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Recognizing the Potential for School Decline

A SCHOOL ON THE BRINK*

Eli Buck reflected back on what might have been. Waverly Elementary School entered the 21st century as one of Westville’s premier elementary schools, but just how long its reputation could be maintained was open to considerable local conjecture. Since the late 1990s, the Hispanic population of Westville had steadily climbed. The region once welcomed the children of middle-class immigrants, but times had changed. Increasingly, those who came from beyond U.S. borders were poor and not well educated. Many were illiterate in their native language.

Some longtime residents of Westville worried that the influx of immigrants would tax the school system and other public services, eventually leading to an exodus of longtime residents and a loss of property value. At one point in 2005, Westville gained national notoriety when the city council passed an ordinance to prevent “overcrowding” of local residences. The measure clearly was intended to curtail Hispanic residents from housing

*The author is indebted to Dr. Jeff Carroll and Michael J. Salmonowicz for much of the information on which the Waverly Elementary School case was based. Waverly Elementary is a pseudonym, as is the name of the principal, Eli Buck.

extended family members and unrelated “guests.” Faced with threats of lawsuits from the American Civil Liberties Union and other organizations, the city council eventually backed off strict enforcement of the ordinance, but the message had been communicated. The welcome mat was not out for poor immigrants in Westville.

It did not take Eli Buck long to realize the high level of concern in the community. Soon after he became principal in June of 2004, he adjusted the marquee in front of Waverly Elementary so that messages were posted in English and Spanish. The complaints from concerned citizens were so vociferous that he felt compelled to return to English-only messages.

Several members of Buck’s faculty also registered their concerns about Waverly’s “changing demographics.” Several veteran teachers made it clear that they had no intention of modifying their instructional practices to accommodate immigrant students. Most of Waverly’s 50 teachers, however, seemed willing to do what they could to adjust to the new students, but they acknowledged their lack of adequate training. The Waverly faculty had received no site-based professional development for the previous five years. Many of the teachers had taught at Waverly for 10 or more years, well before the dramatic increase in non-English-speaking students. Teachers expressed frustration at the difficulty of communicating with parents who spoke little or no English.

Table 1.1 indicates the extent to which Waverly had become a school with a diverse student population. Not surprisingly, the percentage of students on free and reduced-price lunch had increased along with the percentage of Hispanic students. By 2004, over one-third of the students came from low-income families. When Buck took over as principal, the upper grades still were predominantly non-Hispanic, but the lower grades already consisted primarily of Hispanic students.

Table 1.1 Student Demographics, 1999–2004

	Asian	African American	Hispanic	White	Total Enrollment	Free and Reduced-Price Lunch	ESOL
Fall 1999	47	88	81	502	718 ^a	100	NA
Fall 2000	44	93	105	401	643	124	84
Fall 2001	39	92	133	379	645 ^b	122	144
Fall 2002	31	79	176	337	623	131	172
Fall 2003	29	93	212	297	632 ^b	237	223
Fall 2004	30	81	290	287	688	230	316

NOTE: ESOL = English for speakers of other languages.

a. Includes sixth grade. School became K–5 beginning in Fall 2000.

b. Native Americans are included in Total Enrollment

Buck could see the challenge before him when he examined the passing rates on state tests in reading/language arts, mathematics, social science/history, and science. Tables 1.2 and 1.3 contain the test data for third and fifth grades. A gap in passing rates between white and Hispanic

Table 1.2 Percentage of Students Passing State Tests in Adequate Yearly Progress Categories, 2003–2004; Third Grade

	Reading/ Language Arts	Mathematics	Social Science/ History	Science
1. All students	69	85	92	91
2a. Hispanic	65	82	90	90
2b. White	74	92	92	94
2c. Asian	NA	100	NA	NA
2d. African American	68	74	100	86
3. Economically disadvantaged	55	76	76	100
4. Disabled	26	64	65	74
5. Limited-English proficiency	59	78	68	68

