THE EXECUTIVE EDUCATOR

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PHYLLIS WASHINGTON

This Kansas City magnet school is riding high on the crest of court-ordered tax increases for desegregation, but its principal has her eyes on the real prize—learning

BY ANDREW TROTTER

I DON'T WANT to hear about it," laughs the woman in the beige linen suit and Reeboks. Mid-morning on a June day, a week before summer vacation begins, Phyllis Washington is responding to a question from one of her teachers. The exact question—something on the order of what color paper to use for the programs for tonight's assembly—isn't important. Which is precisely why Washington wants the teacher to make the decision herself. Washington pats the teacher's wrist reassuringly and, without giving an answer, heads down the hall toward a classroom.

I'm not dealing with it! That's how the principal of E.F. Swinney Applied Learning Magnet (K-3; enrollment 418) in Kansas City, Mo., brushes aside some of the routine trivia that clutters any principal's day—the complaints, the rumors, the minor problems that shoot up like weeds and choke the real work of the school.

It isn't benign neglect. Phyllis Washington has a keen sense for what are weeds and what are not. She nimbly sidesteps the administrivia, she glides away—then steps assertively toward the essentials. At least that's how it is much of the time.

Her essentials: children always, parents and teachers often, administrivia rarely. When her brain cells are diverted to anything else, Washington becomes impatient, though she'll try not to show it. She shoos away the diversion with one of half a dozen phrases: "I don't care." "I'm not going to deal with it." "I don't want to hear about it." Then off she trots down a corridor to visit a classroom.

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Washington is well aware that as a principal, she has an unusual opportunity. Swinney is riding the crest of a federal desegregation order that has swept across the Kansas City public schools. In 1985, U.S. District Judge Russell G. Clark ordered what the *Washington Post* describes as "perhaps the nation's most ambitious, expensive, and controversial desegregation plan." The cost, underwritten with court-ordered higher taxes, is expected to reach $700 million by 1992. The plan was designed to make white suburbanites voluntarily send their children into the city for an education. "Once uniformly dreadful, Kansas City public schools now range from respectable to outstanding," says the *Post.*

Swinney was one of the first handful of schools made into "magnets." Before the order came out, Washington had just been appointed principal of Swinney, her first principalship. But after the order, she had to apply for the job again. Reappointed in June, she had to select an entirely new staff and put together an entire education program in just three months.

But what the desegregation plan lacked in time, it made up for in material resources. For a start, the 60-year-old school building was given a $2.5 million facelift, including the addition of an elevator, a conference room, and air-conditioning. Now, 1920s-era woodwork coexists with state-of-the-art computers and science equipment.

As the desegregation order requires, Swinney's students are drawn from across the city and from surrounding suburbs. And unlike some of the school system's other magnets, this school really does attract suburban kids; more than 200 children—from all over the area—were on a waiting list last year. There is no per-

formance requirement for admission, but by mandate, the student body must be 40 percent white, 60 percent minority. Fifty percent of Swinney's students are on free or reduced-price lunches.

Washington, 41, administers an annual budget of close to $2 million; $1,720,000 of that goes for salaries to support a student/teacher ratio of 22 to 1. But the remaining budget for capital outlays—$86,152 last year for purchases over $150—has enabled her to buy what she calls "a wealth of resources. You name it and we have it," she says, grinning.

Standard equipment for each classroom includes filmstrip and overhead projectors, a tape player, from four to seven computers, and a printer. The school also has a television and videocassette recorder for every floor—plus a computer laboratory where each student has a 25-minute session twice a week. And just about every classroom has a large rabbit, a parrot, or some other animal.

She's quick to point out that the money for classroom resources is well spent. It goes to support "applied learning," an approach that goes beyond the basics to get kids to experience concepts in varied, active ways. To teach reading, for example, a teacher might read a story aloud while projecting the text on an overhead projector, pausing to discuss concepts encountered in the story.

The curriculum also makes room for monthly and yearly schoolwide themes, such as conservation or transportation. One annual thematic activity is to determine the date of the 100th day of school. When that day rolls around, the kids bring in 100 of some object—such as paper clips or pennies—and predict and measure their comparative volumes and weights.

But the resource Washington values most is the human sort. "The biggest difference at Swinney is the faculty," says Washington. "We *want* to be here. We enjoy what we're doing." It hasn't always been easy. When she first became principal, Washington says, she blamed herself for hiring a teacher who didn't live up to her expectations—or the district's performance standards. When the school lost a teaching position, she chose that teacher as the one to be transferred.

