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WINTER 2008

Urban Outfitters

Professional Program Graduates Change the Look of Bay Area's Underserved Schools

PACEsetters at 25

Urban Out

Malana Willis with some of her students at Learning Without Limits
Photo: Peg Skorpinski

uates Change the Look of Bay Area's Underserved Schools

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By Steven Cohen

One day during her first days teaching at Oakland's Learning Without Limits School, Malana Willis looked toward the back of her classroom. One of her second graders had abandoned the lesson and taken a large cardboard box from the recycle bin, excavated the cupboard under the sink, unearthed tempura paints and, with a few of his classmates, painted the box.

By the time Willis noticed the impromptu art project, the box was covered with dripping blue paint and the classroom floor was starting to resemble the early stages of a Jackson Pollack painting.

"I was totally appalled," says Willis, who had recently received her credential through GSE's Developmental Teacher Education (DTE) program.

"Clearly they were using materials that I hadn't even showed them yet. The craziest part was that I was slightly relieved that at least those few kids had found a creative way to stay occupied!"

Willis's crushing welcome to the world of teaching at the new small school, located in east Oakland's Fruitvale District, brought with it loads of self-doubt. Willis told a colleague that she felt nauseous every morning; nervous she could not handle the challenges of the day ahead.

To that point in her life, Willis had experienced success academically and professionally. She had made the Dean's list as a psychology major at Williams College. After graduating from the prestigious liberal arts college, she spent five years teaching abroad, community organizing, working in an autism clinic and non-profit agencies, each one preparing her for the next job.

"I had never done so poorly at something that I cared so much about and had worked so hard to prepare for."

She ultimately settled on teaching, a career that would tap into her natural creative abilities and strengths as well as her idealistic zeal to make a positive difference in children's lives — the same calling that attracts so many others to UC Berkeley, the School of Education and urban schools. Willis felt she had found the perfect fit in teaching, and she bubbled with enthusiasm before and after she thrived as a fellowship recipient in the DTE program.

As prepared as she thought she could be, Willis was tested by the extreme challenges that she encountered at the new elementary school. Although the students thrived during hands-on activities, she struggled to meet their diverse needs. Juggling curriculum requirements, students' social, emotional and academic needs, and the demands of helping to launch the first-year school were dizzying.

"I had never done so poorly at something that I cared so much about and had worked so hard to prepare for," she admits about the beginning of her first year.

I first met Willis in late September, about a month into her second year at the school, housed on the grounds of Jefferson School, which was reconstituted in 2007 to make way for two smaller schools there: Learning Without Limits and Global Family School.

For Willis, a lot has changed for the better. As a second-year teacher, she focuses more on academics and building community in her classroom. When I asked her how she would compare the two years, Willis said that during year one she spent the majority of her time concentrating on managing negative behavior. Now she was teaching more engaging lessons and focusing on celebrating positive behavior, which have made the classroom experience more enjoyable.

Photo: Steven Cohen

With the magnetic glow of a 32-years-young woman just two months shy of giving birth to her first child, principal **Kyla Johnson-Trammell** wanders through the aging, art-filled hallways and over the broken blacktop of Oakland's Sequoia Elementary School, attracting scores of adoring students, many of whom place their hands on her round belly.

The third-generation Oakland educator is one of a new breed of principals hailing from the GSE's Principal Leadership Institute (PLI) who are leading Bay Area urban schools with a nimble, passionate and hands-on approach.

Learning WIthout Limits Elementary

77.9% FRPM 99.6% Non-White 58.6% ELL

OAKLAND UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT

Learning Without Limits
Aprendiendo Sin Limites

School Demographics Key

ELL = English Language Learners
FRPM = Free or reduced price meals

Source: 2007-08 School Profiles, California Department of Education, Educational Demographics Office

"The difference [between first and second year] isn't so much night and day as night and twilight," she commented. "It's still very hard, very busy and very exhausting."

