

Evans Elementary School Case Study

Susan Watson

Contents

Introduction	1
School Context	1
Description of Neighborhood, Building, Demographics.....	1
Summary of Changes in Achievement.....	2
Distributed Leadership.....	3
Principal Leadership	3
Mobilizing Resources to Support Instructional Goals	4
Prioritizing Staff Development and Professional Community.....	6
Forums for Critical Reflection	7
Teachers: Building Professional Community	8
Parent/Community Leadership	10
The Role of the Cluster and District—Providing Leadership and Support for Instructional Change	13
Instructional Improvement.....	14
Instructional Focus	14
Evidence of Instructional Improvement	14

Evans Elementary School

School context: (All statistics from 1998-1999 school year)
Enrollment: 718
Grades: K-4
Student ethnicity: 40% African American, 60% Latino
Low income: 96%
ESOL: 15%
Special Education: 11%
Suspension rate: 3.9%

Performance Responsibility Index (PRI) Data:

Student Attendance: Percent of students attending 90% of days or more 1995-1999, and 85% of days or more in 2000.

	1995-1996	1999-2000
Evans Elementary School	80%	83%
Elementary school average	83%	85%

Staff Attendance: Percent of staff attending 95% of days or more.

	1995-1996	1999-2000
Evans Elementary School	47%	79%
Elementary school average	53%	65%

Persistence Rate: Percent of students who graduated in four years

	1995-1996	1999-2000
Evans Elementary School	83%	99.5%
Elementary school average	87%	93%

SAT-9 Scores: Percent of Students at or above Basic

	1995-1996	1996-1997	1997-1998	1998-1999	1999-2000
Math	20%	35%	44%	42%	44%
Reading	29%	43%	56%	53%	53%
Science	23%	50%	49%	55%	55%

Introduction

Evans Elementary School has been part of the *Children Achieving* evaluation for four years, beginning in the 1996-1997 school year. In 1997, Evans was perceived as one of the lowest performing schools in the Philadelphia School District. However, over the past four years there has been a steady and notable improvement in the school in several key areas: community and parent involvement, leadership and professional community, instruction, and in the availability of resources to support teachers. These improvements are reflected in the significant increase in student achievement—increases that, in most cases, exceed the average gains made by elementary schools in the District. By the 1999-2000 school year, cluster staff who had been working in the school described Evans as a very strong school that has made significant progress.

While the leadership provided by the current principal and her immediate predecessor have been important in the school's improvement, the leadership and commitment of the teachers, as well as the involvement of parents, are also important dimensions of the story of improvement at this school. In the 1996-1997 school year, the school had two acting principals, yet teachers were still actively engaged in instructional improvement and in building professional community in the school. Teachers identify their decision to adopt a whole-school reform model offered by the Coalition of Essential Schools (CES) as an important factor in their ability to change and improve instruction, along with the support provided by the District and the cluster in promoting and supporting instructional reform. The determination and commitment of parents to promote and support instructional improvement has also contributed to the climate of change.

School Context

Description of Neighborhood, Building, Demographics

Evans has approximately 700 students in kindergarten through Grade 4. Within this group, 59 percent are Latino and 40 percent are African American. In addition, 15 percent of Evans students qualify for English as a Second Language classes (ESOL) and 11 percent are special education students. It is designated a bilingual school: Spanish and English.

Because of the high poverty level of students, 96 percent of whom are low income, the school provides breakfast and lunch for all students. In 1999-2000, the principal estimated that 30 to 40 percent of the students were new to the school each year.

There was a large decline in the number of pupil suspensions between the 1993-1994 and 1994-1995 school years. The District web site shows that Evans reported 42 pupils suspended out of school in 1993-1994, and the number dropped to 5 in 1994-1995. This drop in suspensions coincides with the period in which the staff at the school adopted the Coalition of Essential Schools reform model.

During the four-year period from 1996-1999, 23 percent of teachers were new to Evans. This falls well below the 41 percent average for all elementary schools in the District, and indicates that teacher composition is relatively stable at Evans in comparison with other elementary schools citywide.

The school is situated in a low-resource community in Philadelphia, and one in which the Puerto Rican community has grown dramatically over the past 20 years. While the school cannot ignore the drug trade that has made its presence increasingly felt in the neighborhood over the past decade, community and school initiatives have aimed at making the area around the school a safer one. Among other things, the school has formed relationships with area churches and local community friends. The police department has also provided support to the school and has been attempting to address the problems of drug use and selling in the neighborhood. As we will also discuss, parent and community organizations have also been involved in improvements at the school.

The school is housed in an old, three-story building that is in reasonable condition. Although the neighborhood around the school is strewn with litter, the school grounds are kept very clean and the building gives the appearance of being well cared for. The inside of the building is showing its age, but it is clean and bright with a lot of student work on display, books, posters, and attractive and current notice boards for parents and students.

