

## Shifting from 'I' to 'We'

### Top-down management traditions fall at 2 schools, cutting teacher turnover

The revolution transforming two CMS schools pursues the simple notion that principals must know themselves to lead others, and that a principal's calling is to create a team in which every member helps lead.

This notion, simple as it is, challenges immense legal, bureaucratic and cultural roadblocks that encrust today's public schools.



Supt. Jim Pughsley (right) was among several dozen people at Paw Creek Elementary Friday for a presentation on the Teacher Keeper initiative. Dee Merrill (left) opened the program.

For a century, the principal has been unassailable boss of the local public school. While exceptions were numerous, many principals pursued a leadership model that valued centralized decision-making, not the collaborative leadership essential in today's large schools with highly trained staffs. Yet getting principals to change can be difficult.

"Self-awareness is the bottom

line, and that's too scary to talk about," says Dee Merrill, a Wachovia executive on loan to the West Mecklenburg Collaborating for Education Reform initiative. "Fear makes everybody like they are."

At two CMS schools, small successes are now emerging through a pilot program called Teacher Keepers. Business leaders are

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## Pawtuckett, Paw Creek teachers comment on the change in culture

"There I felt like a teacher. Here I felt like a team member."

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"The people that used to want to transfer are fully engaged."

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"Yeah, we have to fill out this paperwork, but we realize it will have an impact on our teaching."

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"It validated us. It showed that experienced teachers do have good ideas and are valued, and that new teachers have wonderful ideas and they have a great deal to offer."

"You walk a little taller."

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"If you have a principal who's a dictator you tend to duck and hide.... Letting go prospers the environment."

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"The training allowed us to see ourselves in a better light in spite of what is being said outside."

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"I am enjoying coming to work again."

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"...our leadership has never been what it needed to be. We

have a very capable staff but it seems we've never performed the way we should. When Cathy came we could see we now have the instructional leader we need.

"But she was so consumed in so many other issues that she couldn't be that instructional leader. We all knew something had to give."

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"It gives us a stake here, because it is our school."

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"Teachers feel that somebody believes in them."

# Housing policy has role in preventing inferior schools, Harvard expert says

*Desegregation expert Gary Orfield from Harvard University's Civil Rights Project, on the key role housing plays in shaping schools:*

"Our whole problem is based on housing.... We continuously build resegregated suburban communities that just draw away the upper middle class further and further away and draw our tax resources out.

"When we're thinking about this issue we need to think about lots of dimensions.

"If we're going to have redevelopment, gentrification going on we need to think about how to put a really good high-quality school in there so that families who move in raise their children there....



Orfield

"If we're talking about county planning, developments on the outer edge of suburbia need to be diverse in terms of housing cost levels.

"We need to think of using our Section 8 certificates with counseling so that Section 8 families don't all end up in segregated, inferior schools....

"School systems should say, 'We're not going to put a school in any neighborhood that's built without some housing that teachers can afford. That's a principle a school system could stand on....

"You need to think about these things systematically and tackle them from many directions."

— An excerpt from a Q&A session after Orfield spoke March 25 at a Charlotte breakfast sponsored in part by The Swann Fellowship, publisher of this journal.



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anxious to take “to scale” the lessons learned.

But one of the lessons learned is that top-down reform doesn’t work. The motivation to change must come at the school level, from the people on the front lines – and particularly from the principal.

### Genesis of program

Armed with a Ford Foundation grant and volunteer labor from area businesses, the West Meck initiative focused two years ago in large part on Pawtuckett and Paw Creek, two elementaries plagued by high teacher turnover and low student performance.

It quickly became apparent, Merrill says, that the principal was “key to the culture of the school.”

It also became clear that schools were defined by a good many state rules, policies and procedures that could not be changed. Merrill says that the decision to “focus on what we can control... set the stage for the empowerment to begin.”

Former Supt. Eric Smith was heavily involved in the West Meck project from the beginning. “We needed the superintendent to be aware of what we were doing and sign off” on changes needed.

