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NEW TITLE

Arts, Accountability, and Engagement:
How One Urban School Creates Continuous Improvement

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ABSTRACT

This is a case study of a successful public urban elementary school with a disadvantaged student population, high in ELLs, special ed, and free lunch kids. Not only does this school meet its external accountability obligations under NCLB but it does so while providing its students with a program rich in creative arts and activities. In other words, it successfully defies the pressure that often turns schools into test-prep factories. This article describes this school, observed over three years, from the perspective of organizational leadership and change management.

Using data from teacher surveys and site visits I document the strong culture among these teachers that upholds high expectations for their students, collaboration in improvement efforts, and mutual respect with the principal. Reconstructing the process of change leadership that produced this situation, I hypothesize that a “social contract” between principal and staff (for high engagement in exchange for high support) underpins the staff culture of collaboration for continuous improvement.

Creative arts and activities form an important part of the educational vision and day-to-day experience at PS 255. They foster student engagement (among several ways, by lowering language barriers) and they enrich the content of learning; they also help educators to hold to the vision that ultimately drives this remarkable school.

230 words

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Introduction

This article sketches an organizational portrait of one successful urban public elementary school, PS 255 in Brooklyn, NY, while inquiring systemically into its strategy for success. Among the teachers at this school there are clear signs of a culture of continuous improvement and collaboration. Survey data show the shared beliefs, attitudes, and norms that form this culture; comparative data from other city schools show that this school is not typical (but also not unique) on these indicators of teacher culture at PS 255.

Field data from observation and interviews will be added to the survey data to suggest possible answers to three research questions: (i) how this school’s culture was created, (ii) how it is maintained, and (iii) how it functions to support the success of this school on several criteria.

Behind those research questions lies another question, packing much feeling and needing them to be addressed. It is this: *How have the leaders of this school avoided “the NCLB accountability trap”?* This so-called “trip” occurs when the school’s priorities come to be defined by test scores alone, the curriculum is narrowed, and school becomes a “test-prep factory”. The school featured here has clearly avoided that trap. Indeed PS 255 is outstanding in its embrace of creative arts and activities as integral to its educational program – though it is an ordinary public school in a low-income district, not a “magnet” school. The principal who has led PS 255 for eight years, believes that the arts contribute significantly to the success of their disadvantaged students (ELL, special needs, and low income) in the NY state tests – not to mention important areas of growth beyond those tests.

This article examines the leadership strategy used at this school over the past eight years since this principal took office, and its results. Every school finds its own way through the hazards of current conditions: this case study aims to throw more light on the challenges and choices faced by many school leaders, not just the leaders featured here. Using data from teacher surveys over three years and from my site visits it documents the culture found among these

teachers: perceptions and beliefs they share, especially those that define their relations with colleagues and with the principal. Reconstructing the process of change leadership that produced this situation, I suggest that a “social contract” between principal and staff underpins the staff culture of collaboration for continuous improvement: teachers give high engagement in exchange for high support from the principal.

Those are the bare bones of the conceptual framework used here: it involves many more factors and it emphasizes the many-sided role of principal in nurturing and orchestrating the many players and elements involved in achieving good organizational performance. Like any metaphor, this one has dangers. The orchestra conductor is often (wrongly) imagined to be like a puppet-master – but that is not the view I take here. Rather, I want to emphasize that both orchestral conductors and principals are guiding the work of professionals. In world-class orchestras the maestro’s role is to draw from the players ever-better performance, individually and collectively. In less distinguished orchestras (and schools), with poorly paid and less well-prepared staff, the leader must provide even more coaching and professional development. What outsiders can see of these roles (both principal and conductor) is merely one facet – while the most important facets are invisible. I shall use this case to make more visible the role of principal and other school leaders in creating the conditions for continuous improvement, the criterion of “success”.

Within that larger context, this article considers the role of the arts in this school’s above average success with disadvantaged students. I will explore how it may affect both the students’ experience of school and the teachers’ work situation -- making it more engaging for both. *For teachers this school presents important cultural shifts away from several traditions of this profession: away from instructional autonomy to more collaboration, to high expectations for all student -- however disadvantaged they might be, to using formative data persistently to improve their methods, to sharing ideas among colleagues, and to incorporating more of the arts and creative activities into their own teaching.*

This single case can be a window into the very large and complex process of school reform. From examining how this principal and her allies achieve their significant success in

educating students with significant disadvantages one can generate hypotheses about what is required. How do they do it, when many others (so far) cannot? The principal believes that the arts play a crucial role in this success but exactly how? I shall offer several hypotheses.

Systemically this case illustrates how successful reform depends on many inter-dependent factors, especially the core culture of continuous improvement and collaboration among teachers and administrators. That presupposes a “social contract” between principal and teachers (high engagement in exchange for better than average working conditions). But such an agreement is worthless unless teachers trust the principal to honor it. The survey touches on all these components. Reform advocates who promote the approaches of the Professional Learning Community or the Learning Organization will find that this case analysis clarifies important success factors for either of those approaches. Either approach can be used to interpret the change leadership strategy of the school, though I do not claim that either ideology played any significant historical role there.

This article contributes to the literature that attempts to explain the unusual success of certain schools with disadvantaged student populations. It draws on several distinct literatures for important context as it seeks to make sense out of a complicated, real world situation (a school undergoing change), with its history, interacting players and forces, embedded in larger systems (each with its history, players, forces...). We will dip into many literatures in four areas. Firstly, we shall note some of the larger forces acting on the field of public schools in the USA, compelling change nationally – the big picture; secondly, we shift focus to the viewpoint of a single school – the view at “ground level”; thirdly (mid-level) we glance at some district-level dynamics as they impact one school, especially its principal; lastly in this lit review we refocus completely to consider the possible roles of creative arts in a public school striving for improvement.

Context and Literature (i) The Big Picture, Seen From the Mountain-Top

In the USA since 2002 (and similarly in many other nations) the public schools have found themselves caught in a fierce storm of pressure for “standards-based” reform. There have

been many prior attempts to reform US public education: some achieved long term change, others have disappeared without impact. But until now no large scale change to public schools has touched the core of how teachers teach -- until now. This current reform movement addresses results (standards for academic learning, as tested) and imposes sanctions for inadequate performance on administrators and sometimes on teachers. Principals now must act as instructional leaders and teachers must be accountable for what their students learn or don't learn.

The Legislated Mandate of Accountability (NCLB).

For over a century US teachers in their classrooms have had great autonomy over their instructional methods (Pomson 2005). In that tradition the role of the principal was to protect teachers from outside "interference" as much as possible, but never to question the pedagogy of a tenured teacher (Wolcott 1973). That long-standing situation changed finally, abruptly when the federal government passed the first national, academic standards-based education reform in 2002 (PL107-110 2002). Like whacking the proverbial mule with a heavy stick, the "No Child Left Behind" (NCLB) law imposed "accountability" for students' tested academic achievement on schools. The impact of this law has its own literature (e.g. Cooley 2007; McGuinn 2006).

One major result of NCLB is to create the need for principals to take on the role of chief instructional leader in the school and to demand the attention of all educators to improving the effectiveness of their teaching. This is a radical change of priorities and focus for school boards and educators in the USA; of course they face huge difficulty in understanding and supporting such a fundamental shift in school system priorities (Elmore 2000; 2004).

Much of the impetus for the NCLB legislation can be seen in two earlier literatures. One might be labeled: Exposés of Large Scale Educational Neglect and Abuse. This is a small literature in the tradition of "muck-raking" journalism and social activism, passionately urging reform, based on field reporting of shocking conditions in schools. It also highlights patterns of racial and class discrimination, e.g. Kozol (1968, 1991). The other "Economic Danger" literature was backed by major business interests but still took a long time to overcome union and political opposition. Business leaders have appealed for public school reform for over 25 years, notably in

the Nation At Risk report (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), and again quite recently in Tough Choices or Tough Times, an even more dire warning (2007).

A framework for comparing rival theories and proposals for reform notes that the recent polarization of positions over public school reform in the USA seen at the end of the twentieth century, is strikingly similar to an earlier national controversy at the start of that century (Gelberg 1997). In both periods the reformers (business leaders) championed business ideas of “efficiency” and centralized management, i.e. reform of education from outside the system. And in both periods Gelberg identifies an alternative view of how to improve the schools from within, based on progressive ideals of education (Dewey 1900). At the start of the 20th century centralization, bureaucracy and “efficiency” won out. Now at the start of the 21st century (with reform of NCLB itself under legislative negotiation) Gelberg’s framework positions progressivism and teacher professionalism as an alternative approach to education reform (Dewey 1900); (Kohn 1999), (Coalition for Authentic Reform in Education 1999), (Cohen 2002); (Crew 2007).

Now supporters of the “inside” approach to reform should find allies on the business side among advocates for Continuous Improvement and for Learning Organizations (Argyris 1999; Argyris and Schön 1978, 1996); (Senge 1990; Senge, Roberts, Ross, Roth, Smith & Kleiner 1999); (Sugarman 2007). We shall see that PS 255’s strategy represents (in effect) just such a merging of the two principles of reform (inside and outside).

Context and Literature (ii) Ground Level, A School

The Principal. At the epicenter of the reform-induced turmoil stands the principal, the first to be held accountable for student achievement, expected to lead radical change throughout the school, and to become an effective instructional leader, in addition to managing a full plate of the principal's traditional responsibilities. For a reminder of earlier times see Wolcott (1973); for current research on the role of principal see Cotton (2003); and for an attempt to quantify a "leadership effect" see Marzano, Waters & NcNulty (2005). For a case study of one turn-around school situation, illustrating the all-out test-prep scenario -- in contrast to the case to be presented here - see *Tested: One American School Struggles to Make the Grade* (Perlstein 2007).