"It was not an easy situation. It bothered me that I made a bad choice" in the first place, Washington says. But she adds that other teachers rallied around her.

In fact, Washington says she's become closer to her teachers than she ever expected to be. She used to subscribe to the view that a principal must keep the staff members at a distance. But with the exception of the teachers' lunchroom, which she considers the teachers' private preserve, she has brushed aside that social boundary: "I think nothing of having a party with them. Five years ago, I would have thought, 'No way.' [Now] there's a certain amount of ownership I have with the staff."

The closeness, Washington speculates, derives from her commitment to shielding her teachers from distractions, "taking the heat of parent pressure and squelching the rumors." She adds, "Teachers will do the same for me. They know I get the same concerns and telephone calls. We protect each other."

Swinney's human and material resources come at a price, though. As one of the first of Kansas City's magnet schools, Swinney is the focus of high expectations. By next year, all the secondary schools and half of the elementary schools will be "magnetized," and all eyes are on Washington to show that the program works.

Lapsing into jargon, she says, "Prioritizing those expectations is something I have to do. I haven't met one deadline this year." And, of course, there's administrivia, always lying in wait. Despite Washington's skill at evading trivial demands, she says she still spends the largest part of her time solving crises and following up telephone calls "that end up not being anything."

This year she has dispelled some of that pressure by collecting an armload of awards. Last spring, Swinney was honored in the U.S. Department of Education's elementary school recognition program. The school also won an award from the city's Rotary Club. Washington was one of 12 Missouri principals honored by the state association of elementary school principals. And as another kind of tribute, a team from the area's second largest suburban school system came to observe Sweeney's program.

But fame hasn't deflected Washington from the basics—the children, the school. And although her work life is filled with stress and pressure, she distinguishes between "helpful" and "hurtful" varieties for herself and her students. For example, she believes in exposing even the youngest kids to competitiveness, or at least its flavor. Too often, she says, children from poor families don't have the urge to compete—which is why they get "so stressed out" when they have to take standardized tests. As a remedy, Washington makes testing a frequent part of the school routine, and counselors teach the kids to use breathing exercises to help them relax.

Washington's view of competition in grades K-3 might be surprising for an elementary school principal. She grants that socialization is an important goal for elementary education but believes academics are crucial even for kindergartners. Washington's mission: to make sure all children can read before they leave kindergarten. Every new child is given a reading test; the results are used to accommodate the reading program to the students. As a result, according to Washington, Swinney's kindergartners and first graders often read a year above grade level.

One morning, Washington is summoned with the school system's other elementary school principals to a meeting called by Kansas City Superintendent George Garcia. The atmosphere is glum. A new round of statewide test results has just come out, and many Kansas City schools show declines in scores. Garcia asks the principals, one by one, to explain what happened.

The tone of the meeting irritates Washington. "It bothers me that everyone must sit through this, especially if it's not a positive meeting. You can't look only at the scores to determine if someone's doing the job. There are too many variables."

Washington notes that comparing Kansas City's scores to scores in other districts can be highly misleading. She names a wealthy suburban school system in the region: "You can't compare our test scores to theirs. Many kids there don't take the test, or kids who can't read don't take it. But here *every* kid takes the test, no matter what, whether they can read or not."

The comparisons are simply more trivia, blown out of proportion. Washington seems to want to stand up and say something, but she holds back, whispering instead, "There are usually those times when I will debate, but there are times when you keep your mouth shut."

But despite the almost palpable fear of failure at the meeting—and despite the local newspapers' continuing pessimism—Washington believes the city's school desegregation program is working. She discounts the newspapers' reports that—with rare exceptions, such as Swinney—racism will prevent the schools from

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Washington

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attracting white students.

"It's change that people resist," she says. "I don't think they're afraid to come back to the city schools. Why should they change when their kids can walk to school [in the suburbs]?"

She acknowledges the opposition to the higher taxes among senior citizens—"I'm a taxpayer, too"—then points out how the Kansas City schools were neglected before the desegregation order. To critics who call the added resources "gold plating," she retorts: "Where were you when the kids didn't have books? Many of the little things we have now are things that people elsewhere consider necessities—like walls being painted, pipes not being exposed. Is that gold plating?"

As Washington looks to the future, she is hopeful that the school system will emerge from the desegregation order better than ever. "Each year, I've come back to Judge Clark to report how we've done and how well it's going. [District officials] wanted to show some success stories. We're doing OK, and Judge Clark needs to know it."

