who was good with the various curriculum areas, and we agreed about it. We started out by saying, "let's be honest about our strengths. We're here for the children and let's draw upon those strengths" . . . We all talked about it in that tone and we ended up with a beautiful team up there. I think we would probably be continuing, but with no break, it was just too taxing.

Another teacher echoes that same spirit of identifying needs and matching them with resources when she describes her move from a text/workbook orientation to a more active learning in her classroom.

I always do centers after Christmas and the centers consist of a letter center, a writing center, a numbers center, and a color/cut/paste center. These cover the skills I'm working on with the children anyway, but they're hands on and they're more fun.

Another example of teacher-motivated instructional change is found in a sixth grade class whose teacher has steadily built a literature-based reading program in her classroom. While still attending to the skill instruction required by the district-adopted basal reading program, this teacher identifies appropriate novels for her class (e.g., Sounder, Roll of Thunder—Hear My Cry) and gathers literature units from publishers which are supplemented with teacher-developed skill materials built from the basal. The novels are financed by area businessmen through a relationship nurtured by the principal. And the teacher, like other teachers, personally finances the other materials.

Repeatedly, when teachers mention the empowerment they feel, they're referring to two areas. The first is the control they have in addressing concerns which emerge in the operation of the school. This occurs through the steering committee and the openness of the principal. The second is the control they have over instruction and program issues. This would not be possible without the openness and responsiveness of the Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction.

The impact of her work with Gavin might best be seen by looking at an area where such a district attitude and practice does not exist—the hiring and assignment of personnel.

The Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction had long standing ties to Gavin School; this is where her teaching career began. She recalled the long hours spent in preparation for teaching the Gavin children. The night custodian would let her out of the building sometimes as late as 11:00 p.m. The job was rewarding and she “loved every minute of it.” The central office administrator cried when she was asked to join the district administration, but did so believing that she had much to offer. These ties to the school allowed the Gavin case to be pleaded by an empathetic administrator. She knew the Gavin staff gave “150-200 percent” to the school.

Gavin School is not a place where everyone would want to work, nor is it a place where even many highly-qualified teachers could succeed. The circumstances and conditions of the school and community demand particular qualities and skills on the part of staff. The district procedures for hiring and a union contract specifying various provisions regarding the reassignment of personnel denies Gavin local control over staffing. Because Gavin is significantly different from the remainder of the district in critical ways, the lack of local school control over personnel is a serious impediment.

### The Lessons

From this case study at Gavin we can learn two things. First, mission is not the result of a workshop exercise. It is the result of experience which forces awareness of real needs to be met and real capacities to serve. Second, we can learn that while extrinsic rewards may be necessary to keep body and soul together, that's not what causes us to do more than we thought we could do and then feel good about it.

Gavin School exists in a community and district context. It could not be doing what it does if the district didn't, in some way, approve what is happening. Site-based management is one of the catch phrases of the 1990s and, like many fads, it is misguided, misinterpreted, and misused. Site-based management cannot be

legislated by the district—such a notion is contrary to the nature of what the term means. If a school governs itself, that means that the school comes up with the ideas, the plans, and the initiatives. A district cannot mandate the creative thoughts of its educators.

Chicago Heights has achieved a measure of the proper balance between local initiative and district governance. Key elements of this balance are communication and trust. Central office administrators, exemplified by the superintendent and his assistant, maintain ongoing contact with the school. They know people and their interests and needs. The people at Gavin recognize the responsibilities of central administration and they "go through channels." They request, inform, involve, and find willing listeners and supporters.

This results in a blurring of roles throughout the school and district, another factor in the growth of the school. Given a commitment to change and a belief that everyone can contribute, traditional roles of authority and position quickly lose significance in this organization. The principal doesn't chair meetings; the Superintendent sits as a silent observer at presentations to the State Board of Education representatives; the Gavin custodian assists with lunchroom duty as a disciplinarian. Such a fundamental shift in roles can be difficult but is essential to true collaboration, to truly help people to reach their potential individually and collectively.

The commitment is uniform—growth in self-esteem, creating a bigger world for children, and improved, measurable academic growth. This widespread commitment evolved through the commitment and awareness of a dedicated group who witnessed the steady social decline, yet consistently held the belief that the children can succeed and are not destined to be victims of their environment.

Challenges are constant and appear on all fronts. Obstacles which would have earlier halted change in other schools faded in the light of commitment, fueled by intense awareness of glaring needs. The values of service and the strength of each person are constantly modeled by the principal, broadening the base of stakeholders to include all faculty, central office and many community members. The lesson is getting the attention of others focused on where it rightly belongs—the children. That accomplishment is evident, and the teachers of Gavin

do not see themselves as do-gooders, martyrs living lives of pain and sacrifice. They like going to work; they feel good about what they do.

