

# It Can Be Done, It's Being Done, and Here's How

All schools could learn something from the qualities shared by schools that have been successful in educating poor and minority students to high levels.

By Karin Chenoweth

For decades, a sense of powerlessness has permeated many schools and many educators. “There’s not much we can do” has been the mantra of many teachers faced with students who arrive behind and seem to slip backward through their school years.

Maureen Downey of the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* recently wrote about this phenomenon: “I am always taken aback when teachers tell me that their students are essentially unteachable, that there’s little they can do to educate children who arrive at school unfed, unprepared, and unmotivated” (July 15, 2009).

Educators’ sense of powerlessness has been bolstered by what seem like endless data demonstrating the correlation of achievement with poverty and race. Poor, black, and Hispanic students achieve at lower levels, on average, than middle-class white and Asian students in study after study, assessment after assessment, giving failure a sense of inevitability.

So what can we make of schools where those patterns are broken — schools where poor students read as well as middle-class students; where black and Hispanic students do math as well as or even better than white students in their states?

Take, for example, George Hall Elementary. Just a few years ago, the school was one of the lowest perform-

ing schools in Mobile, Alabama, and suffered mightily from disciplinary problems. With a student population almost entirely low-income and black, in an area of Mobile notorious for high crime rates and intergenerational poverty, its low performance and chaotic atmosphere weren’t considered all that surprising. What was surprising was the attitude of its new principal, Agnes “Terri” Tomlinson, and her team after the school was reconstituted in 2004. (Reconstitution meant, in this case, that the entire staff reapplied for their jobs.)

“I knew achievement wouldn’t be a problem,” Tomlinson said.

Tomlinson, a veteran educator, was right: Once the school was doing what it should have been doing, students’ academic achievement rose to a level more often associated with white, middle-class students. In fact, most George Hall students score above the national norm on the SAT 10 test.

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George Hall isn't the only school that demonstrates the power that schools have to change the educational trajectory of their students. Graham Road Elementary in Falls Church, Virginia, is another. Once one of the lowest performing schools in Fairfax County, Graham Road is now one of the top schools in the state, outperforming many much wealthier schools. This, even though 80% of the students speak a language other than English at home because they mostly come from low-income families who recently immigrated to this country.

Yet another is P.S./M.S. 124 Osmond A. Church School in Queens, New York, where more than 80% of the students qualify for the federal free lunch program but perform at levels associated with much wealthier students. Still another is Capitol View Elementary in a low-income neighborhood of southwestern Atlanta, where the students — almost all black — post student achievement that rivals the wealthiest schools in Georgia.

**Graham Road Elementary School**  
Falls Church, Virginia

Enrollment: 359  
Grades: Pre-K-6  
Demographics:

- Black ..... 13%
- Asian ..... 16%
- Hispanic ..... 64%
- White ..... 7%
- Free/reduced-price lunch ..... 81%
- English language learners ..... 51%

**WHAT'S DIFFERENT?**

So the question is: What's done differently at George Hall, Graham Road, P.S./M.S.124 Queens, Capitol View, and other schools where low-income children and children of color learn at high levels?

After spending the last few years visiting such schools and writing about what they do, I've come to the conclusion that they succeed where other schools fail because they ruthlessly organize themselves around one thing: helping students learn a great deal.