Summary of Changes in Achievement

Analysis of school achievement data for the District shows that schools with the highest proportions of low-income students had lower average achievement scores than schools with fewer low-income students. However, while poverty predicted the initial status of schools in terms of achievement, it did not predict improvement. High-poverty schools showed more improvement in their scores than those with low-poverty levels. The

longitudinal achievement data for Evans, a high-poverty school, demonstrate this trend.

The School District implemented a Performance Responsibility Index (PRI) that measures school progress according to such factors as SAT-9 scores, promotion rates, and student and staff attendance, and provides rewards or added support depending on a school's performance. While Evans, like other elementary schools in the District, increased its PRI score between 1996 and 1999, the school was slightly below the District average in each of these years. The PRI for Evans went from 58 in 1996 to 74 in 1998, but declined slightly to 73 in 1999. This was a net gain of 15 points from 1996 to 1999, higher than the average gain of nine percent posted by other elementary schools in the District, whose scores rose from 66 to 75 between 1996 and 1999. However, while the average for elementary schools in the District continued to rise slightly from 1998 to 1999, the PRI for Evans dropped slightly between these years.

The breakdown of the PRI data shows the average daily student attendance for Evans was slightly below the average for elementary schools in 1996 and 1999. There was a notable increase in the percent of staff attending 95 percent of days or more, increasing from 61 to 76 percent between 1996 and 1999. This increase was about 10 percent greater than the average increase for all elementary schools. The percent of students promoted to fifth grade after four years has remained stable at around 82 percent, below the elementary school average that increased from 86 to 89 percent from 1996 to 1999.

For reading, math and science, the percent of students scoring above Basic in the Stanford-9 Achievement Test (SAT-9) increased at a much greater rate than the average for all elementary schools. The

greatest increase in achievement over the four-year period was in science, where there was an increase of 32 percent in students who scored at or above Basic, up from 23 percent in 1996. By 1999, Evans was scoring above the elementary average in science, with 55 percent of students scoring above Basic compared to 52 percent on average in elementary schools.

The second largest gains posted by Evans were in reading scores, which increased by 24 percent over the period, compared with the elementary average of 14 percent. The gains in reading and science scores at Evans leveled off in 1998-1999.

Evans has also made four-year gains in math of 22 percent, higher than the District average of 15 percent. However, Evans still lags behind the elementary average, with 42 percent of students scoring at or above Basic in 1999, compared to the elementary average of 48 percent.

Overall, Evans has made strong progress in the percentage of students scoring at or above Basic, and in the percent of staff attending 95 percent of days or more from 1996 and 1999. These gains are in line with, but greater than, those for all elementary schools over that period.

Distributed Leadership

The strong achievement gains at Evans have occurred as a result of a number of factors that have been important in creating the motivation and support for change. Using the notion of Spillane, Halverson, and Diamond,¹ regarding “distributed leadership,” we describe the role that various people and groups both

¹ J. Spillane, R. Halverson and J. Diamond, *Distributed leadership: Towards a theory of school leadership practice*. Unpublished paper. Evanston, IL: School of Education and Social Policy, Northwestern University, 1999

inside and outside of the school have taken in contributing to a climate of change and instructional improvement.

Studies that examine leadership in schools typically focus on the role of the principal. In contrast, Spillane, Halverson, and Diamond developed a theory of leadership that examines the way that leadership practice is shared among a number of school-level actors. They use the term “distributed leadership” to capture the way in which “leadership practice is spread out over, or to use Rogoff’s term ‘stretched over,’ the work of two or more leaders”²

This is a useful way to think about leadership practice at Evans. Spillane, Halverson, and Diamond focus on the way that leadership is spread between the principal and teachers within a school. Our research shows that leadership is shared among the principal, teachers, parents, and the cluster staff. Each has a role to play in leading, developing, and reinforcing particular aspects of instruction within the school. In this case study, we examine each of these types of leadership practice at Evans and the way each has contributed to instructional improvement in the school.

Principal Leadership

Between the appointment of the current principal three years ago and the last permanent principal prior to that, there were two temporary principals at Evans in the 1996-1997 school year. The current principal, a White woman, is a highly motivated and focused leader. When parent representatives interviewed her for the principalship, she expressed clear goals for the school. She identified literacy as the primary need and focus for the school, a focus that parents and teachers supported, and which has been maintained over the past three years.

² Ibid, p.27

The principal has continued to play an important role in maintaining a strong instructional focus in the school. There are three key elements of her leadership style and strategy. The principal:

- mobilizes resources to support instructional goals, including demonstrating openness to parent participation.
- actively seeks to build professional community in the school
- participates in professional development and seeks critical feedback on her role as principal.

Mobilizing Resources to Support Instructional Goals

The principal, in consultation and cooperation with parents, has established literacy as the primary instructional focus for the school and mobilized resources to support this goal. She has garnered funds to provide books and other resources to teachers. In our visits to the school, we observed classrooms full of new and interesting books, wall charts, and other teaching resources. Each classroom has at least 1,000 books for children to take home and read. The principal also provides opportunities for teachers to make informed decisions about resources and instructional change. Last year she invited a number of publishers to the school so that teachers could choose a reading program. In the 1998-1999 school year, 64 percent of Evans' teachers who responded to our teacher survey said the school had adequate instructional resources, compared with an average of 50 percent of teachers Districtwide.

