

From the Bottom Up: Reforming a Low Performing High School into One of Success



By

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the leadership style of Mr. Stanley Blackmon, former principal of Lanier High School and to compare his leadership style to an existing educational theory. To obtain this information, an interview was conducted with Mr. Blackmon in December of 2009. Research was also done in order to find an educational theory most compatible to Mr. Blackmon's leadership style, as well as the history of Lanier High School, from its beginnings to its current status. Results indicated that Mr. Blackmon's leadership style was most compatible with Kurt Lewin's change management model. As a result of exercising this theory, Mr. Blackmon was able to transform Lanier High School from the lowest performing high school in the district, to one of its highest. Results show that "unfreezing" the negative mindset of the teachers, students, and community; making necessary changes within the operations of the school; and implementing those changes so that they may become systematic are key to increasing student achievement. Mr. Blackmon is a clear example of how school leaders have a tremendous responsibility with day-to-day operations of a school, it is imperative that they are visible in the classrooms and community in order to be effective change agents.

Lanier High School is located in the inner city of Jackson, Mississippi. It has a total of 811 students with over ninety percent of the students receiving free or reduced lunch. Lanier High School was first organized as a junior-senior high school in 1925 providing instruction for pupils from grades seven through twelve. On January 25, 1972, the United States Court of Appeals ordered that Lanier School be designated as a center for the enrollment for students in grades ten through twelve. In 1991, ninth grade students were added to the enrollment (JPS, 2009).

Lanier High School had been a “hotbed” of social change. It was known for producing national, state, and community leaders. Alumnus such as Dr. Gene Young, a professor at Jackson State University, world-renowned historian and writer Lerone Bennett, Jr., and Gladys Noel Bates, a former teacher and a plaintiff in the 1948 case to equalize pay for black teachers have been at the forefront of the Civil Rights Movement and the fight for equal rights for all (Lanier High School Alumni website, 2009). However, as the years passed, the socioeconomic dynamics changed in the Lanier community. After the integration of Jackson Public Schools in the 1970s, many of the middle class families moved out of the inner city, where Lanier was located, and moved out into areas that had been predominantly white and other suburban areas surrounding the city of Jackson. Like many other inner city schools, this had an adverse affect on Lanier High School. The student population began to change from a population of homeowners to a population of renters. The community surrounding Lanier High School had become a high crime area. School and community expectations were at an all-time low.

The 2002-2003 results of the Subject Area Testing Programs (SATP) for Lanier High School forced the Jackson Public School District to take action. At the time, Mississippi schools were rated on a scale of 1 to 5 with five being the highest rating. Lanier High School was a Level 2 and was the lowest performing high school in the district. The superintendent at that time orchestrated a restructuring process for Lanier High School. Teachers had to reapply for their jobs and new administration was brought in. The lead administrator appointed to Lanier High School was Mr. Stanley Blackmon (Stanley Blackmon, personal communication, December 4, 2009).

Mr. Blackmon was no stranger to the Jackson Public School District. He was the Head Football Coach at Provine High School for many years prior to serving as an Assistant Principal at Lanier High School during the 1995-1996 school year and later moving to Assistant Principal at Jim Hill High School. Mr. Blackmon left Jackson Public Schools to return to his hometown of Canton, Mississippi to serve as Principal at Nichols Middle School and later as Principal of Canton High School. Mr. Blackmon returned to Lanier High School in 2003 at the request of the Superintendent in the hopes of restoring Lanier to the prominence that it once had (Stanley Blackmon, personal communication, December 4, 2009).

Upon entering the school as principal, Mr. Blackmon shared that he encountered a culture of low expectations. He often heard teachers say that the students could not read and the parents did not care. Basically, it was the fault of the students and the community that the

school was a failure. Mr. Blackmon knew that he would need to make some changes (Stanley Blackmon, personal communication, December 4, 2009).

Mr. Blackmon used Kurt Lewin's theory of the authoritarian leadership style in order to create the beginning changes. According to Lewin, the authoritarian leader had to determine policy with techniques and steps for work tasks dictated by the leader in the division of labor. The leader is not necessarily hostile but is aloof from participation in work and commonly offers personal praise and criticism for the work done. Mr. Blackmon exercised this leadership style by reorganizing the master schedule. He changed the master schedule so that the teachers providing instruction in the SATP areas (Algebra I, Biology, U.S. History, and English II) would have planning times during the lunch time. The reasoning for this, according to Mr. Blackmon, was because so much instructional time in these areas had been lost because of the time it takes for the classes to complete lunch. In addition, it allowed these teachers additional time to collaborate and work on their lesson plans. As a result of the change in the schedule, the students would have lunch with the physical education or other elective teachers (Stanley Blackmon, personal communication, December 4, 2009).