Clearly Willis has good company at Learning Without Limits where she works in body or spirit with six other Graduate School of Education alumni; recent DTE graduates Morgan Alconcher, Manuel Herrera, Samara Ripps, Olivia Sanders and Daniel Seward all teach at the small school, and their principal Leo Fuchs is a graduate of the Principal Leadership Institute (PLI). Not coincidentally, Susan Audap, a veteran PLI coach, who graduated in PLI's first cohort in 2001, coached Fuchs through the school's incubation year in 2006 and its first full one in 2007.

Exactly how many of GSE's professional program graduates still work in the Bay Area's urban schools is a little difficult to ascertain. Follow-up survey data of Multicultural Urban Secondary English (MUSE), Master's and Credential in Science and Mathematics Education (MACSME), DTE and PLI graduates between 2001 and 2005 show that nearly all have defied the odds by staying in schools at least five years.

Nationally, a third of new teachers abandon the profession entirely within three years of entering it, while 46 percent leave within their first five years according to a 2003 study by University of Pennsylvania Education Professor Richard Ingersoll. The attrition rate nearly doubles for high-poverty schools.

Sequoia Elementary

48.9% FRPM 90.6% Non-White 19.4% ELL

"We've got it all," exclaims Johnson-Trammell of the school situated along Lincoln Avenue in Oakland's Upper Dimond neighborhood between Highways 580/Macarthur Avenue and Highway 13/Montclair Hills. "We've got kids with upper-class parents to transitional homeless kids whose parents are in jail; kids whose parents work in the district; traditional families; single families; GATE families. It makes it wonderful and also a challenge because it's not like we can have this one set vision or even this one instructional focus. I have kindergartners who are reading *Harry Potter* and then I have kindergartners who still don't know what the letter 'A' is."

But Johnson-Trammell has demonstrated that she's ready to tackle whatever challenges her Oakland school throws at her. She credits the PLI and other experiences that include teaching at an Oakland elementary school and a stint as an assistant principal in the Mt. Diablo School District.

"The [PLI] program really prepares you to confront the multitude of challenges in urban schools, to expect the unexpected and to think on your feet," says the 2003 PLI graduate, who also co-teaches a course in the program.

Under Johnson-Trammell's tutelage over the past three years, Sequoia Elementary has thrived. At last September's Expect Success Awards, the Oakland School District awarded Sequoia its Blue Ribbon school award for most test score gains for African American students, who represent 40 percent of its 328 students.

"I have kindergartners who are reading *Harry Potter* and then I have kindergartners who still don't know what the letter 'A' is."

"I think the most gratifying [part of the job] has been being able to think outside of the box," says Johnson-Trammell, who runs the school without the benefit of an assistant or vice principal, "having to work under the constraints of a public school system and having a little liberty and freedom to really think about what a good quality urban school looks like for the kids and parents who I am of service to."

Besides rising scores on various achievement measures, Johnson-Trammell has helped establish Sequoia as an Arts Anchor Grant School with a focus on integrating visual arts into reading, writing and other curriculum objectives. Through a grant from the Alameda Office of Education, an artist in residence works with the children as well as the teachers, who receive professional development for art once a month in an effort to bring it into their classrooms. The school also has a successful garden project and other enrichment and intervention programs that Johnson-Trammell says do a good job integrating content areas and not just focusing exclusively on "the three Rs."

Johnson-Trammell has tapped her PLI background to work creatively and conscientiously within budget constraints and build strong relationship with her teachers. "I try to put in place structures to maximize the time they have to teach and plan and give them support," says Johnson-Trammell, "because it is a hard enough job in itself."

Johnson-Trammell has managed to make the most out of a tough job herself.

—SC

DTE graduate Daniel Seward commands respect in his first year of teaching.
Photo: Steven Cohen

"The research is clear that it's hard to recruit teachers into the most underserved schools, and it's extremely hard to keep them in those schools," says GSE Assistant Professor Ingrid Seyer-Ochi, who researches the career trajectories of teachers.

Informal evidence suggests that approximately 90 percent of GSE's professional program graduates work in urban settings or first ring of suburbs, such as Hayward, Richmond and El Cerrito. These communities have the highest concentrations of students who most need education for economic mobility. They are also the places where schools are more often undermined by the way they are organized, funded and run.

