Powerless to Powerful: Leadership for School Change
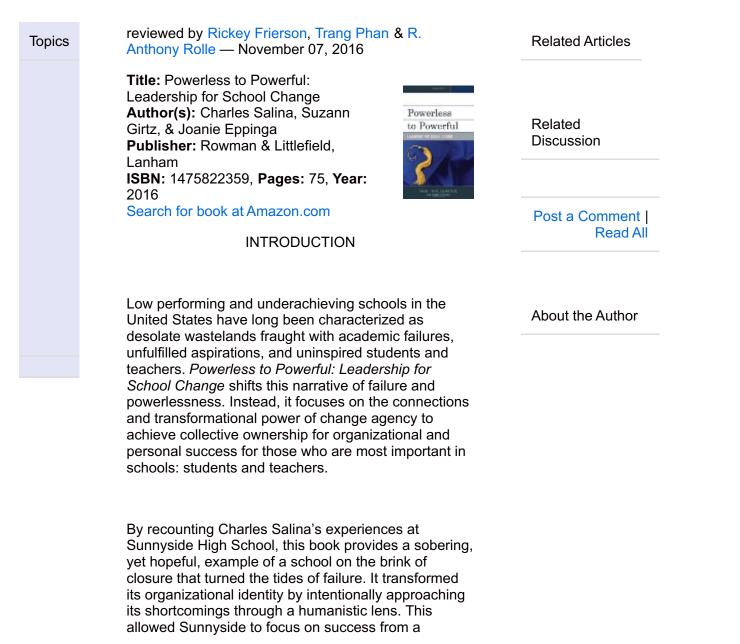
reviewed by Rickey Frierson, Trang Phan & R. Anthony Rolle — November 07, 2016

Title: Powerless to Powerful: Leadership for School Change
Author(s): Charles Salina, Suzann Girtz, & Joanie Eppinga
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INTRODUCTION

Low performing and underachieving schools in the United States have long been characterized as desolate wastelands fraught with academic failures, unfulfilled aspirations, and uninspired students and teachers. *Powerless to Powerful: Leadership for School Change* shifts this narrative of failure and powerlessness. Instead, it focuses on the connections and transformational power of change agency to achieve collective ownership for organizational and personal success for those who are most important in schools: students and teachers.

By recounting Charles Salina's experiences at Sunnyside High School, this book provides a sobering, yet hopeful, example of a school on the brink of closure that turned the tides of failure. It transformed its organizational identity by intentionally approaching its shortcomings through a humanistic lens. This allowed Sunnyside to focus on success from a

collective sense of community and partnership by its students and faculty.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Based on the title, readers may expect to learn about transformational leadership for administrators in any primary, secondary, or post-secondary school setting. Upon reading the preface, you instead quickly discover the book is about Sunnyside, an alternative school that was on the precipice of closure due to poor performance. What follows is an accounting of the lessons that Charles Salina learned by working with Sunnyside's students, faculty, parents, and community to transform it from a low-achieving and low-performing school to a state-recognized high-achieving school. The authors Salina, Suzann Girtz, and Joanie Eppinga detail the characteristics and challenges of the school and describe how they began to discern the issues and foundational causes of challenges that impeded the school's trajectory for success. Once these challenges are identified and change agents are implemented, small steps are taken to initiate change within the school. These changes come about with an investment from teachers and students for the desired changes they wished to see at Sunnyside High. Indeed, these people would become the in-house champions for improvements they deemed lacking and had more skin in the game.

ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

The book is organized into two parts: first, Driving Principles, and second, Conceptual Framework and Leadership Lessons Learned. The first part introduces how a supporting principal should behave, speak, and lead when entering a poor performing school with an objective of intentionality to affect change. The authors present salient points that apply to leadership across all levels of education. They achieve this by sharing good examples from the Sunnyside High School case study to assist readers in understanding and interpreting obstacles and challenges as they engage students and teachers themselves. Later, authors Salina, Girtz, and Eppinga share their conceptual framework, which is comprised of *academic press*, *social support*, and *relational trust*.

