

Hope out of Poverty

BY ROY F. DAVENPORT, MARSHA TOLBERT,
DONNA MYERS-OLIVER, JULIA M. BRISSETT,
AND ANNISSA J. ROLAND

Poverty has rules. In *A Framework of Poverty*, Ruby Payne (1998) itemizes the things that characterize poverty-stricken people. She talks about how hard it is for a person to move out of poverty. To not pass poverty on to another generation, one must have a vision. One must have a desire to achieve a better life or a strong support system. Schools must become the catalytic support system that transitions students from poverty to prosperity.

Students attending the schools of the Hopkins Street corridor in Savannah, GA, have often heard stories of great leaders moving from rags to riches and looked in awe at their success, but somehow they never thought that they possessed the potential to climb out of their impoverished condition. Like most inner-city schools, Hodge Elementary School, DeRenne Middle School, and Beach High School did not have a culture that promoted transitional success from one school to the next. They had succumbed to Payne's characteristics of poverty.

New Direction

When Donna Myers-Oliver was appointed to be the new principal of Hodge in 1999, it was immediately apparent to her that the only true neighborhood schools in Savannah were in trouble. Hodge had been ranked 31st of the system's 31 elementary schools for a long time. Students scored at the 56th percentile on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills. Myers-Oliver said, "The climate and culture of the school were deplorable. Teaching was substandard, student behavior mimicked that of the gangs in the surrounding neighborhoods, and the community's expectations for improvement were nonexistent."

DeRenne, on the other hand, had been applauded for its great test results for years. Despite the low-performing students it received from Hodge, its magnet academy was strong enough to mask the true problems of academic deficiency. Thus, the failure of the Hodge students, the neighborhood kids, was ignored until it manifested itself in high school. Consequently, Beach's graduation rate reflected the poor



performance that had marked Hodge's students for their entire public school career.

Myers-Oliver dreamed of a better outcome for her graduating fifth-grade students, realizing that her failing school affected the success of the entire community and that the poor academic preparation her students received at Hodge presaged a bad ending at Beach. Thus, the concept for the Partnership for Excellence began with the mission to ensure that the transition from school to school was smooth and the articulation of expectations was clear.

Leaders of Change

Because Hodge's students matriculated to DeRenne and from there to Beach, Myers-Oliver began talking with the middle and high school principals of the Hopkins Street corridor in 1999. The progress was stymied during a change in leadership at the secondary schools, but the concept of a partnership between the three schools remained. During the initial collaboration, the principals produced an instruction management document and formed a transition plan for students who were moving from elementary to middle school. The plan included a seamless curriculum for transitioning between Hodge and DeRenne: fifth- and sixth-grade teachers traded classrooms and opportunities to teach at each others' schools.

By the time Marsha Tolbert became principal of DeRenne in 2000 and Roy F. Davenport became principal of Beach in 2001, their work was cut out for them. Tolbert described DeRenne as a house divided between its magnet

PREVIEW

An elementary school, a middle school, and a high school formed a partnership to align their curricula to give their students a path to academic success and out of poverty.

The partnership has grown to include 10 schools in the district.

The partnership has three levels—a leadership team, a steering committee, and strategies committees—to coordinate efforts among the schools and in the community.

Roy F. Davenport
royf.davenport@savannah.chatham.k12.ga.us

Davenport is the principal of alternative programs for Savannah-Chatham County (GA) Public Schools.

Marsha Tolbert is the principal of DeRenne Middle School in Savannah, GA.

Donna Myers-Oliver is the principal of Hodge Elementary School in Savannah, GA.

Julia M. Brissett is an assistant principal of Beach High School in Savannah, GA.

Annissa J. Roland is a senior consultant for the Schlechty Center for Leadership in School Reform in Louisville, KY. She is a former academic coach at Beach High School.

honors academy and its residential program. It was also isolated from the neighborhood high school. The high achievement of the academy students masked the very low achievement of the majority of students. When the student achievement data was disaggregated, it was clear that the vast majority of students at DeRenne arrived unprepared for middle school and went on to Beach destined for failure.

Beach has been in existence since 1867. As a new Savannahian and Beach's new principal, Davenport had heard of the school's rich legacy of leaders and graduates in the Black community. Walking the halls after the keys were turned over to him, however, proved to be disappointing. The great legacy was in decline. He did not see a strong sense of pride and appreciation for the school's heritage. It was evident that the legacy had become a legend in need of repair. "Something spoke to my spirit as an educator and leader that motivated me to restore the greatness of the institution that the community held in such high regard," he said. "I knew that I could not do it alone. There had to be a grassroots movement between the feeder schools and the community to better prepare students for ninth grade."