With 313 graduates — half of whom are people of color — the Principal Leadership Institute boasts a 98.5 percent retention rate among the 231 who now serve in urban schools as principals, assistant principals and district-level leaders.

> "They're grounded in the real world. They share a focus on equity and they believe that everyone deserves social capital."

Longtime PLI and Oakland Unified coach Audap, who has spent 38 years as an educator, including five as principal of Cobb Elementary in San Francisco's Western Addition, believes that, individually and collectively, GSE credentialed graduates share certain core qualities and values which set them apart, and have given the underserved Bay Area schools where they work a needed boost.

"Whether they are teachers or administrators, they see working in schools as a profession, not just a stepping stone," says Audap, who has seen their efforts on the front lines. "They have a can-do attitude: they show inventiveness, persistence and resilience. They're grounded in the real world. They share a focus on equity and they believe that everyone deserves social capital."

Audap's high praise synched with my first impressions of Willis and the other two-dozen GSE alumni interviewed and observed for this article. At the same time, none of them told me their lives are easy. To the contrary, they said that working in their particular urban school setting was the hardest thing that they have ever done.

These credentialed educators and administrators also confided that they are better equipped for the short and long run because of the training and education they received at the School of Education. It seems somewhat paradoxical that they were saying that they couldn't possibly have prepared for what they were now doing, but they valued the preparation they received through their respective professional programs (see five profiles).

"I probably criticized GSE more than I should have," admits Jessica Quindel, a Berkeley High mathematics teacher, "but over the course of my two years in MACSME, I had time to think

about the kind of curriculum I wanted to teach, the kinds of relationships I wanted with students and families and other teachers, and to refine my views on assessment, group work and other big picture items."

First propelled into teaching when she took the undergraduate class in Urban Education from former GSE Professor Pedro Noguera, Quindel feels that she has sustained her drive for social justice and teaching — she is already among the top 50 percent in Berkeley High seniority after just four years — by working with the Interactive Mathematics Program curriculum and its extended network, including her mentor teacher at Berkeley High who provided curricular and instructional support.

The graduate course in urban education — taught by Seyer-Ochi to all second-year DTE and MACSME students in the spring, and by Associate Professor Jabari Mahiri to all first-year MUSE students in the fall — has also been a springboard for professional program students who use the class to deepen their understanding of equity, opportunity, race and class disparities in the context of education.

"Ingrid [Seyer-Ochi] really pushed us beyond conventional thoughts," says Learning Without Limits second-grade teacher Samara Ripps. "She made us focus on the inequities."

For a community-mapping project in the class, the pre-service students observed the physical environment around a school neighborhood, as well as the flow of students, families and community members. Some students observed families arriving at school and picking up their kids at the end of the day, while others witnessed parents drop off and pick up their children at their classrooms and how they interacted with the teacher.

"It opened our eyes to a new perspective on parent participation in schools," says Herrera. "Even without the traditional forms of parent involvement like the PTA, they found a variety of authentic ways to strengthen the family/school connection."

Seyer-Ochi says that she gets requests from her former urban education students like Herrera and Ripps to continue to discuss issues around race, equity and inequality that they now encounter every day at their schools. The assistant professor will soon be piloting an ongoing support network to widen that conversation and community beyond the informal networks that already exist, such as monthly get-togethers of professional program cohorts.

"If we have really dynamic people coming out of our programs who really want to stay in teaching," says Seyer-Ochi, "then we need to do what we can to help them stay in it for the long haul through sustained communities that support newer teachers."

Despite a rough first year, Lara Trale, a MUSE graduate and second-year teacher at Oakland High School is optimistic about staying there, in part because she chose to participate in GSE's Project IMPACT (see page 37) last year as well as MUSE, working on inquiry with other teachers at her school site.

