I first began identifying schools with high-achieving children of color and children from low-income families seven years ago, when I began working at The Education Trust.* My job was to find high-performing and rapidly improving high-poverty and high-minority schools and write about what made them successful.

Early on in my quest, I visited a school in Boston where the principal, Mary Russo, had led a lot of improvement, and I remarked to her that many people believe schools can’t be expected to overcome the barriers of poverty and racial isolation. “They say this work can’t be done,” I said. She replied, “It’s being done.” I spent the next several years writing about her school and more than two dozen others that proved her right, and in her honor I began thinking of them as “It’s Being Done” schools.

Over the years, I found that although the schools shared many characteristics and core practices, the most important constant among all of them was that they had highly effective principals. But that is too facile a conclusion. If leadership is key to the success of schools, what does that mean? Are highly successful leaders superheroes who drop in to save schools with a series of magic tricks only to disappear later? If so, we have no hope of helping all schools become high performing; we cannot expect an entire profession to be filled with magical superheroes.

When I talked with the principals, however, they didn’t seem like superheroes. They seemed like—well, principals. Listening to them made running schools seem like more a matter of common sense than derring-do. And yet, judging from their results, what they were doing was clearly quite special.

When I was at their schools, I would see teachers laugh at their quirks and argue with them over the best ways to do things. But those same teachers would conspiratorially corner me in hallways to whisper that the success of their school was all due to their principals. They would tell me stories of how their principals helped them through the bad days and challenged them to improve on the good days; how their principals had created the atmosphere and the culture that allowed teachers to do the hard work of teaching and made teachers want to come to work every day. Anyone who has hung around schools knows this is not the way most teachers talk about their principals.

Clearly, I needed to write about leadership as a key element of school success, but I struggled with how to do so.

It seemed to me that I needed to do something that combined storytelling and systematic research, and so I asked my colleague Christina Theokas, who is the director of research at Ed Trust, to help me tell the stories of these school leaders in a systematic, methodological way.

*To learn about The Education Trust, go to www.edtrust.org.
odologically rigorous way. A partnership was born. The result is Getting It Done: Leading Academic Success in Unexpected Schools, the book on which this article is based.

Karin Chenoweth

BY KARIN CHENOWETH AND CHRISTINA THEOKAS

Does anyone still hold to the notion that our public schools are the crucible of our democracy, ensuring the vast majority of our fellow citizens develop the intellectual wherewithal and integrity to be reliable partners in building a future? Listening to the national debates about school reform and accountability, it is easy to despair that such an idea exists anywhere.

The good news: that idea is out there, kept alive by countless educators who believe it is their job to figure out how to teach all kids.

The really good news: some of them have succeeded. Administrators and teachers have done it together by creating a professional, collaborative culture that empowers teachers to do great work.

Take, for example, Molly Bensinger-Lacy, former principal of Graham Road Elementary School in Fairfax, Virginia. Graham Road serves mostly the children of low-income, recent immigrants, and when Bensinger-Lacy arrived in 2004, it was one of the lowest-performing schools in the district. By the time she retired in 2009, almost all students met state standards and many exceeded them, making the school’s achievement data look like data from what Bensinger-Lacy calls “country club schools.”

Bensinger-Lacy is one of 33 principals we studied to find out how their schools do what many think impossible: educate all kids. Despite the fact that their schools have tremendous challenges (on average, 75 percent of students are from low-income families and 73 percent are children of color), they achieve at levels equal to or even higher than the middle-class schools in their states. We call them “It’s Being Done” schools.

Like the other principals in our study, Bensinger-Lacy credits the hard work of the teachers and the staff coming together around a shared goal for the improvement of her school. Teachers at Graham Road, in turn, credit her with helping them become better teachers and creating the kind of school where their hard work pays off.

In far too many schools, the hard work of teachers does not pay off, which is why a couple of the questions we wanted to answer were: What about these leaders guides their schools to success? What beliefs and competencies do they bring to the job, and what actions do they take that help their teachers teach and their students learn?

The answers add up to a rather complicated story, but one we think holds a lot of hope for the field of education.

To begin with, these principals are deeply steeped in the classroom and the world of instruction. Most were teachers for huge chunks of their careers.

