





The **best** from the Best: Effective Strategies of Award- winning Principals

Thirty-five award-winning principals share their best practices for creating learning communities that benefit *all* students.

Sandra Harris

Although elementary school principals face increasing stress in the time-consuming nature of their jobs, many elementary schools are flourishing under effective leadership. How are they accomplishing this? To find out, I contacted more than 100 elementary school principals who had been recognized for outstanding leadership as National Distinguished Principals, or whose schools had been identified as high-performing Blue Ribbon Schools, to discover what they considered their best leadership practices. Thirty-five principals responded from schools varying in size from 220 to 970 students.

IN BRIEF

This article presents the best practices of principals who have been honored as NAESP National Distinguished Principals or whose schools have won National Blue Ribbon School distinction. Their strategies fall into six categories: leadership; shaping campus culture; collaborating and communicating; effective instructional programs; school improvement planning; and at-risk programs.

What I Found

In sharing their thoughts on practices that contributed to the success of their schools, the principals echoed Horace Mann's primary goal for education: to "serve all boys and girls ... [and] give each student an equal chance in life" (Mondale and Patton 2001). The award-winning principals submitted more than 100 different practices that fell into the following categories:

- Leadership;
- Shaping campus culture;
- Collaborating and communicating;
- Effective instructional programs;
- School improvement planning; and
- At-risk programs.



Leadership

The principals offered best practices that emphasized the importance of shared and purposeful leadership. They pointed out the importance of creating, nurturing, and sustaining relationships with students and faculty (Harris 2004). One principal noted that leadership was incorporated into the school's mission statement, which "was a reflection of the best of everyone's thinking about what this school would be." Another principal emphasized how important it is to "know where she is going, be well-planned and organized, and build meaningful and caring relationships." That principal's strategy was to establish a governing body of teachers elected by their peers to develop and emphasize leadership qualities.

Other principals noted that the purpose of their leadership strategies is to develop sound educational values and goals, and to move closer to fulfilling their school's mission. In one school, improvement objectives are written in "kid-friendly" terms and posted throughout the building. In this way, students, as well as teachers, are able to articulate what they can do to meet school objectives.

Principals shared the importance of having respect for all and getting to know each faculty and staff member on a professional and personal basis. They suggested that principals be able to answer the following questions:

- Do you know everyone's name?
- Do you know at least three important details about each employee?
- Do you engage in meaningful conversations that focus on personal interests?
- Do you recognize accomplishments by students and faculty?

Shaping Campus Culture

Culture shapes what we are as well as what we think. This includes the way we communicate and interact, and what we value (Pang 2005). Principals shared several strategies for shaping and defining a positive campus culture.

One school establishes a welcoming environment by having someone outside to greet students as they exit their cars. As the students enter the gymnasium for a brief morning assembly, the principal shakes their hands, welcoming them once more to the school day.

Another principal was reminded of the importance of establishing a welcoming environment when she asked the school counselor what he thought her best practices were. The counselor replied, "being present with kids; [setting] up door duty for staff; and role [modeling] for [faculty] to be present, friendly, and involved with kids and their parents."

Supporting student learning also builds a positive school culture. At one school, teachers spend time in school improvement meetings, where they discuss issues, student needs, and other concerns. These meetings have led to the implementation of math clubs, mediation strategies, and mentoring and tutoring programs. Another principal explained that students at her school are often asked to discuss their academic goals.

Cross-age tutoring was also implemented as a strategy to shape positive school culture, with one principal matching younger students with a "buddy" from an upper grade. The students get together to read, work in the computer lab, and go on field trips.



Collaborating and Communicating

Effective communication has been identified as one of the top five traits of successful schools (Verdugo and Schneider 1999). The responding principals reported using a variety of school publications to communicate, including weekly and monthly newsletters, brochures, Web sites, and press releases to local newspapers. One principal reported that he kept the lines of communication open by writing at least three notes each day to faculty, students, and parents.

Several principals noted the importance of listening as a communication tool, and one principal noted that her leadership style has always relied on collaboration. In her school, instructional practices like departmentalized instruction, flexible grouping, looping, and

FALL

Ellison
Shaping Education™

2007

My To-Do List

- ☐ Decorate Classroom: "Welcome Back" theme
- ☐ CHECK MAILBOX FOR LATEST ELLISON EDUCATOR CATALOG!
PLUS IDEAS, IDEAS, IDEAS AND MORE @ ELLISON.com!!!
- ☐ Make Seating Chart
- ☐ First-Day Activities/Introductions

©2007 Ellison All rights reserved.