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) and Distributed Leadership Roles. Two conflicting theories of reform are found, corresponding to the two sides of Gelberg's framework. PLCs and distributed leadership are both found on one side of this divide (reform from within). On the other side is the approach in which reform comes entirely from outside the school. In this view the principal relates to teachers as their administrative superior, presenting them with new instructional and curricular designs and materials from district HQ. In the other approach (reform from within, corresponding to the PLC) teachers are seen as capable professionals who contribute in important ways to developing, testing, and adapting new teaching methods.

The concept of PLC has much in common with the more generic concept of "the learning organization" set in a school¹ and both are central to understanding the success of PS 255

¹ The components defining a PLC are:

1. Shared vision, mission, and values
2. Collective inquiry
3. Collaborative teams
4. Action orientation and experimentation
5. Continuous improvement
6. Results orientation (Dufour and Eaker, 1998, pp. 25-29).

(DuFour & Eaker, 1998); (Baron 2004); (Fullan 2005a). Some of this literature is aspirational and normative; some is empirical, such as Hord (2004) which shows that the movement to encourage PLCs among teachers need not be in conflict with the prerogative of principals. On the contrary, in the pioneer examples of PLCs studied by Hurd and associates they found that principals played a key leadership role in launching and nurturing these developments. Unsuccessful attempts at creating productive PLCs have been reported from different schools where the lack of meeting time strangled the initial attempts and from other cases where the time was given but leadership towards shared purpose and productive practice was lacking (Wood, 2007).

Context and Literature. (iii) Halfway Up or Down the Mountain-side

One cannot understand how a school copes with change without taking account of its district environment. This perspective falls somewhere in-between the two levels just considered. At district level schools that are inclined to be innovative may find themselves hampered by district bureaucracy and school board politics – even when official district policy declares its support for change. Independent and charter schools are differently situated, with more operational autonomy. NYC (the huge home district of PS 255 with 1,600 schools) has begun to give its principals some more autonomy, allowing them to choose their suppliers for professional development and support services, instead of being restricted to what central office supplied (Hill, 2011). **REF** NYC Retro

Research by Ouchi and associates on the school systems of large US cities has highlighted the advantages of three radically decentralized school systems. They compared these three systems with other large city public school systems and found them far more effective and efficient (Ouchi, 2005). It's almost as if the whole city converted to charter schools, with strong regulation and oversight. In each city there were unique historical circumstances that favored the radical change, eliminating most of the educational bureaucracy. However, the transition process was not studied, just the resulting system of regulated competition among schools, which they report is more effective, efficient, and free from fraud than other large school districts. Case

studies of other large districts going through a centrally-managed reform process do however exist (Darling-Hammond, Hightower, Husbands, Lafors, Young & Christopher, 2005).

Research on Change/Improvement Initiatives.

Close-up case studies in single schools can make useful contributions, while being much less costly and less risky than large scale research, which is often considered the gold standard. Small samples and single cases can offer a grassroots check on validity and insight into process, capturing significant data that would not be seen in a large, more representative sample with lower resolution. For example, in one school in one year Sussman studied four projects attempting to improve student learning. Two were introduced by the teachers, one by the principal, and one by the district HQ. Neither of the latter two raised student achievement scores; one of the teacher-initiated innovations produced “startling” improvements – but neither principal nor district officials believed or supported it. So it died. The teacher-initiated improvement depended on some additional resources. Without administrative support, it did not get into the budget and terminated (Sussman, 1977, p.34). Score: Politics 1; Professionalism O.

That close-up research was done before the current interest in PLCs and reform from within. However, old as it is, Sussman’s research is highly relevant to the current situation -- especially regarding the inside-outside polarity in reform thinking. The question at issue is: From where do we get new and better ideas to improve the effectiveness of education? What is the role of central office and its “experts”? What is the role of teachers on the spot? Sussman’s case highlights the long-standing tendency (mental model) of district, state and national reform advocates to assume that solutions come from on top of the system (i.e. from them) and to view teachers as representing “resistance” -- when these administrators want them to be dutiful, unquestioning implementers of external “solutions” – i.e. technicians rather than professionals.

PLC, as the literature describes it depends on levels of expertise among teachers that is not now widespread (Hord, 2004). Reform along PLC lines therefore involves major new learning of job skills (e.g. the use of formative assessment for continuous improvement), roles and relationships (between teachers and principal, among teachers as colleagues), as well as

significant changes in mental models for everyone (e.g. accountability for test results, teaching methods critiqued in a data-driven process of collaborative continuous improvement). This is radical change. In the PS 255 case we will try to see how they address that challenge of professional development.

Successful Schools for Disadvantaged Populations

Prior to 2007 it was hard to find published research on schools that achieve high rates of “proficiency” on state tests with a student intake that was highly “disadvantaged” (Reeves, 2000; Chenoweth 2007, 2009). It has widely been assumed that no such schools existed – one more obstacle to successful efforts at reform. This assumption is bound up with very pessimistic assumptions about the potential abilities of both disadvantaged students and their teachers. To overturn that prejudice would be no small contribution to the cause of school improvement. The study of these unexpected successes may also yield insights (hypotheses) into key success factors. That is the goal for this report on PS 255, another successful school with a disadvantaged student intake, viewed in more depth than the Chenoweth cases.

A third relevant case study illustrates “the test prep scenario” in one school in detail. Tested (Perlstein, 2007) describing the rapid turn-around of one low-performing school, achieved by narrowing the curriculum and focusing everything on test preparation. That approach is often assumed to be the unavoidable cost of success. The case study of PS 255, however, provides a sharp contrast to that strategy and challenges the assumption that successful reform of schools for the disadvantaged must always involve the narrow, test-prep scenario. Data from Chenoweth’s 15 successful schools adds more weight to that challenge (Chenoweth 2007, p.3). While she has more cases, this one (PS 255) provides more detail on culture and change strategy.

This analysis of PS 255 that will follow is guided by the conceptual frameworks of the learning organization (Senge et al., 1999; Sugarman, 2001), the PLC (DuFour & Eaker, 1998), and leadership of cultural change (Schein, 1987, 1999). The role of creative arts and activities in the culture of this school will also be introduced in that context.

This article will not suggest that the arts represent a single-cause explanation for academic success but rather that a wide range of engaging activities play a central role in an effective school that can close the achievement gap for students who come to school with various disadvantages. However, that is just one element in the broader, systemic view suggested here. An engaging curriculum requires highly engaged teachers. Within the constraints of the public school system how can leaders evoke and sustain such engagement? Further, how can they go beyond engagement (activity) to continuous improvement, (professional learning) as teachers work to raise the effectiveness of their teaching and their students' learning? Now that principals must truly become instructional leaders, how can they create a system within the school to support both teachers and principal in this new role – with or without the help of district administrators and resources? These are some of the key issues of culture change, strategic leadership, and organizational learning that are involved in “school reform”.

To understand the role of principal as a change leader I argue that the literature of culture change, strategic leadership, and organizational learning in other domains is valuable for conceptualizing some core processes of organizational and cultural change leadership which face the school principal, superintendent, and other players in this drama.

The Arts in Schools

There are two large reasons for disappointment and concern over the results of large-scale school reform efforts so far. Arts in the school can possibly help with each of them. One concern is at the low end of the problem, i.e. the more basic and rudimentary academic skills. This is a double problem: there is only a little improvement in many schools and none in a substantial hard core. And the gap for the disadvantaged is still wide. But this alas is not all we have to worry about.

At the “high” end the other big concern is over how “advanced” skills are defined and tested. It concerns the ability of graduates to function well in complex, fast-changing systems which require critical and creative thinking, collaborating and competing, plus coping with conflict and confusion, including colleagues who think differently and seem downright difficult. For each of these challenges some researchers hypothesize that an education in and through the

arts can contribute significantly – far more than a conventional academic curriculum (Davis, 2007).

The argument that education for adult life in our modern world cannot be done effectively without the arts converges with concerns from other directions over the inadequacy of the traditional classroom as an environment for learning. Arts education researchers highlight the strengths of the studio or workshop and the widely applicable “studio thinking²” that can be developed there (Winner & Hetland, 2007). Similar arguments have long been made for project-centered teaching methods. All this is relevant to exploring the role of the arts at PS 255.

In relation to basic academic skills PS 255 finds that creative arts and activities can be effective in lowering barriers to student engagement in school – especially language barriers. For example, another visitor to PS 255 around Halloween time observed a classroom where students were making pictures of their own (imagined) Haunted House. With minimal English, even recent immigrants (and other language-challenged students) could participate fully. In addition the teacher took the opportunity to introduce new vocabulary by naming and pointing out different parts of the building. (Source: Quality Review Report for PS 255, NYC Department of Education, October, 2007.)

The arts and creative activities are woven extensively into the fabric of this school. It took me some time to see some of the ways, which I shall identify and illustrate in the main narrative. To anticipate, here are the main categories in brief summary. Each one is the basis for a more formal hypothesis.

² “Studio skills” include visual-spatial abilities, reflection, self-criticism, and the willingness to experiment and learn from mistakes. Eight “studio habits of mind” that arts classes taught, besides artistic craft, all stood out from testable skills taught elsewhere in the schools that they studied. Here are three of them: (i) persistence, (ii) expression: students were urged to move beyond technical skill to create works rich in emotion, atmosphere, and their own personal voice or vision. (iii) was making clear connections with the world outside the classroom (Winner & Hetland, 2007).

(i) Arts and creative activities as a sweetener for the formal education “pill”, helping more students to become more engaged in school more easily. (This is about overcoming verbal and cultural barriers. While creative writing is important here, the arts which are less language-dependent have a special value as sweeteners, or barrier-jumpers, for students who have difficulties with English or language in general.)

(ii) Arts and creative activities as an integral part of the full educational experience. (This involves incorporating the benefits of “studio thinking”.)

Those two categories are defined from the viewpoint of students. Others apply first to staff and then, through them, to students.