A key project goal was to obtain permission for principals to reallocate positions to meet local needs.

At Paw Creek, for example, Cathy Hammond traded in an assistant principalship to create a customized, four-person administrative team of part-time and full-time administrators that is “working beautifully.”

At a meeting for business executives and educators Friday, Hammond said the specific leadership needs of each campus will vary. “We need permission to continue to look at staffing on a

## An N.C. principal’s many responsibilities

*North Carolina’s General Statutes say “the executive head of a school shall be called ‘principal.’” While the law allows for delegation, titles from Section 115C-288 tell the story of the level of detail for which the principal is held legally responsible:*

§ 115C-288. Powers and duties of principal.

- (a) To grade and classify pupils.
- (b) To make accurate reports to the superintendent and to the local board.
- (c) To improve instruction and community spirit.
- (d) To conduct fire drills and inspect for fire hazards.
- (e) To discipline students and to assign duties to teachers with regard to the discipline, general well-being, and medical care of students.
- (f) To protect school property.
- (g) To report certain acts to law enforcement.
- (h) To make available school budgets and school improvement plans.
- (i) To evaluate certified employees and develop action plans.
- (j) To transfer student records.
- (k) To sign driving eligibility certificates and to notify the Division of Motor Vehicles.
- (l) To establish school improvement teams.

school-by-school basis.”

Supt. Jim Pughsley scooted out of talks with visiting Sacramento school officials to attend part of Friday’s session. He said nothing but listened intently. His early departure meant that his parking on the bus parking lot did not impede school closing.

### Building a foundation

Steve Hall, a first-time principal and fairly new to Pawtuckett when the initiative began, said human resources training provided by area businesses helped him see “the primary responsibility of the principal, which is to build leadership in every staff member who is part of the team.”

Merrill says business executives volunteered to interview staff for a “climate study.” The “desired state” of the school was defined, and a “gap analysis” performed.

Merrill says she helped conduct some of those interviews. Tears flowed, she said, as teachers recalled the stories children told them about life at home.

The choice plan brought changes, particularly at Paw

Creek, where an International Baccalaureate magnet opened last fall. “Data changed and choice happened and IB changed everything at Paw Creek,” Merrill said. “Through it all they were still able... to implement those customized staffing plans.

“The Paw Creek organization came together. Things really changed in how they communicated.”

### Supporting teachers

“We have some very capable young people exiting the college teacher training programs,” Hammond said Friday. “But they are not always prepared for what they face.”

To help inexperienced teachers, staff re-planned the school day so that as children went off to art or music or PE and then on to lunch, for example, all main classroom teachers at a grade level would have a 90-minute block of time to collaborate on teaching plans.

And with the front-office changes freeing the principal to be an instructional leader,

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Students at play Friday at Paw Creek Elementary. Says Principal Cathy Hammond, "There is not doubt in my mind that when you have quality teachers in classrooms, studnets are the real beneficiaries."

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Hammond says she has more time to be in the classroom, and to contribute during those grade-level meetings.

"Teachers want feedback and they want it from their principal and they want it regularly – not at the end of the year....

"There is no doubt in my mind that when you have quality teachers in classrooms, students are the real beneficiaries."

Are students benefiting? Quarterly test results look good, Hammond said. And it is some indication of campus conditions that on a Friday afternoon both the principal and assistant principal could be out of range of phones and walkie-talkies for a two-hour meeting.

### Communication tools

A key turning point in culture change at the two school was Adaptive Schools training, shared with all staff last summer. According to the teachers involved, the three-day training gave staff the tools they needed to communicate better.