Table 1.3 Percentage of Students Passing State Tests in Adequate Yearly Progress Categories, 2003–2004; Fifth Grade

	Reading/ Language Arts	Mathematics	Social Science/ History	Science
1. All students	91	94	98	94
2a. Hispanic	78	85	84	78
2b. White	99	100	100	99
2c. Asian	100	100	100	100
2d. African American	84	76	100	92
3. Economically disadvantaged	81	89	90	79
4. Disabled	90	92	100	100
5. Limited-English proficiency	80	87	84	78

third graders was evident, but what really troubled Buck was the fact that the gap widened for fifth graders. In other words, the longer Hispanic (and African American) students remained at Waverly, the less well they achieved relative to white students. Buck wondered what was happening at his school to contribute to the widening achievement gap.

In addition to needing to address the daunting challenge of narrowing the achievement gap between white and minority students, Buck faced a bevy of practical problems. His school, for example, lacked sufficient instructional space to house the growing number of Title I and English as a second language (ESL) teachers. Another concern involved the practice of retaining at grade level low-achieving students. Some of Waverly's teachers strongly favored retention, but Buck understood that the effectiveness of this practice was questionable. This difference of opinion reflected a third issue. Buck believed that teachers should play an active role in school-based decision making. Knowing, however, that many members of his faculty held positions in opposition to his own beliefs, he wondered if he could afford to invite teacher participation in decision making. For their part, many teachers seemed reluctant to assume a leadership role in their grade level or at the school. Buck's predecessor had done little to nurture shared decision making.

Of all the tough issues facing Buck, however, perhaps the toughest involved the parents of his white students. Many of these parents were clearly alarmed that their children were no longer in the majority in lower-grade classrooms. They bluntly asked Buck why they shouldn't withdraw their children and move to a less diverse school.

DETECTING VULNERABILITIES

Every principal, like every physician, must be a good diagnostician in order to be effective. Good diagnosticians look at a range of conditions, not just the immediate problems that are presented to them. The challenges facing principals in the 21st century are likely to have organizational, social, political, legal, interpersonal, economic, and cultural, as well as educational, dimensions. The likelihood of addressing a challenge successfully is reduced when particular dimensions are overlooked.

The central challenge that confronted Eli Buck involved the fear that his school was poised on the brink of decline. *Decline*, in this case, refers to lower academic performance as indicated by falling passing rates on state standardized tests. Students of school decline understand that the process can be triggered by a variety of factors. In Eli Buck's case, the potential precipitant was an influx of Hispanic students with serious educational needs. Other "triggers" to school decline include inadequate funding, weak leadership, and changes in school culture. These challenges will be addressed later in the chapter.

The consequences of failure to address the prospect of lower academic achievement can be very serious. Some have characterized the result of such failure as a downward spiral in which the rate of decline steadily accelerates (Duke, 2008a). Falling test scores, for instance, can lead to parental concerns, which in turn can cause some parents to withdraw their children and send them to other schools. The consequence is a loss of resources that can lead to a reduction in staff. If the students who are withdrawn tend to be higher achieving students, then the concentration of lower achieving students grows, thereby increasing the workload for the remaining teachers and the likelihood of a continuing drop in academic achievement. Such circumstances are likely to cause plummeting teacher morale and a voluntary exodus of additional staff. Recruiting new teachers to fill openings is certain to be difficult, adding to the prospect of sustained school decline.

Whether Eli Buck foresaw all of these possibilities or not is unclear, but he clearly grasped the fact that the challenge facing him was multidimensional. Among the factors he realized could contribute to Waverly's decline if they went unaddressed were the following:

- Lack of instruction geared to the needs of newcomer students
- Overreliance on retention as an intervention
- Reluctance of teachers to assume leadership roles
- Concerns among white parents
- Difficulties concerning home-school communications with Hispanic families

Buck did not blame teachers for lacking the skills to teach students with limited ability in English. Waverly, after all, had lacked any kind of professional development aligned to the needs of its new students. What really concerned Buck, however, was the unwillingness of some teachers to embrace the need for changes in their instructional practice. In certain cases, veteran teachers who had experienced great success in the past remained convinced that their approach to teaching was appropriate for all students. They expected new students to make the adjustment to their instruction, not the reverse. Buck wanted to point out that much of these teachers' prior success could be attributed to *who* their students were, not *how* they taught.