The chapter on academic press is meant to set realistic but high expectation of students *and* teachers. These expectations emphasize the leader's belief in

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the potential of individuals to perform the duties necessary to succeed. The authors express the importance and critical value of applying the right amount of pressure by setting high expectations to achieve breakthroughs rather than burnouts. The chapter on social support states that this type of support is created when everyone is accountable and responsible for the turnaround and success of students and teachers. The authors address social support on four levels: school-wide, teacher-to-teacher, teacher-to-student, and student-to-student. For leaders to infuse hope and transition from powerless to powerful, principals need to assure students and teachers that their relationship is founded on mutual reliance and relational trust between students and teachers, teachers and principals, and principals with their students. Relational trust is a byproduct of social support and a key to eliciting maximum effort and commitment from teachers and students.

The second part of the book details the leadership lessons learned while working on changing the culture at Sunnyside High School. The authors provide eight lessons learned from these experiences at the school. They are titled: "One-on-One is Powerful," "Intentional Actions Inspire Hopefulness," "Time is Golden," "Positive Opposites–Action Teams," "Evidence is Everything but not Anything," "If Time is Golden, then Language is Platinum," "District Office: Friend or Foe?," and "Support the Ones who Support the Work."

Each leadership lesson begins with an explanation, describes how it emerged, and is followed by suggested strategies for implementation. These lessons focus on high school settings, but are applicable to all educational levels.

REVIEWER'S PERSPECTIVES AND CRITICISMS

While *Powerless to Powerful's* target readership seems to be high school principals, the lessons discussed and the approaches to achieving success that are shared in the book may be utilized by other educational leaders. Salina, Girtz, and Eppinga appear to speak to leaders who are in high schools that are underperforming, with students who exhibit behavioral issues, and are comprised of teachers and students who have low morale and lack unity. The information shared in the "Conceptual Framework" and "Leadership Lessons Learned" chapters could be applied to any level of education and enhance leadership skills for teachers and administrators alike

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because all educators are in some leadership role while performing their job duties. Furthermore, the leadership lessons can be scaled to various positions based on the level of responsibility and demand. The book also helps identify ways in which transformational leadership can be applied within educational settings at schools, specifically those that are underperforming.

With respect to the book's formatting, it is easy to follow and written in a manner that easily engages the reader. The authors do an excellent job of highlighting key terms or phrases to aid readers in recalling important lessons or tips. However, the text does not include a section that shares the outcomes of Sunnyside High. The book's foreword mentions Sunnyside's improved performance, which ultimately led to its recognition as a high-performing school. What is not included is an explanation of how this success was measured. This exclusion makes readers wonder about the effectiveness of the skills and strategies discussed throughout the book, leaving them with questions. What impact level or change resulted from these leadership strategies? What long-lasting outcomes can be expected from the application of the leadership lessons and strategies introduced?

Overall, *Powerless to Powerful* is a good read and could serve as a primer for aspiring or new educational administrators and those seeking positions of leadership in educational settings. Seasoned educational administrators and leaders could also benefit from reading the book. Its emphasis on hands-on and inclusive approaches to leadership is a good reminder of the core values and characteristics that are needed to achieve and sustain success in schools. Indeed, the book places a greater emphasis on the merits and gains to be made from interpersonal dynamics and social support rather than bureaucratic and inefficient leadership practices that distance teachers, administrators, and students from one another.

CONCLUSION

Powerless to Powerful proposes a humanistic approach to leadership that focuses on shared responsibility among teachers, students, parents, and communities for success. The challenges that administrators and teachers face in schools with limited and inadequate resources mirror the struggles that their historically underrepresented students must learn to navigate on a daily basis. Toward this point, it

is imperative that struggling schools adopt a model that promotes partnerships and collaborations similar to Sunnyside High School.

This book should be a fixture in academic, student affairs, financial aid, and leadership offices in both secondary and post-secondary schools. It is a necessary reminder of what is important and core to the mission of education: the empowerment of students and teachers towards academic and personal success. Furthermore, the text emphasizes the importance and value of appreciating contributions from all members of the school community and community at large. Successful schools begin with successful individuals who work together with an understanding that individual victories can lead to collective gains.