Molly Howard was working as a special education administrator in another part of the county when Jefferson County (GA) High School was being constructed in fall 1994. It was to be the only high school in the county, the consolidation of two high schools. The community had debated the consolidation for years, and even as ground was broken for the new school, many were still upset about it.

Howard’s route to work took her right past the construction. Daily, she felt something tug at her as she drove by. “I really knew that I could pull the county together,” she said, but something, she wasn’t sure what, was holding her back from applying for the position of principal. One day she decided to face her feelings: “I imagined that the school was fully operational: children coming and going, buses coming and going, teachers teaching, and a principal. [I asked myself], how would you feel if it wasn’t you?” she said. “And I just had this feeling of regret.”

**Creating HOPE**

When the school opened in 1995, Howard was the principal. A close look at the students found that 70% of those who graduated remained in the county, making it one of the poorest in the state, year after year, and that less than 50% of the adult population of Jefferson County had a high school diploma or its equivalent.

“We made a promise to our community when we opened that we would be the economic future of Jefferson County,” Howard said. “And we realized that if we were going to improve the economic status of our community and raise the standard of living...that a high school diploma wasn’t enough.”
That first year, Howard began to create a culture of collaboration, gathering a school improvement team made up of department chairs, as well as the media specialist, guidance counselors, and assistant principals. “I realized very quickly that one person alone could not drive this mission, that it had to be a collaborative effort,” she said.

The team met regularly to develop a school reform plan that was based on four principles: higher expectations, opportunities for success, personalized learning, and experiences in real-world problem solving. The “School of HOPE” aimed to accomplish three objectives: increase graduation rates, raise achievement on state tests, and create a personalized caring school community.

Howard quickly established a research-based model for reform discussions. The team studied the recommendations in Breaking Ranks: Changing an American Institution. They also studied the work of Michael Fullan, Robert Marzano, Larry Lezotte, and Phil Schlechty, spending eight years building a firm foundation of research on school change. She encouraged research among the faculty and staff members and followed up any proposed idea with one question: what research is that based on?

To alter the perceptions that the school improvement team was just another level of administration, team members attended department meetings to get teachers’ input. Eventually, the teachers realized that they had a voice. When the school improvement team developed the reform plan, they relied on teacher input and teacher leadership. “If we were to have a plan to increase schoolwide literacy, we would put it before the faculty and staff that we were looking for someone to chair and form a committee,” Howard said. So the school “not only had a school improvement team but also teachers who are actually leaders, responsible for the implementation and monitoring of each of the action steps.”

After many attempts at schoolwide reform, the team decided to use a comprehensive, cohesive reform model, High Schools That Work, which was established in 1987 by the Southern Regional Education Board–State Vocational Education Consortium. This model is based on the belief that students can learn and master complex academic and technical concepts within a school environment that encourages them to make the effort to succeed.

With a Comprehensive School Reform grant to implement the model, Howard and her staff embraced the 10 key practices of High Schools That Work, choosing those that could, in Howard’s words, “get us the biggest bang for our buck.”

Higher Expectations

When it comes to raising expectations, Howard knows that, “you can’t just raise the bar and say, ‘Jump higher.’” She tackled the first initiative—higher expectations for all—by evaluating whether or not the school’s policies and procedures truly reflected that belief. With her cross-curricular school improvement team, Howard created new policies and procedures and eliminated those that did not contribute toward their goal.

One of her first steps: abolishing the dual track, thereby eliminating all lower-level courses and putting all students in college-prepatory classes. Teachers had determined that the courses offered in the career-tech track were not nearly as rigorous as those in the college-track. All ninth-grade students now begin their tenure at Jefferson in college-prep English, math, science, and social studies. When they reach grade 12, they can choose between college-prep or AP courses.