About the change process, principal Hall invokes the image of a ping pong ball smashing into a pile of ping pong balls. "When the ping pong ball is released, it batters into two more... and soon all the balls are moving." By sharing

## Teacher data for 2 schools

*The Equity Plus II program provides high-poverty or low-performing schools additional resources and salary incentives to teachers. In connection with that program, each school's key teacher demographics are tracked against a systemwide goal designed to assure a cadre of experienced teachers at all schools. Here is data for Paw Creek and Pawtuckett, and the overall goal. Paw Creek left the Equity Plus II program this year. All figures below are percentages of the teaching staff, except average tgeaching experience, which is in years.*

	Current goal	Paw Creek		Pawtuckett		
		'00-'01	'01-'02	'00-'01	'01-'02	'02-'03
Clear licensure	92.57	91.89	89.80	89.66	90.00	85.19
Advanced degrees	31.50	10.81	14.29	17.24	13.33	14.81
New to teaching	8.04	18.92	16.33	13.79	13.33	11.11
Avg. experience	11.39	10.41	8.90	7.66	7.47	6.85
Natl. Bd. Certified	4.60	0	2.04	3.45	3.33	3.70
5+ yrs. experience	67.11	62.16	59.18	48.28	53.33	51.85

Source: Achieving The CMS Vision: Equity & Student Success, 2002, 2003

decision-making with his staff, "I feel empowered and I have the time to do so much more."

Leadership at Paw Creek, says Hammond, is "not driven by my experience or by what I want but by what we want."

Priscilla Graham worked with Hammond when Hammond was pulling Allenbrook Elementary out of low-performing status. Now they work together again at Paw Creek, with Graham the assistant principal. But Graham says their relationship now is different.

At Allenbrook, Hammond made all key decisions, Graham said. And when Hammond left Allenbrook, "the school could not

sustain itself. It began to fall apart little by little by little." Under the new leadership model at work at Paw Creek, Graham says, the school "will grow stronger because everybody's invested."

Says Hammond, "I have been at three schools in 12 years in CMS. I am convinced that the process and mechanism in place at Paw Creek will be there long after I am gone."

Merrill does not disagree, but adds, "It could also go to hell in a hand basket with the wrong leader."

When the model is duplicated

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throughout CMS will be the day that “parity” arrives among schools, Hammond says.

Says Hall, in exchange for sharing decision-making power with all staff, “what I’ve gotten back, tenfold, 100-fold sometimes, is better quality of decisions.”

### Chicken or the egg

So what does it take to motivate principals and teachers to risk change? Perhaps these two principals’ stories are extreme.

Hammond says she was transferred to Paw Creek on 30 minutes’ notice. On the first day she had 200 students for whom there were no teachers. Fourteen teachers were new to teaching. Both administrators were new. The custodian was new. When time came for a fire drill, no one in her office knew where the alarm switch was.

“Almost weekly I was on the phone with my regional superintendent saying, ‘Get me out of here,’” Hammond recalls.

“The trust level was extremely low. I had been introduced as, ‘Here she is and we’ll be back in a year and things had better be different.’”

“I didn’t have the tools. I didn’t have the models.... It was really painful because I had viewed myself as a leader.”

Hall’s memories of two years ago appeared to be so vivid that he lapsed into the present tense as he answered the same question.

“I said to (former Supt. Smith) I feel for the first time like a failure.” There was “dissonance” between what he valued and what the system seemed to want. “It is blatantly clear that I am nowhere to be found in this place.”

With retirement looming, he faced the unwelcome prospect of “bowing out without a much higher level of certainty that I was



Paw Creek (above) and Pawtuckett Elementaries were chosen in part because of 40% or higher teacher turnover in 2000-2001.

part of something terrific.... The kids were not thriving and teachers weren’t thriving.... Necessity is the mother of invention.”

Merrill believes “there are lots of good principals” across CMS. And while every school staff would benefit from the communication and collaboration skills the West Meck project has focused on, the need is greatest at schools with the most high-needs children.

### How to begin

Sprinkled among the business executives and teachers Friday were administrators from other schools. They were excited about the teacher training program. But the veterans from Pawtuckett and Paw Creek warned that reform wasn’t as easy as scheduling a few days of training.

Hall, for example, said that planning how staff would be used was a critical first action. And implementing those plans convinced teachers that they should take the change seriously, that CMS was “committed to doing business differently.... That prepared the way, that made the ground fertile.”

At the summer training, “the skills that they learned were invaluable,” but without the preparation and belief in change

the training would have been a waste.

