

# Equity Against Adversity

Ed Trust's Karin Chenoweth  
talks about the strategies  
that can help historically  
disadvantaged schools  
and districts succeed



In *Districts That Succeed: Breaking the Correlation Between Race, Poverty, and Achievement*, The Education Trust writer-in-residence Karin Chenoweth examines five “ExtraOrdinary” districts. Serving large percentages of children of color and children from low-income homes, they have shown rapid improvement in spite of their disadvantages. What are they doing that other schools and districts might emulate?



Karin Chenoweth

*Principal* magazine recently asked Chenoweth—also the author of *Schools That Succeed* and several other books—what she has discovered

about “ExtraOrdinary” schools and districts that have been able to champion change and improve student achievement despite inadequate funding, preconceived ideas about education, and other challenges. Here’s what she said:

**Principal:** What are the issues that schools in the five ExtraOrdinary Districts have in common, and how have they been able to move the needle?

**Chenoweth:** All of the schools in the districts I profile are underfunded—some shamefully so. That means they make painful trade-offs: They provide music or art, have a school library, or have new computers or field trips. In each of them, however, school and district leaders know that their students can achieve, and use what they have to advance their students’ knowledge and opportunities—and they all focus intently on early reading as a way to open those opportunities.

In every school and district I have written about, I have seen what U.K. researcher Mel Ainscow calls “exposing and sharing expertise,”

which requires sitting together and examining evidence of student learning, whether it is assessment results or student work. [When] teachers [agree] on roughly what their students need to learn, by roughly what time, and how to assess it, it allows them to ask what I call the most powerful question in the field of education: “Your kids are doing better than mine. What are you doing?”

This is a question that can be asked at the grade level, the department level, the school level, the district level, and even the state and country level. But an awful lot of systems have to be in place in order for educators to be able to ask that question. In addition to a common set of expectations, assessments, and data systems, educators need time to be able to study the data together, and they need to have a culture of trust. As Pam Matthews, current superintendent of Lane Public Schools in Oklahoma, told me, “There’s nothing wrong with not knowing. What’s wrong is if you don’t find out and learn.”

**Principal:** What are individual districts doing that really stuck out to you as effective in helping them improve?

**Chenoweth:** Each of the districts I profile in the book have very different contexts, which means that the specific solutions they have found differ a great deal. For example,

when Lane Public Schools began its improvement trajectory back in 2005 or so, then-superintendent Roland Smith began by looking for a district that was similar demographically but doing better. He found nearby Cottonwood and essentially said, “Your kids are doing better than mine. What are you doing?”

After touring Cottonwood, Smith realized that as a former high school science teacher, he hadn’t understood how much learning needed to happen in the early years. “My epiphany was to understand—from [Superintendent] John Daniel—the importance of reading,” he told me. Smith sent his teachers to learn from Cottonwood’s teachers, got a grant to get his staff additional training in early reading instruction, and kept in close touch with Daniel to consult on problems that emerged.

Seaford, Delaware’s trajectory was quite different. When it began its improvement process in 2013, its assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction—now superintendent—Corey Miklus, began the job with a really good idea of what needed to happen. He was able to recognize the advantages of a new reading curriculum and slowly introduced principles of reading instruction to teachers and staff members. [It] has proven very helpful in driving improvement in reading achievement.

Chicago has a much more complex story to tell, but beginning in about

# Advice for Successful School Leadership

Chenoweth has distilled several important strategies in supporting school growth from her observations of, and interviews with, the leaders of the ExtraOrdinary schools and districts featured in her books and podcast:

**Attend to the culture.** Deb Gustafson, a principal who led enormous improvement in Kansas' Ware Elementary, launched her tenure by telling her teachers and staff that they would never face repercussions from her for any mistake except one: speaking disrespectfully to a student or staff member. When some teachers objected that it was the students who were disrespectful, she responded that adults, not children, are responsible for culture.

**Use the scientific method to solve problems.** Dave Perrington, who led enormous improvement in Seaford, Delaware, as superintendent, said, "Let's reintroduce something that we know works. In the other disciplines, it works—and it can work for us." This means bringing an empirical pragmatism to each problem schools face, identifying the problem through data, fashioning and implementing a solution, gathering evidence about its effectiveness, and finally, extending the solution if it works or trying something new if it doesn't.

**Don't major in the minors.** Sharon Brittingham, a successful principal coach at Frankford Elementary in Delaware, told Chenoweth that principals too often try to solve all of the problems in a building. This can make principals heroes, she said, but it also means they are taking leadership opportunities away from teachers and staff, and are often unable to spend the time attending to the systems that will allow their schools to improve. "Another way of putting it comes from a principal who calmly told me in the middle of an interview that one of the bathroom ceilings had just collapsed," Chenoweth says. "I asked her if she needed to attend to it, and she said, 'That's not my job. It's my job to make sure there is someone whose job it is.'"

**Help everyone make better decisions.** When leaders try to make all of the important decisions, their schools and districts become paralyzed. What effective leaders do instead is help the adults in their systems make better, more informed decisions and then help systematize those decisions across their schools and districts.

**Build systems that ensure students can learn and teachers can teach.** So much has been said about instructional leadership in the past few years that the managerial role of leaders has gotten lost. "If a practice is effective and solves problems, it should be systematized across the district in order to ensure that everyone can benefit from it," Chenoweth says. Making certain routines systematic helps direct the "real energies of students, teachers, and leaders to teaching and learning—which is the whole point of a school."