"It helped me form academic bonds here at school and broke down a lot of my concerns about being a new teacher," says Trale. "It's important for me to know

Berkeley High

28.2% FRPM 66.7% Non-White 6.2% ELL

Above, Jessica Quindel has made curriculum choices that have sparked her students' interest in math.
Photo: Steven Cohen

Seyer-Ochi is piloting a support network for professional program graduates.
Photo: Bijan Yashar

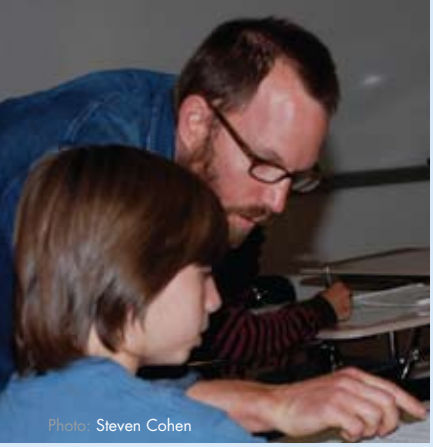
Photo: Steven Cohen

Willard Middle

57.4% FRPM 77.3% Non-White 8.9% ELL

With a number line projected on the screen in front of his Willard Middle School class in Berkeley, teacher **Jake Disston** displays the keen awareness of a seasoned conductor at a podium.

He urges the diverse group of 20 students to squish together in order to talk about where to place the variables or expressions on the number line. After a 12-year-old girl shows the rest of the seventh graders where she believes the expression should go, Disston asks the others for their opinions.

In another seventh grade pre-algebra class, one could imagine a teacher imploring his charges to do a related textbook exercise. But even on this routine review Disston encourages explanations from his students.

"There's a huge divide between students who are able to crank through problems and those who don't," says the 1997 Master's and Credential in Science and Mathematics Education (MACSME) graduate. "How do you ask a question of kids to reason through something rather than just to recall from memory whether they have it or they don't? How do we improve the situation for kids who aren't learning?"

Engaging those hard-to-reach students in this urban setting has motivated Disston at Willard for 11 mostly gratifying years. One of a handful of National Board Certified Teachers in the Berkeley school district, Disston continues to draw support from an extensive professional learning community that includes the Diversity in Mathematics Education (DiME) project and the MACSME program, as well as school and district colleagues.

Before returning to the classroom full time in September, Disston spent three years spreading his wealth of teaching knowledge district-wide, coaching mathematics teachers throughout Berkeley and coordinating professional development workshops through the DIME partnership.

The cross-site collaboration has paid dividends in Berkeley's mathematics classrooms. Despite tight school budgets, the district has maintained smaller class sizes of 20 students for seventh and eight grade math classes. The middle school mathematics departments have built in common assessments that reward understanding mathematics over parroting what they've memorized. And scores on the mathematics portion of the California Standards Test are on the rise.

While Disston believes that no pre-service program can totally prepare a student for the challenges of teaching full time in a public school, he is quick to credit MACSME for getting him off on the right foot.

"The breadth of experience [in MACSME] is really helpful toward developing your intuition, strategies and an attitude to just keep going," says Disston. "It's a very different experience from being thrown into a classroom without much guidance or mentorship."

In the meantime, Disston has discovered a new expression for his mathematical tastes.

"I used to think that you only reached mathematics at the highest levels, and this [school math] was all sort of a warm-up," says the one-time Reed College math major. "I've learned, or maybe I've unlearned, to love the subject of middle school math, of algebra, pre-algebra and that transition of thinking about mathematics.

"And I'm still finding out what I can do slightly differently each day so that every kid will get into it a little more."

—SC

that other teachers at my school are working on their own time, in real and immediate ways to make the school a better place by improving their own instruction."

Unlike Berkeley High's Quindell, Trale says that she knew from a very young age that she wanted to teach. She chose MUSE because "I admired the program's rigor, and could tell that they offered serious support structures to help their students meet consistently high expectations."

Classroom management issues overwhelmed Trale, like many other rookie teachers, during a frustrating first year in which she had five English classes, and her English 2 sections began the year with an average fifth- or sixth-grade reading level.

"As the year progressed, I came to see that a lot of my disciplinary problems were rooted in the students' reading difficulties," Trale says. "I know it seems like basic psychology, but it took me a while to recognize that students often yelled and wandered around and threw things because they needed an escape from work they thought they couldn't do."

