

**Westlawn Middle School  
Huntsville, Alabama**

Ms. Presonia (Lynette) Alexander, *Principal*

Ms. Melissa Smith, *Turnaround Specialist and Indistar Process Manager*

**By Maureen M. Mirabito**

Some stories you hear and think, *there are neither the right words nor enough pages to tell this story right; to tell it the way that covers bare arms in goose bumps, that fills tired eyes with tears of triumph, that causes a pound in your chest that sounds like hope and admiration and belief; to tell it the way it feels when the people living the story tell it.*

This is one of those stories. This is the story of the people at Westlawn Middle School in Huntsville, Alabama, which sits in the center of the city serving the five surrounding housing projects, the homeless shelter, and is situated on a street lined with apartment complexes where families live but don't often stay. This is the story of educators, students, families, community members, and educational partners—and how they have built capacity, commitment, and relationships with minds and hearts and hands in a school that once had a reputation as “the place no one else wanted to be” but today stands proud with t-shirts and megaphones and achievement scores shouting publicly at pep rally's and privately in their meetings, “We're going to show the world.”

All 540 of students at Westlawn Middle are eligible for free and reduced lunch; more than 20 percent speak English as their second language. Many children who attend there cannot be children when they leave there—they have siblings to raise, jobs to work, bills to help pay. Mobility rates are high, particularly depending on the time of year—enrollments and withdrawals ebb and flow with the season and the employment opportunities it brings for families.

In 2012, Westlawn's achievement scores were in the bottom ten percent of the state and it was placed on the failure list. The school applied for a School Improvement Grant and selected the turnaround model that replaced 80 percent of staff and the principal. That's when Ms. Alexander was brought in.

“When I was appointed as principal to Westlawn Middle School three years ago, people wanted to tell me all kinds of stories and rumors about what it was like here, about the bullying, the fighting, the despair,” says Ms. Presonia (Lynette) Alexander, “but I tell our teachers and our students, ‘We write our own story, we get our own messages out. We don’t let rumors or misconceptions do it for us.’”

In addition to her relentless focus on improving instruction, there are two things that Ms. Alexander has done at Westlawn to forge new understandings and shared commitment in the community: Warrior Walks and Community Day.

“Because so many of our teachers were new and because we have such a high turnover of staff every year, we do Warrior Walks. We get out into the neighborhoods where our student and their families live and we talk to them and pass out information about our school that we want them to know and have. This lets our teachers—many of whom have never worked in high poverty, high needs areas—understand that when our kids come to school tired, maybe there is a reason for that. If they come to school with dirty clothes, maybe there is a reason for that. We don’t make excuses, that is not allowed, but we do it to build relationships and shape understandings and get our own messages out.”

The school also conducts a Community Day every year. This means they invite the community in to see their school, share their vision, and learn from members too.

“We have had nurses and churches participate in Community Day, we have put on performances and informational sessions. We do it to get the word out about our school but we also do it to make connections for our students and their families.”

The conversation shifts from contexts and circumstances to learning and instruction.

“There were three things we had to do right away—establish a strong leadership team, create structures for teachers to collaborate on instruction, and get student discipline under control.”

Ms. Alexander was able to bring a couple of teachers with her from her former school, people who knew curriculum and instruction, who could support her in her role

as the instructional leader, who could help establish buy-in and support for the hard work that was desperately needed.

“About twenty teachers that had been teaching at the school returned. They’d been beaten up and were exhausted. We knew we had to breath fresh air and new life into them. The rest of the teachers were brand new to the school, many new to teaching. Seven were Teach for America (TFA) candidates. The new teachers were excited and enthusiastic, but they needed training in pedagogy. I pulled together my leadership team and our first order of business was to get the discipline under control so that we could support our teachers to improve instruction and student learning.”

The district used two external providers to support Westlawn in their efforts—Solution Tree and Education Company. Solution Tree worked with the entire school to align standards, curriculum, assessments, and instruction, and to provide professional development in using formative data to continually adjust and adapt instruction to meet individual student needs. Education Company helped the leadership team to establish and implement their behavior management program.

“In the summer of my first year, we held a retreat with staff at a nearby hotel. We identified five areas that we felt were critical to turning around our school—Academics, Technology, Parental Involvement, Culture and Safety, and Professional Development. We spent a lot of time discussing what we wanted Westlawn to look like in each of those areas and what we—administrators, educators, support staff, students—would do to achieve that vision. We called it our ‘collective commitment’ and established a vision, a mission, and goals for each area. Our collective commitment is something that we talk about every week, three years later.”

Ms. Alexander believes that taking the time to talk about and identify this collective commitment with the entire learning community was crucial to building buy-in and getting everyone on board. But that was just to start.

“We knew that professional development—training our teachers and providing them with opportunities to collaborate and learn from one another—was essential to our success and meeting our goals. Once we had our collective commitment, we spent a lot of time building understanding and expectations for teaming—what teams are, what

they do, how they work, how they use data to inform instructional adjustments and professional development needs.”

