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HOW DO YOU GROW GOOD PRINCIPALS?

THE NONPROFIT CHARLOTTE ADVOCATES FOR EDUCATION TAKES LESSONS
FROM SUCCESS OF STANDOUT SCHOOL LEADERS
ANN DOSS HELMS, STAFF WRITER

Shortly after Joe White became chairman of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg school board, he offered a quirky solution for struggling schools:

Clone successful **principals**.

He was joking about the science, but serious about the concept: The most challenged public schools need the best teachers. And **principals** hold the key to attracting them.

It's a theme that echoes across the country, as baby boomers retire and the challenges of public education rise. The quest is on to develop leaders who can create successful schools in poverty-stricken neighborhoods, with no excuses when children don't speak English, come from troubled families or arrive lacking basic skills.

Now, the nonprofit Charlotte Advocates for Education is weighing in with its own approach to cloning **principals**.

The group has identified characteristics of Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools **principals** who have retained teachers and raised test scores in schools with high to moderate poverty levels. It's urging CMS to find ways to replicate those traits.

Superintendent James Pughsley says the district will use the study to improve its leadership training.

But one key finding poses a challenge: Successful **principals** can't be mass-produced. In fact, they succeed by bending the rules.

They shield teachers from a barrage of mandates. They tailor their vision to their school's specific needs. They take risks.

Pinewood Elementary **Principal** Nancy Guzman, one of the 20 successful **principals** in the study, calls it "creative insubordination."

"I feel like I serve as a buffer," she says. The seven **principals** who gathered for the Charlotte Advocates' focus group agreed: Sometimes a **principal** must protect teachers from orders that interfere with teaching.

For instance, Olympic High School **Principal** Pam Espinosa, another **principal** in the Charlotte Advocates study, recently told her science teachers to ignore a CMS deadline for doing an inventory of supplies. It would pull them away from planning classes, she decided, and there was no reason the inventory couldn't wait until the next teacher work day.

With reform efforts sweeping the nation, mandates pour in from Washington, Raleigh and CMS headquarters. Schools are judged on standardized tests, with quotas for progress and penalties for lagging.

The best **principals** buck the assembly-line atmosphere. They make teachers feel like individuals whose skills and dedication are respected, the study says.

To encourage candor, Charlotte Advocates offered anonymity to the **principals** who answered the survey and participated in the focus group. But Guzman and Espinosa agreed to be interviewed.

Both are white women, but the group included men and African Americans, said Cheryl Pulliam, research director for Charlotte Advocates. What the successful leaders had in common, she concluded, was self-confidence, self-motivation and eagerness to learn.

The study urges CMS to screen for leadership traits, then teach new **principals** practical skills, from time management to budgeting.

Some suggestions are already happening. CMS has a yearlong "leadership academy" for assistant **principals** and **principals** hoping to advance. First-year **principals** are mentored by retirees who know the nuts and bolts of running a school.

People earning master's degrees in school administration from the UNC system **do** internships to get the kind of real-life experience the successful **principals** say is vital.

However well-prepared **principals** are, making the match between a person and a school can be as elusive as romance.

"There are **good principals** out there that **do a good** job at a certain school that might not be worth a hoot at another school," said White, who spent decades as a CMS coach before joining the school board.

He applauds efforts to figure out what makes great leaders tick and generate more of them.

"There may be a few **good principals** born," White said, "but most of them are made."

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Principal Study

Details on the Charlotte Advocates for Education study: www.advocatesfored.org or (704) 335-0100.

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Making Changes

Here are some of the recommendations in the Charlotte Advocates for Education leadership study:

Screen **principal** candidates for leadership traits; a competent administrator might not be a strong leader.

Review university degree programs and in-house training to make sure they're building the right skills.

Use mentoring and internships to help new **principals** learn real-life skills from veterans.

Provide more "nuts and bolts" training on such things as budgets, master schedules and conflict resolution.

Find ways to free **principals'** time to focus on education, rather than the mechanics of running a school.

Illustration:PHOTO:1

1. LAYNE BAILEY - STAFF PHOTO ILLUSTRATION. NANCY GUZMAN, PINEWOOD ELEMENTARY **PRINCIPAL**, Guzman prides herself on pushing the limit, bending the rules and listening to her staff. When she came to CMS five years ago, she asked for a challenge. The district made her **principal** of a school where test scores were low, water ran brown and mice skittered across teachers' feet. Read more about Guzman on 4A

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WILLING TO BUCK THE SYSTEM

SHE FIGHTS FOR RESOURCES, BENDS RULES, GETS RESULTS

ANN DOSS HELMS, STAFF WRITER

Nancy Guzman likes a good fight.

When she came to Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools five years ago, having turned around a troubled elementary school in South Carolina, she asked for a challenge.

The district made her principal of **Pinewood** Elementary, off Tyvola Road in south Charlotte, a school where test scores were low, water ran brown, and mice skittered across teachers' feet.

Guzman drew her sword.

She told her teachers the work they'd been doing wasn't good enough. "I think they had Employee Relations on speed-dial," she recalls.

She boycotted her first Showcase of Schools, telling district officials that until her school got computers, playground equipment and up-to-date library books, **Pinewood** had nothing to showcase.

Her superiors haven't always loved her tactics, she says, but it's hard to argue with the results. **Pinewood** has gone from 43 percent of its students testing at grade level to 83 percent - at a school where most kids qualify for low-income lunch aid and a growing number come from Spanish-speaking homes.

Her school now has the books and equipment it lacked. A new building is rising next to the schoolhouse built in 1953.

Guzman, a 53-year-old with 30 years in education under her belt, leads a young staff with relatively little teaching experience. But she says she's building loyalty, expertise and passion for doing what's right for **Pinewood's** children.

As special education teacher John Holik puts it, "We've got her back 'cause she's got ours."

Pinewood teachers say they feel stereotyped by the public, the news media and even district officials, who seem to equate high poverty with low performance. To counter that, they say, the staff must support one another.

Guzman invites teachers to her house for Christmas parties and cookouts. She writes notes when they do something well - and doesn't throw fits when they goof.

She uses federal money for high-poverty schools to send teachers to education conferences. She's trying to raise money to turn an empty classroom in the new building into a workout room.

And perhaps most important, she asks for teachers' advice. Her staff imitates her S.C. drawl on her trademark phrase: "Y'all tell me: What do you think?"

Guzman tries to shield her staff from distractions, whether that's angry parents or time-consuming orders from central offices. When the district issued weekly lesson-plan forms, **Guzman** decided that wasn't the best use of time and energy. Talk to one another about lessons, she told teachers.

"When lesson plans are more important than classroom delivery, we've got a problem," she says.

Guzman knows it's risky to sidestep mandates, and even riskier to admit it. But she believes the educators who see their children every day must decide what's best for them - and then fight for it.

So she voices opinions that may ruffle feathers: CMS should free successful schools from one-size-fits-all orders. District officials should spend less time telling principals what to do and more time asking their advice.

"You've got to have people to buck the system," she says, "to make it improve."

Illustration:PHOTO:1

1. LAYNE BAILEY - STAFF PHOTO. **Pinewood** Elementary School Principal **Nancy Guzman**, 53, prides herself on pushing the limit, bending the rules and listening to her staff. Here she talks briefly with several teachers about needs.

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