Through the use of Title I funds, class size has also been reduced in Grades 3 and 4 from 33 students to 27. As the principal commented, "It may not seem like much, but it helps." The principal has also been able to gain funding to provide a number of additional staff to support the literacy program. These include 10 literacy interns who are assigned to kindergarten and Grade 1 classrooms (along with the regular teacher), six "Reach for Reading" tutors who work with individual students for half an hour each day, a bilingual teacher, a "Reading Recovery" teacher who is a certified teacher, and seven "Experience Core" tutors who are trained at Temple University and work in the classroom on a volunteer basis with Grade 3 and 4 students. In addition, there are four key personnel who support the reading program in the school: the two coordinators of the school's Small Learning Communities (SLCs), the reading specialist, and the program support teacher.

The reading specialist position was created during the 1997-1998 school year. When we interviewed the newly appointed reading specialist, she described her role as that of a resource person to teachers, providing them with reading materials. She works with three targeted groups of students who require additional assistance with reading—in Grades 2, 3, and 4. She also holds monthly workshops for parents in which she explains the curriculum and standards, stresses the importance of reading and writing at home, and tells parents how they can help their children with tests.

The program support teacher is very experienced, having been at Evans for more than 13 years. She ensures that the programs in the school run smoothly and she is also a coach for one of the "Critical Friends Groups" in the school, a voluntary association of teachers working to improve one another's instructional practice. When

interviewed in the 1997-1998 school year, the program support teacher mentioned a number of supports and people the school was using to help children reach the District's new, tougher standards and to attend to students' social needs. These included the reading specialist, the Home and School Association, the nurse, the social worker, the SLCs, and parent volunteers who work with small groups of students.

In addition to providing extra staff to support teaching and learning during the school day, the principal has written a grant to support an extended school day for the entire school next year. At present, all Grade 3 and 4 teachers volunteer (unpaid) to stay on after school to tutor students whose scores in the SAT-9 fall below Basic. Currently, 110 students are staying two days a week for one-and-a-half hours after school. There are approximately 10 students in each classroom and they get individualized work and one-on-one time with their teacher. All of the parents have given consent for their children to take part. Teachers who were staying with their students after school talked about using the time as an opportunity to give students individual attention and said they use Early Balanced Literacy as their key instructional method. Staff members share in supervising the student breakfast and lunch programs and the money saved by not having to employ lunch staff is then distributed to teachers to enable them to buy resources for their classrooms.

The principal also works with parent organizations and encourages their input in setting priorities and in working with school staff to improve learning opportunities in the school. Prior to the current principal's arrival, two community groups—the Alliance Organizing Project (AOP) and the Eastern Philadelphia Organizing Project (EPOP)—established priorities for the

school: to improve safety in the school area and to increase student reading levels.

One example of principal-parent collaboration was the refurbishment of the school library and the hiring of a teacher librarian. In 1998, a parent team directed its attention to the renovation of the school library as a means of supporting the literacy focus in the school. This decision was the result of parent research that indicated that strong school libraries can be a catalyst for school change by supporting a focus on literacy and improved student achievement. The parent team talked with the principal about revitalizing the library. The intention was that parents could use the library to borrow books for their children. In addition, the library would be available for children for pre-K classes to help familiarize them with the school environment and introduce them to the literacy program.

Collaboration around improving the library has provided an opportunity for the parent team and principal to learn to negotiate with one another on behalf of the school. The importance of this initiative is that rather than the principal or staff deciding what to do and seeking parental support, parents took the initiative and sought the principal's support. As a report by Research for Action on the Alliance Organizing Project³ noted, the Evans team is an example of one of the most highly evolved team/principal partnerships in the District.

³ E. Gold and D. Brown, A report to the Alliance Organizing Project on its work with parents. Philadelphia: Research for Action, 1998.

Prioritizing Staff Development and Professional Community

The principal has a leadership style that is focused on achieving instructional improvement through teacher development and leadership. When asked about the elements that are critical to an excellent instructional program, the principal identified two things: professional staff development that involves asking teachers to change their teaching methods, and collaboration. "People need to do this [changing] together," she stated.

The principal provides many opportunities for staff to develop their knowledge and skills and to take active leadership responsibilities in the school. Staff development is also focused around meeting instructional goals, as well as building professional community.

Each year the principal sends teachers to the Coalition for Essential Schools for training to become coaches in the school. In 1998-1999, the principal sent three people, two of them funded by the Annenberg Institute for School Reform, and one funded by Evans itself. She also has an Obey-Porter grant of \$50,000 that helps pay for professional development. (In 1997, Congress passed the Obey-Porter Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration Act, providing grants of at least \$50,000 per year per selected school for whole-school reform initiatives.) Obey-Porter funding will be used to strengthen the professional community and focus on school improvement in 2000-2001 for the entire school community.