These principals are deeply steeped in the classroom and the world of instruction. Most were teachers for huge chunks of their careers.

Karin Chenoweth is the writer-in-residence at The Education Trust, where Christina Theokas is the director of research. This article is based on their new book, Getting It Done: Leading Academic Success in Unexpected Schools, published by Harvard Education Press in 2011 (www.hepg.org/hep/book/147). Getting It Done builds on two previous books by Chenoweth, “It’s Being Done”: Academic Success in Unexpected Schools (2007) and How It’s Being Done: Urgent Lessons from Unexpected Schools (2009), both of which were excerpted in American Educator.

Unless otherwise noted, information about the educators and schools was up to date as of the spring of 2012. Since then, staff, programs, student characteristics, achievement levels, etc., may have changed.
This is a far cry from the old model of principal as the person who prevents and manages crises, buffers teachers from parents and school board members, and basically keeps the trains running. It also has little to do with some of the other popular notions of principals, such as the tough baseball-bat-wielding Joe Clark (portrayed in the movie *Lean on Me*) or generic “leaders” brought in from other fields.

It is, in fact, more like the kind of principal teachers want to work for—someone who has walked in their shoes, knows the challenges, and can offer critical feedback and support for improvement.

That does not mean It’s Being Done principals make the job of teacher easy—it will never be easy, particularly in schools where many of the students live in poverty—but they support teachers and help them become proficient in their craft. That helps make success possible.

None of these principals define a successful student as one who does well on tests but, rather, as someone who applies himself, loves to learn, and is able to stand up for himself.

So how do they make success possible? Briefly, they:

- set the vision that all students will be successful;
- establish a climate and culture of respect;
- focus their time on instruction;
- manage the building to support instruction; and
- monitor and evaluate continually.

That’s a big job description. Let’s go through the list one by one.

**They set the vision that all students will be successful**

This is one of those things that sounds simple but is actually quite complex. What does it mean, after all, for a student to be successful? These principals have quite a broad definition, using words like “curiosity,” “confidence,” and “a sense of joy in learning.” Elain Thompson, former principal of P.S. 124, says, “Success for me is to see a child grow physically, emotionally, intellectually, and socially. If I have a child who comes from a shelter, if they can acclimate and can go to their teachers with trust and say, ‘I didn’t have breakfast this morning,’ that confidence will help them become a better student.”

The interesting thing here is that these principals were initially identified because of the high test scores of their students. Site visits later confirmed that the schools were doing much more than simply doing well on tests, but the initial screen was test scores. And yet none of these principals define a successful student as one who does well on tests but, rather, more broadly as someone who applies himself, loves to learn, and is able to stand up for himself.

“*You know what a successful student is?”* asks Bethune Ele-

**They establish a climate and culture of respect**

In some ways, this is the toughest job a principal has. Working in schools is difficult; working in high-poverty schools is very difficult, and principals have a lot to do with making the climate either hostile or engaging and the culture one of defeatism or can-do resiliency.

A teacher in an It’s Being Done school, Laura Bailey, from Jack Britt High School in Fayetteville, North Carolina, indicated just how integrated culture and climate are with school success when she told us:
Fortrequires that teachers be willing to let go of established ways of something created by all the faculty and staff, and sometimes it would never "write them up" for anything except speaking disre-
spectfully to a child. By this she meant not just yelling but also speaking in a sarcastic or demeaning way. Gustafson says some of the teachers bristled; they said they were simply responding to the disrespect shown them by the students. But Gustafson held firm that it is the grownups in a building who establish the climate. “How kids function is an absolute consequence of how adults function,” she says.

To help teachers learn how to control their classes without sarcasm and humiliation, she and her assistant principal Jennie Black led book studies, beginning with Teaching with Love and Logic: Taking Control of the Classroom, by Jim Fay and David Funk, which gives concrete ways teachers can handle students’ misbehavior respectfully. In other words, instead of just insisting that teachers respect students and punishing their way to the goal, they created a process for the staff to work together to develop

They respect teachers as professionals and help them hone their craft and their critical eye to see what is working and what is not.

ers begin with a respect for the abilities of their students to succeed, and they work to ensure that respect permeates throughout their buildings. All of these principals know that many of their students are under great stress at home, and they strive to make school a place where students feel comfortable, safe, and welcome.