Some teachers even felt it was not their responsibility to teach the new students. That was what Title I and ESL teachers were expected to do. Relying on pull-out programs, Buck knew, had its downside. When students left class to get help from specialists, they ran the risk of falling further behind their classmates. Prolonged absence virtually ensured that these students would never catch up. Over time, students who were retained in elementary school were more likely to have problems in middle school and eventually drop out of high school. Buck also realized,

though, that promoting low achievers to the next grade was unlikely to be successful if their teachers lacked the skills to address these students' learning needs.

Given the large number of veteran teachers at Waverly and Buck's belief in teacher leadership, he wanted to enlist faculty members in the effort to avoid school decline. No principal by himself or herself can handle all the changes required to accommodate an increasingly diverse student body. Teamwork was the key, but Buck discovered that most Waverly teachers were reluctant to serve as team leaders or assume other leadership roles.

The last two factors that had to be addressed if school decline was to be averted involved Waverly's parents. White parents needed reassurance that efforts to respond to increasing student diversity would not result in their children's education being compromised. Fearing that Waverly teachers would have to spend most of their time with non-English-speaking and limited-English-speaking students, white parents threatened to send their children to other schools. Buck knew that "white flight," if it did occur, would not serve the academic interests of the students who remained at Waverly.

The other group of parents whose concerns had to be addressed was Hispanic parents, but the language barrier presented a formidable obstacle. There were few Spanish-speaking staff members at Waverly. The limited English of many parents made them reluctant to approach teachers with their questions and concerns. Without the active involvement and support of these parents, the challenge of providing their children with a sound education would be even greater.

Before a principal can address a challenge like the threat of school decline, he or she has to diagnose the school-based conditions that may need to be changed. The potential for incorrect diagnoses, of course, is ever present. There is no substitute for good listening skills, sound judgment, willingness to question standard operating procedures, and a commitment to doing whatever is necessary to serve the interests of children. Eli Buck possessed all of these attributes, and they helped him determine the leadership focus needed to address an increasingly diverse student body.

School decline, of course, may result from other impetuses besides changing demographics. In the following sections, three other decline scenarios will be discussed.

THE IMPACT OF INADEQUATE FUNDING

Economic conditions are roller coasters for public institutions like schools. When the local, state, or national economy sneezes, schools catch cold. The relationship between school funding and student achievement is well established (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Flanagan & Grissmer, 2005). In *Savage Inequalities*, Kozol (1991) provides disturbingly vivid examples of

how funding disparities place students in poor school systems at a decided disadvantage. Even students in relatively well-off school systems may face the prospect of academic adversity when there is a downturn in the economy or a substantial loss of school funding. Such was the case in San Jose, California, following the passage of Proposition 13 in 1978 (Duke & Meckel, 1980).

Proposition 13 restricted the ability of localities in California to raise revenues by increasing property taxes. Since a substantial portion of school funding came from local property taxes, the impact was immediate and far-reaching. Stanford University researchers reported on how two consecutive years of 10 percent budget cuts affected one high school in San Jose (Duke & Meckel, 1980). It should be noted that the principal did not control all of the ways that the budget cuts were made. Some of the retrenchment decisions were governed by district policies and the teachers' contract. The principal, however, was expected to minimize the impact of *all* budget cuts on teaching and learning.

