

# A Home Away from Home

**B**rusha was only in kindergarten, but her temper was adult-sized. When she didn't get her way, she threw a fit. Like many of the school's 200 pupils, Brusha lived in government-subsidized housing near Julia Frazier Elementary School in Dallas. She had seen lots of violence, experienced neglect, and spent a lot of time in principal Rachel George's office.

George knew it was behaviors and attitudes like Brusha's she had to turn around if she were to make Frazier a high-achieving school. It seemed an impossible task. But then George realized that what Brusha and her peers lacked was what had bolstered George during her own childhood—an extended family who lovingly reinforced messages about right and wrong.

"A lot of our children come from single-parent homes, and there may be a grandmother in the house or a lot of other children," says George. "Everyone needs someone—one person who will applaud them for doing well. The children have to be told and led to believe that people do not always scream and holler at you."

George put a plan into place: Each classroom would be a family—the kids would even take the teachers' last names—and teachers in neighboring classrooms would be their aunts. It was more than a gimmick. Before long, children began competing to see whose classroom could behave better; whose test scores could be higher.

George credits her teachers for making it work. Many of the 23 teachers shared common experiences and it was their warmth toward each other that first gave her the idea of an extended school family. George built on their camaraderie by pairing teachers

and telling them to do nice things for each other. Their fuzzy feelings for each other spilled over to the children. Teachers now come in early to tutor students and some even pick up children to make sure they get to school on time. They also show up routinely at community functions—even funerals.

"I had a little girl killed last summer," says George. "The young mother said, 'I don't know what to do.' We took over." The Frazier staff bought burial clothing for the child and made lunch for the family after the service.

The school rewards parents who take active roles in their children's educations by checking homework, attending conferences, and returning signed forms on time. Each "Parent of the Month" gets a plaque. George recalls how one parent's eyes filled with tears as she said, "All through high school I never got anything. This is my first award."

The caring works. Frazier Elementary School has been labeled an exemplary school by the Texas Education Agency for the past three years. There are only five to 10 discipline referrals a year. And Brusha? After more than two years of discipline—lunches alone with the principal, isolation from peers who felt threatened, frequent shifts to different classrooms—she took the stage this spring for the annual awards ceremony.

"She got the 'most improved' award," said George.

—Ruth Sternberg

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and understand what factors have contributed to their presence.

## Choosing a Destination

Turnaround principals obviously must guide their schools toward higher achievement, based on standardized tests. However, such a single-minded focus often is insufficient alone to save a school. Effective turnaround principals are acutely aware that students are more than test scores, that teachers are more than instruments for raising scores, and that the hopes and dreams of parents entail more than higher scores.

Consider how Rachel George led Julia C. Frazier Elementary School in South Dallas, Texas, from a low-

performing school to one whose students' achievement rivals that of peers in far more affluent neighborhoods (Benton 2002). (See "A Home Away from Home," above.) Before students could focus on academic improvement, they first needed to feel that teachers cared about them. George and her staff set about creating a family-like environment in the school, going so far as to have students adopt the last names of their teachers during the school day. Everyone made a concerted effort to see that Frazier was clean and safe, a place students wanted to be. By requiring students to wear uniforms to school, George eliminated the distracting influence of clothing.

Principals like Rachel George know that their ultimate destination must be nothing less than a learning environment in which relationships are as important as rules, where all students feel valued not for how they perform on tests, but because they are human beings worthy of care and respect. Turnaround principals understand the message that psychologist Abraham Maslow tried to convey decades ago—that people must feel cared for and cared about *before* they will take the risks necessary to achieve. In unsuccessful schools, unfortunately, students too often get the message that they must first achieve in order to be valued.