Under the same philosophy as the College Board—that AP is for the prepared, not for the elite—Howard also established an open-door policy for AP courses and increased the number of AP course offerings to seven, a high number for a school with 80% of the student body qualifying for free and reduced-price lunch. Students are placed in AP courses when they are prepared, even if their confidence isn’t there yet. When students say that they don’t think they need to take an AP class, “we explain to them that, yes, they are ready; they are prepared,” Howard said. She also holds a parents night to explain to parents that the school will support their children as they take on these challenging courses. “You can
raise the bar if you build the scaffolds and support their learning," she said.

Raising expectations is about more than just offering tougher classes. It’s about modifying, sometimes radically, the beliefs of faculty and staff members. This doesn’t happen overnight. “At the time, it seemed like it was going to take forever,” she said. “I would think that we had truly embraced the idea [of higher expectations for all], when all of a sudden, I’d hear things come from a teacher’s mouth in the faculty meeting that made me realize we still believed that some can, some can’t, and some won’t learn at high levels.”

Teachers at the school were used to going into their classroom, closing the door, and doing their own thing. Howard believes they felt isolated and alienated from one another and from the mission of the school, so she created a structured environment where teachers can have meaningful dialogue. In weekly departmental meetings, teachers discuss school improvement with different groups around the school.

Howard also asked her teachers to commit one week during the summer for collaborative planning. All the teachers in one subject area spend the week creating common course syllabi, assessments, rubrics for projects and assignments, semester calendars, and pacing guides. Howard believes that this week gives them “their road map, so that there is equality across the courses,” and ensures that students receive the same rigorous course no matter which teacher they get.

Opportunities for Success
One of the tenets Howard has instilled is that students will not fail simply because of their race, socioeconomic status, or past performance. In fact, Howard says that “a failing grade is not an option.” She has implemented a new approach to grading that allows students to redo an assignment until they meet the standard. And even if students meet school standards, they must pass certain subject-area tests before they can graduate.

To meet the school’s mathematics requirement, students have the option of taking either Algebra I or three lower-level math courses. Howard found that the students who were not taking Algebra I had trouble passing state tests. The lower-level math courses did not have the same rigor as Algebra I, so Howard and her school improvement team created Algebra That Works, a standards-driven course that teaches Algebra I in four modules. Students spend four and half weeks on each module then take a formative assessment. Those who achieve 80% mastery move on to the next module. Students who don’t must repeat that module. During the second time around, however, teachers don’t reteach the concepts that the students have already mastered. Instead, they focus instead on what the students had trouble with, using different instructional strategies. Students who are still struggling receive after-school tutoring with a teacher-leader and peer tutors that zeroes in on exactly what they need help with.

Students can take as long as they need to be successful in Algebra I because the modules are each built upon 6–10 standards, for which students can get credit when they master them. When students take the formative tests again, their original grade is replaced by the new grade.

This effort is working: students at Jefferson are scoring, on average, 88% on the state mathematics tests. Those who discover their aptitude for math
their freshman year (when they are required to take the first module of Algebra) are going on to more advanced courses that they may not have taken before the math reform.

Personalized Learning Environment
Students can feel anonymous in a crowd of 1,000. To combat the risk of students slipping through the cracks, Howard’s mantra revolves around Fullan’s three Rs: relationships, relationships, relationships. “Every child has to feel valued,” she said. “If you don’t create that culture, it can be difficult for all children to be successful.”

She looked to Breaking Ranks for recommendations on how to build relationships and found that she could provide each of her students with a personal adult advocate through a student advisement program. The program, which began in 2003, assigns a small group of students to each certified adult in the building to advise for all four years. Students get to know their teacher advisers, and teachers can monitor student progress, make course recommendations, and be the first point of contact for parents.

Howard built time into the 4 × 4 block schedule (another change brought about to personalize the learning environment) for students to meet with their advisers. They meet each quarter to review report cards and arrange tutoring or other assistance when students need a little extra help. One of the school’s committees developed a curriculum for advising sessions, giving advisers structure to discuss goals, current progress, study skills, and other topics.

To foster school-to-parent communication, advisers are also required to have face-to-face contact with the parents of their advisees at least twice a year. On report card day, Howard opens the school to parents, giving them the opportunity to pick up their child’s report card and meet with teachers and advisers. “Students whose parents don’t come won’t get their report card until the next day,” she said. “Parents have come to expect it, so participation... increases every time we do it.”