Trale is more optimistic now and believes that she made the right choice by sticking it out. "With the support of my cohort, my student teaching supervisors, my professors and my wonderful colleagues at Oakland High and Project IMPACT, success feels possible."

Like Seyer-Ochi, MUSE founding director and GSE professor Sarah Freedman says that preparing and keeping former students, like Trale, working successfully in high-poverty,

low-performing urban schools, such as Oakland High, is an essential undertaking.

Through a longitudinal, qualitative study, Freedman and Deborah Appleman, a professor of education at Carleton College, examined how teacher education could support teacher retention. Their findings, published in a recent article in *Teacher Education Quarterly* entitled " 'What Else Would I be Doing?': Teacher Identity and Teacher Retention in Urban Schools," concluded:

"... we must continue to create the most robust programs we can, offer our best theoretical and practical pedagogical knowledge, and help them [beginning teachers] to become more knowledgeable about the challenges they and their students face... These young educators remain optimistic that they can still make some difference for their students, enough of a difference to keep trying."

Oakland High

70% FRPM 98.6% Non-White 19.9% ELL

> "I know it seems like basic psychology, but it took me a while to recognize that students often yelled and wandered around and threw things because they needed an escape from work they thought they couldn't do."

Teacher turnover is not a big issue at Sequoia Elementary School, which last year was honored by Oakland School District for posting the greatest test score gains among African American students.

"Retaining teachers creates a real cohesive community," says Principal Kyla Johnson-Trammell, a PLI graduate who is co-teaching in the program (see profile page 18). "Kids who are bounced around from school to school and have instability in their home lives just need extra academic support. It adds that extra layer of advantage because the teachers not only know their craft and know their curriculum and get to know their families and communities, but they also do a lot of articulation with the teacher [in the grades] below and above them."

Above, Lara Trale with fellow MUSE alumna and Oakland High English teacher Aya Allen at an IMPACT meeting at the school
Photo: Steven Cohen

Johnson-Trammell says that Sequoia has been able to offer individualized instruction within its limited resources. One of the major differences between urban schools that succeed and those that do not, she says, is the ability to quickly identify students who are failing and strengthen those places where there are gaps at the moment they get noticed.

The young principal introduced me to Tahya Abuzaid, a Sequoia fifth grader whose home language is Arabic. As an English Language Learner, Abuzaid receives extra individual support from his regular teacher and works diligently. Johnson-Trammell says that with such a high English Language Development population at the diverse school, Abuzaid doesn't feel singled out, and, as a result, has made great strides socially and academically.

Kevin Jeung, a 2007 DTE graduate and fourth-grade teacher at Sequoia, says that a teacher's life is often extremely difficult, but "it's the moments when students' eyes go bright, and the light bulb goes on in their heads and the trust relationships that are built over the course of the year that make it all worth it."

Jeung's take on the power of building personal relationships resonates with his former DTE classmates and teaching colleagues at Learning Without Limits. As time allows, Learning Without Limits teachers visit with each of their students' families at their homes. They say that they also take time after school to go on weekend outings with some of their students, such as to track meets, drum sessions and church events.

Teachers can offer alternative solutions that society doesn't or can't, according to Na'ilah Nasir, an associate professor who joined the GSE and the African Amercian Studies Department this fall (see page 10). While instructional content is still king, Nasir says that teachers often can't focus on learning because so many of their students of color are wrestling with identity issues.

"The racial stereotypes and polarization of ethnic groups on campuses don't come from the classrooms but it is very much played out there," says Nasir, who has researched culture and race in diverse urban high school mathematics classes. "Teachers don't really know how to handle it or they just ignore it. I don't think that is the optimal solution. I think teachers can disrupt that by helping students construct themselves differently."

Another troubling trend, according to assistant professor Janelle Scott, who, like Nasir, joined the GSE and the African

"I believe in reminding students that they have agency and power to change things instead of just passively accepting them."

Mission High

57.6% FRPM 93.2% Non-White 46.8% ELL

Photo: Steven Cohen

Below, teacher Kevin Jeung says that his fourth graders are measuring up, thanks, in part to the Sequoia's model garden program.
Photo: Steven Cohen

Erica Ramirez grew up in South Central Los Angeles. She did not become a teacher because she had good role models in school. "Unfortunately, I saw what bad teaching looked like," she says. "I thought the kids deserved better."