(iii) Teachers at PS 255 are encouraged and supported to introduce new activities in the search for greater inclusiveness. This enhances their professional development, adds to the school’s diverse repertoire, models innovation to other staff, and (when successful) recruits enthusiastic, responsive students – who were (perhaps) not attracted by previous offerings.

(iv) When teachers see students’ artwork and creative activities, as well as their many test results (which are much emphasized as a tool for “data-driven” continuous improvement), they are more mindful of the full scope of their goals for these students, they are more apt to hold the vision (“Stars that shine”). This helps them, despite all the external pressure over test results, to resist “teaching to the test”.

Method

Data for this case study comes from two main sources. One source consists of statistics compiled by New York City’s Department of Education (DoE) with reports available through its website. This includes (i) student test data, (ii) a questionnaire survey completed by teachers and parents, and (iii) reports of DoE educational assessors who conduct site-visits at schools (DoE 2007). The DoE survey data comes from three school years (2006-2009). In years 2 and 3 84% or more of the PS 255 teachers responded to the survey. Only in the first year was the

response rate much lower at (54%) but there is no sign of non-response bias in that year. To anticipate, there is great stability in all the PS 255 survey responses. This data will be reviewed and analyzed in the section entitled: “A Collaborative Culture Among Teachers.”

Our second main data source is eight days of on-site observations and interviews that I conducted during three separate visits. I interviewed and observed the principal and two assistant principals (several times each); I interviewed and observed four teachers (several times); and with at least another six teachers I had brief conversations and I observed them, sometimes in their classrooms, or in meetings, hallways, cafeteria, etc.. My approach to interviewing was opportunistic, with just a few target subjects pre-selected (the three principals, art teacher); others were identified from early interviews (e.g. the ELA coach, fencing teacher); and others just appeared, e.g. a janitor, security officer, food service staff, and two incidents that happened while I was in the principal’s office. Some documents were collected, e.g. schedules, school policies, DoE city and state regulations, and event flyers).

The open-endedness of the fieldwork balances the highly structured survey data. Each helps to interpret and check on the other; together they help us to explore processes that neither alone could comprehend well. In the tradition of many clinical and biological disciplines, this study uses a single case to study some fundamental processes. Using my field data with the teacher surveys, I will identify and illustrate some key processes of leadership, learning, engagement, and improvement. The narrative will switch its viewpoint several times between close-up vignettes and big-picture panoramas.

My connection with the school in this case began in 2007 and continued over more than two years until the completion of this article ms. At the outset I was not intending to pay such close attention to a single case: I was more focused on the big picture of school reform and seeking some grassroots perspective. At Teachers College Columbia University I met with many

of the Cahn Fellows, thirty outstanding principals of NYC public schools. I then made site visits to three of their schools. I was strongly attracted to PS 255 and returned two more times to the site, also studying the city-wide changes/reforms being made in NYC public schools under Chancellor Klein and Mayor Bloomberg. Concurrently, I was researching the earlier reforms of NYC's Police Department. Organizational learning and change forms a central part of my theoretical framework for both of these research interests (Argyris, 1999; Argyris and Schön, 1996; Senge, 1990, 1999).

As I was beginning this project Chenoweth's collection of brief case studies of high achieving public schools was published (1997), though it did not get my attention until several years later. What does this case add? Methodologically it adds hard survey data on the culture among teachers in this school and on the relationship between principal and teachers. Theoretically it provides a more systemic framework for understanding how the various success factors interconnect causally.

This case study can contribute to learning in educational management and policy in several ways. (i) PS 255 can be taken as an example of "best practice" in principal leadership; (ii) the case study can be used to identify the field of forces that affect the strategic choices that face a principal; (iii) it can be used as a test case (or reality check) for assessing district, state and national approaches to school reform; (iv) it can provoke reflection within the reform-research community, as a stimulus and challenge to theorizing and research (Daft and Weick, 1984; Weick, 1979).

The kinds of inquiry and sense-making attempted in this article are no different fundamentally from the inquiry and sense-making that must take place in any school or organization committed to continuous improvement. The esoteric methodologies that are sometimes necessary in research are not always necessary for practical purposes. Believing that to be true here, I have analyzed the data (including the survey data that is available (to the general public) for every NYC school via the DoE website) using only the most elementary and easily replicated methods. Such assessment, inquiry, and action learning should be commonplace in schools that have a serious commitment to continuous improvement (Dufour & Eaker 1998).

Case Study: Assessment of Academic Test Results

The approach of this case study is to explain the “success” of this school, so we must first establish this as a credible fact. As an imperfect but convenient proxy measurement I shall use the data on student performance in the NCLB (federally)-mandated, state-administered tests. While the objectives of PS 255 educators are considerably broader and higher than this, and closer to the progressive educators’ notions of life-long learning and every child fulfilling his/her potential, I shall assume that a highly successful school should be capable of succeeding by both criteria. In this article, however, we shall be using the only achievement data available, namely scores from state tests. Evaluation of this “hard” data must, however, take account of differences in school intake.

PS 255 is a public elementary school in Brooklyn, NY, an area of high immigration. Among its student intake 29% are English language learners (twice the city-wide average) and 12% are special education students. There is a significant level of poverty among these families (62% Title One eligibility) (REF). These are significant challenges to reach state and federal standards for academic test results and yearly improvement. However, PS 255 is ranked in the top 20th percentile among all NYC elementary schools. This was true in 2006-7 and is still true in 2008-9 (DoE 2009). In the latest DoE statistics there is special attention to the lowest achieving one third of students. Over 80% of these students at PS 255 achieved at least one year’s progress in both English and math – again putting this school in the top 20th percentile for NYC elementary schools (Source: DoE-NYC, 2009. NYC Progress Report 2008-09 for PS 255. website.)

Test data from the end of school year 2008-09 shows PS 255 students ranking in the top 20% on most measures. First we focus on the students’ level of “proficiency” (the percentage of students who achieved one of the top two levels). This was 83% (ELA) and 94% (math). Next the percentage making at least one year’s progress was 67% (ELA) and 78% (maths); and among students in the lowest one-third of the school that percentage it was 87% (ELA) and 81% (maths). Each of those measures places this school in the top 20% of all NYC’s elementary

schools. Only two measures are lower and they show PS 255 as no better or worse than the average. They refer to the actual degree of improvement in math scores.

How This School Runs – An Introduction

“We are Stars. See Us Shine” – Public School 255, Brooklyn, NY.

These words appear at the main school entrance in large, bright lettering. This is a statement (worded by the principal) to all who enter the building: this is how she wants students to think of themselves. This is what visitors should know about the official guiding philosophy of the administration, and for all those who work here this is the vision designed to guide and inspire their efforts. Many institutions display fine-looking symbols designed to create a public image that is not close to the inner reality and results of what happens there. So, as an observer, I note the “We are Stars” message as simple data. By itself, it proves nothing. I note, however, the achievement data we cited earlier. In this case study I looked for further data on how this ideology enters into actual practices and policies. *Show me your (allegedly) shining students! And show me the shining teachers they need!*

To many observers of school reform efforts and would-be reformers it has seemed that there must be a grim but inevitable trade-off between better academic (test) results and less time for the arts, recess, play, and other ‘non-core’ subjects. But the implications of this case will poke a big hole in that gloomy assumption. Principal Linda Singer believes firmly that this school has succeeded precisely because they invested in the arts and other ways to offer students a variety of ways to be engaged in “school” and learning.

This article will not suggest that the arts represent a single-cause explanation for academic success but rather that a wide range of engaging activities play a central role in an effective school that can reduce the achievement gap for students who come to school with various disadvantages. However, that is just one element in the broad, systemic view suggested here. An engaging curriculum requires highly engaged teachers. Within the constraints of the public school system how can leaders evoke and sustain such engagement? Further, how can they go beyond engagement (activity) to continuous improvement, (professional learning) as

teachers work to raise the effectiveness of their teaching and their students' learning? Now that principals must truly become instructional leaders, how can they create a system within the school to support both teachers and principal in this new priority work? These are some of the key issues of culture change, strategic leadership, and organizational learning that are involved in "school reform".

To recap the basic facts about student intake at PS 255: English language learners comprise 29% (double the city average) and special education students 12%. To recap the basic facts about student achievement: PS 255 is ranked at above the 80th percentile among all NYC schools (i.e. top 20%). Among the lowest achieving one-third of students over 80% achieved at least one year's progress in both English and math – again putting PS 255 in the top quintile.

One of the "Stars" -- A Vignette, Leading to a Hypothesis.

On one visit the principal introduced me to a third grade student who gave a very articulate explanation of the student art exhibit displayed in the hallway. My young guide was dressed smartly in a white shirt and tie, poised, confident and enthusiastic about his role. He seemed reluctant to end his narrative when we needed to move on. Just as evident as the young student's pride in his role and performance was the glowing pride of the principal in her protégé. Privately she explained that he had only recently taken on this role, he was an English Language Learner, and had been having some behavior problems before his teachers got on his case and the principal took him under her wing, coaching him in the specially created role of visitor guide. He had recently conducted several visitor groups -- including a city council member -- through this art exhibit. This student's problem with tardiness disappeared when it was pointed out to him that he would not be allowed to perform his exciting new role if he came late to school.

This "junior docent" example is a special case of a school-wide approach the principal has implemented, providing a wide range of attractive activities at school that can engage the enthusiasm of students and creating a more positive attitude to school. These activities include an extensive art program, music, drama, dance (including ballroom dancing), gym (including tennis

and fencing), computers, and weekly assemblies of student performances. This principal has made this kind of engagement central to the school's success and it works (I hypothesize) in two ways. One way is that it makes coming to school more attractive, so it reduces absenteeism, as a barrier to school-based learning; the other way is that each of these activities may be integrated into the school's core learning objectives. Attendance at PS 255 is 95.8%, slightly above the city average for elementary schools³ – despite the high level of immigrant, non-English speaking families (29% of the student body are English Language Learners) which must often need the help of these relatively bilingual members at home (DoE 2007). Attendance on Fridays used to be a problem but not any more – so the principal told me. Most Fridays now there is an assembly for the whole school at which one or two classes present a performance. (Parents of the performers are always invited and many attend.) “Friday is not a day you want to miss school”- she said (interview).