In 1979, the first year that Proposition 13-related cuts were implemented, San Jose High School enrolled 1,400 students, 65 percent of whom was Hispanic. Another 15 percent consisted of African American, Portuguese, and recently arrived Vietnamese students. Many students qualified for free and reduced-price lunch. Despite the principal's pleas that San Jose High School should not be cut as much as high schools in more affluent parts of the district, the central office insisted that all school budgets would be reduced by the same percentage.

To absorb the first round of cuts, San Jose High School released 14 teachers. They were collectively responsible for 44 classes. So great was the loss of classes, in fact, that the principal had to switch the schedule from a six-period to a five-period school day. This move had the immediate effect of limiting the course options available to students, eliminating teachers' planning periods, and increasing class sizes. The teacher-student ratio jumped to 1:31. More than 20 paraprofessionals also had to be released. Many of them came from the local community and spoke Spanish. Their departure meant the loss of a vital link between the school and non-English-speaking parents. The district even pressed the principal to eliminate the entire counseling department, but he was able to retain five counselors on the condition that each would teach several classes.

To accommodate the loss of faculty, six sections of English as a Second Language were dropped. An innovative reading remediation program was scaled back, and electives in music and industrial arts were eliminated. In most of these cases, the principal had little choice. Courses required for graduation could not be dropped. Seniority rules in the teachers' contract sometimes resulted in fully qualified teachers being "bumped" by less qualified but more senior teachers from other schools in the district. Eleven veteran teachers were transferred to San Jose High School in the fall of 1979. Under normal conditions, transfer teachers with

limited experience teaching certain courses would be assisted by department chairs. Department chairs, unfortunately, also had been eliminated as part of retrenchment.

No area of school operations was spared. Extracurricular activities took an especially big hit. The band was disbanded, and approximately half of the sports program was cut. Physical education offerings also were curtailed.

Even the most capable principal may be unable to protect students and teachers from all the adversities associated with the kind of drastic cuts faced by San Jose High School. What principals must do to minimize the negative impact of such cuts is to anticipate where and how the reductions will be felt. This is an important aspect of organizational diagnostics—anticipating problems *before* they arise so that people can be forewarned and strategies for addressing problems can be developed. When parents, students, and school personnel are caught by surprise, the likelihood of serious school decline is greatly increased.

Given the cuts at San Jose High School, the principal understood the predictable fallout. Larger class sizes, the loss of special programs, and cutbacks in the time counselors had to counsel meant students were likely to receive less individual attention. Cuts to electives and extracurricular activities eliminated some of the school experiences most valued by students. Loss of ESL sections hit Hispanic and Vietnamese students especially hard.

The faculty of San Jose High School doubtless felt overworked and frustrated. With larger classes and no planning periods, the workload for teachers increased substantially. Discipline problems rose because students could not get the help they needed. Teachers were apt to adopt an informal triage system whereby students with the least chance of succeeding academically were all but abandoned. These students became prime candidates for dropping out. The combined effect of these circumstances led some of San Jose High School's most capable teachers to seek employment elsewhere. Attracting capable teachers to replace them was difficult.

As hopeless as the situation following substantial budget cuts might appear, many schools manage to avert a sustained downward slide. If they do, credit must go, in part, to an able principal who refuses to be caught off guard, who raises awareness of what can happen, and who sees to it that steps are taken to minimize the impact of budget cuts on teaching and learning.

THE IMPACT OF A WEAK PRINCIPAL

If capable leadership can be an antidote to school decline, the absence of capable leadership can serve as an impetus to school decline. Such was the

case at Bluemont Elementary School in rural central Virginia.* When Sara Scott was chosen as Bluemont's new principal in the summer of 2004, she only had a few weeks to diagnose the damages that had resulted from her predecessor's lack of leadership. Scott was hired in July, and her teachers were scheduled to arrive in mid-August.

Bluemont enrolled 352 students, 88 percent of whom were white, and 9 percent of whom were African American. Approximately one-third of the students qualified for free and reduced-price lunch. Scott was relieved to discover that Bluemont's students tended to spend all six years of their elementary experience at the school. Of concern, however, was the fact that 18 percent of the students received special education services. The relatively high percentage alerted Scott to the fact that teachers may have been too quick to refer students to special education.