Mr. Blackmon also communicated to the teachers what he expected to see in the classrooms. He expected to see objectives posted and an agenda indicating how these objectives will be taught in class. He also wanted to see increased teacher/student interaction and student engagement through inquiry-based instruction as it relates to real-life experiences.

He wanted to see teaching from “bell to bell ” (Stanley Blackmon, personal communication, December 4, 2009).

Mr. Blackmon exercised the first stage of Kurt Lewin’s three stage process for change by “unfreezing” or changing the existing mindset or mental barriers that led to failure. As a result of the restructuring process, Mr. Blackmon had to hire a new team of teachers. This allowed him to communicate his expectations and at the same time, he was allowed to rid the school of much of the negativity and low expectations. He hired teachers who had the passion and desire to see students succeed. He also wanted teachers with high content knowledge, creativity and high expectations for themselves and their students (Stanley Blackmon, personal communication, December 4, 2009).

Mr. Blackmon later changed his authoritative style to that of what Lewin would call a more democratic management style. These types of climates are characterized where policy is determined through a collaborative process with decisions assisted by the leader. Before accomplishing tasks, perspectives are gained from group discussions and technical advice from a leader. Members are given choices and collectively decide the division of labor. Praise and criticism in such an environment are objective, fast minded and given by a group member without necessarily having participated extensively in the actual work. Mr. Blackmon created a leadership team devised of grade level leaders. He communicated the vision of success he had for the team and how he planned to achieve this success. Some of the teachers immediately

agreed with his vision. However, there were some that did not. When asked if he kept these naysayers on his leadership team, he responded that he did because in the words of Abraham Lincoln, “Am I not destroying my enemies when I make friends of them?” In addition, you need those naysayers in order to provide another point of view and to keep you on your toes (Stanley Blackmon, personal communication, December 4, 2009).

Once the leadership team was established, he started meeting with them often in order to contribute in the decision-making process. If you include them, according to Blackmon, it makes the implementation process much easier. For example, prior to the beginning of the school year, he worked with his leadership team to create what he called the “20/20 rule.” This was in response to the teachers stating that there was a constant problem with students walking the halls during instructional time and cutting class. This rule stated that during the first and last twenty minutes of class, the halls should be clear. In the event of an emergency, teachers are to buzz the front office and an administrator and/or designee will escort a student where they needed to go (Stanley Blackmon, personal communication, December 4, 2009).

Another part of the “unfreezing” process in which Mr. Blackmon had to lead was in taking pride in the physical appearance of the school. He stated that it has been the belief of successful and effective school personnel that you can determine whether a school is successful or not by looking at the front office and the cleanliness of the school. It is important to pay special attention to the restrooms. He shared a story with me about when he first became principal of his former school, he noticed that the classrooms and the restrooms were filthy. He

knew that it affected the morale of the teachers and the students. He used his personal funds to pay someone to come to the school, on a Saturday, in order to clean the floors in the classrooms and extensively clean the bathrooms. He stated that when the teachers returned that following Monday, they were stunned at how clean the building was. He noticed that the teachers and the students acted differently and took more pride in their school. Needless to say, it increased the morale of not only the staff, but the students as well. At Lanier, he met with his custodial staff and established a schedule in which he expected restrooms, and other widely used areas, to be cleaned. He stated that he expected the restrooms to be cleaned once in the morning after the students have entered class. They should be checked again after lunch is complete, and a final check should be done after student dismissal (Stanley Blackmon, personal communication, December 4, 2009).