2010 or so, the district office realized that school improvement happens school by school, and key to that are school leaders who understand how to lead improvement. This means the district put tremendous effort into ensuring that every principal is prepared to lead improvement.

**Principal: How important or influential are a school's leaders in realizing rapid gains in achievement?**

**Chenoweth:** We have had really good research about the importance of school leaders in leading school improvement, including in student achievement. My observations are consonant with that research, which in essence says school improvement is not possible without an effective leader.

Among other things, effective principals make sure that teachers' and children's time is not wasted by building master schedules that ensure teachers have uninterrupted time to teach and collaborate, and students have uninterrupted time to learn. Effective principals also establish schoolwide cultures of respect for all, which both attracts and retains expert teachers.

We also know that effective principals can be developed when districts and universities pair up to ensure that principals know how to lead improvement and when they are supported by their district offices. This has been done in Chicago, where leaders who graduated from the University of Illinois–Chicago have led more improvement, on average, in their schools than the schools led by principals from more traditional backgrounds.

For six years, The Wallace Foundation funded an effort by six large districts to develop principal pipelines of better-prepared and better-supported principals, and a RAND study of the initiative found that within three years of having a new principal from the pipeline, schools in five of the six districts saw improvement in academic achievement that could be attributed to the new principals.

**Principal: What are principals and other building leaders in the ExtraOrdinary Districts doing to advance equity?**

**Chenoweth:** One of the key things they are doing is simply providing proof that it is possible for schools and districts that serve children from low-income backgrounds and children of color to be high-achieving and improve.

Ever since 1965, when James Coleman published his findings that academic achievement was more highly correlated with the socioeconomic background of students than with what he could measure about school quality (funding, number of books in the library, number of teachers, and so forth), the field of education has been entranced by the idea that demography is destiny. Schools that serve mostly African American children or mostly children from low-income homes are just assumed to be low-performing.

# Core Concepts: Championing Change

But even Coleman said some schools seemed to have more of an effect than others, particularly for African American children. Unfortunately, too much education research has been dedicated to refining our understanding of the correlation between the socioeconomics of students and academic achievement; not nearly enough research has been done on what makes an effective school that breaks that correlation.

That doesn't mean we don't have any such research; we have quite a lot of information about effective schools that ensure all children—particularly children of color and children from low-income homes—achieve at high levels. The problem is that too much of the education world has not acted on that information. The school and district leaders I have profiled have. And that means they are continually looking at information about how well students are learning. They look not just in the aggregate and not just at individual students, but by student groups in order to find and act on patterns.

## **Principal:** What can districts do to sustain academic gains as principals and teachers move up or move on?

**Chenoweth:** This is, of course, a thorny question faced by all districts. One answer is to do what they can to keep teachers and principals in the job by ensuring that their jobs are manageable and satisfying. I have heard many complaints from principals that their already difficult jobs are made impossible by arbitrary or unnecessary requirements from their districts.

[One] way districts needlessly make principals' lives more difficult than they need to be: When fall enrollment doesn't match projections, they cut budgets five or six weeks into the school year. This means that after the school year has, hopefully, settled into a routine, principals need to decide whether to cut a music teacher or a first-grade teacher. The most highly skilled and effective principal in the world has a hard time building a cohesive school community when something like that happens.

Janice Jackson, CEO of Chicago Public Schools from 2017 to 2021, announced she would hold schools harmless for the first year when enrollment didn't match projections. With that single policy, she made lives of students, teachers, and principals better. This policy, by the way, is part of a citywide effort to try to support and retain principals.

Ultimately, of course, school and district improvement can't rely on teachers and principals staying forever. This is why it is important to build a culture where people are part of systems that continually learn to make better decisions based on data and evidence rather than personal predilection.

*Districts That Succeed: Breaking the Correlation Between Race, Poverty, and Achievement* ([bit.ly/3w7rrwl](https://bit.ly/3w7rrwl)) and other titles from Karin Chenoweth are available from the Harvard Education Publishing Group. Access The Education Trust's *ExtraOrdinary Districts* podcast at [bit.ly/3GKtPyd](https://bit.ly/3GKtPyd).

- In underfunded districts with concentrations of students of color and low-income families, ExtraOrdinary schools' leaders know that children can achieve and marshal resources to provide students with as many opportunities as possible.
- Successful schools and districts "expose and share" expertise to create the kind of culture that allows principals to ask about the ideas and strategies other leaders have found effective and build collective knowledge.
- Principals and administrators in successful districts continually look at information to assess how well students are learning in order to find and act upon patterns, and establish cultures of respect that help attract and retain high-quality teachers.

## **Principal:** You've covered the ExtraOrdinary for several years. What stood out as you wrote your latest book?

**Chenoweth:** As I was writing this book, I was struck anew by how unnecessary it should be to have to demonstrate, in 2021, that African American, Hispanic, Native American children, and children from low-income homes not only can, but want to, learn—and that public schools can be organized to help them do so. I long ago read Ronald Edmonds' 1979 *Educational Leadership* article, "Effective Schools for the Urban Poor," but after spending so many years providing the field with examples of effective schools, the power of his final two points struck me anew:

First, how many effective schools do you have to see before you are persuaded of the educability of poor children? If your answer is more than one, then I submit that you have reasons of your own for preferring to believe that basic pupil performance derives from family background instead of school response to family background. Second, whether or not we will ever effectively teach the children of the poor is probably far more a matter of politics than of social science, and that is as it should be. ●