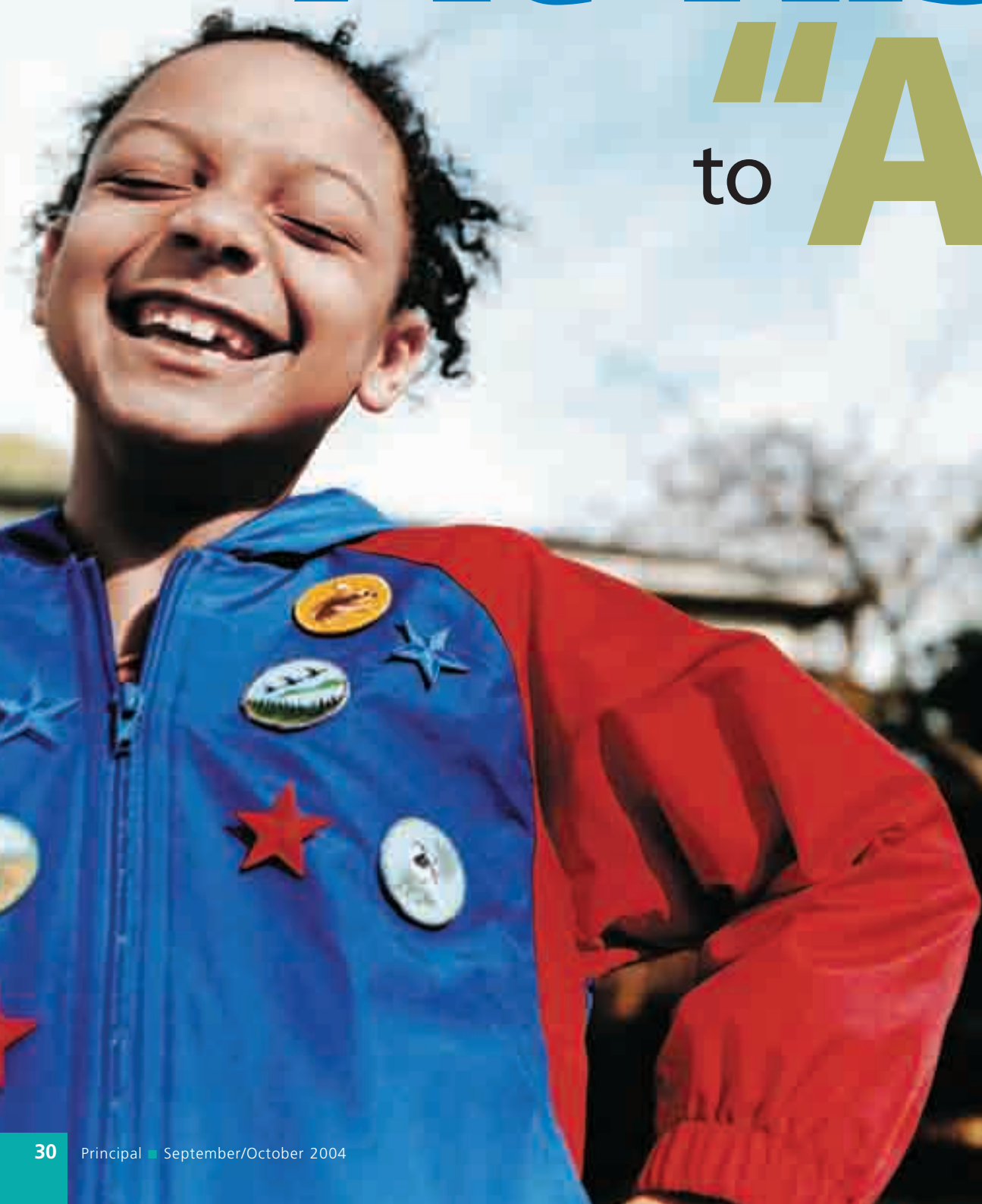


# From "At-Risk" to "At-





# Promise":

## A Three-Year Journey

J. Harrison Coleman

A principal's vision of success and a commitment to change has turned a failing school into a "diamond in the rough."