A Common Vision

In October 2002, the three principals finally came together to form the Partnership for Excellence in which they articulated their common vision of high levels of learning for all of their students. The concept of the P-16 initiative, which is based on

the work of Georgia's Office of the P-16 Initiatives (2002), was the driving force of the partnership. The principals agreed that all education professionals, prekindergarten through grade 16, needed to:

- Understand the role that each level plays in successful school transitions
- Understand the culture of inner-city poverty, which was the culture of the majority of students in all three schools
- Recognize and address the issue of low and mediocre expectations for some students, particularly minority students
- Acquire and implement strategies for unmasking the giftedness and brightness of the students
- Create a culture of excellence in the three schools.

The partnership received a big push in 2003. In February, the principals organized a workshop for themselves, the teachers, the students, and the parents that focused on professional learning for staff members, mastery of the curriculum, assessment of student achievement, and parental support to foster success. Gwendolyn Cooke, an author and consultant, was brought in to serve as a consultant for the partnership.

The workshop participants discussed the issues and goals that were indigenous to the three schools and the surrounding community. In May, the discussions evolved to unfold the stakeholders' vision and mission, and in July, the first partnership retreat took place. Its purpose was to consolidate the stakeholders' ideas and plan strategies for future success.

Combined DeRenne Middle School and Beach High School bands perform.



Photo courtesy of author

Building a Bridge

What began as a partnership among 3 schools became the Bridge Partnership for Excellence, which addresses the common culture of poverty of 10 schools. The vision of the bridge partnership is to prepare students to be successful at the next level of schooling and, ultimately, in higher education, the military, the workforce, and community service. Despite the current failure and mediocrity of their students, bad press releases, and negative student attitudes toward learning, members in the bridge partnership undertook a new mission: to empower the community to work collaboratively with the schools and the schools to work together to develop and implement a seamless curriculum that improves students' knowledge and teaches them the skills they need to meet the challenges of the future.

The concept of a seamless curriculum became the focus of the work that teachers designed for students using the *Working on the Work* framework by Schlechty (2002). Teachers participated in a series of district-level workshops beginning in the 2002–03 school year. Subsequently, the partnership provided professional learning activities to continue the development of the Working on the Work concepts. The partnership's leaders realized that the teachers' role within the partnership required each teacher to:

- Teach Georgia Performance Standards through the design of engaging work
- Identify skills deficiencies through data analysis at each level
- Engineer a common assessment that would measure progress across time
- Track students' success from elementary to postsecondary experiences.
- Collaborate with other teachers in focused conversations about the design and the production of student work.

The partnership has grown in complexity and effectiveness. The organizational structure developed into three distinct layers: a leadership team, a steering committee, and strategies committees. The leadership team is made up of the principals of each of the 10 schools. There are 7 elementary schools, 2 middle schools, and 1 high school. The steering committee is a group of principals, teachers, parents, students, and support staff members who are responsible for establishing and guiding the direction of the partnership. The strategies committees are responsible for correlating the strategies that support schools and their students. Each of the strategies committees solicits ideas from stakeholders about how to improve services relating to guidance and counseling, academic excellence and profes-

Although no research has been done that would establish causality, we strongly believe that a systemic focus on teaching and learning in the partnership schools resulted in students feeling a greater sense of connectedness and belonging.

sional learning, data analysis, public relations, parents and community, grant writing, and student involvement. These ideas are taken to the steering committee for consideration. The steering committee makes specific recommendations to the leadership team for action. The leadership team, in turn, develops specific strategies to implement the recommendations in each of the schools.

Marks of Success

Success is marked by the data. Hodge met AYP in 2005. DeRenne did not meet AYP for the 2005 assessment. Although this indicator was a blow for the entire school, everyone was encouraged because DeRenne's math and language arts score exceeded the district's and the state's averages by 12.1% and 12.3% respectively. Five of the district's seven high schools are on the needs improvement list. Beach, however, showed increases in all sections of Georgia's high-stakes graduation test. In addition, Beach's graduation rate ascended from 38% in 2004 to 78% in 2005. Although no research has been done that would establish causality, we strongly believe that a systemic focus on teaching and learning in the partnership schools resulted in students feeling a greater sense of connectedness and belonging. Consequently, fewer students felt compelled to drop out and the graduation rate increased.

Determined that the rules of poverty will not dictate the culture of their schools, control the success of their students, nor predict outcomes of failure, the schools of the Bridge Partnership for Excellence are working together to ensure that their students not only make the transition from school to school well but also make the transition out of poverty. **PL**

References

- Payne, R. (1998). *A framework for understanding poverty*. Baytown, TX: RFT Publishing.
- Schlechty, P. (2002). *Working on the work: An action plan for teachers, principals, and superintendents*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Office of the Georgia P-16 Initiatives, Board of Regents of the University System of Georgia. (2002). *P-16 history and background*. Retrieved November 16, 2005, from www.usg.edu/p16