Deb Gustafson, who became principal of Ware Elementary at Fort Riley in Kansas in 2001, after it was put “on improvement” because of its low performance, began by telling teachers that she would never “write them up” for anything except speaking disre-

**School Characteristics**

The 33 principals and assistant principals we studied come from 24 schools across the country. The schools, at all grade levels, differ in size and locale. Most are regular neighborhood public schools; one is a charter school. The average free or reduced-price lunch eligibility across these schools is 75 percent, and the average minority student enrollment is 73 percent. All of the schools were, under the leadership of the principal in the study, either high achieving or rapidly improving. Their achievement data put them at least at the level of middle-class schools in their states—in some cases, they are at the top of their states. In the cases of principals who have left, some of the schools have continued improving; others have fallen dramatically.

**Level**
- Elementary: 62.5%
- Middle: 12.5%
- High: 12.5%
- Combined: 12.5%

**Locale**
- Urban: 54.2%
- Suburban: 20.8%
- Rural: 25.0%

**Composition**
- Average school size: 667.1 students
- Average free or reduced-price lunch eligibility: 74.8%
- Average minority student enrollment: 73.0%

-K.C. and C.T.
School, says, “It’s about people, not programs, or all schools would be successful.” These leaders don’t come into their schools with a prescribed program and script of interventions; instead, they respect teachers as professionals, and as leaders in their classrooms, and help them hone their craft and their critical eye to see what is working and what is not.

**They focus on instruction**

Two or three decades ago, no one really expected principals to lead instruction. The old stereotype was that principals were gym teachers with decent behavior management skills and a flair for administration; they made sure purchase orders went out and students registered for classes. Such principals might have taken an interest in teachers at the time of hiring but usually left teacher-complaints.

It’s Being Done leaders believe it is up to them to solve the essential paradox of instruction: reaching all students is highly dependent on expert teachers, yet no teacher can possibly be expert enough to teach all things to all children. It is only by doing what Richard Elmore of Harvard University has called the “de-privatizing” of teaching that schools can have a hope of helping all children succeed academically. They know that ultimately the work of teaching is too complex to be left to individual teachers in isolated classrooms.

Good teachers have always built collaborative relationships with peers, but It’s Being Done leaders make this the core of the way their schools work.

Good teachers have always built collaborative relationships with peers, but It’s Being Done leaders make this the core of the way their schools work.

new principal Arelis Diaz first laid out how she expected teachers to work, which included studying assessment data in collaborative meetings. Her first response was that she didn’t think assessments were “developmentally appropriate” for first grade. “I told her that I had had several principals before her and would no doubt have several principals after her, and I wasn’t going to change the way I worked,” Smith says.

Diaz remembers that conversation as well: “She told me it wasn’t developmentally appropriate to look at data. But when I asked her which students were successful and which students were low, and why, and what we could do about it, she couldn’t tell me.”

When Diaz consolidated reading programs in order to send a team of one reading teacher and several trained paraprofessionals into first-grade reading lessons, there was a quick burst of achievement. “Teachers were seeing their kids zoom through these levels that had taken them a whole year to get through,” says Diaz. “Every teacher loves to see students learning—that’s why we go into teaching.”

That early success helped Smith see that Diaz was interested in helping her and her students be successful, and made her more open to give this new way of working a try. Once she saw the value of understanding exactly what students needed to know and tracking their individual progress through data, she became one of the most enthusiastic data trackers in collaboration meetings. She now works with other teachers to get them over the hump of doing something they weren’t necessarily trained for in their teacher preparation programs. The principals may be in charge of establishing how the instructional program operates, but teachers give breath to its success.

There’s more to instructional leadership than setting up collaborative structures, however. Some of the other elements include:

**Hiring carefully.** It’s Being Done leaders take the opportunity to hire new teachers very seriously. They want to ensure that new teachers understand how much work is involved and the emphasis they place on collaboration with colleagues. Most require prospective teachers to teach model lessons, and many include teachers as observers. They often rely on veteran teachers and teacher leaders to help them assess candidates to see if they will fit in with the needs of the existing teaching staff and students. “Teachers ask much harder questions than I do,” said one leader in our study, who requires prospective teachers to incorporate...
teachers’ critiques of a model lesson by re-teaching it, to see if he or she can work collaboratively.