**E**mily Spong Elementary School is a Pre-K–5 urban school in a high-poverty community, surrounded on three sides by public housing and with an enrollment of 250 black students, most of them from single-parent homes and many being raised by grandparents. The school has the highest Title I enrollment in the district.

This was the school I inherited three years ago. But where others saw a failing school with no chance for academic or social growth, I saw a school with promise, hope, and success written all over it.

However, the reality was tough to swallow. Spong was the lowest-

performing school in the district; many of its students had been retained at least once; and morale was poor on a staff that included a number of teachers who wanted to keep doing things the way they had always been done.

### IN BRIEF

A principal describes some of the many initiatives that have changed the culture and perception of a low-income urban school. They include a military-style structure in which students become cadets and teachers become instructional facilitators. Data-driven assessments identify student needs, which are addressed with rigorous before-school and weekend remediation.

In *Teaching the Elephant to Dance*, Belasco (1990) explains the process of change by comparing tradition-bound organizations to circus elephants. It is only when the circus tent catches fire, and the elephants see the flames and smell the smoke, that they suddenly forget their old conditioning and change. My task was to accomplish major change without burning down the school.

It takes vision, persistence, and determination to inspire change and confront the challenges of reshaping the culture and perception of high-poverty minority children in a low-performing school. I realized that if I was to change the school's image, it was imperative that I initiate academic and social improvement by walking it, talking it, seeing it, wearing it, living it, believing it, doing it, and, above all, promoting it with confidence and consistency.

To accomplish this, I undertook a number of initiatives that have helped move our school from "at-risk" to "at-promise."

### **Restoring Law and Order**

One of my first initiatives was to restore law and order. We gave each student the title of cadet and put them on a strict, military-style schedule. At 8:00 a.m. every day, the cadets line up by classes in the school's entrance foyer to recite the Pledge of Allegiance and the Cadets' Creed. At 8:17 a.m., the cadets go to their classrooms, where they receive a brown-bag breakfast and read the morning activities, homework, and special announcements that are written on the front board. Instruction starts at 8:30 a.m. With this structure, we were able to reduce the noise level in the building, the number of tardy students, and hallway disturbances. As a result, instructional time has increased by as much as 45 minutes a day.

### **Building a Winning Team**

Today, only half of the original faculty remains, and replacing teachers has given me an opportunity to

**"Addressing the diverse challenges and problems I inherited has been an exhilarating experience. With the support of an outstanding team...I can take pride in what we have accomplished."**

hire, mentor, train—and learn from—a team of new and seasoned teachers that we prefer to call instructional facilitators. All willingly accept the challenge of continuous improvement of student performance.

Teams of instructional facilitators work together in combined classes. One is responsible for math and science; the other for history, social science, and language arts. They support each other and each team is assigned a tutorial coach to assist with remediation.

### **Documenting Time-on-Task**

Time-on-task is an essential key to guaranteeing student gains. At Spong, I use a strategy called SWEEP (Scan Walking to Evaluate Educational Productivity) several times a day to observe and document student engagement. A class observed to be totally engaged earns the instructional facilitator a "check of compliance." But this is denied if even one cadet is seen as not on task. The schoolwide implementation of SWEEP has made time-on-task the norm.

### **Emphasizing Remediation**

Remediation at Spong is immediate, consistent, and targeted. TAXES (Teachers Applying eXtra Educational

Support) is a daily program from 7:30 to 8:30 a.m. for students in grades 3–5 that helps them master concepts and skills they failed to grasp the previous day. While cadets may attend voluntarily, most attendance is required.

We also run an SOL (Saturdays of Learning) program every week from October to May, from 9:00 a.m. to noon, with a snack included. More than 45 percent of our cadets attend SOL, where each works on needed skills. Parents provide transportation for both programs, and attendance and productivity are excellent.

The collection and use of data plays a major role in the continuing assessment and remediation of our students. Weekly assessments and quarterly benchmark tests are submitted by each instructional facilitator and all scores are recorded in an assessment log that is used to compile the individualized Cadet Educational Plan that drives each child's remediation program.