Experiences in Real-World Problem Solving
As a school committed to improving the community, Jefferson works very closely with Sandersville Technical College to plan dual enrollment classes that address the needs of high school students. Students can attend programs in certified nursing, welding, Web-page design, Microsoft Excel and Access, truck driving, law enforcement, child care, and other areas. Graduates from the programs receive a high school diploma and a certificate. Many go on to earn a two- or four-year degree. Others continue at the technical colleges to further their education in their field. During the 2006–07 school year, 64 students participated in dual-enrollment courses with Sandersville Technical College.

Howard also instituted a youth apprenticeship program that allows students to work in an area business for credit and pay. For example, students who are interested in journalism can work at the local newspaper. Those who are interested in teaching
can enter a teacher cadet program to apprentice at one of the elementary or middle level schools in the county. “Students have to apply, go for an interview, and be accepted,” Howard said. “It’s real world.” During the 2006–07 school year, 42 students were employed as apprentices by 27 businesses throughout the county.

Moving Forward
It has taken Molly Howard 12 years to reform her school. And she’s still working at it. “We’re in the process right now of taking a formal look at all of those [beliefs and values] again, and saying, ‘Is this what we still believe?’” she said.

Many of the faculty and staff members who were instrumental in bringing about the school reform have retired. Howard knows that if someone were to ask most of the current teachers if they had any input in the reform, they would say it was already in place when they arrived. She believes it’s important to keep all faculty and staff members engaged in the school’s mission.

She has seen her staff members’ beliefs change from “students can learn if” to “students can learn when.” Howard acknowledges that to really increase student achievement, the whole school must believe that all students can learn at high levels. Principals must not wait to change behavior until everyone changes their beliefs. It may never happen. Her advice: change behavior first, and the belief structure will follow.

But the most important element of Howard’s reform is Jefferson’s personalized learning environment. If principals really want their students to succeed, Howard believes, they must create a culture of healthy relationships in their schools: teacher-student, teacher-teacher, teacher-administration, student-student, school-parents, and school-community. “Large schools have got to find ways to make themselves smaller [to] personalize the environment,” she said. “Our children need it. Our future, I think, depends upon the personalized learning environment.”

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James Dierke, the 2008 MetLife/NASSP Middle Level Principal of the Year, made collaboration and consistency his early goals for a struggling urban school—and although he was handed lemons, he proceeded to make some excellent lemonade.

On the first day of school in 1999, Dierke, then a high school assistant principal, was told, “We need a middle school principal, and we’re putting you in the position.” Upon arriving at his newly assigned school, he discovered that his office was furnished with only a card table and a folding chair. Thus was Dierke’s introduction to Visitacion Valley Middle School.

Visitacion Valley is located in a high-crime, high-poverty area on the southeast side of San Francisco. The expectation for student success was low, and teacher turnover was high, as were the truancy and suspension rates. At the time, it was the lowest performing of San Francisco’s 18 public middle level schools. Today Visitacion Valley ranks 10th in achievement, attendance has risen to 98%, teachers are choosing to remain at the school, and the San Francisco Chronicle has called it an “island of safety in a sea of trouble.”

The school’s remarkable journey began when Dierke took steps to stabilize the faculty, which had only three members with a tenure of five or more years. He also took steps to introduce consistency in expectations, curricula, and instruction. The vision for the school was developed by the teachers and is carried out through collaborative practices that have become a part of the school’s culture. When asked about his proudest accomplishment, Dierke said, “I’ve been able to establish an institution where kids can learn, where teachers can teach, and people feel happy to be there every day.”

His advice to colleagues is “we can’t give up, need to see humor as our best friend, and be good advocates for the principalship. I think we’re working hard and doing a good job at finding answers, and bringing people together—we’re the glue that makes the education process work.”

To read the full-length article by Patti Kinney in the January 2008 ML edition of Principal Leadership, please go to www.principals.org/plmag.