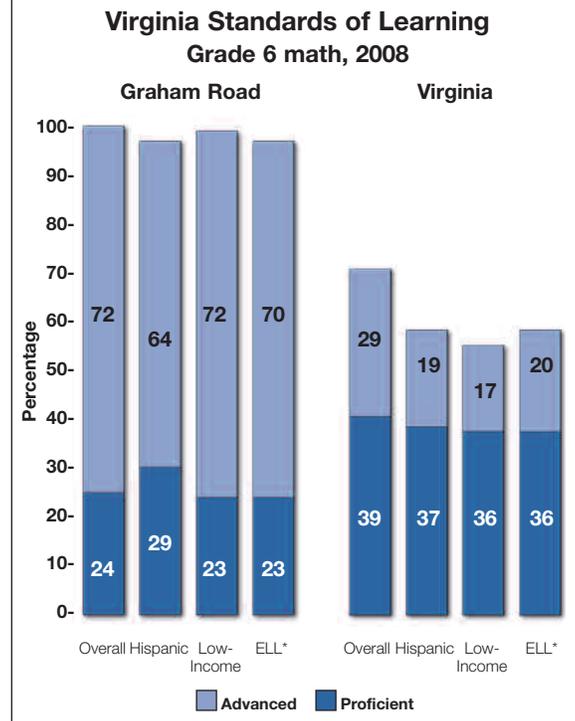
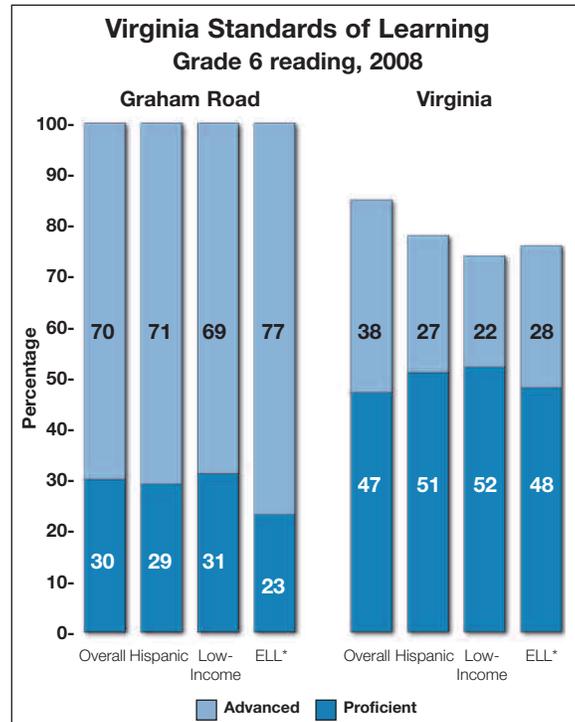
This seems too simple an explanation, really. But, by focusing on student learning and then creating structures that support learning, these schools have drastically departed from the traditional organizational patterns of American schools.

I sometimes think about what Wendy Wachtel, a math teacher at high-achieving Lockhart Junior High School where most students are low-income and Hispanic, told me: "It's not rocket science. You figure out what you need to teach, and then you teach it."

In contrast, consider a recent quotation in the *New*

*York Times* from a teacher who teaches recent immigrants: "American students come to school with a lot of cultural knowledge," she said, "teachers assume they don't have to explain because their kids get it from growing up in this country, watching television or surfing the Internet."

**Teachers who work collaboratively help guard the quality of the teaching force in ways that are impossible when teachers work in isolation.**