After graduating from UCLA, she applied to UC Berkeley's Multicultural Urban Secondary English (MUSE) master's and credential program. A number of her friends went the emergency credential route to being a teacher, but Ramirez says that she "didn't want to go into the classroom unprepared, like some of the Good Samaritan teachers I'd had who had excellent intentions but little to offer in the way of curriculum and challenges."

Ramirez uses the lessons she garnered in the MUSE program to teach her classes of English Language Learners (ELL) at Mission High. All of her students have been in the U.S. for three years or less, and some arrived only a couple of months ago. She works with them both on reading and language development. They spend half of the class in the language lab, practicing pronunciation.

On the day I visit, her students are about to start reading Elie Wiesel's memoir of the Holocaust, *Night.* Ramirez starts off with a chart on the interactive SmartBoard she is demonstrating, a combination of a laptop with a projector and a responsive dry-erase board. The chart has three columns, KNOW, WANT TO KNOW, and LEARNED, a strategy she brought from her credential program. The students offer suggestions for the first two columns, including questions about whether events like the Holocaust continue to happen.

"In my classes at Berkeley," says Ramirez, "I learned that students might have low-levels of literacy, but high levels of thinking. It's important not to lower expectations in the curriculum."

Ramirez frames the discussion by asking the students to write a short response to the statement, "History repeats itself, just with different people." The students offer examples of when history *does* repeat, but Ramirez suggests a counter-example about her mother wanting to give her a quinceañera party when she turned 15. Ramirez told her that she wanted to save the money for college. When Ramirez graduated from UCLA, she asked her mother to throw a big, belated quinceañera party.

The students, who are a little older than 15, respond enthusiastically, asking many questions about whether Ramirez's family gave the standard presents to the guests and whether there was dancing.

"The reason I told the quinceañera story," she tells me after class, "is because I believe in reminding students that they have agency and power to change things instead of just passively accepting them."

Ramirez jokes that her students — who are with her 90 minutes a day, five days a week — "must really love me or hate me by the end of the semester."

Judging from the crowd of students that flood her room during lunch hours, it looks like love is winning.

—Zack Rogow

American Studies Department this fall (see page 10), is that a certain set of schools argue that students of color from low-income families just need more discipline, structure and back to basics. As a result, Scott says that "schools develop a very tiered system of what other kids are getting and then what Black kids, who have not gotten quality educations, need."

The use of scripted state- or district-mandated language arts curriculum such as *Open Court Reading* have many less-experienced teachers living in fear of the so-called "curriculum police" — those authorities who are ready to punish them for veering away from their teaching manuals.

That's a case where the kids are punished, according to Jeremy Hilinski, a former literacy coach with the Pittsburg Unified School District and the new vice principal of Green Oaks Academy, an East Palo Alto elementary school with 87 percent Latino students.

"If students are not interested, they'd rather be sent to the office," says the 2007 PLI graduate. "That's what happens when you're dealing with children of color and those from low socio-economic communities and children and families who have been disenfranchised from education because it's boring and irrelevant to their lives.

Green Oaks Academy Elementary

92.9% FRPM 100% Non-White 83.9% ELL

> "The best classroom management plan or device is an engaging lesson plan."

"We get stuck because a lot of teachers don't see it that way. They see the students as being defiant."

Hilinski sees a "blatant" difference between "old-school" approaches and the "new-school" ones that GSE professional program graduates practice. Longtime educators like Audap and Bessie Stewart Ross, a retired principal from the San Mateo-Foster City schools who coaches Hilinski for the PLI, also share that view.

"You can really tell the people who have a progressive train of thought when it comes to professional leadership," says Hilinski, "because they're instructional education leaders as opposed to being really good organizational managers. [But] in essence, the best classroom management plan or device is an engaging lesson plan."

When it comes to school management, Audap recalls some sage advice she received from PLI Director Norton Grubb about

When **Patricia Newsome** receives her Ed.D. in Educational Leadership in May 2009, the Joint Doctoral Program (JDP) graduate will already have logged 35 years as an educational leader.

