

***Principal Leadership in North Carolina “Beating the Odds” Schools
... Advocates for Social Justice and Equity***

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Despite conflicting views of social justice, of the sources of injustice in schools and society, and of educators’ obligations to committed action, the evidence is clear and alarming that various segments of our public school population continue to experience negative and inequitable treatment on a daily basis (Porter, 2014). When compared to their white and Asian middle-class counterparts, students of color, students of low socio-economic status, students who speak languages other than English, and students with disabilities consistently experience significantly lower achievement test scores, teacher expectations, and allocation of resources (Alexander, Entwisle, & Olsen, 2001). Haycock (2001) maintained that these gaps exist because “we take the students who have less to begin with and then systematically give them less in schools” (p.8). The differences show up in the curriculum taught, the resources spent, how teachers are assigned, and achievement expected.

Freire (1990) proposed that the purpose of our educational system is to make bold possibilities happen—as such, that it is the work, in fact the duty of public education to end the oppression of these students. Many agree, suggesting that educators today are actually the frontline civil rights workers in a long-term struggle to increase equity. And, although many schools are failing to fulfill this duty, others are meeting the challenge of serving each and every student really well—students from varied racial, socio-economic, linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Riester, Pursch, & Skrla, 2002). In striving for equity *and* excellence, virtually all students in these schools are learning at high academic levels. There are “no persistent patterns

of differences in academic success or treatment among students grouped by race, ethnicity, culture, neighborhood, income of parents, or home language” (Scheurich & Skrla, 2003:2).

Unfortunately such schools are not the norm. Instead variations in financial expenditures and teacher quality variables often explain statistically significant and important differences in student achievement (Henry, Fortner, & Thompson, 2010). However, even when such key variables are controlled for, it’s actually the differences in the characteristics of student populations across schools that account for the preponderance of the differences in Performance Composites between schools (Porter, 2014). And yet, there are still some schools that are “beating the odds” against low performance. They are producing high rates of learning with challenging student populations—high percentages of students with low entering reading and math skills, high percentages of students from low income families, and high percentages of students from traditionally disadvantaged racial/ethnic groups. What explains the exceptions?

Research indicates that school leadership is second only to teacher quality as an “educational asset” in assuring all students an equal opportunity to get a sound basic education (Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2005). Principals can make significant contributions to student learning outcomes and are crucial to turning around low performing schools (Brown, 2014). Thus, because of its currency in policy discussions, judicial findings, and research, the extent to which principals’ leadership and associated organizational characteristics help explain good but unanticipated learning outcomes produced in some “beating the odds” schools (BTO) was examined. To structure the investigation, a set of eight North Carolina high schools which produced higher levels of student performance than would be expected in light of the challenges their students posed were identified via equity audits.

Demographic, teacher quality, and expenditure analyses all indicated a fair amount of equity between the eight BTO high schools and other low performing high schools across the

state of North Carolina (i.e., schools with more than 75% economically disadvantaged students). A more in-depth audit of achievement between both types of schools indicated great disparities when academic data were disaggregated and analyzed. Even though there were striking similarities in the below average mean Reading and math scores for their incoming ninth grade students, across the board, students at-risk in the BTO schools outperformed their low-performing school counterparts. These findings raised some interesting issues and warranted a deeper examination inside for more subtle causes. By interviewing the principals and teachers in these schools, the purpose of this study was to identify what the principals were doing differently, with what impact on the schools as organizations, and with what resulting impact on student learning outcomes.

Results indicate that the eight North Carolina Beating the Odds (BTO) high schools shared a distinctive common profile that cultivated and combined well-defined elements of both the will and the capacity to succeed with challenging student populations. And, in all of these schools, it was the principal who seemed to drive this development by working actively to promote organizational commitment, to hold both individual teachers and groups of teachers responsible for learning outcomes, and thus to strengthen the school's resilience—its ability to withstand inevitable setbacks and disappointments. Enlisting active cooperation from teachers, BTO principals also effectively recruited, retained, and strengthened their faculties through supervision, professional development, and professional learning communities. Driven by a common commitment to the organization and its goals, and by administrative and professional accountability, teachers and principals created an orderly and disciplined environment for learning and implemented a distinctive set of curricular, instructional, and assessment practices and incentives. They did so with an evident determination to assure high levels of learning for all students and for each and every student!

Having said that, it is crucial to emphasize that the profile of BTO schools and leaders does not constitute a checklist of independent items, but an integrated whole with dynamic relationships among the elements. For example, the bonds of trust and attachment that link teachers with principals in BTO schools make it possible for principals to assert strong accountability pressures on teachers both individually and collectively without alienating them, depressing morale, or increasing undesirable turnover. In turn, the combination of organizational commitment and internalized responsibility seems to make for resilience in the face of adversity. Further, the resulting will to produce high student outcomes drives the implementation of key curricular, instructional, and assessment practices. Because incentives are focused primarily on student learning outcomes, curricular, instructional, and assessment practices are carried out not in a pro forma, compliance-oriented manner, but are employed mindfully and deliberately as tools in order to get results. The spirit is not, “Well I guess we gotta do these things because the state department or the principal said so,” but “We do these things because we are determined that these kids will learn, and doing these things in this way will produce better outcomes.”

Just as the elements of will drive the way elements of capacity are built and employed, elements of capacity also strengthen the will to excel. For example, the professional learning communities that improve teacher quality and teaching also strengthen accountability. Teachers hold each other as well as themselves accountable for teaching the standard course of study and producing high outcomes—so “professional accountability” reinforces the administrative accountability asserted by the principal. Table 1 captures the joint action of the BTO schools’ success.

Table 1. How elements of will and capacity shape learning outcomes in BTO schools

ELEMENTS OF WILL	ELEMENTS OF CAPACITY
<p>Organizational Commitment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Persona & Presence • Principal-Teacher Trust & Bonds • Teacher-Teacher Bonds • Positive School Identity 	<p>Teacher Quality</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Teacher Recruitment •Teacher Retention •Professional Development •Professional Learning Community •Teacher Assignment •Pressure to Improve or Leave
<p>Authoritative Accountability</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Setting & Communicating Goals • Monitoring Student Progress • Monitoring & Evaluating Instruction • Providing Incentives for Performance • Internalizing Individual & Collective Responsibility 	<p>Curricular, Instructional, & Assessment Practices</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Freshman Academies or Other Transition Support •Standard Course of Study, Pacing Guides, & Common Lessons •Rigorous Curriculum Standards with Pressure & Accountability to Learn •Cross-grade Curriculum Articulation •“Stairstep Curricula” and Curricular Re-Sequencing •Smaller Classes for Low-Performing Students •Interim or Benchmark Assessments •Protection of Instructional Time •Tutoring •Inventive Preparation for End of Course Testing
<p>Resilience</p>	<p>Disciplined and Caring Environment for Learning</p>