AllStar™ PRESTIGE™



For more information, call
800.253.2238

tutorials after school and on Saturdays are developed in a team environment in order to promote academic excellence.

Many principals commented that collaboration must involve parents as well. For example, one principal noted that when students misbehave, parents are expected to play a role in taking corrective action. Another school created a parent center with worktables, a living-room area, a classroom area, a refrigerator, and a microwave. Parents who gather there to visit often end up helping out by laminating, cutting, and sorting.

Another principal considered gaining support and building relationships with the community as her best practice. She noted that she regularly communicates the successes of the school to residents living in the school attendance zone. She also attends community events while wearing a school sweatshirt, and invites business leaders to participate in school-business partnerships.



Effective Instructional Programs

Research by Hoy and Hoy (2003) concluded that principals influence instruction in at least six ways:

- Encouraging academic excellence;
- Supporting faculty improvement;
- Including teachers in instructional improvement;
- Providing resources and materials;
- Sharing best practices with faculty; and
- Recognizing and celebrating academic excellence.

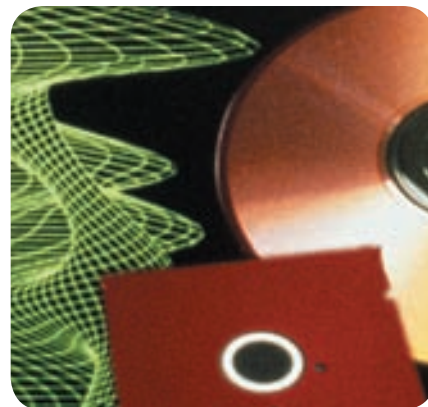
“Effective leadership fosters school improvement by establishing a culture of inquiry, and award-winning principals accomplish this in a variety of ways.”

The award-winning principals who contributed best practice ideas noted similar strategies.

One school used a literacy lab where students in grades 1 and 2 who are performing below grade level receive one-on-one tutoring assistance in reading. Students attend the lab four days a week for 30 minutes each day. Another school implemented a self-selected reading block where students read books at their own levels. This activity is especially effective when children read books of high interest to them.

Another principal who took over a school with low academic scores relied on the power of the arts to begin an academic turnaround. He acquired grants for a summer arts enrichment program; integrated visual arts with student writing; coordinated music with content areas; developed an after-school program that supported the arts; created a code of conduct that used visual displays; and created schoolwide dance, drama, and music assemblies.

Providing teachers with quality professional development was mentioned by several principals. At one school, new teachers are assigned mentor teachers and meet monthly with the principal to discuss their experiences. A two-week orientation is provided to new teachers to support them in that difficult first year. At another school, teachers are encouraged and supported in finding challenging ways to address various learning styles.



School Improvement Planning

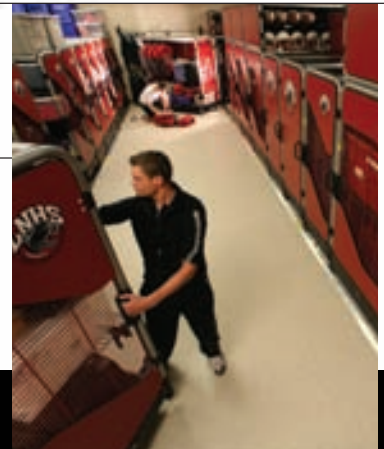
Effective leadership fosters school improvement by establishing a culture of inquiry (Harris 2006; Lambert 2003), and award-winning principals accomplish this in a variety of ways. Several principals use book studies with faculty to support school improvement, and one principal uses the award application process as an improvement strategy.

One principal noted that her school became successful by reviewing data daily to drive school changes. A second principal created four teams to review data that could impact school improvement—the internal review team surveys and interviews the school community; the teaching and learning community team supports new teaching methods and follows up on inservice training; the student, learning, and progress team analyzes student data from state test scores, achievement scores, and other relevant information; and the learning community team reviews school policy, looks at what worked and what did not work, and makes suggestions for changes.