This vignette showed the busy principal of a school with nearly 700 students who takes a “problem child” into her special care because she sees a creative way that she could engage him in a positive role, change his attitude to school, and set him on a path to becoming a self-motivated learner. From what I observed and from Principal Linda Singer's explanation to me of the context and her intentions, I gained a vivid image of her declared values and ideals-- and how she can model them to her staff. Later I shall explore further the strategy of high engagement for teachers and students that I believe to be an important part of the explanation for this school's formula for success. This strategy goes along with an appreciation of the diversity of their students and a commitment to keep seeking new ways to engage all students when the current ways are not sufficient. And why is all this effort necessary? Because this principal and her team seem to feel an obligation to each and every student (so I infer), to bring them to success so that they shine like stars.

³ <http://schools.nyc.gov/AboutUs/data/stats/attendance/default.htm>

accessed on May 4, 2010

It means creating a school culture where learning is not just possible for all but enjoyable. That is the educational vision that is propagated here and which sets the standard for practice. This is my hypothesis about the success formula of this school. The survey data that supports this view rather strongly will be presented in the next section.

Successful school improvement requires many components to change together. It requires aligning curriculum and instructional methods with standards and learning goals; it depends on a system of assessment and reporting being applied to continuous improvement; it depends on improved infrastructures for budgeting, scheduling, planning, materials, building management, information technology, etc.; it depends on a system for better teacher preparation, recruitment, support (including professional development), assessment, and reward. But while all these important components can improve an education system from bad to mediocre, without the passion of educators to create for every student a first-class education we can never achieve significant, sustained improvements from mediocrity towards excellence (Hargreaves et al., 2008).

One hundred teachers (70 certified teachers and 30 other staff) are employed at PS 255; and they determine the quality of education those students get. The principal's vision can only become a reality with the whole-hearted cooperation of these teachers, and provided that they possess high levels of expertise in their work. In any school working to raise student performance significantly that means more work for teachers, including more work to keep improving their teaching skills and methods. For children to become good learners they need teachers who are themselves good learners -- and who continue to be good learners. Good practical learning is usually not best done in isolation -- though teachers have traditionally worked in isolation from their colleagues (Drago-Severson, 2009).

Here is an opportunity (which the principal of PS 255 has seized) to strike a bargain with the teachers. In this "social contract" it is understood that the principal provides better than usual working conditions (planning time, in-house professional development, funding for outside courses chosen by each teacher, supportive supervisors, good materials, respectful students and parents) -- in exchange for the teachers accepting higher than usual standards of creative and

effective teaching and learning, thorough supervision of their classrooms, and expectations that they use data on student learning for continuous improvement in their teaching practice. Support for this view will be documented from the teacher survey conducted by New York City, Department of Education: teachers at PS 255 report receiving these benefits and they report that their principal has these expectations for them (source: interviews).

My hypothesis about this success formula (the social contract) will be considered in two parts. One part deals with the role of the principal in initiating and supporting the high-engagement, high performance social contract. Hord (2004) points out the crucial role of principals in launching the successful school-based professional learning communities (PLCs) that she and associates have studied. The other part of the hypothesis deals with the resulting culture of collaboration for continuous improvement among these teachers. The next two major sections report the data in relation to these two interconnected hypotheses.

The Principal Launches and Supports the Social Contract

What does the survey data show about how PS 255 teachers view their relationship with their principal? With any questionnaire data there can always be doubts as to how literally to take the responses. Here we can afford to be agnostic about the literal face validity of responses and to pin our understanding more on the difference between responses in this school and the corresponding citywide average. What is clear in every one of these comparisons is that PS 255 teachers view their principal differently from the way most NYC teachers view their principals. And this is not a small difference. Moreover there is considerable stability to this difference over three annual surveys from 2006-7 to 2008-9. And there is a clear, dominant pattern, in which PS 255 significantly exceeds the citywide average of all NYC schools in a positive direction. With data from three years it is clear that this is not any one-year fluke. There is a secondary pattern, a trend in the gap between PS 255 and the city-wide average: on most survey questions studied the all-city average rises over the three years, reducing the gap favoring this school. Still the gap remains significant – typically 2:1 in favor of PS 255.

Teachers' responses to selected questions from the NYC DoE survey will now be presented. I shall focus on how teachers at PS 255 report the way that they perceive the principal, her leadership, and their working relationship to her, as compared to citywide teachers' responses. In the next section I will focus on the culture of peer perceptions among this school's teachers.

Questions relevant to these variables were selected from the survey; the full survey reports are available at the DoE website.⁴ My analysis of survey data focuses on the percentage of "Strongly Agree" responses and I use data from all three annual surveys (2007 through 2009). Teacher response rate at this school in 2007 was 49% (N=30) but rose to 84% and 85% in 2008 and 2009. Across these three survey years there was strong consistency in the dominant pattern: there is a wide difference between this school and the city-wide average -- always in favor of this school, even as the citywide average slowly rises and that gap is slightly reduced.

Six major themes, each illustrated by several questionnaire items, emerge from an analysis based on face validity, as follows. (*The actual wording of items appears in italics.*)

1) Teachers think that PS 255 has an effective leadership that provides an overall, guiding vision and very clear expectations for each employee.

Three items from the survey support that summary:

"School leaders communicate a clear vision for this school".

"School leaders let staff know what is expected of them".

"The principal is an effective manager who makes the school run smoothly".

On these three items the percentage of PS 255 teachers indicating "Strongly Agree" over the three survey years averages 84% while the average for all city schools is 43%.

2) The principal of this school is seen by teachers as the educational leader -- not just the top building administrator.

"The principal visits classrooms to observe the quality of teaching at this school".

⁴ <http://schools.nyc.gov/Accountability/tools/survey/default.htm>

Strongly agree: 79% in 2007 and 80% in 2009 for PS 255, compared to city averages of 32% and 44% in those years.

“The principal places the learning needs of children ahead of other interests”.

At PS 255 73% “strongly agree” – compared to 46% citywide (2009 survey).

3) The principal does not try to micromanage teachers, but trusts them as professionals.

“The principal has confidence in the expertise of the teachers”.

At PS 255 75% “strongly agree” – compared to 41% citywide (2009 survey).

Note that “trusting them as professionals” does not mean “blind trust” here, but includes both classroom observation and other forms of supervision, as shown in responses to the next item.

“School leaders give me regular and helpful feedback about my teaching.”

Strongly agree: PS 255 - 65%; citywide average - 33% (2009 survey).

This item refers to “school leaders”. At this school that includes the two Assistant Principals, who share with the Principal, the duties of classroom observation for all teachers. Not only does the Principal act as an instructional leader to the teaching staff, but she increases the resources devoted to instructional leadership by enrolling and empowering the two Assistant Principals in this work.

4) The principal provides good support to teachers. The survey asked:

“To what extent do you feel supported by your principal?”

Answering “To a great extent” at PS 255 were 80% of respondents in 2007 and 84% in 2009, compared to 40% and 51% city-wide average.

Three related survey questions refer specifically to professional development:

“The professional development I received this year provided me with teaching strategies to better meet the needs of my students”.

“The professional development I received this year provided me with content support in my subject area”.

“This year I received helpful training on the use of student achievement data to improve teaching and learning”.

On these three items the percentage of PS 255 teachers indicating “Strongly Agree” averages 65% -- double the average for all city schools (32%) (2009 survey).

5) But the principal checks carefully on the quality of teaching and on student results.

“School leaders visit classrooms to observe the quality of teaching at this school”.

PS 255 “Strongly agree” – 80%; citywide average 44% (2009)

Describing her supervision of teachers to me (in addition to classroom observation) the principal showed me recent class grade sheets she had reviewed and the comments she had written on them to each teacher, highlighting some students in those classes whose grades/progress she was concerned about – expecting to hear back from the teachers about their plans and progress.

6) Participation but not democracy. This is a principal who listens to staff but who makes the major decisions her way. In the survey most teachers at this school say they feel included in decision-making – far more so than at most other schools in the city.

“The principal invites teachers to play a meaningful role in setting goals and making important decisions for this school”.

Strongly agree: PS 255 62%; city average 37% (2009 survey).

“School leaders encourage open communication on important school issues”.

Strongly agree: 69%; city average 38% (2009 survey).

This principal leaves no doubt about who is the boss -- but this is a boss who shows respect for the teaching staff, listens to their ideas, and actively encourages creative and innovative ideas in teaching and activities for students.

To summarize this section, based on teacher survey data: teachers at PS 255 report that they receive from their principal a substantial degree of support and respect, along with high expectations for excellence in teaching and attention to continuous improvement. This was anticipated in the social contract hypothesis. A similar social contract might exist in most other schools in this city but survey data suggests that PS 255 differs from the average quite strikingly.

Some teachers interviewed recognized that their situation was not common and placed a high value on it. In the next section we examine more survey data bearing on the second part of the “social contract” hypothesis. That concerns working relationships among teachers at this school, their professional culture, as they report on it.

A Collaborative Culture Of Continuous Improvement Among Teachers

Two research questions are central to this section:

1) Have PS 255 teachers moved away from the tradition of educators working in isolation from each other, towards more collaboration?

2) Are their collaborative efforts and the social norms within teacher networks aligned to the school’s goals of continuous improvement in finding ways to engage and educate all its students?

To anticipate the answers to these questions: I shall conclude that the survey data does show firm support for the existence of a collaborative culture of educational excellence through continuous improvement in this school – just as expected in the social contract hypothesis.

