

2010 Bell Award Winners on Leadership

Naomi Drouillard—Rosa Parks Elementary School, Richmond Hill, Queens, NY:

We were a new school, brand new. I had to buy the books and the tables, and the pencils. We had to do everything. We were the explorers. Teachers were fresh out of college.

Real quickly, and over the summer before we opened we all got together and we professionally developed ourselves. That was our biggest obstacle but I also think that's what made us successful, is because we started off with a clean slate. We didn't know what contractually we were supposed to do and not do. We just knew that we had to open up a school in which the children had to learn and we were there to do it.

James Verilli—North Star Academy Charter School, K – 12, Newark, NJ:

I think what prepared me first and foremost was teaching, I believe that principals need to be strong instructional leaders and help teachers to become the best of teachers.

The other was that I was thrust into leadership early so it was a little baptism by fire but I learned a lot by doing.

The other thing that helped me develop was after we started North Star we created a network of charter schools called Uncommon Schools. And across that network we have a bunch of talented principals and we have professional development for principals and we inspect each other's schools every year and the inspection process is very thorough and through that inspection process you determine what your big rocks are to improving and get better at.

So the other thing that helped us was improving instruction. We found in the beginning that we got some real hot shot teachers and we could start with that, but that wasn't sustainable over a long period of time. We realized that if we were going to be a great school, we would have to create hot shot teachers. So we brought people in with the right motivation, drive and knowledge and then we had to treat them like Olympic athletes and coach them down to 1/100th of a second in terms of their ability to do their craft.

Darlene Brister—Ryan Elementary Elementary School, Baton Rouge, LA:

I didn't do this for accolades. I did this because I wanted to be the voice of the voiceless. In my preparation I guess, for working with more at-risk kids, I had to retool myself and learn some things all over again, like how to deal with kids in high-poverty areas, what makes a good leader? Moving with a sense of urgency, holding everyone accountable. Being a teacher of teachers and coaching, myself, I felt like—just, retool the craft!

There are all kinds of obstacles that we had to overcome. One is, the better you perform the less funding you receive. So we had to, in order to sustain our gains, we had to do some things that were creative. One thing that we had to do was to take and make more teacher leaders within

our building, because we don't have the number of coaches that some schools have. We just had to roll up our sleeves and go to work.

We have kids that we kind of coach into being leaders. We had to do some creative things in our school. There were days when we would stand at the buses and make our kids, after school—say, “go back, you're not going home. You have tutoring.”

Tom Evans—Eastern Technical High School, Essex, MD:

I inherited a good school. But my work was to see how we could get better. Some people would say we are a great school but I try to keep “great” as some unattained goal out there. This is my 43rd year in education and I've been a principal for about 30. I've had some unique opportunities in my career.

Back in the 70's and 80's we were doing a lot of work with assessment processes and teaching the skills that administrators needed to be successful and then working with school districts to assess their people in terms of their readiness for the principalship. So I was on the front of that—training districts, what to look for, how to assess, the kind of feedback that you give to candidates.

And when you do that work, you gain a lot of skills yourself.

Laverne Nimmons—Granville T. Wood Elementary – P.S. 335, Brooklyn, NY:

I started out in another very impoverished district in Harlem. And the school that I was in was under state review, which means that they were very low achieving. And we were given three years to move our children out of that state review status and to show performance. So I learned a great deal on practice and strategies and instruction and working with children and supporting the needs of children and also partnering with colleges that would send their experts in to support our teachers as well. So I think from that experience, I learned the importance of professional development for teachers because so often, teachers are thrown into a classroom and given a bunch of books, a stack of books and say here, take this and go forward, you know. That was never successful, but with staff developers, with coaches, with support systems like that to go in and help teachers *learn* how to differentiate instruction, you know, because they really don't know how to do that. It's not like they can just walk into the classroom and say, “OK, now you work over there independently and you work over there in that small group.” It doesn't happen that way.

It takes a great deal of support, a great deal of professional development, a great deal of course work and just observing and a great deal of practice in order for those, kinds of skills and strategies to come into place for teachers.