When I see a large amount of progress in a small time, it brightens my day. Even when I see a small amount of progress, I'm tickled pink.

I really want to see the children succeed. When I see a child that improves just a little bit, when he has a particular subject or a problem and comes back and tells you, "Thank you . . . for helping me." A lot of the children come back after they leave here. Maybe I had been on them for certain things that now they understand. . . . It's a reward getting back the news and knowing that you did help someone in the long run.

When you see kids coming back, that's what gives you satisfaction. You see them doing good. I read the paper in my room for high school and junior high school and I underline the kids that come from Gavin School because I think the kids need to know that these kids did something with their lives and you can do it too. . . .

One might feel that, of course, in an environment like that where the children's needs are so great, attention naturally focuses on kids. Whereas, in less needy areas, school people might focus more on other, peripheral issues. It's important in learning this lesson to sense what it must feel like each day to risk personal safety by going to work. It's important to understand that the vast majority of Gavin students, if enrolled in the schools of "better" neighborhoods, would be "excused" from learning, labeled by the system, and shunted off to school careers in alternative programs, the salve of the conscience of the educator.

"We have a miserable performance record in educating low-income, racial- and language-minority students. Given the changing demographics of our nation, we cannot succeed economically or in sustaining our democracy unless we succeed educationally with those students with whom we have historically failed. We need to create the policies and structures that result in high achievement by those students as well." (Ed. Wk., 5/6, p. 32)

Over the years, "better" schools have increasingly accepted the proposition that not all of their children will learn and are, therefore, "excused" by the system. Invariably, this is approved, and often sought by the parent community, fully endorsed by the "kids should be happy, feel no discomfort" school of child rearing. In fact, the kids don't end up feeling all that good. But the adults maintain their illusion of everything being right, and our systems remain intact. Problems of the adult society and the educational system are scapegoated through sugar-coated blame placed on children. Gavin, at the spearhead of society's challenge to enable and help all to be productive, shows that "we can work it out."

#### **PART FOUR: My Personal Lesson by Irene Diedrich-Rielly**

While this case study report is not an introspective narrative by the researcher, it obviously reflects in some part an experience in which an outside person had some involvement, feelings, and reactions. I collected this data while on a ten-month leave of absence from my duties as an elementary school principal in an affluent public school system in a north suburb of Chicago. While I have worked with diverse students and settings, that diversity is narrowed to small towns and suburbs with the exception of student teaching in inner-city Chicago, an experience characterized more by amazement than enlightenment. Had I spent any time in the neighborhood of the study prior to committing to it, I would have refused to go there, for I came to recognize early on that it is not a safe place. But I didn't know that up front. By the time I figured it out, I was in the midst of what I knew to be the best learning opportunity of my career, and I was in a place for which my admiration and affection grew daily.

Professionally, I learned what really high standards are about; they're the ones you have to stretch to reach. This has caused me to reconsider drastically the manner in which I, like so many educators, excuse myself from fully educating all students under the pretense of protecting children and families from possible discomfort. In schools where the vast majority of students succeed academically with minimal support from the system, it's easy to excuse, dismiss, or blame those who don't succeed, all the while ignoring the reality that the fault lies with the system. Gavin doesn't have that luxury because so many children could be labeled "at risk" or "non learners." Their options, then, are to say that these kids just can't learn or to say that they all can and will learn. The latter was their choice. The Gavin

community holds equally high expectations for all children, a lesson to be learned by me and, perhaps, others in similar settings.

I learned the importance of unity of purpose and a true sense of community, within a school and its constituency. I learned about the importance of the conservation of human energy, time, and emotion: there is only so much we have, and we need to decide where and how we want to focus it. In schools like mine, as compared to Gavin, there is often diversion from focus on children. Many programs and projects are undertaken which don't really bear much relation to the children. The rationale for this is typically that "Well, our children are already succeeding well above norms, so we can move on to other things."

Personally, I learned that the white-liberal song that I've sung for years is a pretty rusty tune. Liberal social behavior is simple: Be compassionate, demand social programs, give money and do it all from a safe distance, one that precludes identity with "them" at anything but a philosophical level and reinforces both personal certainty of "having all the answers" and the security that "our" world is not and never will be like "their" world.

Spending some time on the East Side of Chicago Heights taught me that there are only two differences between the Gavin neighborhood and my neighborhood.

One is that theirs is poor and ours is not. Let there be no mistake about what poverty means. People die from it, subtly or dramatically, quickly or slowly, physically, intellectually or emotionally. It means food that may not go far enough, may not taste good enough, may not be healthy enough. It means bodies that can't get warm enough in winter or cool enough in summer. It means free time with nothing to do; busy time with the impossible to accomplish. It means never being ahead, or just even; it means always being behind. It means opportunity denied, opportunity unknown. It means forced intimacy, violent, abrasive intimacy. It means having nowhere to go and no way to get there. Poverty challenges the human spirit to seek escape, even knowing that available escapes are usually destructive. Poverty deadens the body and ravages the mind.

