

## How an unconventional principal turned around a struggling urban school

BY JENNIFER D. JORDAN, THE HECHINGER REPORT September 8, 2015 at 3:58 PM EDT



*Pleasant View Elementary School Principal Gara Field interacts with students during the morning assembly this past June. Photo by Gretchen Ertl/Hechinger Report*

PROVIDENCE, R.I. — It's Field Day at Pleasant View Elementary School and at the moment, there's a crisis with the bouncy house.

"No, no, it's not supposed to go there," says Principal Gara Field into her mobile phone as she rushes out the front door. "Hold on. I'm coming."

Field, 45, hustles back inside a few minutes later. She grabs a microphone and arrives just in time for the morning assembly in the cafeteria, where the school's nearly 450 students are buzzing.

"Good morning Panthers," Field nearly shouts over the whistles and clapping. "I know you are fired up for Field Day!"

As she leads the students in the “Panther Pride” chant she invented, it’s easy to see the hard-charging soccer coach she once was.

“Perseverance,” she begins. “We never give up,” the students respond.

“Respect.” “We honor.”

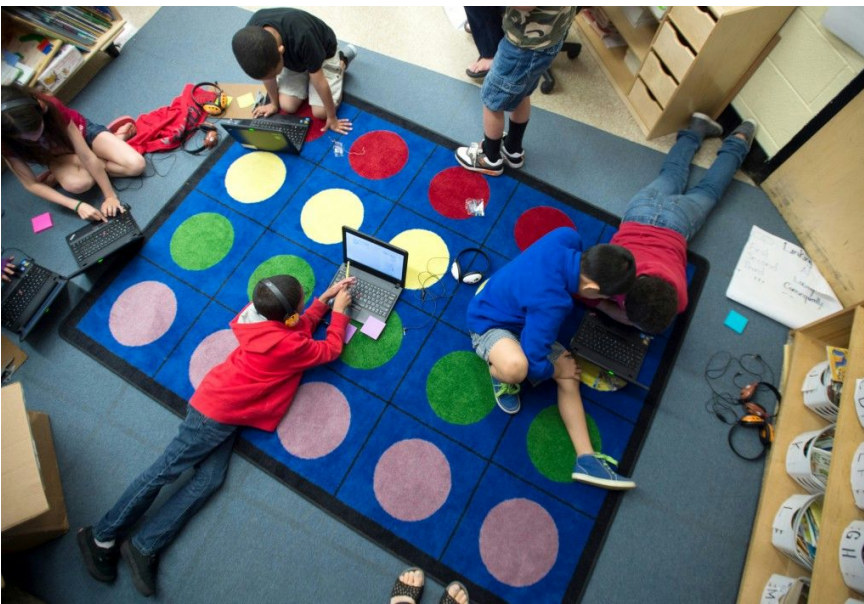
“Integrity.” “It’s part of me.”

“Determination.” “We strive.”

“Excellence.” “In everything.”

“We’re panthers,” Field cheers. And the students finish, “With pride!” Then they growl in unison, “Grrrrrrr,” and head off for classes and outdoor games.

In the past four years, Gara Field has done more than boost morale at Pleasant View Elementary, an urban school that has struggled for years with leadership churn and low test scores. According to the Rhode Island Department of Education, 33 percent of Pleasant View’s students receive special education services, compared with the state average of 15 percent, and 80 percent are poor enough to qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, compared with the state average of 47 percent. The school is ethnically diverse: 59 percent of students identify as Hispanic and 19 percent as African-American.



*Pleasant View Elementary School students research birds during Friday’s enrichment academies in which students can pick from several different activities, such as creating and editing a film, learning more about dinosaurs or doing yoga.*

Shortly after Field arrived, Pleasant View was identified as one of the lowest-performing elementary schools in the state and placed on intervention status by state education officials. Since then, the first-time principal and her team have made significant strides in student achievement, teacher satisfaction, technology upgrades and parent involvement. Today, due to improved test scores and a positive school culture, the school is one of only four of 33 that is on track to emerge from intervention status in Rhode Island.

Pleasant View's faculty and Rhode Island education experts agree that embracing blended learning — a mixture of face-to-face classroom instruction by teachers and self-paced online learning by students — has been a key driver of the school's success.

Yet they say what's really made the difference is Field's consistent and creative leadership. While good principals are needed everywhere, they are particularly critical in schools that are integrating technology into classrooms, said Shawn Rubin. Rubin is director of blended learning at the Highlander Institute, a training organization that works with schools across the country, including Pleasant View.