When Scott reviewed student performance on the state's third- and fifth-grade standardized tests in reading and mathematics, she detected the beginning of a downward trend. In the three years her predecessor had been at Bluemont, the passing rates for fifth graders had not improved, and the passing rates for third graders had declined.

The next step in Scott's diagnosis entailed a review of her faculty. She immediately noticed the high percentage of first- and second-year teachers, especially in the third grade. She also discovered that several teachers lacked the appropriate credentials in special education. What she did not find out until teachers returned to Bluemont for orientation was that the faculty was deeply divided. Apparently, Scott's predecessor had favored certain teachers over other teachers. The resulting resentment posed a challenge to Scott's plans to cultivate a schoolwide spirit of teamwork at Bluemont.

When the teachers arrived at summer's end, Scott learned more about why Bluemont was teetering on the brink of decline. Her predecessor had failed to share the results of state testing with the faculty. Teachers had no idea how their students had performed or what areas of reading and mathematics required attention. The previous principal also tended to deal individually with teachers. As a consequence, teachers worked alone rather than in teams. Bluemont lacked a school leadership team or grade-level teams. Apparently, Scott's predecessor was reluctant to share decision making with her faculty or nurture teacher leadership.

Knowing that many of Bluemont's students required additional help, Scott asked teachers about the kinds of assistance they provided for low achievers. She discovered that no programs of systematic and continuing assistance were in operation. If students did receive out-of-class aid, it was arranged on an individual basis with their teachers. Judging by Bluemont's test scores, whatever remedial instruction students received was not very effective.

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When Scott inquired about inservice training, she found out that there had been no school-based professional development during the preceding three years. To their credit, however, faculty members seemed receptive to learning more about strategies for raising student achievement. Scott hoped to capitalize on this interest by instructing teachers in how to make sense of their students' test results and provide targeted and timely assistance.

A veteran principal, Scott realized that immediate action would be needed if Bluemont was to be spared a period of sustained decline. Three years of ineffectual leadership had left the faculty adrift, divided, and unfocused and the community wondering what had become of their school.

THE IMPACT OF A CHANGE IN SCHOOL CULTURE

Educators who have spent time in different schools understand that schools can develop very distinctive organizational cultures. A school's culture encompasses professional and organizational values, beliefs about teaching and learning, and norms governing behavior (Sarason, 1982). Schools may be characterized by robust cultures, weak cultures, or the absence of a dominant culture. In the last instance, the school may consist instead of various subcultures. A robust school culture, of course, may not always constitute a positive force in the life of the school. In *The World We Created at Hamilton High*, Grant (1988) describes how a high school's culture changed for the worse. With the change came the threat of sustained school decline.

Located in an industrial city in the northeastern United States, Hamilton High (a pseudonym) started out as an elite public high school when it opened in 1953. Things began to change in 1966, however, when the school system began to implement a desegregation plan. At the time, only 90 African American students were enrolled at Hamilton High, but that number soon rose. By 1970, 210 African American students attended the high school. Racial tensions increased, and some white parents withdrew their children, but these developments alone do not explain why Hamilton High teetered on the edge of decline. Grant attributes much of the high school's troubles to bad judgments by the principal and the evolution of a school culture characterized by permissiveness and the abandonment of adult authority. The forces conspiring to undermine Hamilton High's reputation for academic excellence constituted a "perfect storm" that included a faculty's unwillingness to adjust to changing demographics, a principal's lack of leadership, and the development of a dysfunctional school culture.