### **Schools Within a School**

Being a Pre-K–5 school means we have a wide range of ages and abilities. That is why Spong is divided into two schools, Pre-K–2 (SOLution Station) and 3–5 (Lollapalooza Academy). A dean at each school coordinates internal activities, and both schools organize events and activities; plan with the principal; implement programs and strategies; requisition materials and supplies; and exchange resources.

### **The Principal's Role**

The best way to know what's happening in your classrooms is to be an intimate part of the planning process. I spend two to three hours a week planning with the instructional facilitators from each school. We discuss the standards they are addressing for the upcoming week and how they plan to approach instruction. My role is to serve as a sort of resource bank for the facilitators, but it's great to have first-hand knowledge of their concerns, questions, and innovative ideas.

After the first faculty meeting of the year, I delegate responsibility for planning, recording, and preparing refreshments to the instructional facilitators on a rotating schedule. Placing them in charge ensures exciting and exhilarating weekly meetings that address staff development priorities. In the past, faculty meetings have had guest speakers, presentations, demonstrations, book studies, unit/theme planning, and roundtable discussions. I've found that when the staff, rather than the principal, plan these meetings, the knowledge gained is retained and valued.

### Walls that Talk

At Spong, we use all available wall space to recognize student achievement. For example, cadets' work samples cover the walls in the hallways and in designated sections of the cafeteria. Each display is labeled with the standard addressed in the samples. The walls are updated at least

once a month. Cadets achieving 85 percent or above on tests are recognized on designated mastery walls that are located throughout the school.

### Involving the Parents


Over the past three years, we have seen a complete turnaround in PTA participation. Where we once had about 2 percent of parents involved—numbers you could count on one hand—we now have attendance that ranges from 35 to 100 percent. The key has been to involve every cadet. Schoolwide PTA meetings are announced and promoted weeks in advance. Cadets personally invite parents to come and see some of their finished products and to participate in theme events that have included a harvest picnic, poetry night, science fair, measurement marathon, and honors night. The meetings always start on time and end promptly one hour later.

### Finding Funding

Because budget restraints and strict federal guidelines make it difficult to fund special projects and incentives, it's important for us to write and win grants. I have helped train our instructional facilitators and interested paraprofessionals on how to write grants, and each year our grant-writing team diligently seeks and applies for major grants from foundations, companies, programs, and organizations at local, state, and national levels. In addition, all instructional facilitators are required to apply for annual grants in subject areas across grade levels. Our efforts have paid off with grants and donations totaling over \$250,000.

### Completing the Turnaround


What I have described is just a sampling of the many initiatives that have helped Spong turn from an "at-risk" to an "at-promise" school. Addressing the diverse challenges and problems I inherited has been an exhilarating



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experience. With the support of an outstanding team of instructional facilitators, I can take pride in what we have accomplished.

Our accreditation status has moved from Accredited with Warning in 2002 to Provisionally Accredited in 2003, to likely Full Accreditation for 2004. Data analysis shows gains of 14 to 57 percent across core subject areas, and our fifth-grade proficiency scores on state writing assessments have steadily improved from 40 percent in 2001 to a whopping 100 percent in 2004.

Today, Spong Elementary School boasts central air conditioning, new windows, security cameras and buzzers, classroom telephones, and advanced technology. Best of all, Spong today is a "diamond in the rough," housing many of the brightest, happiest, and most confident children in the district. We've proven that all children can—and want to—learn. ■

## Reference

Belasco, J. *Teaching the Elephant to Dance*. New York: Plume Books, 1990.

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## WEB RESOURCES

The Emily Spong Elementary School describes its mission, vision, and goals on its Web site. <http://pps.k12.va.us/schools/eses/>

Elizabeth City State University documents its partnership program with Emily Spong Elementary School. <http://nia.ecsu.edu/nrts/Espong/esmain.html>

The University of North Carolina provides the complete text of a doctoral dissertation, "Turnaround Schools: Four Case Studies." [www.ga.unc.edu/pep/pp/turnaround.PDF](http://www.ga.unc.edu/pep/pp/turnaround.PDF)

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