Another principal described a plan that decreases disciplinary problems while increasing positive student interactions. For example, after the first offense a student is given a written warning and verbal reminder of the rule; after the second offense, the student completes a “think sheet” on the rules broken and lists ways to improve; and after the third offense, the student



Style. *Composition.* Harmony.



Create a design that really performs.

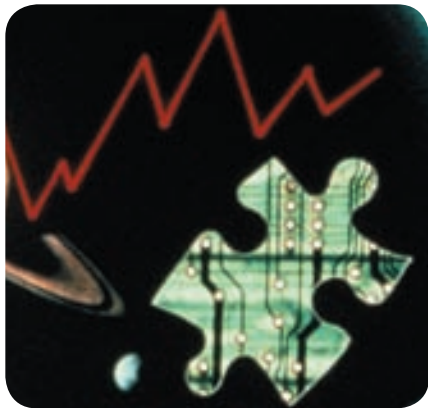
For over 60 years, Wenger has focused on specialty areas like the music wing, auditoriums, theatres and athletic spaces. We've helped establish effective design guidelines and tools for acoustics, layout, traffic flow, storage and more. And we've consulted with architects and educators on thousands of projects to create cost-effective environments that work. When it comes to creating high-performance speciality areas, Wenger is your leading resource. Call us – we are ready to assist with a series of planning tools and experienced representatives.

800-4-WENGER (800-493-6437) / www.wengercorp.com

Wenger®

Your Performance Partner

attends the next scheduled meeting of the mediation group, which includes the teacher, counselor, and principal.



At-Risk Programs

Educators are being challenged today to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student population. Award-winning principals have responded by welcoming diversity and emphasizing strategies that are culturally proficient. They have promoted remedial programs such as Reading Recovery and Early Literacy for at-risk elementary students. They also provide additional services for struggling students in the form of tutoring and counseling, instruction in social skills, and preferential seating, while providing resources and inclusion for students with special education and English-language needs.

One principal who took over an at-risk inner-city school wrote a grant that funded two additional positions and provided training in the William Glasser model of choice theory, which emphasizes that everyone makes decisions, and that each decision carries a positive or negative consequence. This model was integrated into the school day in support of the school's philosophy that no one has the right to disrupt the learning of others.


Another principal noted that her school developed a mission specifically to serve its growing at-risk population by focusing on students' abilities rather than their inabilities. Assessments are continuous, curriculum changes are

"Educators are being challenged today to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student population."

based on data, and teachers take collective responsibility for students at each grade level.

As I read through more than 100 of the best practices submitted by the 35 award-winning principals, I noticed that all of their leadership practices were framed within three important ideas:

- We, not me;
- People, not programs; and
- Students, not schools.

Each principal attributed his or her success to collaborating and working with others, recognizing that programs provide quality only if administered by quality people. Most importantly, these principals understood and acknowledged that their schools succeed only when their students succeed. 

Sandra Harris is an associate professor of educational leadership at Lamar University in Beaumont, Texas. Her e-mail address is sandra.harris@lamar.edu. This article is adapted from her book *Best Practices of Award-Winning Elementary School Principals* (Corwin Press 2005).

References

- Harris, S. *BRAVO Principal*. Larchmont, N.Y.: Eye on Education, 2004.
- Harris, S. "Six Kinds of Questions to Create a Culture of Inquiry." *Principal Leadership*, October 2006, 27-31.
- Hoy, A. and W. Hoy. *Instructional Leadership: A Learning-centered Guide*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 2003.

- Lambert, L. *Leadership Capacity for Lasting School Improvement*. Alexandria, Va.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2003.
- Mondale, S. and S. B. Patton. *School: The Story of American Public Education*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2001.
- Pang, V. *Multicultural Education: A Caring-centered, Reflective Approach*. 2nd ed. Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2005.
- Verdugo, R. and J. Schneider. "Quality Schools, Safe Schools: A Theoretical and Empirical Discussion." *Education and Urban Society* 31 (1999): 286-308.