Training new teachers: It’s Being Done leaders know that no new teacher can possibly have all the knowledge and skill necessary to manage a classroom, master a curriculum, design lessons, get to know students and colleagues, and incorporate school routines. Each principal handles this issue in a slightly different way, but in general they assign mentors, send in coaches, and work to get new teachers any other necessary support. Under Susan Brooks’s leadership, new teachers at Lockhart Junior High School were handed their first year’s worth of lesson plans. Only after a year or two were teachers expected to help develop curriculum and lesson plans with their colleagues.

New teachers were handed their first year’s worth of lesson plans. Only after a year or two were teachers expected to help develop lesson plans with their colleagues.

They also use the years until teachers gain tenure as an extended job interview—they want to see that teachers are growing and improving before they are afforded employment protection. “No one drifts into tenure at Elmont,” says John Capozzi, the principal of Elmont Memorial Junior-Senior High School in Elmont, New York.

Assigning carefully: In too many schools, the most vulnerable students—the ones who have experienced the most failure and are most behind—are assigned to the newest teachers. Such students often present the most discipline problems, and veteran teachers often try to avoid them (which is understandable in schools where teachers are not well supported). But that means students who arrive behind often fall further behind. In contrast, It’s Being Done principals assign their most skilled teachers to the students who need them most. Wendy Tague, for example, is widely acknowledged to be one of the most accomplished English teachers at Elmont. She teaches incoming students who read two or more grade levels behind. In other schools, such an assignment is considered a punishment; at Elmont, it is considered an honor, and Tague says she is thrilled to be able to introduce literature to previously discouraged students who still need to work on basic decoding skills and fluency.

Supervising classroom instruction: It’s Being Done leaders consider being in classrooms and collaborative meetings as the core of their work because their primary role is supporting instruction. But they know it is up to the teacher to be the expert in his or her classroom, so they try not to impose their personal preferences. For example, Terri Tomlinson, principal of George Hall Elementary School in Mobile, Alabama, says she prefers a calm, orderly classroom. However, if teachers are getting good results in a classroom that is more lively and disorganized, she doesn’t question it. “It’s business, not personal,” is what she says, meaning that results speak for themselves.

On the other hand, as longtime teachers, they are often able to offer a struggling teacher ideas and help. So, for example, when Barbara Adderley noticed a teacher’s class took a full 10 minutes to get together materials for a lesson—leading to some boredom-induced mischief—she was able to suggest the teacher organize the materials in bins ahead of time. He later thanked her for the suggestion, saying it not only saved instructional time but helped in classroom management.

Teachers who are struggling are offered help and support, but if they don’t take it and continue to have bad results, It’s Being Done principals are unflinching about letting them know they are falling short. “It is a principal’s job to make a marginal teacher uncomfortable,” says Jennie Black, one of the assistant principals included in our study. This may sound tough and uncompromising—and it is—but teachers who are doing their best appreciate it. Dannette Collins, a teacher at George Hall Elementary School, says that in other schools in which she has worked, principals would permit some teachers to shirk responsibility; conscientious teachers felt obliged to do not only their own work but the work of their colleagues or risk harm to students. She says she appreciates working somewhere where everyone does their work and the expectations are clear.

Sometimes this uncompromising attitude means that an It’s Being Done leader fires a teacher or, more common, helps him or her find a less demanding job.

But It’s Being Done leaders do not believe that firing teachers is the way to school improvement. “We can’t hire and fire our way out of this,” says Barbara Adderley. Rather, they believe it is the job of school leaders to help current teachers lead instruction in their classrooms.

They manage the building to support instruction

Many principals, when told they need to be the kind of instructional leader outlined above, respond that they don’t have that kind of time; they have a building to run. For It’s Being Done principals, the opposite is true. “It’s not my job to run the building,” says Diane Scricca of her days as principal of Elmont Memorial Junior-Senior High School, a large comprehensive high school (Continued on page 32)
There is only one way to get it all done: develop the leadership capacity of every adult in the building and empower all to make decisions appropriate to their jobs.