"In the world of educational leadership, one of the many things administrators learn quickly is that your world is full of politics," says Newsome. "It's even truer for urban administrators, especially superintendents, where politics is an every day occurrence."

She remembers one of her earliest political encounters as an administrator in Fresno Unified School District when a court-approved voluntary integration plan was implemented in 1978.

"The tensions were high in the community and emotions were heated and vocal," she says. "The superintendent and other district leaders never blamed the courts or rejected the reasons for the need to implement the plan," says Newsome. "They worked hard and long hours doing what was right for students throughout the district."

She left Fresno to become an associate superintendent in Southern California, and then settled in Sacramento in 1996, where she served as deputy superintendent of curriculum and instruction for the California State Department of Education under Delaine Eastin, and held other high profile district-level positions.

When the Grant Joint Union High School District superintendent retired in 2007, the school board selected Newsome as its interim superintendent to lead the district through a difficult unification process; once again she

how school budgets need to reflect an administrator's values and beliefs. "It sounds obvious," says Audap, "but a lot of people don't do it that way. They let the program define their values."

An independent study of PLI released in March concluded that the model program met its objective of preparing administrators to serve as leaders in urban school settings as well as address the issues of race and class. The evaluation also highlighted the fact that PLI graduates "are most confident of their ability to develop schools that are safe, secure and respectful for all students and adult personnel."

A safe and secure school environment may be the elephant in the proverbial room of urban schooling. Without one, GSE graduates, who value community, networks, teaching for understanding and with culturally relevant materials, among other things, can't be as successful. "You can theorize about education all you want," Nasir states succinctly. "Can you create a successful educational space?"

Just a mile and a half from Learning Without Limits, Maxwell Park Elementary School commands a stately presence at the top of a hill among evergreens and other types of trees that line Fleming and Monticello streets in east Oakland. Until this year, however, its exterior masked an interior with a poorly lit cafeteria, bathrooms that may or may not have soap, paper towels or toilet paper and other telltale signs of decay. Before its incubation year in 2007, fights broke out almost daily between kids from Maxwell Park and a neighboring school, Sherman Elementary, which closed because of dwindling enrollment in 2007.

Only about a fourth of Maxwell Park's teachers remained when Principal Mary-Louise Newling took the helm of the newly reconstituted school last

Maxwell Park Elementary

73.0% FRPM 99.4% Non-White 19.5% ELL

Assistant Principal Earl Walls and Principal Mary-Louise Newling are helping to raise hope at Maxwell Park.
Photo: Steven Cohen

faced many challenges. Once the unification process was completed, Newsome chose to help other educators by returning to education consulting.

Among her many accomplishments at the helm in the Grant district was helping lift schools out of program improvement status; transitioning district staff through a contentious unification process with three other districts; and helping to employ data-based systems to support instructional and curriculum decisions, which lead to remarkable growth on student achievement scores.

As a consultant, Newsome has served as an external evaluator for California's Immediate Intervention for Underperforming Schools Initiative, and provided mentoring and coaching for site-level school administrators.

"There is not one administrator I know that does not want to be accountable for student achievement," says Newsome, "but we must have good information and accurate data from all sources including schools and the department of education to make the right decisions about educational programs that will support high student achievement."

Communicating and educating leaders to deal with the complex politics of education is, in part, what brought her to JDP.

"The ability to come together in a strong learning environment with peers on a regular and voluntary basis is one of the most powerful experiences education leaders can undertake," she says. "It not only gave me good information to make improvements in my district, but it gave me the a stronger foundation to work with stakeholders and to challenge policymakers in their efforts to improve education."

—SC

(Note: The Leadership for Educational Equity Program replaced the Joint Doctoral Program in Leadership for Educational Equity in 2007.)

César Chávez Elementary

80.5% FRPM 98.6% Non-White 74.4% ELL

Zareen Poonen Levien

was moving on a fast-track in the high tech industry when she found herself volunteering in an elementary school classroom.