WEB RESOURCES

The Elementary Best Practice Study looks at what works best for teaching elementary students.

www.isd194.k12.mn.us/EBPStudy.htm

Leading Learning Communities identifies six standards for what principals should know and be able to do.

www.naesp.org/client_files/LLC-Exec-Sum.pdf

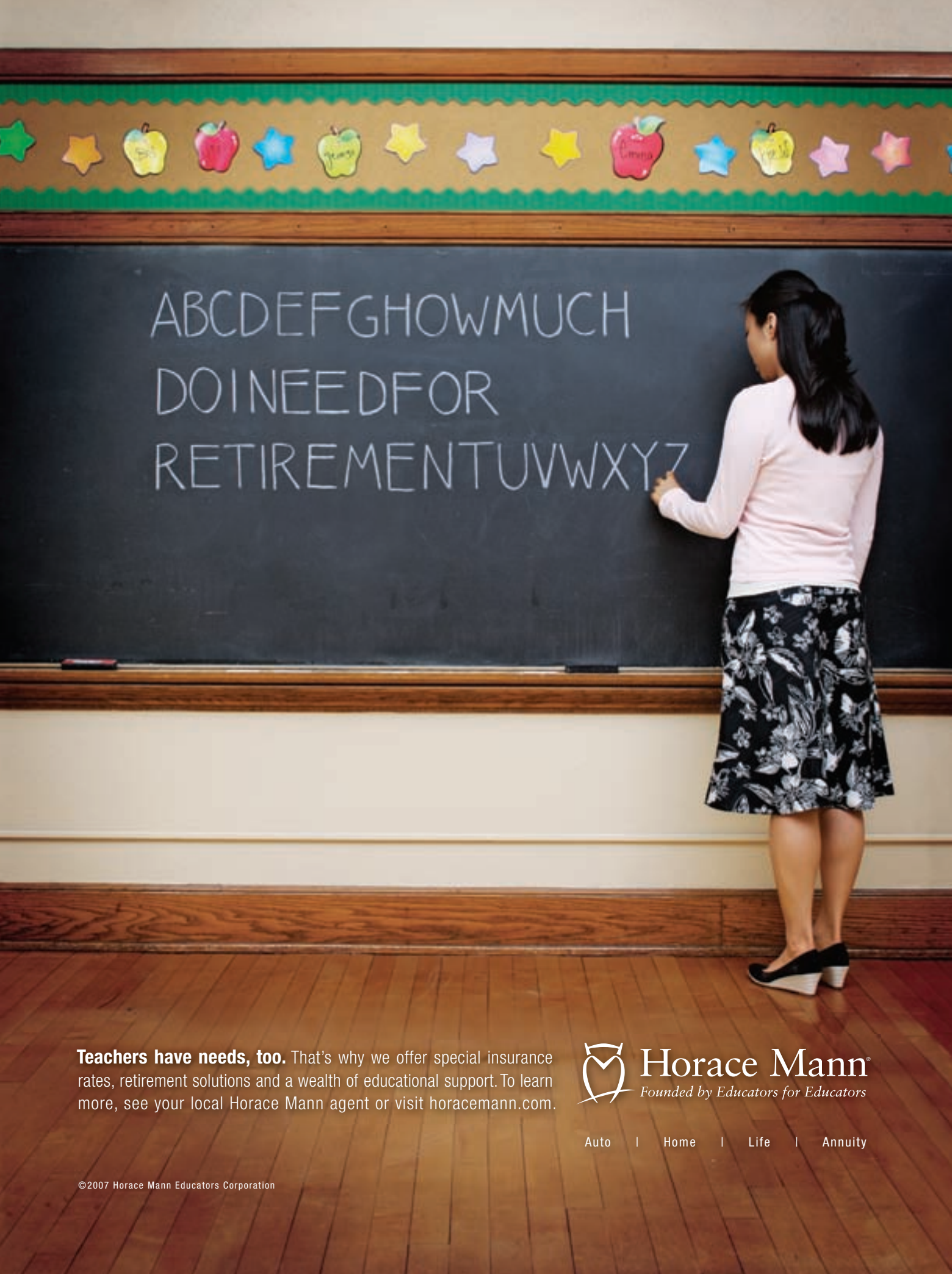
An article from the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory examines leadership practices of successful principals.

www.nwrel.org/request/2005nov/practices.html

The report "Good Principals Are the Key to Successful Schools" can be downloaded at

www.sreb.org/programs/hstwt/publications/pubs/03V03_GoodPrincipals.pdf





ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ
DO I NEED FOR
RETIREMENT

Teachers have needs, too. That's why we offer special insurance rates, retirement solutions and a wealth of educational support. To learn more, see your local Horace Mann agent or visit horacemann.com.



Auto | Home | Life | Annuity