1) The culture of this school includes a significant degree of collaboration and support among teachers -- as the survey responses of teachers show:

“To what extent do you feel supported by other teachers at your school?”

“To a Great Extent” said 74% of PS 255 teachers; the city average = 55% (2009 survey).

“Teachers in this school trust each other”.

Strongly agree: PS 255 = 60% (city average =31%)

2) The collaborative culture among these teachers supports the school’s official improvement goals of continuous improvement.

“Teachers in this school recognize and respect colleagues who are the most effective teachers”.

Strongly agree: 71% (city average = 40%)

“Teachers in this school respect teachers who take the lead in school improvement efforts.

Strongly agree: 69% (city average =41%)

“Most teachers in my school work together to improve their instructional practice”.

This single item, more than any other, captures the essence of the professional learning community among teachers, an idea strongly supported in the literature as the key to substantial school reform and improved student learning. Not only do we find the familiar pattern of PS 255 appearing as a positive outlier, ahead of the citywide average, but we also find a year-by-year increase in the percentage of teachers endorsing this item with “Strongly Agree” -- both at PS 255 and citywide. See Table 1.

INSERT TABLE 1

To summarize so far, I am arguing that to explain this school’s success one must recognize the special relationship (social contract) established between the principal and faculty. The empirical support for this conclusion derives from both my interviews with principals and teachers, and also from the teachers’ responses to the DoE survey – consistently over three years and three surveys. This social contract within the school is separate from the contract formally negotiated between the union (UFT) and the city. The former understanding is specific to this school building. It involves a shared understanding of mutual expectations: the principal holds high standards for teachers and for their student’s success in learning; teachers accept accountability for that. The social contract also means that the school provides teachers with high levels of support -- both directly from administration and indirectly through the supportive professional peer culture that has developed at the school. The social contract is not legally enforceable; it is based on personal relationships, good personal experience (on both sides) of trusting and not being disappointed, reinforced by the social norms and understandings among these teachers as professional peers.

This is a culture, not a cult. Some teachers are more deeply engaged in it than others. My interviews and observations were undoubtedly biased towards the believers and enthusiasts. But

the survey data may allow us to get some inkling about the extent of the dissenting element. First, let's assume that they participated in the survey and expressed their views freely. Then they might be expected to appear in the "Disagree" categories, since all survey items are worded in a positive direction. See Table 2.

INSERT TABLE 2.

Table 2 shows responses to various teacher survey items used earlier in this analysis to characterize their work culture. Earlier our focus was on Strongly Agree responses, but now the focus switches to estimating the extent of Disagreement. Items evoking the most Disagree and Strongly Disagree responses were selected for inclusion. Even these show very low frequencies. Combining both, the average is 6.8%. This is a small dissident group. To be cautious about possible underestimation, we could add in an estimate for the 15% of teachers who did not respond to the survey. Are they more likely to be dissenters? Even if 2/3 of this group (equivalent to 10% of PS 255 teachers) were dissenters outside the survey, that would revise the estimate to 16.8% of teachers being hold-outs from the dominant teachers' culture at this school. anchored in a social contract with a trusted principal. Clearly this culture of collaboration for continuous improvement includes a solid majority of the teachers (over 80% and possibly higher). In the context of school reform – or any reform movement to change an entrenched organizational culture -- this is a very high level of success in culture change.

That summarizes the current culture among teachers at PS 255. The history and developmental stages through which the school reached that place were not thoroughly researched but from interviews with the principal I hear that in the early years after she was appointed to head this school (six years before the interview) that social contract was not acceptable to some teachers. By now, however, most of those dissidents have left or learned to live with the new reality. Now the social contract between teachers and the principal and the resulting culture, focused on high engagement and collaborative, data-based improvement-seeking is central to the school's strategy for all its students to be shining stars. Sustaining that core depends on the support of a web of distributed leadership that stretches across the school.

Distributed Leadership

• Assistant Principals and Distributed Leadership. Having written this story so far around the central figure of the principal, it is now time to define more carefully the role of top leadership and how it is shared. This principal delegates extensively, while keeping a keen awareness of many areas. She is demanding and also meticulous in expressing appreciation for examples of excellence and initiative by staff. Of course, the success of this school depends on the work of individual teachers and it also depends on a network of other leaders throughout the school -- some with official titles and some informal, de facto, grassroots leaders, aligned with the (shared) vision and strategies of the principal.

While PS 255 would not be what it is now (I believe) without the passion and policies of this principal, I think it is equally true that this school could not be what it is without the talents and dedication of other school leaders – and without the principal’s intention to create, nurture and empower such a system of distributed leadership. The two Assistant Principals, along with the Principal herself, form a closely coordinated, top leadership trio, as closely attuned to each other as any good musical trio. (Later I shall refer to “the principals” meaning these three.) Then there is another ring or layer of school leaders with formal titles that includes: Subject Heads, Grade Leaders, as well as two Coaches (one each for math and language arts).

Thirdly, and never to be underestimated, is the whole category of informal leaders, project leaders pro tem, the initiators and/or coordinators of each special event or project. Many of these are individuals who conceive a novel idea intended to enhance the learning experience for students. Each becomes the leader for her own project, seeking the help they need. When the principals make available resources (especially money and time to attend a related workshop), and when colleagues respect such efforts, the aggregated, enthusiastic efforts of these informal leaders (innovative educators) can add greatly to the total, aligned energy towards the goals of the school. Those three levels (assistant principals, other formal leaders, and informal leaders) add up to a powerful network of distributed leadership throughout the school.

Fourthly, the most recent addition, is the data coordinator whose job is to support all teachers in utilizing student test data chasing continuous improvement for all students. One survey item gives us some insight into the status of this area.

“This year I received helpful training on the use of student achievement data to improve teaching and learning”.

On this item the percentage of PS 255 teachers indicating “Strongly Agree” in 2007 was 57%. This is three times the city average BUT in the context of PS 255 this is far below the level of all other indicators. By 2009 the response at PS 255 had increased to 64% -- still at the lower end of the range. Evidently this is an area of later emphasis and still a steep part of the learning curve (confirmed by interviews with the principal).

- Peer helping, trust, and learning among teachers

The tradition of public school teaching for over a century has been for each teacher to work alone in her/his classroom, a tradition which is now seen to be problematic in relation to the new PLC goal of fostering much more professional collaboration and learning. Creating a more collaborative practice calls for changes in two areas: infrastructure (especially scheduling) and culture (which we have addressed through the survey). The schedule at PS 255 prioritizes one grade level meeting each week in addition to each teacher’s prep period when a specialist teaches their class each day. That is the infrastructure of collaboration. Returning to the culture of collaboration, a core component is the feeling that one can easily ask for support and that one can trust colleagues to respond in good faith. Two questions from the teacher survey touch on these areas.

To what extent do you feel supported by other teachers at your school?

In 2007 80% answered “To a Great Extent” (city average = 45% at other city schools).

“Teachers in this school trust each other”.

In 2007 66% responded Strongly agree: (city average =20%). Though not as high as most other items here, this percentage for PS 255 teachers is even farther above the city-wide average than usual.

However, when we check these 2007 figures for stability against the next two years these two items waver slightly and show a small decline in the latest period. This could be due to random fluctuation or, if the decline should continue next year, it could be an early warning of softness in these areas. Over this three-year period there is an increase in teachers' participation rates in the survey -- mainly between 2007 and 2008, not when the main decline occurs (between 2008 and 2009). This researcher has no explanation for this, nor does the principal. For further detail and food for speculation, see footnote ⁵

Next we turn from survey data to some scraps of field observation. Walking around the school on my first visit in 2007 I saw two teachers conferring in an otherwise empty classroom. One was the classroom teacher (with just a few years' experience) and the other was the special education teacher (with many years' experience) who works half-time in the same classroom,

⁵ Close-up of a Statistical Anomaly or Early Warning. In the survey data we already noted the high level of agreement for “feel supported by other teachers at your school” and “teachers in this school trust each other” reported by teachers at PS 255 in 2007. When data for the next two years (on repeats of the survey) became available this was analyzed to test the stability of the 2007 patterns. What we find on these two items is:

- (i) Stability between 2007 and 2008 (when there was a big increase in the response rate of PS 255 teachers in the survey).
- (ii) A decline from 2008 to 2009 on both “support” (83% to 74%) and “trust” (65% to 60%) – proportionately each drop is a little over and a little under 10% respectively). (See Appendix for more detail.)

What does this mean, if anything? The change is seen only in one year-to-year comparison out of two. Change in response rates cannot be blamed. They did change between 2007 and 2008 (from 49% to 84%) but not between 2008 and 2009, i.e. when the small decline in these two items occurred. Is this pattern, so central to the success culture of this school, weakening? Is this an early warning? If the overall pattern across all survey items were not so remarkably strong and steady, this small change would barely be noticeable. Still, there it is.

responsible for three special needs students. This arrangement is common throughout the school. At each grade level there is one classroom that contains both special needs and regular students, with two teachers, who team teach and work very closely together.

I had found this pair of teachers during their planning period and they kindly agreed to answer my questions. The focus of their planning was how to adapt the regular lesson plan to make it accessible to the special needs students – within the shared classroom. They would be team teaching, with the (more experienced) Special Ed teacher looking out for where the special needs students might need extra help during the lesson. Often her modifications would be a useful reminder for the regular teacher and students too. The younger, regular ed teacher was very enthusiastic about how valuable she found this partnership. Both teachers said how much they enjoyed working together like this, appreciating its benefit to both student populations and to their own professional growth. I also visited other classrooms where I saw other pairings of teachers working with regular and special needs students in an integrated classroom. It was striking to me how very smoothly the two partnering teachers worked together in front of their students, adapting the presentation and calling on students.