I learned this year that wealth is not the opposite of poverty. Material comfort does not guarantee what poverty denies. What a seductive veneer we have in

middle and upper-middle class communities. Surely, it's a veneer that greatly increases opportunity for personal comfort and well-being, but it is still only veneer. Beneath that veneer, the same challenges exist, the challenges of the human spirit to reach beyond its circumstances, the challenge to build self-worth, the challenge to resist escape hatches from life, the challenge to become one with others in building community. Because of economic differences reflected in environment—public services, size of homes, privacy, cleanliness, social services, behavior norms and customs—the school community studied is naked and exposed. Not much is behind closed doors, not much can be denied.

The second difference between communities is that the East Side is, in many ways, more honest about its condition than many wealthier towns. Maybe, if there's a good side of poverty—which I really don't believe—maybe that's what it is: A level of honesty that sweeps away self-deception.

When I would, periodically, start my liberal speech at Gavin about how the neighborhood needed this or that social program, people there gently but firmly cut me off and redirected me. I was encouraged to look more closely at what was around me, in both neighborhoods. In the course of the year, I reflected closely on my experiences in schools, and I followed the news stories of schools which are privileged. Earlier, I could have read about the test tampering by administrators and teachers in Lake Forest, or students cheating on advanced placement tests at New Trier and dismissed these as aberrations, not symptomatic of anything. In my own school, I never felt concerned that our Korean parents (about 15% of the school) weren't participants in the school. I thought they just didn't elect to participate; in reality, the "exclusion" component in our system, subtle as it is, was at work. Now I wonder to what extent are we educating and to what extent are we only polishing the veneer, using whatever polish is available? My view, upon return to my school, is different in many ways. Being part of a very small White minority in a Black community has sensitized me to the power of a system to include, exclude, rank, judge, label, all the while in a manner that is quite invisible.

The Gavin community believes that everyone can make it, everyone can be okay in life and, more than that, they believe that making it results from personal acts of will, supported by a living community, smart and hard work, and spiritual forces. It comes neither from birthright nor privilege. While that's an ethic with which I

grew up, I came to realize during the year that it's one that has become distant, replaced increasingly by the legacy of recent years that the good life is guaranteed and education of the privileged middle class consists more of helping children following tracks than in making their own tracks.

It's blatantly clear that the children of the Gavin community will not benefit from following in any of the adult "tracks" and everyone knows it; most of the adults want to get out of the tracks they're in, and everybody knows that, too. For those of us who are more comfortable, it takes more effort to realize that every child has to make his or her own tracks. Neglected, worn out tracks eventually get slippery and start heading downward. I think that's what many people are realizing, at some level, as our national mood of discontent expands and grows. A false relationship may have grown in public perception between post-World War II prosperity and the societal conditions and institutions of those years. Perhaps the "good old days" never were all that good; now, the pool of victims resulting from those ways is steadily increasing.

The drive from the north shore to the east side of Chicago Heights was a hard one, and it wasn't the 130 miles there and back, or the road conditions, or the traffic, that made it hard. At first, it was hard to drive in there because it was frightening. Then it was hard to drive home, because I felt guilty at having more than the families I would see at school. Then it was hard to drive both ways because it was confusing. Then it was infuriating to go from one world to the other and see the severe deprivation in each, knowing all the while that it doesn't have to be that way. The belief which has operated for so long that it is alright to build success through the denial of access to others is self-destructive. The burden on society created by acting on the premise that not all human beings have to be productive is growing, with no end in sight. Our functioning beliefs that it's acceptable to have increasing percentages of our population on welfare, unemployed or underemployed, or in prison while others can still live "the good life" are moving toward their logical, destructive conclusion. The role of education in perpetuating all of this demands our attention and action.

In many ways, the Gavin School community is ahead of those who think they have a lock on the good life. They know that each human being has the potential to make a new world, a better world. Again and again, the Gavin faculty echoes the

firm belief that "children are no different," the belief that environmental circumstances and conditions are not a death sentence. Just as suffering in life does not have to pass from one generation to another, neither does comfort. And they work to assure that each child understands this and gets everything that they as teachers can give, to help each child create his/her own life, starting with themselves as examples. The historical "odds" in education have been in favor of schools like mine; namely, the likelihood that children will grow up to have lives like their parents and, accordingly, schools can only perpetuate what is. Gavin exposes this dangerous myth—all schools must follow suit. I learned that there and appreciate the lesson.

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