The principal builds leadership from within, rather than bringing in leaders from outside the school. In the 1996-1997 school year, there were no Small Learning Communities or "schools-within-schools" in Evans. However, a committee of teachers had

been formed to gather information on SLCs and had visited five schools to see how SLCs were operating. In 1997-1998, when the current principal arrived at the school, she created two SLCs: the lower house (K-2) and the upper house (Grades 3-4). The SLC coordinators are instructional leaders in the school and use all of their time in that role. The principal described them as "mini-principals—they take care of the house."

The SLC coordinators help their SLC to look at standards and to work on meeting them. They help teachers to plan assessments and get the teaching resources they need. Last year the SLC coordinators worked with small groups of students for two periods a day to boost student achievement on the SAT-9. SLC coordinators attended all grade group meetings as "listeners," in order to pick up information and share it with the leadership group. They also worked with children who had not improved with the help of the Comprehensive Support Process (CSP) by looking for other resources within the school that could assist them. Staff input is funneled to the principal formally through the SLC's grade group meetings, as well as informally through one-on-one conversations.

In 1999-2000, the SLCs met formally once a month. At those meetings, facilitated by the SLC coordinator, the CES protocols were used to guide teacher review of student work. The protocol is not specific to the standards, but teachers are encouraged to reconcile the standards and curriculum objectives with these protocols. The use of protocols is becoming part of the culture of the school. For example, the building committee wanted to discuss ways to make recess better and used a protocol to guide the discussion. Through the use of protocols, more people become facilitators in a process, making the process more widely accepted. The principal and senior

teachers said that teachers who didn't like the process, or weren't trusted to participate, have now either left the school voluntarily or been "written up" by the principal.

The principal also emphasizes to potential new staff that they must be willing to participate in a collaborative professional community. She has had some control over the selection of staff. The principal served on the selection committee for 10 literacy interns and asked the prospective interns to meet the teachers with whom they would be working.

The principal has created a number of structured and unstructured opportunities for teachers to work together. She has freed Grade 1 teachers to support Grade 3 teachers in their implementation of Balanced Literacy and scheduled grade level meetings one period each week. Each grade level has a coach who has been trained by the CES and who facilitates the discussion. Coaches have been trained to use protocols to critically reflect both on teaching practice and student work. In grade-level meetings, teachers can review data about the achievement of their students and are encouraged to use the data as the basis for instructional decisions.

Another forum for reflection and collaboration around teaching practice is the Critical Friends Groups (CFG) that the current principal started when she came to the school. Teachers volunteer to be on a CFG—a forum for teachers to critically reflect on their teaching practice with the aim of improving instruction and student achievement. Each CFG has a coach who is also in charge of each grade-level group.

The principal observes and evaluates staff, and tries to visit each classroom every day for five minutes. She undertakes more formal observations using the standard evaluation form required by the District,

but she has also developed her own process of evaluation, in consultation with the cluster. Twice a year she visits every teacher and carries out an observation of a class. The principal writes a narrative of what she observed and poses 3-4 questions to the teacher about specific aspects of the lesson. The teacher responds to the questions in writing and then discusses her answers with the principal. As the principal explained, "We are trying to have conversations about our work." The evaluation process is not intended to be threatening, but rather to help teachers consider what they can do to improve teaching and learning. Her philosophy is that a classroom observation should not be a punishing experience for the teacher, but rather a collaborative exercise between the teacher and the principal.

Data from our 1998-1999 teacher survey confirm the importance of professional community which includes both principal and teacher leadership. We also found a relationship between professional community and progress on the SAT-9 (4th grade reading scores) across the schools in the District.

Effective principal leadership in our evaluation indicates the ability to develop leadership among teachers and to provide them with opportunities to develop and share their expertise in the school.

Forums for Critical Reflection

The Evans principal believes that critical reflection and collaboration are vital to the success of the school and she has built opportunities for these processes into the operation and culture of the school. She is also aware of her own needs for support and learning, and of the need to model the process of critical reflection that she expects of her staff.

The principal actively seeks support and feedback from a range of people. She is a member of a Critical Friends Group with seven principals in the District that was established by the cluster and receives input from Annenberg Institute trainers. This group meets in a high-trust environment that permits principals to talk openly about issues of concern. The principal believes that, partly as a result of her involvement in this group, she has made important changes and improvements in her leadership style. Cluster personnel also described the principal at Evans as being open to feedback.

The principal also meets twice a year with other principals to talk about protocols, raising achievement, and building a collaborative school culture. Prior to a recent leadership conference, 10 teachers at Evans were asked to undertake an anonymous evaluation of the principal and results were presented to her at the conference. The principal described how the evaluation emphasized a need for her to praise teachers more and to be less “controlling.” She described herself as trying to be positive and to emphasize the gains the school has made, while also striving for improvement.