That data came from my visit in 2007. In the next two years I made two more visits and spent most time with another pair of teachers in the fourth grade “collaborative” classroom. Both were less than five years out of college. Both had been student teachers in this school before they were hired. Bright, innovative, well-organized, and effective teachers, they expressed great appreciation for the culture and work conditions at this school. Their college peers were incredulous when they described those condition to them. In 2009 these two joined with two other teachers and their class to prepare and stage the musical-chorale (school version) of “Pocahontas” (in costume) for the whole school and parents. Every student in the two participating classrooms had a role. The program listed 48 student performers and “special thanks” to ten teacher and parent contributors (including the grandmother of one teacher who made most of the costumes). (See photo #4.)

- Coaches and learning resource specialists. The school has two individuals in this position: one for math and one for English. They are a crucial part of the school’s distributed

leadership network, extending the reach of the principals – as helpers, but not as evaluators. They meet with all new teachers and provide in-house professional development, as they discover needs. They sometimes make connections among teachers to help one to find an appropriate peer helper. They provide individual coaching and even a little counseling. They occupy a crucial and delicate position in the school’s professional networks of learning and helping: straddling the boundary between the principals and the teachers. While protecting the confidentiality of individual teachers, they can give the principals valuable information on the needs and concerns of teachers. They can pass along faculty concerns “safely” and before the matter becomes a sore subject.

• Peer Helping and Learning – Students and Teachers

Peer helping and learning among students is an important element in this school, deliberately cultivated. In one classroom I observed two students sitting close together on the rug at the back of the classroom, quietly working together, while the rest of the class sat at their desks working with the teacher. I learned that one of the students was a recent Russian immigrant (ELL) who spoke very little English and her companion /interpreter was a Russian speaker who had completed the ELL program and was fluent in English. The latter was tutoring the former, helping her with the exercises in her ELL workbook. Another day I saw a similar example in another classroom.

From an interview I learned how integral this peer helping can be in this school especially for integrating their many non-English speakers. The principal told me about a difficult situation she faced recently when the teacher of one of the ELL classes unexpectedly had to take a leave of absence for at least one semester. Rather than hire a substitute at short notice (with all the attendant risks) the principal chose to mainstream all those ELL students into several regular classrooms, depending on student peer tutors, informal peer helping and teacher flexibility to meet their needs. The experiment was a great success, encouraging the principals to continue working for further mainstreaming of ELL and special needs students. This example highlights the learning networks among both teachers and students – and some of their interconnections.

• Reaching Outside the School For Additional Art Resources

Music and art both have full-time teachers who have created very active programs that involve many students and permeate the whole school. The art program has benefited from substantial outside resources, notably from Studio In A School, a nonprofit organization that has worked to establish and support strong art education programs in the schools of NYC for over thirty years. This program represents a major center of expertise, a network of artists accustomed to working in schools, teaching both students and teachers. The local leader-advocate-activist for this effort in PS 255 (with strong support from the principal) is PS 255 art teacher Miriam Rankin. Two teaching-artists also work and teach in the school through the Studio program. Over six years of involvement with Studio In A School, with steady principal support, and many professional development events, teachers here have become more comfortable with integrating art into their subject area teaching. Student art work is on display extensively throughout the school: in the entrance lobby, inside and outside the main office, and in the lunch room, where large student-made murals form the main decoration. (See photo #1.)

Although visual arts dominate, three other community arts agencies bring programs into this school: two dance programs and one theater program. Between them they involve over 300 students for an average of 12 hours per student, per program. Studio in a School, however, involves over 500 students for 40 hours each. (Source: report by principal to NY State for Annual Arts in School Report 2008-09.)

Creative arts events held in the school are reported in the same document. Many concerts, dance, and theater performances, and exhibitions (all for student participation) were held in school that same year. (“Many” = 77 events). In addition students went on field trips to attend nine concerts, plays, and museum/gallery exhibits during the year. (Source: the same State Arts Report.)

Vignette: I joined a third-grade field trip in which students walked to a near-by street to study and sketch domestic architecture styles, guided by the art teacher, accompanied by their two classroom teachers, a parent, and an aide for one special needs student. The students worked diligently at observing and sketching several house facades. In lieu of the classroom white board,

Ms. Rankin carried an 18-inch card with the word “façade” in large print and used it during her lesson outdoors.

To add another dimension to this art network, the school offers art classes for parents, replicating some of the methods and materials used by their children. Some of the parents’ art-work was on display in the school as well as a large amount of the children’s work. The quality of art work is high and PS 255 students have won competitive city-wide awards for their art projects.

There is much debate on the role of art in public education (Davis 2007; Eisner 1998; Hetland 2007; Winner 2007). How important is it? Why exactly? I detected an interesting (and possibly creative) tension in this school, which is such a strong supporter of art. The principal is very clear that she sees the arts as invaluable in helping the school to engage students in school (especially ELLs) and in raising standards of academic achievement. In addition she sees the arts as an integral part of a full education. Meanwhile Miriam Rankin (the art teacher and project leader for Studio in a School here) is very clear that art education also has its own curriculum and purpose: to educate students in core concepts and methods of making art (interview). These two sets of goals are quite distinct but seem to co-exist amicably.

Finding and Keeping Excellent Teachers, Building a Culture

Principal Linda Singer’s strategy in developing a school where every child can shine began over eight years ago when she took the helm. An essential part of it has been investing heavily and early in finding and holding excellent teachers, and assistant principals. This she explained to me in several interviews. I was also able to observe a little of the flow of students, teachers, other staff, and parents through the school office. This section has no statistics; it is based on those interviews and observations -- unless otherwise noted.

How do you attract and hold the best? Not through money, of course, public school salaries are fixed and bonuses are impossible. But by creating superior working conditions with high job satisfaction, professional growth, and encouragement for creativity. Once started, the process is self-reinforcing, in effect paying compound interest. One example was setting a

priority in making the school schedule to ensure time for grade level meetings and daily prep periods. Other key investments are in professional development, including teacher observations, which mean a huge time commitment for the principal and both assistant principals. (The principal’s Admin. Bulletin #12 specifies among the duties of all three: “In class 50% per day, every day.”).

With a few hold-over teachers who proved unsatisfactory they went through the extremely long, difficult, and uncertain process necessary to remove them – although many principals consider this course far too difficult and costly in time, frustration and frequent failure to be worth undertaking. By now PS 255 has a faculty that is overwhelmingly supportive of the school’s direction and finds it a supportive and satisfying place to work. The school has no trouble in hiring excellent teachers when needed and few worries about retention.

In recent years the principal has refined a recruitment strategy for hiring excellent newly-qualified teachers. In a recent year the school hosted ten student teachers (final year interns). They can be socialized into the culture of this school and closely observed in the classroom. When vacancies arise the school does not have to look far for pre-tested candidates. They have had great success with several such hires. These new teachers cost less for salary; they need good supervision and support – a capability which this school has developed; and they are eager learners. Stars in fact. The principal is very satisfied with the way these recruits have integrated into the school as high performers.

The experience profile of PS 255 teachers is:

	3 years or less	4-10 years	11-15 years	over 15 years
	27	34	11	28

(source: DoE teacher survey).

?? Experience at THIS SCHOOL OR ANY SCHOOL??

This human resource strategy (hire and hold onto talented, like-minded staff) is important for how it supports the faculty culture of high engagement, innovation, and collaborative professional development. In fact each supports and depends on the other. “The best” teachers for this principal means those who not only know their content and methods well,

but who do creative, innovative teaching, and are willing to experiment with new ways to engage more students more fully. The existence of this culture is supported by the survey data reviewed earlier. Most teachers at PS 255 strongly agree that their colleagues “recognize and respect colleagues who are the most effective teachers..., that they “respect teachers who take the lead in school improvement efforts” and that “Most teachers in my school work together to improve their instructional practice.” [Emphasis added.]

The principal encourages and supports teachers’ innovation in many ways that promise to enhance student engagement and learning. Any teacher who becomes enthusiastic about some new approach that she (the teacher) would like to learn more about and bring into the school can usually get support from the school. “Support” has included not just permission but funding to attend a training workshop and to buy materials. (Even if there is some subtle screening here, apparently it is not enough to spoil the concept.) When the innovators are ready to share the idea with colleagues (as they often do), it is the teacher’s enthusiasm that energizes the effort. These projects are supported but not pushed by the principals. Because it is the teacher’s own project, all the hard work seems OK – because it’s their baby, or their friend’s (when helping out). Hypothesis: this is why stress and burnout do not necessarily follow long hours of hard work. Engagement makes the difference.

At the time of my last visit one fourth grade teacher was enrolled in a series of outside classes to learn robotics, which she had already begun to introduce to her students. (Other teachers had initiated the robotics idea.) The students proudly showed me some (working) robotic models they had made. The previous year a fencing class was introduced by the adaptive physical education teacher, for special ed students. She had experience in this sport and also had access to surplus equipment. She spotted this very novel opportunity and persuaded the principal they should try it. It proved successful and a second cohort was learning to fence when I last visited (see photograph #2).

School assemblies are held every Friday in the school auditorium, upper grades together and lower grades together, in two separate sessions. Each class is responsible for presenting

some kind of performance at least once during the year. Some are quite ambitious, such as the musical drama of Pocahontas which I attended, along with many parents. (See photo #4.)

Vignette: While visiting a fifth grade classroom after the end of scheduled classes I observed these students joyfully practicing dance routines for the show they were preparing for a school assembly. These students wrote the script themselves, basing it on a “fractured fairytales” (parody) version of “American Idol”. Their homeroom teacher was present but not running a formal rehearsal. Some other students were working on computers at the back of the room, where another fifth grade teacher was helping them to print something related to the show. The majority of students in the room were dancing as one large group. It seemed to me that impetus came from one or two informal student leaders, with the teacher smiling her approval. (See photo #3 to catch the spirit of this incident.)