“What we know about schools is that they are unique,” agreed Hammond. “You cannot short-circuit this process.... Everybody doing Adaptive Schools Training would not be our recommendation.”

### Business support needed

Teachers say they are renewed by the culture change (box, page 1). Specific steps were taken to bring about that culture change, and they weren’t cheap.

Merrill says the Ford Foundation grant helped pay for training, and for the substitutes needed in classrooms as teachers were trained. Teachers have also undergone training at companies collaborating with the project. One example:

“I give up seven teachers for four consecutive Wednesdays,” Hammond said Friday. “What I get back Thursday morning are seven energized teachers feeling, ‘I’m important. I’m going to be a better member of this team’... and committed to this school and the lives of children.”

But foundation-supported services are not enough, says Merrill. “We believe that businesses are out there with the expertise to

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**“Behold the turtle.  
It makes progress  
only when it sticks  
its neck out.”**

– James Bryant Conant,  
president of Harvard College  
from 1933 to 1953, quoted by  
Hal Portner in “Teachers: Want  
to Learn? Then Learn to Risk!”  
at [http://teachers.net/gazette/  
APR03/portner.html](http://teachers.net/gazette/APR03/portner.html)

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lend” as the program expands to new sites.

And off-site training is not enough. “It’s not just opening a brain, pouring in training and sending (teachers) back out there,” says Merrill. What’s involved, she says, is “changing the system.”

### The big change

Pawtucket was represented at a recent transfer fair where CMS teachers had an opportunity to “shop” for positions at the Equity Plus II schools. The delegation included the principal, but also included Pawtucket teachers.

As the delegation talked with teacher candidates, “the focus was

not so much on pedagogy,” says Hall, “but how will they fit.... Fit has become increasingly important. It represents our shift from classrooms that work to a school that is working.”

Teachers at Friday’s session insisted that fundamental change must always begin with the principal.

About Hall, one teacher said, “Until he made that commitment we could not follow along.”

“Clearly, the executive coaching has really made a difference,” said Wachovia’s Merrill.

But there probably isn’t a single standard method for achieving revolutionary change at a school that’s not serving its students well. And no school should wait on outsiders to begin the process.

Says Hall, “the timetable, if you’re interested, begins tomorrow.”

– Steve Johnston

## Diversity advocate reflects on her CMS role

In a Johnson C. Smith University auditorium Tuesday, CMS chairperson Wilhelmenia Rembert tried to explain how her life and the battle for desegregation had become entwined.

She grew up a few miles from Scotts Branch School, the Clarendon County, S.C. all-black school out of which came the first of the school lawsuits that took the name *Brown vs. Board*.

She graduated from a segregated high school in 1969, the year Judge James B. McMillan ordered Charlotte-Mecklenburg to use busing if necessary to “make good on the Brown decision of 1954.”

Rembert’s father left school as a 15-year-old still in third grade.

She entered college a year after the first black student entered what is now Winthrop University, where she teaches today. Mentors at Winthrop showed her “that there were people like me doing very important work....

“I believe very firmly in the value of diversity in public educa-

tion,” she told the Smith students, and added that it was important that “I am sitting at the table. In my parents’ day, they weren’t at the table. And not too long ago there were not enough of us at the table.”

Yet Rembert made the motion that led to a choice plan that has resegregated many CMS schools.

“We didn’t have the backing where we needed it ... to continue the desegregation efforts we would like to have provided,” Rembert told the students. Blacks were among “the vast majority” of parents who chose nearby over distant schools last year, decisions that have led many schools to mirror the economic and racial separation of the county’s neighborhoods.

Earlier, black children had “borne the brunt” of desegregation’s long-distance busing because their parents knew that the resources would be placed where the white students went to schools.



Rembert at Dec. 3 meeting during which she was elected chair.

But now, “many African Americans felt, ‘Enough already. We value diversity but not at that cost.’”

It is “extremely unfortunate,” she said, that “when our nation is becoming increasingly diverse that we would educate our students in isolated environments.”