We were also able to compare the survey responses of Evans teachers on a number of items from surveys of Philadelphia teachers conducted in 1996-1997 to 1998-1999. In the 1996-1997 school year there were two temporary principals at Evans and teachers’ responses to questions about the principal reflected this lack of stability. For example, in 1996-1997, only 27 percent of respondents said they felt respected by the principal, while in 1998-1999 when the current principal was at that school, the percentage rose to 79 percent, slightly greater than the average response for this question for the District. There were similar increases among those who said the principal communicates a clear

direction—from 17 to 79 percent; among those who said the principal had confidence in teachers’ expertise—from 20 to 86 percent; and those who felt the principal was committed to shared decision-making—from 13 to 43 percent. However, the percentage of teachers who felt the current principal was committed to shared decision-making in the 1998-1999 school year was noticeably lower than for the other survey items about the principal. It appears that while the current principal has a strong vision for the school and encourages teachers to develop expertise and leadership, a number of staff want more input into decision-making and felt the principal was “controlling.”

In an interview in the 1997-1998 school year, one senior teacher commented that the school’s former principal strongly emphasized consensual decision-making as part of the CES approach. With the current principal, although the staff still provides a high level of input, their input does not seem to lead to action, according to this senior teacher. At the time of this discussion, the teacher estimated that within the past few years, the influence of staff had declined from 75 to 35 percent. These results indicate that while the principal is committed to strengthening teacher leadership within the school and has devolved some decision-making authority, at the same time, she has centralized some aspects of decision-making in order to maintain control over key aspects of the school focus and instructional improvement strategy.

Teachers: Building Professional Community

Building professional community is an important focus in the school, and one that has been sustained for at least five years, predating the current principal’s

appointment. It is important to acknowledge that, while the current principal works to strengthen internal capacity for instructional improvement by encouraging teacher leadership and by building professional community, she did not initiate such efforts in the school.

According to a senior teacher at the school, five years ago the staff and former principal decided they wanted to focus on improving their school and the achievement of their students. At that time, the cluster took 72 faculty and administrators from schools in the cluster on a week-long Coalition of Essential Schools retreat. The principal and several of the more experienced teachers from Evans attended. On their return they led a whole school meeting from Friday night to Saturday morning.

Teachers have continued to make significant changes to their teaching since they became a CES school. Teachers started to meet in grade groups, or CFGs to plan instruction and curriculum.

They made changes to instruction, including the implementation of the Early Balanced Literacy program and the move to small group, activity-based instruction. A senior teacher said colleagues from her CFG observe her teaching and give her ideas. They also have lunch and preparation time together. As one senior teacher commented, "Working collaboratively is the bottom line here." The importance of the CES model is that it has provided them with support, training, and a process for undertaking change.

In 1999-2000, we observed a grade group meeting with all the kindergarten teachers, the literacy interns who work with them, and the principal. The meeting was facilitated by the CFG coach, who had chosen a "collaborative assessment" protocol from CES to structure the

meeting. Along with her intern, she had selected samples of work by a student with whom they had been using specific interventions to try to improve her classroom participation and achievement. The meeting provided an opportunity for critical reflection on the student's work and also on the teacher's practice. A number of additional interventions and strategies were suggested. The coach followed the protocol closely to ensure broad participation and kept the entire meeting focused on instruction.

The staff sustained the CES reform structure and a commitment to instructional change over time, despite the arrival of two different acting principals in the 1996-1997 school year. Teachers continued meeting in grade groups. The acting principal at the time reported that teachers were working on collecting work samples and portfolios as an alternative assessment strategy. He noted, "not all the teachers are entirely happy with it, but they do see the benefit and are willing to keep trying." Using the CES process, teachers began to address different needs they had identified, and in the 1996-1997 school year there was a team to plan staff professional development.

The CES reform model is based on a set of 10 "common principles," rather than a particular instructional focus.⁴ The CES model requires that all of the school's staff be involved in deciding the school's goals, schedules, and management, and emphasizes smaller learning communities (schools-within-schools). The CES model fit well with Evans' commitment to building collaboration and professional community and also with the SLC structure of the *Children Achieving* initiative. The model also advocates the use of block scheduling

⁴ Herman, R., Aladjam, D., McMahan, P., Masem, E., Mulligan, I., Smith, O., O'Malley, A., Quinones, S., Reeve, A., and Woodruff, D. (1999). *An educator's Guide to schoolwide reform*. Educational Research Service: Arlington, VA

to permit classes to meet for longer periods and focus more in depth, and encourages family and community involvement.

In addition to introducing the CES reform model to schools, the staff followed up with monthly meetings with a trained facilitator. "Essential friends" visits were also held in which the principal and three staff of one school visited another school and followed a structured process based around an "essential question." When we interviewed the cluster leader in 1996, she said that at that time the cluster was being criticized for "giving" principals the vision for CES, instead of helping them to develop their own. She commented:

But I do not feel it is prescriptive. The 10 principles [of the CES model] are just a starting point for thinking about what is good for your school, and then you can make your own design.