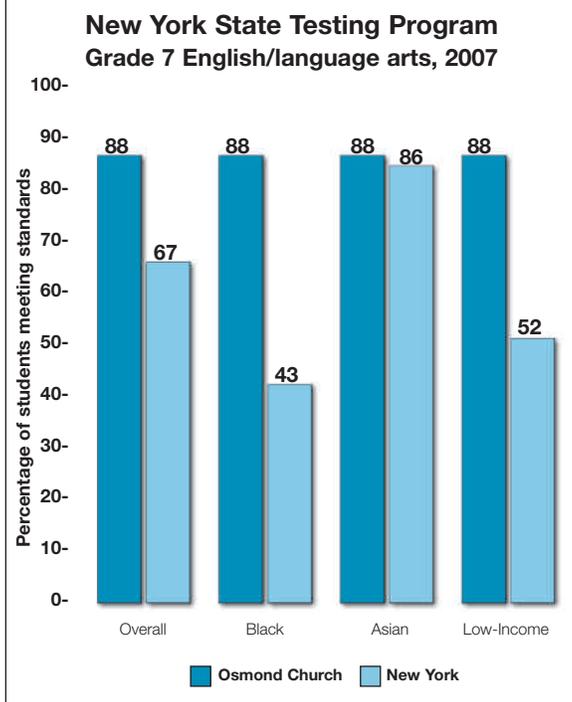
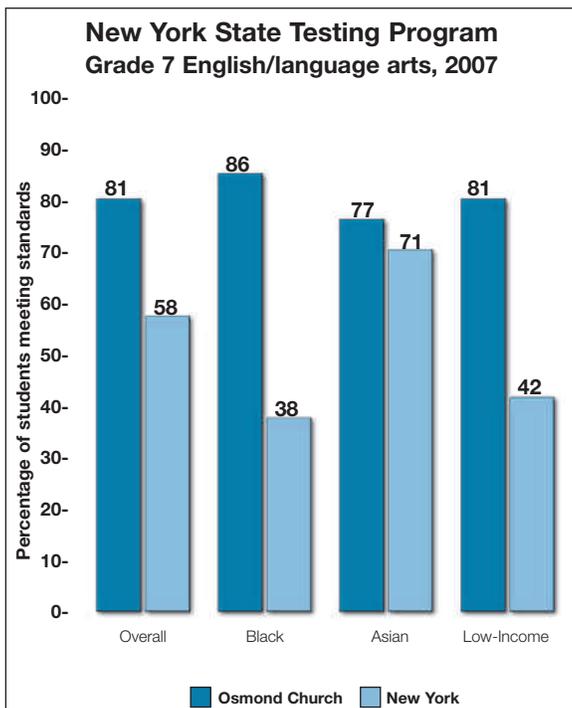
\*English Language Learners  
Source: Virginia Department of Education

**Schools that successfully teach students of poverty and students of color assume that they must teach what they want their students to know.**

Schools that successfully teach students of poverty and students of color do not begin with the assumption that there are things they don't have to explain. They begin by figuring out what children need to know and be able to do; they assess what their students already know and are able to do; they figure out how to move students from where they are to where they need to be; and then they analyze what students

have learned and whether they need further instruction. They do this systematically grade by grade, class by class, student by student, month by month, and day by day, carefully and relentlessly. They know, as Marie Parker, an instructional coach at Graham Road, told me, "If we're not going to do it, who is?"

At Graham Road, for example, teachers go over every test with each student to discuss their wrong answers so that any misunderstandings can be addressed immediately and don't compound. When teachers met to discuss test results, they realized that their students needed to radically improve their vocabularies and their background knowledge. This, of course, is a common need among low-income students around the country.



Source: New York State Department of Education

**P.S./M.S. 124 Osmond A. Church School**

Queens, New York

Enrollment: 1,044 students

Grades: Pre-K-8

Demographics:

- Black . . . . . 40%
- Asian . . . . . 36%
- Hispanic . . . . . 21%
- White . . . . . 3%

Free/reduced-price lunch . . . . . 86%

To help build vocabulary and background knowledge, Graham Road teachers use the thousands of documentary videos that many schools can access. If teachers want children to read a particular book but know they won't understand the book's references to earthquakes and volcanoes, they have students visit the classroom's "background knowledge center" — otherwise known as the computer — to watch short documentaries on earthquakes and volcanoes. They do this because, as Molly Bensinger-Lacy, principal of Graham Road Elementary, said, "We have almost no kids who, if you haven't taught something, will get it."

George Hall uses field trips in the same deliberate, thoughtful way. Classes take field trips about once a month, and teachers think deeply about what vocabulary words and background knowledge students need to understand to get the most out of the trip to the state capital, the local zoo, the theater, or wherever they're going. Then, after the field trip is over, students post on the Internet the photos and videos that they have taken, together with written commentary. Teachers know many of their students have rarely left their neighborhoods and, in order to be educated, need exposure to the wide world. "They live 10 minutes from the bayou," one teacher told

me. “But they’ve never even seen it — or been on a boat. We take them on a boat.”