"I had just been promoted to manager at Yahoo! when I started realizing that I wasn't fulfilled by the goal of increasing profits for the company," she says.

So she took advantage of their program to volunteer in a public school and began working with kids one hour a week, soon finding it much more exciting than her day job.

"I found it very fulfilling to work in a school," she says. "It was magical to see the process of learning."

Making that magic is now her full-time occupation. After leaving Yahoo! Levien taught high school on an emergency credential for one year, and then decided to apply to UC Berkeley's Developmental Teacher Education (DTE) program. Several aspects of the master's and credential path appealed to her, including the opportunity to work with several different supervising teachers and to learn about being a teacher researcher.

Levien chose elementary school teaching because she felt she could effect more change by instructing younger kids. "So much of the world is new to them," she says. "They've never heard of multiplication or been on the BART train. I love being the person who teaches them about those things."

Levien incorporates a number of lesson plans in her class that she first witnessed as a student teacher in her DTE placements. Her third graders learn geography through a "game show," where two teams compete to name areas of interest on the map of California. They also learn "how to play the game." She starts by having the students talk about the best way to react when a team member *doesn't* get the right answer. But that doesn't happen very often: Her students are sharp and well-prepared, identifying almost every region, city and river on the map she points to.

Levien also sings songs with her third-graders, bringing to her school the curriculum she learned in the Guitars in the Classroom course that DTE offers. "I can't help but include music in what I do," says Levien, who sings in a band called Los Boleros. "Music is a sneaky way to teach because the students don't even realize they're learning. They get so excited by it. It's also a great release when they come in from recess."

The children sing a song about division: "Welcome to the Islands Where We Divide by Four." They are so engaged that some of them click their tongues to the beat between verses. They also learn geography by singing a song to the tune of "The Wheels on the Bus."

Many of the students in Levien's class are facing problems that are tough for people of any age to cope with. One boy I spoke with has a brother who has already been in jail and is now hospitalized in a drug treatment program. Despite the challenges the students deal with, Levien creates a calm and warm atmosphere in her room. "I work a lot on community building," she says. "We talk about how to cool off if you're angry, how to problem-solve when two students get into a conflict."

—Zack Rogow

"Music is a sneaky way to teach because the students don't even realize they're learning."

Below, families and staff recite the school vision statement at a Learning Without Limits family night.
Photo: Peg Skorpinski

year. But with support from Audap; Earl Walls, a 2004 PLI graduate who serves as the school's assistant principal; new teachers, including 2008 DTE graduates Patrick Hamilton and Alice Paal; and a new safety officer, Newling believes that Maxwell Park has a fresh look and feel just two months into the new school year.

"There's a brightness and hope that wasn't here before," says Newling, who hails from Trinidad. "Everyone has chosen to be here. There's much more interaction between students and staff. Everyone is more engaged. There's a whole different expectation."

Walls says that ultimately success comes back to serving students and parents. "Some students feel that there's not much available to them beyond the borders of their individual communities," says Walls, who has held several administrative positions with Oakland schools. "Part of what I picked up from PLI is that we have to break down those barriers and open their eyes, that there's a whole world out there and they can make an impact in it."

"There's a brightness and hope that wasn't here before… There's a whole different expectation."

When I returned to Learning Without Limits in late October, there was fresh evidence that the tone of that small school was on the rise, too. Warm relationships and a caring community of support permeated the classrooms and grounds. Willis playfully hugged her young students goodbye. Herrera spoke in English or Spanish with the parents and guardians there to pick up their children, and exchanged high fives with his students as they exited the classroom. Other Learning Without Limits teachers conversed easily with Principal Fuchs in a nearby courtyard.

An hour later, students, families and staff mingled comfortably together over a pizza dinner at a family reading night in the old Jefferson School auditorium. Then they stood together, and with the accompanying gestures, recited the new school's vision statement:

We stand on the shoulders of those who came before us as we grow into leaders who are passionate and care about making our world better. We are equipped with skills and knowledge, filled with curiosity, and we know that even when we face challenges we will achieve.

During a lull in the program, I asked Willis if she was in it for the long haul. Without hesitation, she told me that she could not imagine doing anything else.