Children Achieving is the goal. CES is a means to that goal. It builds teams and focuses on teaching and learning—it can help you improve teaching and learning.

In adopting the CES model, Evans began a process of breaking down the isolation and provincialism that exists among so many teachers in so many schools. There appears to be a good level of respect, mutual trust, and collegiality in the school. Most interviewees reported that a high percentage of staff were in agreement about the school's priorities and, with one or two exceptions, rated the level of staff competence as high. Staff were hopeful and believed they were effective in improving the achievement of students. At Evans we saw a high quality of work and enthusiasm by students.

As a senior teacher commented:

I would say 100 percent of teachers are attuned to the [instructional priorities] of the school. We are a Coalition school. We have made these decisions as a staff, maybe not 100 percent of staff, but an extremely high percent. When there are differences, we talk them out. We have the critical friends here, so we talk things out. It teaches us to agree and disagree at the same time.

While professional community is clearly a strength at Evans, teacher turnover has made maintaining professional community difficult. High turnover rates make it hard to train new staff in instructional strategies and in the reform focus of the school. For example, in the 1999-2000 school year, there were 18 new teachers in the school, including 10 literacy interns, one librarian, and one counselor. Some new hires were able to go to the Balanced Literacy training provided by the District in the preceding summer, but some were not hired until September 1. Those hired later had a one-day training and new teachers were assigned a mentor one day a week. As we noted in the first section of this case study, the teacher turnover at Evans is relatively low in comparison with the District as a whole. Teacher turnover also increases the importance of building a strong, experienced professional community that can provide support and training to new teachers.

Parent/Community Leadership

An important element in the improvement at Evans is the role played by parents and the community. There are several parent and community groups in the school: the Alliance Organizing Project (AOP), the Home and School Association, and the school's elected Local School Council. In

addition, the designated AOP organizer at Evans is paid by the Eastern Philadelphia Organizing Project (EPOP), a local community organizing effort based in a local church. There are strong connections between these parent and community groups and they are often referred to interchangeably in interviews.

In 1998-1999, Research for Action studied the role of the Alliance Organizing Project in three schools, one of which was Evans. The study involved interviews with parents, the principal and others who were involved, including community leaders and cluster personnel. The AOP is a community organizing process aimed at energizing parent-community-educator partnerships. According to the study:

The purpose of forming parent-community-educator partnerships is to bring school stakeholders into a complimentary relationship in which all parties accept responsibility to each other for children's school success. (RFA, August 3, 1999, p. 2).

The AOP parent team was established in Evans prior to the appointment of the current principal and had defined two priorities—to improve safety in the school area, and to improve students' reading levels. A member of the AOP was part of the team that interviewed the current principal and was able to articulate these priorities. The new principal agreed with these priorities and has established a strong working relationship with the AOP. In 1998-1999, the principal attended community meetings organized by the EPOP to bring increased attention to the lack of safety in the area surrounding the schools.

In 1999, the RFA report described the AOP-principal partnership at Evans as:

...one of the most highly evolved team-principal partnerships, albeit one in which differing priorities sometimes need to be worked through. The team, however, is fully embedded within the school through its co-membership with the Home and School Association leadership and Local School Council. From these vantage points, as well as through the continuing organizing of the parent team around the library and safety in the community, the team contributes to school reform, maintaining and augmenting the foci on literacy and building a school-community initiative to bring attention to the need for greater safety measures in the neighborhood.

The AOP supports the literacy focus in the school and has been largely responsible for the revitalization of the school library. The principal, the EPOP and the Home and School wrote the grant proposal for the renovation of the library. When the application was successful and they received \$5,000 for library improvement, the principal matched the grant with school funds and they looked for a librarian together. The library improvement initiative was the result of parent research and the adoption of the "Library Power" model that sees the school library as a catalyst for literacy-based school improvement. The parent team interviewed librarian candidates, raised funds for new books, sorted the existing books, and ran the library prior to the appointment of the teacher librarian.

The AOP team also introduced the *Rocket Reader* program to the school. The principal fully supports this program and has organized rewards for students who meet the reading targets. In an interview in 1998, the principal commented: "I've always had a good relationship with my parents...because I think parents and administration and teachers need to work together. And basically I think the parents in our school...want the same things that I want for this community." She described how she was trying to get more parents involved in the Home and School Association but that recent welfare changes have meant that many parents in the neighborhood were going back to work.

The principal described her commitment to ensuring that parents know and understand what is going on in the school: "I want them to know what we're doing at school and why we're doing it." She makes achievement data available to parents and invites parents to speak at meetings of the Local School Council. In the 1998-1999 school year, the principal described the need to build trust between the teachers and the Home and School Association. "It takes time to build trust. You don't build it overnight."