The Leadership Team made instructional teaming an immediate priority as they built the schedule and looked at extended day options. In the first year, the school added an entire period for job-embedded professional development. In the second year, they made additional changes to the schedule (aligning physical education periods with instructional teaming time) so that teachers now have two hours of instructional teaming and professional development every day.

“Our teachers must grow before our students can grow.”

Westlawn Middle School’s focus on growth is evident in the way the Leadership Team talks about their journey. Their responses to questions typically start with, “Well, in the first year we did it this way, but we discovered a better way for the second year. And now in our third year, we’ve fine-tuned it even further and are doing it this way.”

I ask a question about assessments and there is no hesitation, just pure honesty and humility. Westlawn struggled with the same challenges that many states, districts, and schools struggle with in changing times: new assessments, new curriculum guides, faster pacing. The school had used one student growth model assessment the first year; the district was preparing to adopt a more rigorous, norm-referenced model in the school’s second year of turnaround.

“We saw so much growth that first year. We had the most growth of any school in the district! It was nothing for us to see our children make three- or four-years of growth in one school year. We were working so hard in our instructional teams to study the standards, develop formative assessments, identify exactly which part of the standards our students, by name, were struggling with, and then provide them with interventions to bridge those gaps. Our teachers were doing many quick, formative assessment using their clickers and first responders. We were cruising.”

Then the new assessment program was introduced.

“We faltered a little bit, I faltered. The pacing was much quicker than we were used to, than our kids were used to. The new program had us teaching to mastery and left no time for us to build up prerequisites, which we knew our students needed. We

really faced an internal battle during that period—do we stay with what we know works or do we change with the tide? We really struggled with that decision.”

Even now, you can still hear the agony of time lost in her voice. But she doesn't linger there. Ms. Alexander bounces back, like you know she will.

“We came up with a strategy that would address our student's needs but also keep learning expectations high.”

The strategy included students taking more ownership of their learning—graphing their assessment results against the standards and conferencing with their teachers to talk about their strengths and understand where they were struggling—relative to the standard.

“We used the pacing guides, broke down the learning targets, and we test those learning targets using quick, multiple assessments. Students take their result and graph them to see which part of the standard they've mastered, which they have not. This process always involves a conference with the teacher and then working in small groups, depending on which part of the standard they need enrichments or interventions in.”

If that seems an awful lot to fit in during a 52-minute period, it is. But it is not impossible and Ms. Alexander and her staff have figured out how to make it happen.

“It's been a process to get some teachers to use data and commit to small group time because it is tough to find the time. But we address it a lot in our professional development and instructional teaming time and we use a lot of peer observation so that teachers can see how other teachers make it happen, live, in their classes.”

Addressing the gaps in student learning happens fast at Westlawn. And again, the process for doing so has grown over time. In addition to small-group instruction during class time, Westlawn has scheduled daily intervention periods into the day.

“In our second year of turnaround, we hired additional reading and math intervention teachers. Depending on how students scored on our pre-test (before coming into the district) we developed individual learning plans based on the skills they needed to build and scheduled them into specific intervention courses with those teachers. “

If you're guessing they've adjusted this model in the third year, you're right.

"This year we made a big scheduling change so that the English and mathematics teachers instruct their own intervention periods with their own students. These teachers have four core classes and then two periods of interventions that they schedule with their own students. We tried our best to exact the dialogue between the intervention teachers and core teachers last year, but just couldn't get it to gel. We knew we were missing something and we could do a better job. So now, when teachers have their kids in intervention period, they know immediately what the kids need, where they are. They hit the ground running."

Early in the conversation, the Leadership Team emphasized the immediate focus on discipline and behavior management. What happens so that all of this learning and growth can occur?

"We put in a five-step behavior management plan—starts with a warning, ends with involving the principal. And we are strict with discipline; we have to be. My Assistant Principal and my Teacher on Special Assignment (aspiring administrator) really help with that. But what we've focused on and done well is building relationships with our children. We build their confidence, we believe in them when they don't believe in themselves. We dream for them because sometimes they can't see past that hour."

The team spends a little bit of time talking about the WOW cards (Warriors on Watch) that they've instituted as part of their behavior management plan.

"We started out using these reward cards with our students on probation. But it has evolved into something crazy that all kids want to participate in. It's a behavior card that the kids get daily and that each teacher initials at the end of every class if the student has had a good day. The teachers have to provide the student with a specific behavior that they observed, like, 'I really like how you raised your hand during class,' and we are discovering that the kids love that feedback from their teachers. I see them in the hallway and they stick their cards in my face and say, 'Look how I am doing!' We could not have predicted how much this would mean to the students. But they love it, they love that positive feedback from their teachers and we love to celebrate them."