"A leader brings the vision and is able to articulate the instructional problem you are trying to solve," Rubin said, whether it's closing achievement gaps, rolling out a new math curriculum or improving school culture. "Blended learning just helps you accomplish the goals that you've set. But it's the leader who has to make the decisions, understand the budget, think about how you are going to sustain all this."

An effective school leader doesn't necessarily have to be the one driving all the technological innovation, he said. But the leader does need to understand how to tie blended learning into a larger framework focused on student achievement, and how to make sure that it's working as intended. Perhaps most important, a leader has to make teachers feel safe enough to experiment, and sometimes fail and try again, as they venture into blended learning. Pleasant View's Field, Rubin said, has excelled in these areas.



*Pleasant View Elementary School teacher Alex Gibbons, center, dances with her students during a transition between lessons in her class this past May. Photo by Gretchen Ertl/Hechinger Report*

“She’s the only principal in my 15 years of teaching who has inspired me,” said Heather Simons, who has taught at Pleasant View for 12 years. “She made you believe you could be better. We trusted her when we plunged into blended learning, and now I feel like everyone is on the same page. Teachers visit each other’s classrooms now; before everyone was in their own bubble.”

Four years ago, Pleasant View Elementary lacked wireless Internet, and its handful of computers were obsolete or broken. It was clear from the latest test scores that the school would soon be placed into the lowest-performing category. Another principal had just left. At the time, Field was up for tenure at the University of Georgia, where she was teaching educational psychology. But she’d heard that Rhode Island was looking for principals to turn around struggling schools. And she was inspired by the state’s reputation for innovation — particularly with technology in the classroom, a topic she had spent years researching and was eager to explore in a real-world setting, with teachers and students. “If I didn’t make the leap now, I knew I never would,” she said.

Field had earned a doctorate in curriculum and instruction from the University of Connecticut, where she studied under educational psychologist Joseph Renzulli. Renzulli expanded the concept of “giftedness” to apply to every child, not just a select few, a perspective that has shaped Field’s approach as a principal.

Field also had a master’s in educational leadership from Harvard, and had taught history at a New Hampshire prep school for a few years. But she’d never been an administrator, or worked in a public school. Her colleagues say that even more than her higher education credentials, Field’s willingness to try new things and her experience as a soccer coach — particularly her motivational and team-building skills — have proven to be her biggest strengths as Pleasant View’s principal.

“I had this urge to run a school and see if all this theory I had been studying could be applied to lead a community through a transformation,” Field said. “The Pleasant View community took a chance on me. And this is by far the most challenging thing I’ve ever done.”



*Pleasant View Elementary School Principal Gara Field works with first grader Rachael Rodriguez on a word game on an interactive screen during free time in Rodriguez’ class this past May. Photo by Gretchen Ertl/Hechinger Report*

Field quickly realized that she'd have to get additional resources if she and her faculty stood a chance of improving the school.

She applied for and received \$424,000 in federal School Improvement Grants, according to school administrators, and got some support from the district, as well, which enabled Pleasant View to collaborate with outside organizations and offer "full-community school" services. These include literacy classes for parents, after-school programs for kids and eight City Year corps members to assist teachers in the classroom as they integrate blended-learning strategies.

"Teachers could never do this work alone," Field said. "It is unfair to assume that a teacher could meet all of the challenges one child might have based on things that happen outside of school. These partners are critical for us."

In 2012, Pleasant View won a \$470,000 "Innovation Powered By Technology" grant from the Rhode Island Department of Education, so that the school could embark on blended learning. Teachers received training from the Highlander Institute, and shared what they were learning with one another.

"I was petrified at first," said second-grade teacher Stacy Andreozzi. "The most I'd ever used was a projector before then."

Before long, she was breaking her class up into three reading groups, with one group working with her, one doing independent writing and reading work and the third using educational software on laptops.

"We immediately saw improvements and the kids were comfortable," Andreozzi said. "It was a ton of work the first year, but it's all been worth it. Gara made us feel like we could do it."

Field took some risks. One involved personnel. By the end of her first year, she said 10 of the school's 37 teachers retired, transferred or were asked not to return. Another risk involved Field's decision not to require her teachers to rigidly adhere to the district's pacing and curriculum guides; she trusted her teachers to know best when students had mastered a concept and were ready to advance. And, instead of building in extra blocks of "skill-and-drill" in math and reading as some low-performing schools do in an effort to improve standardized

test scores, Field adopted a “whole child” approach intended to make learning more fun and tap into children’s creativity. Students began taking hands-on enrichment classes on Friday mornings, ranging from sewing classes to yoga to coding.