The Pocahontas assembly, the projects and field trips, the fencing class, and the “chorus line in the classroom” vignette (previous paragraph) can stand as examples of the many rich opportunities this school offers for students to engage in activities that can contribute to their learning and development. That, I hypothesize, is the outcome of the social contract, the high performance, collaborative culture among teachers, and the entire strategy of high engagement for education that lets all students “shine” at PS 255. In the next section I shall develop these hypotheses more formally.

Arts, Engagement, and a Culture of Learning – Discussion

We have only one case but it can serve as a window into a better understanding of the struggle for educational reform. Looming over the whole reform landscape in the USA is the federal NCLB law (2002) that currently drives and constrains reform efforts in the USA. While it achieved something important in unblocking some of the long-standing obstacles to change, it can now be seen as a very blunt instrument with harmful side-effects. Its critics can be divided into several camps: (i) business/economic interests that see too little improvement in the kinds of learning essential for success in a knowledge-based economy, (ii) civil rights advocates who see too little progress in overcoming the achievement gap for poor and disadvantaged students, and

(iii) guardians of progressive ideals of education for citizenship and lifelong learning, not just basic skills for low level employability. All three interest groups on public school reform might find in this case significant learning and cause for encouragement. PS 255 not only meets the demands of NCLB but it does so in a way that should be pleasing to each of the three critical interest groups. It is raising academic achievement and closing the gap in which the more disadvantaged students fall farther behind – while avoiding the test-prep trap and providing a culturally rich curriculum with high student engagement in learning and schooling.

Two clear and important facts about this school stand out. (1) It has cultivated a rich and diverse program of creative arts and activities as an essential part of the school (2) To a far greater extent than most other elementary schools in NYC it has developed a culture of collaboration and improvement among its teachers (documented in the survey data). As an observer I saw very focused and engaged students; over eight days on site I saw no wasted time in any classroom. This is a high performance, high engagement school based on a culture among teachers of collaboration and improvement in their teaching. The key components and how they function together to produce these results are specified in the following propositions.

- 1) The principal's strategy (social contract) and (distributed) leadership
[leads to] →
- 2) a high engagement, high performance culture among teachers, which includes:
 - a) teachers creating a wide variety of engaging (and educational) student activities
and
 - b) teachers making continuous improvements to their teaching and curriculum
[which lead to] →
- 3a) high engagement of students [and also leads to] →
- 3b) high levels of learning and development for students, based on intrinsic rewards,
[which lead to] →
- 4) students well prepared for the next stage of becoming life-long learners.

What is “engagement”? It has become apparent that this concept lies at the heart of this school’s success. Though often used by some process consultants and managers, I have not found it in the literature. I shall use this term as follows. When people are highly engaged in some activity it commands their attention – it is hard to distract them; they feel motivated to do as well as they possibly can; they are so engrossed in what they are doing that time slips by, unnoticed by them. It feels important; it feels engaging.

“Play” (voluntary) is normally engaging; “work” may be engaging or not. Long periods of intense play or highly engaging work are not inherently stressful or nearly as tiring as much shorter, less intense episodes of non-engaging work. Chenoweth finds that pattern of intense engagement, hard work, and low stress in 15 schools selected for their high success with disadvantaged student intakes (Chenoweth 2007, pp. 225-256) and it seems to be found at PS 255. In my interview with Assistant Principal Susan Ehrlich she reported this as her personal experience: long hours and hard work but usually no stress to take home at night.

Since the arts form a central element in the educational experience at this school, we must define better how they relate to the concept of engagement. At PS 255, I suggest, teachers use the arts and expressive activities broadly in two important ways: (i) as an integral part of the core educational process and content, and (ii) as a sweetener that helps to draw both teachers and students into assenting to a tacit social contract (and engagement) with the school. Because of these varied arts and expressive activities found at the school, first teachers as providers of activities, then students as participants are drawn into high levels of engagement. Teachers are encouraged to be creative in introducing new activities; as a result students are offered a variety of activities through which they can have fun, learn, and express themselves.

My social contract hypothesis for this school has two layers: first for the teachers, then for the students. The social contract among teachers leads to creation of a collaborative culture of learning/improvement, this makes the school a more welcoming place for students and for teachers who are hired later (i.e. after the formation of this faculty culture). In a virtuous cycle of mutual reinforcement (escalating like compound interest) levels of engagement progressively rise.

The arts are essential to PS 255's strategy for success but we must understand how they interrelate with engagement and the formation of a high-engagement, high-performance culture among teachers and then students. This arts-based strategy has built-in diversity to match some of the diversity among students; the non-verbal arts are well suited to dodging the language barriers that restrict the ELL population and others from language-limited homes -- giving them easier and more congenial ways to participate in the social relations and learning of this school. If we see this school as one with an engagement strategy -- not just an arts emphasis -- the implication for other schools becomes wider. Other schools and their leaders might choose different kinds of sweeteners from those used by PS 255, e.g. sports, gardening, religion, animal care, meditation, family, video games, etc.. If they are successful, the same theory should apply.

Now we must zoom in closer on an important element that has so far been in the background. If there is any First Cause for the effectiveness of this school it may be this: it is the vision, value system, and driving passion of an educational leader set on doing right for these youngsters full of bright potential. The vision of PS 255's leaders is depicted on a sign board at the entrance to the school: "We are stars. Come see us shine." In writing those words, attributed to their students, I believe school leaders projected their personal mission and commitment. When I first saw that sign it seemed cute but not compelling; however, as I came to know this school better I saw how those words could represent an educator's vision of these students as all potential "stars" and the commitment to do everything possible to enable these students to develop and display their potential "star power".

Such a vision and commitment can begin with one leader. As others join up (becoming engaged as part of a small but growing network of change leaders) and as they share their dreams and ideas, a shared vision emerges to serve as their Pole Star and energy source, guiding them when they face critical choices and challenges, helping them to persist in spite of difficulties (Senge 1990). The leaders of this school (judging from the principal and two assistant principals at least) believe firmly that all these children can learn successfully; that they deserve and need to do so; and, as educators, that they must find effective ways to help them do so -- whatever their disadvantages may be. That applies on a daily, teacher-student level and it applies on a broader

level in the obligation for school leaders to create a school environment that supports that shared vision. For Principal Linda Singer that vision requires a school with creative arts.

The Culture of Continuous Improvement

Having identified the importance of shared vision, we can now identify six key elements that make PS 255 successful and we can define their main interconnections. This analysis is based on examining this school as it appears between 2007 and 2010; it focuses on the process of establishing and sustaining the new norms and practices (i.e. the less familiar work of leading and managing culture change) rather than the traditional work of educational administration (such as curriculum, pedagogy, busing, budgets, etc.). Both are essential. A key part of the social contract is that teachers can count on administrators to ensure that essential infrastructures are working. That is the traditional stuff of school administration. Now we must focus on the less familiar side of educational leadership, which involves shaping and sustaining a school culture. Seven key elements in that process will be presented, as follows.

- High engagement (of staff and students) is essential to this school's success; supporting this must be a high priority for school leaders.
- The inclusion of arts and creative activities is important in several distinct ways:
 - i) as a sweetener, assisting early engagement of students,
 - ii) as an integral part of the full educational experience, and
 - iii) as an embodiment and reminder of the educational vision and values.
- A tacit or explicit "social contract" is offered to teachers and students by the principal (you give above average engagement and performance; we give you above average conditions); when teachers accept, it then becomes available to students at the classroom (and individual) level; the social contract leads to high teacher engagement, which creates a variety of ways for students to get engaged with "school" -- ways to pass the time, to express oneself, to learn, more ways to be known to others as an individual.
- Parents are invited to be partners with school staff in a parallel social contract to establish high engagement of parents in supporting the education of their children.

- For teachers the social contract supports the emergence of a culture of collaboration and continuous improvement in instruction. These norms and beliefs (held by teachers) reinforce them in using more formative assessments of their effectiveness and in their continuous improvement efforts – in collaboration with colleagues. Equally essential to the culture of collaboration and continuous improvement is what administrators do to provide the resources, infrastructures, policies, and professional development that allow teachers to meet and collaborate for data-driven diagnosis of student learning, and to seek (ever more) improvements.

- The shared vision of school leaders here is centered on their students, for whom they have high expectations. They believe that every one of them can and should be “stars” i.e. successful, confident, motivated learners in school and beyond. Their calling and duty as educators is to find and deliver the best means to make that happen. This is the ultimate energy source for this change leadership. It originates in the personal vision of individuals. It is strengthened greatly when a few of these come together as a nucleus of change leaders, sharing their ideas and convictions, and converging on a shared vision, which can later “go viral” and create an “epidemic” throughout the whole school -- if they nurture the right conditions.

- At a personal level educators feel a caring commitment to students and draw energy from the connection to them; but this is not incompatible with their commitment to high standards, boundaries, and discipline – i.e. “tough love”.

This combination of two crucial principles that do not easily combine is repeated in relationships between teachers and principals. The school has some qualities of a community or large family, while still acting like a well-managed organization that must achieve difficult goals. As a family or community, members collectively celebrate each others’ birthdays and acknowledge their important life-events. But as a high-performing organization with an important mission, sub-standard work (even from a beloved and respected employee) would not be overlooked.

Vignette: On one visit at around 8:15 a.m. on a very cold winter morning (December, 2009) I observed Principal Linda Singer standing just inside the main entrance, welcoming the arriving students, with warm words to individuals (some by name) and some hugs. When I later

commented on how that impressed me, she assured me that it was her regular habit at the start of the school day; that she would not miss it for anything and that this contact with the children energized her for the rest of the day. (See photos #5,6,7.)

Conclusion

This article contributes to the literature on successful schools that serve many disadvantaged students. Using data from teacher surveys and site visits I have documented the strong culture among PS 255 teachers that upholds high expectations for students, collaboration in improvement efforts, and mutual respect with the principal. This culture makes it possible for the school to function like a Professional Learning Community (i.e. a learning organization). Reconstructing the strategy of change leadership that produced this situation, I hypothesize that a social contract between principal and staff (for high engagement in exchange for high support) underpins the (nontraditional) staff culture of collaboration for continuous improvement.