They monitor and evaluate continually

It’s all very well to have a vision and set up systems, but that is no guarantee of success or excellence. Teachers around the country tell sad tales of all the highfalutin plans by principals that never really got off the ground because no one followed through. That’s why much of the daily work of It’s Being Done principals has to do with what Valarie Lewis says is the need to “inspect what you expect.” It’s Being Done leaders are in data meetings making sure they focus on identifying the instructional needs of individual students and the professional development needs of teachers. They are in classrooms making sure teachers are able to establish respectful classroom routines and give their students high-level instruction. They are in alignment meetings making sure teachers have an aligned curriculum across the grades. They are planning powerful professional development opportunities for staff members who need help, and they are continually reflecting on their own practice for flaws and weaknesses. George Hall Elementary’s Terri Tomlinson, for example, has a daily practice of thinking about what went well during the day and what she could have handled better.

They are, in other words, holding everyone accountable for their jobs and helping those who need help to improve. But, more
you know you’re actually growing.” Monitoring and evaluation are not intended to be punitive, but rather to provide feedback as part of continual improvement. These schools are not perfect; they have flaws and weaknesses. But they know what they are, and they are always trying to improve.

As defined above, this is a huge job, bigger than any one person can handle. So the question is: How do these principals handle it?

They say there is only one way to get it all done: by developing the leadership capacity of every adult in the building, and empowering teachers and staff members to make the decisions appropriate to their jobs. Although the change for staff can be intimidating, these changes make these schools places where teachers want to teach. The job is not easier, but it is more satisfying and professionally challenging, in part because problems are tackled in a community of professionals.

When the creative energy of teachers and other staff members is trained on solving problems—not only individual child and classroom problems but school-wide problems—all jobs, including the school leaders’, are made doable. More important, schools that operate in these ways are able to help all their students learn at high levels.

Given all this, many teachers question what they can do when their principal does not support instruction with a clear vision, transparent standards, and respect for all students and staff. This is a difficult situation to be in, but we think there are a couple of possibilities. The first is that teachers in general must expand their expectations of what they have managed to do, however, that it is by far the more difficult path. We need more school leaders who understand the ways to build a respectful, professional environment in which all students are helped to succeed. And there is no reason we shouldn’t have them, because nothing It’s Being Done leaders do is revolutionary or new. All of their practices are rooted in the best research and professional tools of school leadership.

What they have managed to do, however, is put together everything called for in the research in a way that makes sense and that is tailored for their individual schools. In doing so, they give us the confidence to say that the work of educating all children can be done. To quote Molly Bensinger-Lacy one last time: “The students living in poverty whom I have served in multiple schools in three states lack all kinds of resources…. And yet there is a place of incredible possibilities within the neighborhoods of these so-called ‘disadvantaged’ children—their free public schools. And inside those schools, there are educators (us) who have the power and the privilege to develop in our children perhaps the most powerful resource of all—the mind. We educators really do have the knowledge to provide all children with a high-quality education—an education that will help break the cycle of poverty and despair. To do anything else but act on this knowledge is unacceptable.”

When the creative energy of teachers and staff is trained on solving school-wide problems, all jobs, including the school leaders’, are made doable.

Getting It Done builds on two previous books by Karin Chenoweth about high-performing schools with significant populations of children of color and children of poverty:

- “It’s Being Done”: Academic Success in Unexpected Schools (www.hepg.org/hep/Book/65), which profiled 15 schools, as well as one consortium of schools, and identified 25 characteristics they share. To read an excerpt from “It’s Being Done” in the Summer 2007 issue of American Educator, go to www.aft.org/newspubs/periodicals/ae/summer2007/chenoweth1.cfm.

- How It’s Being Done: Urgent Lessons from Unexpected Schools (www.hepg.org/hep/book/102), which profiled eight high-performing schools and identified five core practices of these schools. To read an excerpt from How It’s Being Done in the Fall 2009 issue of American Educator, go to www.aft.org/pdfs/americaneducator/fall2009/chenoweth.pdf.

Endnotes