But most of all, Field used her coaching skills to develop a strong sense of teamwork among faculty. She carved out time for groups of teachers to work together. She encouraged them to share what they were learning about educational software, ed-tech tools and online platforms and to visit each other’s classrooms more. Perhaps the biggest shift under Field has been how teachers have collaborated to analyze data and customize lesson plans for each student based on that information.



*Pleasant View Elementary is proud of it's school spirit. Photo by Gretchen Ertl/Hechinger Report*

“I am nothing more or nothing less than I’ve ever been — a coach,” Field said. “Coaches are the ones who prepare you to play well. But it’s the teachers who are doing all the work, who are trusted enough to change and to do things in a different way.”

The school’s standardized test scores have improved substantially over the past couple of years — math from 26 percent to 42 percent proficient, and reading from 43 to 53 percent. (The most recent school year’s data is not yet available.) Third-grade reading scores — a

critical predictor of long-range student outcomes — jumped from 45 percent proficient to 61 percent. And state education officials say Pleasant View's steady progress to close gaps between the test scores of certain groups of students' — such as black, Hispanic and special education — and state averages make it just one of four struggling schools in Rhode Island that are on track to emerge from intervention status.

Pleasant View has also connected with parents, and provides supports to help families deal with challenges ranging from house fires to mental health issues. Parental engagement at the school is the highest it has been in years, say district officials.

Yet Pleasant View's turnaround is fragile and faces considerable strain. The federal and state grants that Pleasant View to finance technology upgrades, teacher training and other supports for the last few years are now exhausted, and Providence schools are facing \$9 million in federal cuts this year. The district just appointed an interim superintendent. Can Pleasant View's momentum continue amid all these changes and challenges?

Field's experience at Pleasant View indicates that transformation takes longer than some education reformers want to acknowledge, said Ken Wong, who holds the Walter and Leonore Annenberg Chair for Education Policy at Brown University.

"Gara's been there for four years now, and she'd tell you the first year was very challenging," Wong said. To her credit, he added, she became more patient, and valued teachers' input on how to improve the school.

"I think Pleasant View shows how it takes multiple years to build these relationships," Wong said, "and that three to four years is a good benchmark for us to think about deeper change at the cultural level."

Turning around Pleasant View Elementary has required all of Field's resourcefulness, patience and sports training. "It's a marathon, not a sprint," she often reminds her teachers, and the cliché also applies to her job. "Even a good day is a hard day," she said.

In an age of heightened school accountability, thankless paperwork and pressure over test scores, principals are stretched thin. Observed during a brief visit this spring, Field met with



two parents who had dropped by unexpectedly, hosted a district administrator and intervened when a young boy was exhibiting behavioral issues — all in a span of 30 minutes.

Catching a glimpse of teachers and students in action is one of the ways she energizes herself throughout the day.

“Roberto, I loved your origami serpent,” she told a boy as she passed him in the hall en route to visit Claudia Jackvony’s second-grade classroom. “It was incredible.”

“Thanks, Dr. G,” he said.

Jackvony was Providence’s Teacher of the Year in 2014, credited with significantly boosting test scores for her students in both reading and math. During a visit to Jackvony’s classroom in June, Field observed eight students were working on vocabulary worksheets at a table. Six were on laptops using reading software. “It’s like having six extra teachers in the room,” Jackvony said of the computers. “This lets each kid work at their own level, and when I look at the data, it will tell me who needs more instruction before they move on.”

A small group of students were with her on a rug. They were discussing the “who, what, where and how” of a story about veterinarians.

“Let’s look up the words in the glossary,” Jackvony said. “Hector, why don’t you pronounce the next word and spell it out?”

“G-R-O-W-T-H,” Hector responded. “Okay,” Jackvony said. “Is that a noun or a verb?”

After the visit, Field said, “When I go into these classrooms, I am amazed by how differently each teacher does it. Just like with students, every teacher is different. We never said ‘you have to do blended learning like this or like that.’ What you have to do is support teachers to find their way of doing what’s best for kids. And the teachers here, they constantly teach me.”

This summer, Field received some good news. She found out that the district budget includes funding so that Pleasant View can remain a full-service community school for another year —meaning that after-school programs and parent literacy classes can continue, and that City Year corps members will return to help the school achieve its improvement goals in 2015-16. But there are no new technology grants on the horizon, and she knows that the pressure to raise test scores and keep blended learning on track will persist, even with fewer resources.

Yet she says she has faith in her team and that Pleasant View will have another “winning year.”

“The people who are doing it are the teachers who shared a vision with me and the parents who are involved and the students who are engaged and learning every day,” Field said. “We are all working to get the kids to a place where they are happy and ready to learn, where test scores take care of themselves, where teachers push them to excel and where their needs are being met.”

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