According to Grant (1988), 1970 to 1971 was a pivotal year at Hamilton High. White teachers who had perceived black students to be industrious and well behaved when their numbers were small began to change their attitudes as the numbers of black students climbed. Teachers insisted that many of the new students were incapable of functioning in higher-level

classes. As a result, basic classes consisted of large percentages of black students. To make matters worse, many white teachers disliked having to teach basic classes. Racial tensions led to violent incidents, and teachers and administrators spent an increasing amount of their time handling discipline problems. In the face of deteriorating conditions, veteran white teachers began to leave in droves. By the fall of 1971, 72 percent of the teachers who had taught at Hamilton High in 1966 had resigned, retired, or transferred. Personnel turnover, thus, can be added to the list of precipitants of school decline.

The principal correctly determined that drastic measures were needed to prevent the further escalation of problems. Rather than deciding to address school discipline and safety issues, however, he mistakenly concluded that Hamilton High's problems derived from its academic program. When the new school year began in the late summer of 1972, teachers were surprised to discover that the principal had unilaterally decided to eliminate all basic classes. Yearlong courses were replaced with semester and quarter-semester courses, and electives judged to be of greater relevance to students were introduced in place of many traditional academic offerings.

Replacing the departed veteran teachers were an assortment of young teachers whose sympathies clearly resided with their students. When it came to discipline, these teachers could best be described as lenient. They were slow to condemn students for drug use and inappropriate language, and they were less insistent on academic rigor than their predecessors. The school culture that began to emerge placed relatively little value on adult authority and academic excellence. Importance was placed on being able to address the varied needs of Hamilton High's students. The high school came to resemble more of a "social service center" than an academic institution. A variety of specialists offered programs on drug awareness, sex education, suicide prevention, and medical advice for pregnant teenagers.

Good intentions clearly were not enough to prevent Hamilton High from entering a period of sustained decline. By the time a new principal was chosen in the fall of 1977, enrollment had dropped by almost 300 students, absenteeism and behavior problems had reached alarming levels, and academic performance had plummeted. Teacher morale was low, and parent complaints were numerous. That Hamilton High eventually was put back on track is testimony to the impact of effective leadership. The leadership needed to turn around a troubled school like Hamilton High will be taken up in Chapters 3 and 4.

MEETING THE CHALLENGE OF SCHOOL DECLINE

One of the greatest challenges of school decline is recognizing the signs of decline early enough to address them effectively and avoid descent into an accelerating downward spiral. In his massive study of the collapse of

entire societies, Jared Diamond (2005) identifies several precipitating failures. Failure to anticipate a threat and failure to recognize a threat once it has surfaced are two failures that can adversely affect organizations as well as societies (pp. 419–440). To meet the challenge of school decline, principals must understand the forces that can lead to decline and recognize the signs and symptoms of decline once they begin to appear. Chapter 1 has examined several potential sources of school decline, including demographic changes, sizable budget cuts, ineffectual leadership, and changes in school culture. These sources of decline may impact a school individually or in combination. Left unaddressed, they can lead to a variety of performance-undermining problems, including falling student enrollments, loss of community support, teacher turnover, and declining student achievement. Chapter 2 discusses some of the leadership actions a principal can take to prevent school decline.

KEY LESSONS AND NEXT STEPS

Eli Buck's first months at Waverly Elementary School offer several lessons to principals who confront a rapidly changing student body:

- A principal must be able to anticipate the needs of new students and assess the faculty's capacity to address these needs.
- Where capacity is lacking, provisions must be made for retraining the faculty.
- Potentially harmful practices such as pull-out programs and student retention at grade level should be reexamined.
- A principal must understand how parents feel about the school. This includes parents of new students as well as longtime residents.

Based on his assessment of the circumstances facing Waverly Elementary School and the potential for declining student achievement, what steps must Eli Buck take in order to prevent school decline?

Eli Buck must

- direct the faculty to focus on developing literacy in students with limited English proficiency,
- examine the school schedule in order to find additional time for English language instruction,
- identify effective practices and programs for English language learners, and
- consider how best to deploy Waverly's teachers in order to meet the needs of English language learners as well as other Waverly students.