In order to “unfreeze” the mindset of the parents, Mr. Blackmon wanted to reach out to the parents and members of the community. He wanted to revamp the Parent Center. He stated that according to some of the teachers and other staff members, the Parent Center had really been underutilized. Parents were not often invited to the Parent Center and it was unclear of what its purpose was. Mr. Blackmon wanted to change that. First of all, he appealed to community businesses in order to donate furniture and other resources needed to improve the physical appearance of the Parent Center. Secondly, in accordance with Lewin’s second stage of the change process, “transition”, Mr. Blackmon hired two retired teachers he had known from his years at Provine High School, to operate the Parent Center. He hired them not

only because he knew they would support his vision, but they had the energy and charisma to go into the community and appeal to the parents. These teachers, along with Ms. Loretta Epps, revitalized Lanier's Parent Center by educating parents on how they can help their children with their homework, how to prepare them for SATP testing, and providing parenting classes. They also helped parents to understand what were "Do Now Activities" or instructional activities that took place at the beginning of class. The Parent Center also served as the location of several health screenings provided by community medical services (Stanley Blackmon, personal communication, December 4, 2009).

Mr. Blackmon was also successful in the implementation or "transition" of his vision by doing constant monitoring and providing immediate and effective feedback. Not only did he monitor the day-to-day operations of the school, he monitored the classrooms as well. Once he communicated what he expected from teachers and students in the classroom, he would often conduct classroom observations, whether they were in-depth observations or quick drop-in observations. If he was not satisfied with what he observed, he would conference with those teachers during their planning time or after-school in order to let them know what their strengths were and what they needed to improve on. He stated that his assistant principals would often assist him with these observations. Sometimes he would have to provide feedback in a whole group setting. He stated that this would really be the only time that he would conduct a staff meeting. He told me that he would tell the staff, "If I have the podium out during staff meeting, you know I am getting ready to rock!" In other words, if he was having a

staff meeting, he was often not happy with what his staff was doing and he had no problem expressing that to them (Stanley Blackmon, personal communication, December 4, 2009).

When asked about student buy-in to his vision, Mr. Blackmon expressed that he had to change his own behavior toward the students. He had to “unfreeze” the notion that he had to be hard on the students and just be a no nonsense type of person. People also expected him to be that way. He found that as he got to know the students, he had to transition his approach from the authoritative approach, to more of a nurturing approach. He had to be more of a “father-figure” to many of his students. He stated that he would often stop students in the hall and ask them how their grades were. He knew many of the students by name but if he did not, they would be quick to tell him their names. He often did not forget them after he had interacted with them. The students knew that Mr. Blackmon cared for them and as a result, they responded to him in a positive manner. He gave an example of a situation in the cafeteria in which one of the students saw him dressed in his suit cleaning the cafeteria tables. The student came up to Mr. Blackmon and stated that he did not have to do that. He would clean the tables for him. Mr. Blackmon stated that he wanted the students to see him do that because if they saw him cleaning the tables, they should not have a problem cleaning the tables if they are asked to do so (Stanley Blackmon, personal communication, December 4, 2009).

The final stage of Lewin’s three-stage process for change is the “freezing” stage. This is the stabilization stage or making the change stick. After Mr. Blackmon’s first year as principal of Lanier High School, the school made incremental growth according to the SATP tests.

However, after Mr. Blackmon's second year as principal, the school moved from a Level 2 to a Level 3, which deemed Lanier as a successful school. When asked how he stabilized that school in such a short amount of time, he stated that the teachers rallied around him. This was especially true when they saw positive changes occur and saw how he believed that the teachers had the power to make Lanier High School a successful school. Being a former coach, Mr. Blackmon understood the "we" concept and he often expressed to his staff that we were all in this together. The teachers had high expectations for the students and expressed determination in doing whatever they had to do in order to ensure that those students would be successful. They would often tell him, "I am doing this for the kids!" (Stanley Blackmon, personal communication, December 4, 2009).

Mr. Blackmon remained the principal of Lanier High School until his retirement in 2007. However, the changes made by Mr. Blackmon have continuously impacted Lanier High School. The Mississippi Department of Education recently changed the state accountability model in order to reflect the new rigor in the Mississippi Curriculum Test (MCT2) for grades 3-8 and the SATP grades 9-12. Despite the increase in rigor, Lanier High School obtained a Quality Distribution Index of 150 as a result of the 2008-2009 SATP tests. Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) was met in all areas. The graduation rate has also increased to 76.8%. Lanier High School has been labeled a "successful" school under the new state accountability model (Mississippi Department of Education, 2009).

Mr. Blackmon currently works as a School Improvement Consultant. He works with various schools in order to help them to implement change and become successful schools (Stanley Blackmon, personal communication, December 4, 2009).

References

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