**PROVIDE TIME FOR TEACHER LEARNING**

My point is not that every school should use videos or field trips or any other particular teaching method (though I do think both are kind of nifty). The point is that every school should engage in the kinds of deep discussion that Graham Road and George Hall faculties have when they meet together to study their state’s standards (and, sometimes, other states’ standards), think about what their students already know and are able to do, and decide what more they need to learn. During these discussions, they look at student achievement data, build curriculum maps, and develop benchmark assessments, grading rubrics, and lesson plans. Even more profoundly, they discuss why one teacher is having success teaching fractions while another is not, and what the more successful teacher can teach the less successful teacher.

Such discussions take time, which means that successful high-poverty and high-minority schools must build their schedules carefully in order to ensure that teachers have the necessary time to meet together.

Many of the successful high-poverty and high-minority elementary schools I’ve visited schedule “specials” in a way that enables grade-level teams to meet together during those times. That means all 1st graders go at the same time to art, music, computer, gym, or whatever other “specials” the school has. At Atlanta’s Capitol View, students have, in addition to the specials every day, “back-to-back specials” once a week, permitting grade-level teachers to meet with the principal and assistant principal for almost two straight hours to discuss curriculum, instruction, achievement data, and all the other things that they need to discuss to ensure that their students learn to high levels. At secondary schools, teachers’ “prep” periods are scheduled so teams or departments can meet together. These scheduling practices are so simple and

**ARTICLE AT A GLANCE**

Many schools have broken through the pattern of low achievement for poor, black, and Hispanic students. Schools that have been successful with high-poverty, high-minority populations share many common qualities.

Those successful schools reduce teacher isolation by providing time for teachers to work and learn together. Collaborative teams of teachers help bolster the quality of teaching in those schools and ensure greater consistency across grade levels. Teachers in those schools assume responsibility for teaching what they want students to know and not assuming that parents will fill in the gaps for them.

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mundane that they hardly seem worth mentioning. But they're one of the many building blocks that help develop the kind of deep teacher collaboration that allows teachers to focus on student learning. This means these successful schools have directly addressed something that too often is overlooked in many discussions of student achievement — the American tradition of teacher isolation.

**Successful high-poverty, high-minority schools have directly addressed something that too often is overlooked in many discussions of student achievement — the American tradition of teacher isolation.**

I should say the topic of teacher isolation is not overlooked in the academic literature of school reform. Richard Elmore, Michael Fullan, Mike Schmoker, and many more have written at length about the role teacher isolation has played in retarding student achievement. Robert Marzano, Rick and Becky DuFour, and many others have long preached the gospel of collaboration as a way to improve student achievement. And yet its importance has yet to permeate the national education discussion.

For the most part, schools are still organized on the principle that teachers close their doors and teach by themselves. But no teacher can be an expert in all aspects of the curriculum, all the possible ways to teach it, and every child who sits in his or her class. Although every teacher should have expertise that can be tapped by other teachers to improve their knowledge of their subject, pedagogy, and students, the traditional organization of schools doesn't allow teachers to pool their knowledge in a systematic, structured way.

#### **TEACHER COLLABORATION**

Because they focus so closely on what students need to learn, successful high-poverty and high-minority schools operate as schools, not as a collection of isolated classrooms. That means, among other things, that they tackle such questions as discipline and teacher quality — problems that plague many low-performing schools — with schoolwide responses.

This is what I mean. I recently spent a day in a dysfunctional urban high school in which the staff had voted to prohibit students from wearing hats, hoods, or earphones. A common enough rule, but only a few administrators enforced it. Teachers who cared about the rule enforced it in their classrooms; teachers who didn't care or felt overwhelmed didn't bother. As a result, the rule was openly flouted, and teachers who valiantly tried to enforce the rule felt undermined and lonely. The school had an unlawful feel; the week before my visit, there had been three fires at the school.

The successful high-poverty and high-minority schools I've visited have very different atmospheres.