Creative arts and activities form an important part of the educational vision and experience at PS 255. They foster student engagement by lowering language barriers; they enrich the content of learning; and perhaps they also help educators to hold onto the vision that ultimately drives the work of instructional improvement at this school.

This analysis is consistent with the PLC literature ((DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Hord, 2004), and with other research (Chenoweth, 2007 and Reeves, 2000). However, it adds to them by (i) inquiring further into the make-up of the teachers' culture of collaboration in their improvement efforts and (ii) identifying three different ways in which creative arts may contribute to the effectiveness of this school. Although there is a need for much more research into the process of educational change leadership, there is also (and even more, I believe) a need for more awareness of the importance of implementation processes, which are often overlooked and violated, causing failure of good plans. This article has spelled out some hypotheses about the creation of the social contract and the characteristics of the trusting, partnering relationship that can develop both between principal and teachers, and among teachers as colleagues. The point here is to raise awareness of the importance of implementation processes in successful reform.

This hypothesis about implementation is closely linked to another important hypothesis concerning the distinction between change drivers which are internal to a school and those which are external, and the importance of balance between them. In the change model we find in PS 255 (similar to PLC) we see a balance and partnership between principal and teachers. The principal plays a very active role: through traditional supervision and observation, through providing in-house professional development, through monitoring how teachers monitor the progress of all students, and through structuring the weekly meeting to review students who are still not succeeding – all this on top of the vital climate-setting through the social contract. Meanwhile teachers are also actively involved in continuous improvement efforts: through grade-level meetings and informal help-trading among peers (given the climate and culture of collaboration), use of the math and English coaches for consultation, finding resources, and communications.

According to the PLC literature there are further stages of development in the organization of staff improvement meetings (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Hord, 2004). PS 255 has overcome the common barriers to beginning such a partnership. It is truly in this “game” of serious school improvement, which is played on a long, two-track course of (i) the continuous (daily, weekly) improvements in students’ results, and (ii) further improvements in the (improvement) process -- e.g. this school invested in more professional development work in the past year on how to use test data for diagnosis of students’ learning difficulties.

The NCLB era (which began 2002) in the USA up-ended the situation by introducing a huge external driver that broke a log-jam of long-standing obstacles to change. Obviously it tilted the balance far in the direction of external, centralized change “drivers”. PS 255 began its change process very early in this time period and so avoided much of the panic and pressure for quick results that affect many schools now, including many in same NYC school district. The survey data shows large differences between teacher responses at PS 255 and those at the majority of NYC schools, i.e. differences in teacher culture. (It also suggests that there are many similar schools in NYC among that numerous minority!)

Also important is the fact that PS 255 never experienced the extreme pressure for quick results and micro-management of a panicky superintendent, unlike the school depicted in Tested (Perlstein, 2007). The point to note here is that change strategy is not entirely in the hands of the principal (under-statement); the steady hand of the principal can be jolted (sometimes disastrously) by emanations from central office, heedless of the harm they can do to the delicate implementation and trust-building process within the school.

In discussions on school reform there are two polarized perspectives or mental models, each seeing the challenge of reform through either an internal or external lens. The external (top-down) view sees reform as needing to come from outside the school system, with central office issuing policies and mandates to the principal, and with teachers expected to be compliant implementers (technicians). The other (internal) view sees teachers as (professional) partners in engineering improvements, partners whose experience, expertise, and hands-on, local knowledge are needed for adapting borrowed methods and materials (even those that are exceptionally well pre-tested) and also for their own innovations in methods and materials ⁶.

From research on large scale reform efforts in various nations some reform scholars are arguing that the improvements in test results from most nation-wide, top-down school reform efforts have been insufficient (even insignificant) and will never reach the level required (Fullan, 2005a, 2005b); (Hargreaves and Shirley, 2008). They see the need for a different model of change based on “teacher professionalization” – a model that draws much more heavily (relative to the current top-down centralized model) on the leadership of teachers and has much in common with PLC thinking. The feasibility and effectiveness of that approach is supported by data from a large network of schools in England (RATL) and from the national experience of school reform in Finland and Singapore (Hargreaves and Shirley, 2008). This “Fourth Way” is also consistent with the findings of this case. However, such thinking usually runs up against widely entrenched beliefs (mental models) among policy makers and people in general,

⁶ These two perspectives on reform are more than a little reminiscent of McGregor’s Theory X and Y (theories of workers’ basic motivation).

especially the beliefs that teachers and most employees (especially when unionized) are only interested in protecting their own jobs and traditional benefits; hence they are not considered good candidates to be full partners in school improvement.

Mere contrary data is rarely enough to change deeply entrenched beliefs like this but it is certainly needed – at least to help those determined to push for improvement to develop a better understanding of the challenges of the change process. Good intentions are not enough if a bad strategy is employed. One example of a good, effective strategy for school improvement, well implemented, can be seen at PS 255. Cases like this are well worth study for an introduction to a few of the intricacies involved in implementing a strategy for radical school improvement.

Three major stakeholder groups pushed a long time for public school reform and improvement. (i) Business and economic development interests had grave concerns about the lack of employment skills among graduates. (ii) Civil rights advocates had grave concerns about the vast inequity shown in the achievement gap separating disadvantaged students from others. (iii) Educationalists had various humanistic concerns about the content and quality of schools pre-reform but since reform they have grave concerns about the effect of reform legislation on narrowing the focus of curricula and teaching to the test – the “accountability” trap. For all three groups the message of this case study should be somewhat encouraging.

Of course we are still a very, very long way from meeting the goals of NCLB and eliminating the achievement gap, but we do know that it can be done – without teaching to the test and eliminating creative arts and activities. And we have some further pointers on how it can be done. The current generation of educational change leaders are pioneers and heroes in unfamiliar territory, for which they have had far less preparation than they need. Maybe more case studies would help a little with preparing more volunteers for this noble work, with in-service professional development, and (not least) in honoring their work from the side-lines.

WHERE?

Final Vignette: The 4th grade Native American Pow Wow was the culmination of a major curriculum unit, planned collaboratively by the 4th grade teachers and specialists. Each homeroom studied one tribe or region and created artistic representations of that culture. During Pow Wow week each classroom visited the others, as they took turns in sharing and explaining their work. Some younger grades also got to see these exhibits. I was not on site at this time but later I saw various samples of the students' work which still adorned (and nearly filled) the hallway walls, adjacent to the respective classrooms. That is when I realized that the choice of "Pocahontas" for an assembly performance by two of these classrooms was no accident!

TABLES

Table X Response Rates to NYC DoE Annual Surveys: PS 255 and All-City Rates

SURVEY RESPONSE RATES (%)	2006-2007	2007-2008	2008-2009
	PS255 CITY	PS255 CITY	PS255 CITY
Parents	53% (35%)	50% (40%)	51% (45%)
Teachers	49% (48%)	84% (61%)	85% (73%)

Table 1. Results from three annual surveys of NYC schools – one item.

Most teachers in my school work together to improve their instructional practice. % who responded “Strongly agree”	2006-2007 survey	2007-2008 survey	2008-2009 survey
PS 255	59	69	75
Average for all NYC schools	28	38	41

Table 2. Dissidents: Non-subscribers to the Dominant Teacher Culture (PS 255).

<u>Percent of responses in each response category:</u> → →	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
School leaders communicate a clear vision for this school.	85	9	0	5
School leaders let staff know what is expected of them	89	6	2	4
The principal is an effective manager who makes the school run smoothly.	78	15	2	5
School leaders encourage open communication on important school issues.	69	22	4	5
I trust the principal at his or her word.	64	29	2	5
AVERAGE % of responses in each category/ column:	77.0	16.2	2.0	4.8
Standard Deviation	10.512	9.418	1.414	0.447

What year?

APPENDIX

Teacher Survey Responses on Items Related to the Culture of Professional Improvement:
Comparisons between PS 255 and all-city averages for surveys in three different years

To what extent do you feel supported by other teachers at your school? % To a great extent.	2006-2007	2007-2008	2008-2009
PS 255	80	83	74
Average for all NYC	45	53	55

Teachers in this school trust each other. % Strongly agree	2006-2007	2007-2008	2008-2009
PS 255	66	65	60
Average for all NYC	20	28	31

Teachers in this school recognize and respect colleagues who are the most effective teachers. % Strongly agree	2006-2007	2007-2008	2008-2009
PS 255	66	75	71
Average for all NYC	28	37	40

Teachers in this school respect teachers who take the lead in school improvement efforts. % Strongly agree	2006-2007	2007-2008	2008-2009
PS 255	66	67	69
Average for all NYC	28	37	41

Most teachers in my school work together to improve their instructional practice. % Strongly agree	2006-2007	2007-2008	2008-2009
PS 255	59	69	75
Average for all NYC	28	38	41

Results from three annual surveys of NYC schools – one item.

<i>Most teachers in my school work together to improve their instructional practice.</i> % who responded “Strongly agree”	2006-2007 survey	2007-2008 survey	2008-2009 survey
PS 255	59	69	75
Average for all NYC schools	28	38	41

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GLOSSARY

AYP – Acceptable Yearly Progress (improvement standard demanded under NCLB)

DoE - NYC – Department of Education, New York City

ELA – English Language Arts

ELL – English Language Learner (formerly ESL – English Second Language)

ESEA – Elementary and Secondary Education Act (of US Congress, federal government)

HRM – Human resource management

NCLB – “No Child Left Behind”. Nickname of ESEA Re-Authorization Act 2002 that introduced tough accountability on all public schools with penalties for failure.

OD – Organizational Development

ODC – Organizational Development and Change

PLC – Professional Learning Community

USDOE – United States Department of Education