Make no mistake about it, Westlawn might be all business. But they love to celebrate.

“We are a party school. We are a t-shirt wearing school. We have murals and data all over our building. It’s not about who is not teaching or who is not learning. It’s about students and their growth. If your scores aren’t where they need to be, we will help you get them where they need to be. If we’re not getting results, we’re not going to keep doing the same thing.”

Ms. Alexander is excited to talk about is Project Lead the Way, a program for students with interest in math and science. A Milken Educator Award Winner, also from Ms. Alexander’s former school, leads the program. There is no application process; it is open to all students.

“In one year, participation in that program has grown from 80 students to 150 students. Every one of those children participating in Project Lead the Way has increased their achievement scores. They get to see their learning in application. The teacher is a great science teacher and also wonderful with technology; in addition to the benefit the children receive, she does a lot of modeling and coaching in our instructional teaming and professional learning communities with other teachers. They learn from her too.”

For all of the growth that Westlawn has seen, it has not been without serious, toll-taking challenges.

“We have a lot of staff turnover. We use Teach for America candidates. We work with them and train them and they do great work. But then after two years, a lot of them leave, all of them in our case. It really is amazing that we’ve survived. But we have. We survive because we are committed and we are focused on our students. I am proudest that we always, we still hold on to what is good and right for kids. At Westlawn, we are displaying some of the best teaching practices I’ve observed in my 20 years as an educator.”

Ms. Alexander’s algebra teacher is leaving at the end of this year. Ms. Alexander recalls when she first asked the teacher to take on the advanced level course.

“We were all nervous—for our kids, to take the risk. The teacher didn’t have the confidence that she could do it. But I told her, ‘Baby, you’re all I’ve got; you’re on the map. You’ve got to do it and you can do it, and she did. We went from zero students passing the exam our first year to four passing our second year to eleven this year. We will see even more next year. Another teacher will step in and we will support him or her like we support all of our teachers. We will get it done and do it well.”

If you are familiar with Indistar, then you know we talk about it as a guide for schools, something that focuses and helps the people in the school know their work, do their work. It’s the hum that runs in the background, that sound you should only hear when the voices have left for the day. So it was right that a discussion about Indistar didn’t come up until the end of this conversation because it’s presence in this school’s work was so obvious throughout it, humming in the background. As I listened to Ms. Alexander and her Leadership Team talk about leadership, curriculum, instruction, and assessment, classroom management, community engagement, and parental involvement, the indicators of effective practice ticked away inside my head.

“Our work is directly aligned with the guidance of Indistar. The indicators of effective practice are what we do. Because we have new teachers coming in each year, we are constantly striving to achieve full implementation, but we have seen so much change and growth in three years. Indistar really pulls it all together and keeps us moving.”

“Every week, each leadership team member has an opportunity to talk about their progress toward the indicators of effective practice that we are addressing. We have to sometimes cut them short because they are so excited and enthusiastic about what their area is doing related to the indicator. We have rich discussions and sometimes we can’t get to it all—and that’s meeting for 1.5 hours *every week*.”

The team shares one last reflection before sharing what’s on their mind for the future.

Ms. Melissa Smith, Turnaround Specialist and Indistar Process Manager, shares, “I have made a list of the community agencies that we’ve invited in and partnered with over three years to support our students and it is just incredible to me to see that list go



from nothing to pages and pages long. When we first started, we had community members say to us, ‘we haven’t been invited into this school for more than seven years.’”

Ms. Alexander takes a turn, “When I think back on what people said we would face here, it’s unimaginable. It is nothing like that. The community was ready. The students were ready. We are strict about our expectations for behavior, for performance, for how we treat one another. We tell everyone, if you’re going to be here, you’re going to have to work hard. We aren’t 100 percent where we want to be, but we are in a really good place.”

Now, the school is preparing for rezoning resulting from a desegregation lawsuit in Huntsville. It used to be that the middle school students all went to the same high school; now, they will be divided up among five different high schools. This change means uncertainty to the adults and the students at Westlawn.

“Academically, our students will be fine. But we are so focused on relationships and knowing what each of our students need, we don’t want them to be lost emotionally. We have churches come in and give kids backpacks full of food for the weekend because they are home alone, raising their brothers and sisters. We do everything we can to get them the support they need to survive when they leave here. We are working with the district to see that support continue in their high schools.”

Another change resulting from the rezoning: enrollment at Westlawn will shrink from approximately 550 students to 300.

“I tell my teachers with 300 students, we can touch every one of them. That was hard to do with 550. We will continue to improve teacher practice and instruction. We will continue to see learning gains among all of our students. We will continue to build the capacity of our staff to lead and support other teachers. Our growth will continue. And we will touch every single child.”

If you had told someone five years ago that a family had moved to Huntsville just so their children could attend Westlawn Middle School, they probably would have thought you were crazy. Well, you’re not.

Because that is exactly what is happening.