If the school has a rule, every grownup in the school (and that includes nonteaching staff) enforces it because everyone has a stake in providing a safe, respectful, and comfortable environment in which students can learn.

Similarly, teachers who are working collaboratively help guard the quality of the teaching force in ways that are impossible when teachers work in isolation. Once teaching is public and collaborative — meaning that teachers work together to figure out what children need to learn and how to teach it — teachers who don't contribute or openly sabotage such efforts begin to stand out.

Von Sheppard — who as principal took Dayton's Bluff Achievement Plus Elementary from what was widely acknowledged in 2001 to be the worst school in St. Paul, Minnesota, to a well-organized, more-or-less average-achieving school in 2005 — calls sabotaging teachers "toxic teachers" because they poison the atmosphere. As Dayton's Bluff developed a collaborative culture, he says, "the [other] teachers in the building began holding these teachers accountable. No one wanted to be associated with a toxic teacher." As a result, the toxic teachers left of their own accord — a fairly common experience in high-achieving high-poverty and high-minority schools.

By acting as a team, all the energy and expertise of the faculty and staff are concentrated, rather than dispersed, and can have a much bigger effect than is possible with the tradition of teacher isolation. That concentrated effect allows students — even students burdened by poverty and discrimination — to learn at much higher levels than has traditionally been expected.

#### **ISOLATION HURTS STUDENTS**

There is an interesting argument that has been waged in the education world that I suspect is well known to readers of the *Kappan*, and it goes along these lines: All the talk of a crisis in American education is overblown. There may be problems in some schools, but the problems are mostly concentrated in urban and rural schools and other schools where most of the children are low-income or minority. Most schools, the argument goes on to say, are just fine and serve students well. Besides, schools can affect student achievement only on the margins because so much depends on the social capital that students bring with them. The fact that high-minority and high-poverty schools have low achievement has more to do with the characteristics that students bring to school than with anything the schools do; thus anyone who cares about education should focus their attention not on school practices but on building the social capital of impoverished families.

I would make a different argument: The traditional organization of schools, which relies on iso-

lated teachers doing their jobs with little interference and less support, means individual students are totally reliant on the knowledge and skills of their individual teachers. They (and their teachers) have little access to the broader expertise of a school's faculty or the accrued wisdom of the education field as a whole. Because middle-class students bring more social capital than students of poverty, this tradition of isolation, on average, hurts them less. That doesn't mean it doesn't hurt them, but their parents are more likely to notice a problem in decoding or in mastery of basic math facts and either demand more help or provide it at home, either themselves or with the help of outside tutoring. Their parents are also more likely to fill in the background knowledge that too often teachers assume their children have.

Poor students, on the other hand, are often terribly harmed by that isolation, in large part because their parents are less likely to notice deficits and less able to compensate for them. For the most part, parents living in poverty leave education to the schools — not because they don't care about their children's education but because they often don't feel competent to challenge the knowledge of teachers and because they're more likely to be overwhelmed with the daily logistics of life. This means low-income children are often completely reliant on their schools for their education.

When schools understand that and step up to the challenge — as George Hall, Graham Road, and many others have done — and set up the structures and systems that allow teachers to work together, even students burdened by poverty and discrimination can achieve remarkable success. That does not relieve us as a nation of the obligation to try to ensure that poverty becomes less common and less desperate. Nor does it relieve us of the obligation to provide low-income families with the social and health services that better allow children to learn. But it does require that we think deeply about how we organize schools.

But that raises something that George Hall's principal said to me. She and I were talking about how her students — most of whom live in isolated poverty — are now achieving at levels that in some ways exceed that of well-off, white students in wealthy parts of Mobile and elsewhere in Alabama. "It makes me wonder what they are doing in those schools," Tomlinson said. With students who have many more advantages than students at George Hall, few schools are outperforming George Hall. "I think they're coasting," she said.

I suspect a lot of schools are coasting on the advantages of their students. If they learned the lessons that high-performing schools that are also high-poverty and high-minority schools can teach us, our nation's academic achievement would soar. **K**

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