That evening, the light drizzle stops just in time for the outdoor assembly. The kids have a show to put on: Decked out in plastic animal noses and ears, with drawn-on whiskers, they're ready to perform a musical skit about mice, cats, and bears getting along together—a multicultural theme.

Families are sprawled on blankets across the school blacktop—a panorama of coolers, babies, aluminum lawn chairs, and tripods for video cameras. Washington looks like she belongs in a kitchen—she's wearing an apron a class of third graders gave her that afternoon, decorated with their self-portraits.

But there's a problem—those video cameras—says the teacher who is directing the show. The program relies heavily on songs from Walt Disney Productions. And Disney granted use of the songs on condition that there be no video cameras, only still photography. But a sprinkling of parent filmmakers have chosen to ignore their instructions. After making a futile plea over the microphone, the director turns to the principal for help.

Washington scans the audience for a moment. Then smiles. "I'm not dealing with it. Let them film it. If Disney wants to sue them, let 'em sue." ■

Rocking the boat

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have a clear, concise, and powerful vision for the school system.

In Jackson, our vision is embodied in this simple statement: "All children can learn." If students fail, it's the system's fault. Every student, save those with severe brain damage, has the capability of learning. It's up to the system to find the appropriate instructional methods and invest the requisite time to help each student master the necessary skills.

It might not be easy to convince your teachers and administrators that such a vision must drive the system and every activity in it—and that the vision will yield positive results. But when student achievement rises, you have the data to point to.

Persuading people to buy into the vision means communicating the vision and involving employees, board members, and community residents in translating that vision into reality. You do that through such efforts as effective marketing plans and strong shared governance programs in schools. You don't do it by administrative fiat. The time is long past for autocratic leadership. Too many good decisions never see the light of reality because they're lost in the ownership struggle: Employees have no voice in shaping the decision, so they feel no responsibility for seeing it through.

At the same time, communicating effectively and getting people involved doesn't mean every controversy will disappear and every conflict be resolved. People have different values. What's important to one individual or group will not be important to another, and the two sides might never see eye to eye.

So what does the strong leader do? Eventually, you realize that no amount of communication will resolve all differences. You'll never change the status quo, never implement reform, if you try to placate every voice you hear. So you make a decision to ignore the rhetoric and move ahead.

The effective school leader, in short, is willing to take risks. Directing the resources of the organization (money, time, people, and knowledge) to achieve optimum productivity, the leader thrives on controversy when it arises, as it surely will. Effective school leadership means developing a vision for the organization, building momentum to implement the vision, and sustaining the intensity to accomplish it. ■

Taxes

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increases, provided the increases go to the schools. (County governments in Florida are even seeking to cut schools in on revenue-raising efforts because schools have the muscle and influence to sell the public). But although a good school system has drawing power at the polls, some caution that targeted taxes might provide only short-term gains.

"They're a trick, a game," contends school finance specialist John Augenblick. "It's like a federal checklist: 'Where do you want your money to go? Agricultural subsidies? Cities? Defense? Education?' Sure, I'd feel a whole lot better if 22 percent of my federal taxes went to the environment and 42 percent to education. . . . But we don't work like that. It's not good government." The idea of targeted taxation undermines America's whole notion of civic responsibility, Augenblick continues, substituting private gain for a public good.

The other trend worth watching is emerging in the courts. Many of this year's tax hot spots—Illinois, Pennsylvania, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Michigan—have equalization cases in the works or about to be filed. And as Stanford University's Michael Kirst predicts, the push to reform school finance will put the most pressure on property taxes in high-wealth districts to make up for losses in state revenue under equalization formulas. Where property taxes are already high, that pressure could further erode support for schools.

Bruce Fisher, of Citizens for Tax Justice, on the other hand, cites the Supreme Court's recent decision in *Missouri v. Jenkins,* which upheld a federal court's power to raise taxes for school desegregation. To Fisher, the ruling is an opportunity to weaken the clout antitax groups might have. "More than anything else, more even than the California vote," Fisher maintains, "the Supreme Court's decision sends a powerful message to legislatures: If [citizens or lawmakers aren't] responsible, someone else will be. That's certainly going to gum up the works of later tax revolts." Fearing the precedent the court case sets, a group of U.S. senators, along with taxpayers' and business groups, have begun to lobby for an amendment to the U.S. Constitution to prohibit court-ordered tax hikes.

In a nation whose federal government has spent more than it has been willing to be accountable for, the bill finally has arrived. ■