The school sponsors activities for parents, such as a family reading night with a visiting author, to encourage families to read with their children. In 1999, the principal said that 60-70 parents attended. She commented, "They're beginning to see that everything I do is tied into reading, and they're seeing the results in their own kids." The principal recognizes and affirms the importance of having the strong involvement of parents in the life of the school. She tries to make parents feel welcome and utilizes their ideas and input in the operation of the school. There is a visible day-to-day presence of parents in the school. The notice board for parents is up-to-date and well organized. The school

sends home with students a monthly newsletter that shows samples of student work and a running tally of the number of books read. It celebrates students' success, and encourages parents to read with their children. The overall tone of the newsletter is positive and welcoming.

EPOP and AOP also recruit parents and involve them in classrooms with the goal of having a parent representative in each classroom. The Home and School Association holds breakfast meetings for teachers to meet their parent representatives. However, while some classrooms have four or five parents involved, others have none. One veteran teacher interviewed this year said she has tried a number of strategies to get parents involved, but that nothing has worked well.

Teachers also try to make their expectations for parents clear—such as reading with their children each night—and the cluster and school have provided workshops for parents to learn about the reading program. The parent notice board and monthly newsletter constantly encourage and reinforce the importance of reading and acknowledge student achievements. For example, one page lists the number of books that students in the school have read at each grade level. The Basic Literacy program requires that students take books home each night and parents must sign a form stating that they heard the child read. Most do this. Teachers send a letter home at the start of the year describing their homework expectations, and believe that parents understand what teachers expect of them.

The Role of the Cluster and District—Providing Leadership and Support for Instructional Change

When we first visited Evans in the 1996-1997 school year, we looked at teacher attitudes toward the newly—created “cluster” office, one of 22 created across the city in a new organizational structure. Initially, several teachers felt “short-changed” by the cluster office.

Several cluster staff had been unavailable for various reasons and teachers felt there was significant disharmony within the cluster office itself, resulting in a lack of consistency and support being provided to the school.

For the past two years, however, the principal and teachers described the cluster as being more supportive. Last year, the cluster provided training on the Balanced Literacy program and sent a professional development facilitator on a weekly basis to work with teachers who needed help in the classroom.

The cluster TLN (Teaching Learning Network) representative provided site-based coaching and staff development. A cluster person who was an authority on Basic Literacy was described by a Grade 2 teacher at Evans as a “very inspiring” model of best practices. This teacher found the cluster staff less supportive in 1999-2000, but she reasoned that this was because their focus was on the bilingual students and on introducing Basic Literacy to Grade 3. The cluster has defined a writing curriculum to support Basic Literacy that has been incorporated into professional development for all K-2 teachers. They have also developed new report cards that align with Basic Literacy and the curriculum standards, and that

chart student progress over the course of the year.

In the 1999-2000 school year, the cluster was primarily focused on supporting the Basic Literacy program at Evans. The TLN coordinator at the cluster visited the school once a week, at the principal’s request, to work on particular things with particular teachers. These could be points the teacher has asked for help with, or simply things the principal has identified in the course of her evaluations. The TLN coordinator worked only with those who asked for help, as she does not believe in forcing change on teachers. Cluster staff said that the principal and the veteran teachers at the school are very supportive of change and welcome feedback. The principal praised the cluster leader and said she has been willing to work in a collaborative way with her, and the other principals in the cluster. The cluster has also made funding available for an extended school day two days a week and on Saturday, as well as over the summer, and is helping schools to decide how best to use this time. The cluster office has also brought a social worker to the school.

The District paid teachers to attend professional development seminars on Balanced Literacy (BL). Teachers who are assigned a literacy intern attended a nine-day training institute on BL. The school has also received an Annenberg Grant to support BL and the funding has been used to provide 10 literacy interns, one in each Kindergarten and Grade 1 classroom.

Many teachers have been through the Urban Systemic Institute (USI) training in math and science and the school has a math and science teacher who is a leader in these subject areas. One of the veteran teachers said the *Children Achieving* initiative has been important in supporting change and in providing resources. She appreciates that the standards are

accessible on line, providing an outline and guidelines on what teachers need to cover. However, she feels that *Children Achieving* on its own is not enough, and that teachers need specific school-based reforms, like CES, to make *Children Achieving* work.

Instructional Improvement

Instructional Focus

The current instructional focus for Evans is very clear—literacy. However, in the 1996-1997 school year, there were two instructional priorities identified—Reading English Language Arts (RELA), using a whole language method, and math, using the Jumping Levels program.

By 1997-1998, literacy had become the primary focus for the cluster, parent organizations, the principal, and teachers. Although math seemed to have declined in importance, an interview with the cluster leader in 1998-1999 indicated that “hands-on” math was still a strong emphasis in the school. In 1999-2000, the school was beginning to implement the *Everyday Math* program at Grade 3 level, with the aim of slowly introducing it to the rest of the school. The teacher who is largely responsible for leading the introduction of this initiative had attended two summer workshops.

Based on the SAT-9 and other achievement data, the principal sets very specific goals about how many students in each grade should be reading on grade level. This information is shared with teachers and parents. The principal and the staff believe that it is vital to ensure that every child is reading at his/her level and they use Balanced Literacy to guide their instruction, the *Rigby Literacy Tree* to provide reading

resources, and the *Rocket Reader* program to encourage students to read.

The *Rocket Reader* program, initially introduced by parents, rewards students for the number of books they read. Displays in classrooms, on the school notice board, and in the monthly newsletter record the number of books read and there is a system of rewards for students that is supported by the principal. Parents are also expected to read with their children at home. Teachers chose the *Rigby Literacy Tree* after reviewing a range of literacy resources over a two-month period. Initially, teachers felt they needed a structured guide of this sort to help them in choosing literacy resources, but they now buy resources from about 20 different vendors. The *Rigby* resources were on display in classrooms and being used by teachers and students.

An important aspect of the implementation of Balanced Literacy is that it is progressive. Rather than attempting to introduce the program across all grades at the same time, the school and the cluster have implemented the program in the lower grades first, and are moving up a grade level each year. The advantages of this approach are that resources are not spread too thinly and staff can build on and utilize their expertise to assist one another in implementation.

Evidence of Instructional Improvement

The strong emphasis on instructional improvement in the school has resulted in noticeable changes to teaching practice—particularly in reading and language arts. Teachers were previously using mostly whole class instruction. For example, in a third grade reading lesson in the 1996-1997 school year, the teacher used whole

class instruction, first grouping all students at the front of the room, and then moving them to small groups to complete a task. Teachers are moving away from this teaching style and other styles that do not provide activities aimed at the individual needs of the students. In contrast, more recently we observed teachers using the Balanced Literacy model of instruction.

Several examples of improved teaching methods were observed in the 1997-1998 school visit. The students were well-organized into small groups, were task-oriented, and highly engaged with their learning activities. The teacher's style of working with the children was that of a teaching facilitator or coach. The teacher had displayed examples of student work and the room was well supplied with text books, manipulatives, cassette players with earphones, and reading books.

By the 1999-2000 school year, the school devoted an uninterrupted, two-hour block of reading and language arts time every morning in each class. We saw a range of strategies being used, including a blend of whole group instruction and small group work in which students worked on a range of literacy tasks including conferencing with the teacher, silent reading, shared reading and journal writing. In classrooms where teachers had been using the Basic Literacy approach for at least a year, assessment was driving instruction, and students were working more in groups of two or three. In 1999-2000, the principal noted, "In K-2 classes, you may not be able to find the teacher when you go into the room, as students are working in small groups on a range of activities."

In 1999-2000, teachers in Grades 1 and 2 were using Balanced Literacy to guide their instruction. In one classroom where a senior teacher was skilled at using this literacy program, the classroom was organized into learning centers, consistent with the Balanced Literacy approach. There

were different areas for different activities: a shared reading area under the blackboard at the front of the room, carpeted areas for small group or individual reading, three groups of seven desks, and two large tables with books on top. The classroom was very colorful and well organized and there were many phonics-based word lists, reading charts and student stories displayed on the walls. There was a large selection of colorful books for students in baskets, sorted by reading level. The overall impression was of a highly interesting environment in which instruction was focused, challenging, and enjoyable for the students. The teacher said the lesson was "standards-driven" in the sense that Balanced Literacy is closely aligned with the standards.

This teacher said she has made notable changes to her teaching as a result of the Balanced Literacy initiative and as a result of the school's involvement in the Coalition of Essential Schools. She believed that Balanced Literacy has had a big impact on student achievement commenting, "Children now love to read."

There has also been an improvement in the integration of standards into teacher practice. In 1996-1997, many of the teachers said they were not comfortable with the District's new, more stringent, academic standards. While most of the teachers had attended workshops on them, they reported that they still felt unprepared to direct a standards-driven classroom. One teacher said, "I've been to a couple of workshops on standards, but couldn't tell you what they're about." Another commented, "Standards are good, but there are not enough materials and money for staff development. You can't use old things to teach new techniques."

The following year, when we visited the school, the new principal described the compatibility between the standards and the school's priorities. The teachers were in

the process of ensuring that the standards were integrated into their themes and lesson plans.

Evidence of instructional improvement seemed to explain the notable gains in achievement scores that are described in the introduction to this case study. However, it is important to note that Balanced Literacy has only been implemented from grades K-3 over the time covered by the reading score gains. This suggests that while the literacy program may be an important contributor to the achievement gains in the early grades, other factors have also been important in promoting achievement.

On the basis of our four-year case study of Evans school, the following factors have been important in creating an improved learning environment. First, the leadership and involvement of parents who are not only contributing to key literacy programs in the school, but on an individual basis, are reading with their children at night. Second, the strength of the professional community that has created a climate of raised expectations, increased the belief that teachers can help children to achieve at higher levels and provided a culture for instructional reflection and improvement. Third, both the previous permanent principal and the current principal have supported and encouraged parent and faculty initiatives and have been effective in mobilizing resources necessary for instructional improvement. Finally, the overall climate of reform created by the *Children Achieving* initiative and cluster support have also been an important factor in the story of this school.