

## **Praise for Allan R. Bonilla's *I'm in the Principal's Seat, Now What? The Story of a Turnaround Principal***

*I'm in the Principal's Seat, Now What?* by Dr. Allan Bonilla is the kind of book that appears once in a decade. Bonilla became the principal of a large failing school in Dade County, Florida, succeeded in turning the school into an exemplary school, remained in that school for fourteen years, and tells his story through evidence-based examples of team building, school culture, principal visibility, and so much more. This book will appeal to any school administrator interested in leadership and practical options for helping a failing school become better, making a gifted school better, and anything in between. It is destined to become a landmark book.

Mark F. Goldberg, PhD, Education Writer and Book Editor  
Austin, TX

In this immensely practical and powerful book, Dr. Allan Bonilla avoids the typical slogans about school culture and instead provides readers with the hard truths of leadership. Although Bonilla is a successful turnaround school leader, this book is valuable for leaders of high-performing schools as well as those in need of significant change. Moreover, both new and experienced leaders will benefit from the relentless emphasis on human connections in these pages. I particularly appreciate the author's iconoclastic approach to leadership visibility as he demonstrates that visibility in the lunchroom, hallways, and sidewalks is as important as visibility in the classroom. Looking through the eyes of the student, Bonilla appeals to leaders to make a human connection, preferring relationships over checklists and impact over appearances. Finally, this book provides an impressive mandate for the support of elective subjects, including arts and athletics, to save students from academic failure. Bonilla poignantly reminds us that electives are not a competitor for academic achievement, but a necessary support for them. The "Afterthoughts and Reflections" at the end of each chapter make this an ideal book for faculty book studies. I hope that it will generate vigorous discussions, constructive controversy, and as the author suggests, a few tears, all in the pursuit of a better understanding of helping our students.

Douglas Reeves, PhD  
The Center for Successful Leadership  
Denver, CO

This book is sure to be a must-have for every beginning and experienced principal. With Allan's experience as a successful principal in a struggling school, combined with his knowledge of leadership coaching, readers will gain inspiration and solid strategies to be equally successful.

Karla Reiss, Education Consultant  
Certified Professional Coach and Corwin Author  
President, The Change Place, LLC  
Boulder, CO

As a veteran of twenty-one years in the principalship, I recommend this work to new and even seasoned principals who wish to continue to grow professionally. This is a thought-provoking work—one from which we can all learn.

David G. Daniels, High School Principal  
Susquehanna Valley Senior High School  
Conklin, NY

*I'm in the Principal's Seat, Now What?* provides a realistic, relevant view of how to be a principal in a changing environment. The power of the ideas and strategies is seen in the success of the school! This book is a must-read for those studying to be a principal or newly placed in a principalship.

Dr. Elizabeth J. Lolli, Superintendent  
Monroe Local School District  
Monroe, OH

*I'm in the Principal's Seat, Now What?* is a structured recipe for what matters most in school turnaround. The significant strategies are a visual road map for leading change and providing a quality education and high achievement for all students.

Suzanne Link Gimenez  
Retired School Turnaround Principal  
Devonshire Elementary  
Charlotte-Mecklenburg School System  
Charlotte, NC

It has been a privilege and pleasure over the past two years to listen to Allan as he shared with me his dream of writing a book that would assist in the transformation of low-performing schools. I quickly realized how much value this book would be to leaders of the many low-performing schools I was visiting as a turnaround consultant. I look forward to recommending this book to all my clients!

Mike Cave, MEd, School Turnaround Specialist  
and Certified Educational Leadership Coach  
Dripping Springs, TX

*I'm in the Principal's Seat, Now What?* is a practical yet powerful book that provides valuable insight into time-tested principles needed to turnaround any institution of learning. This back-to-basics book is designed to help school leaders create a culture of academic excellence.

Eric Acosta, EdS, Principal  
Miami-Dade County Public Schools  
Hialeah, FL

As a rookie administrator, I was placed under the supervision of Dr. Bonilla. I quickly learned that creating a positive culture, establishing a mission of academic success, and being visible are essential keys to being an effective school leader.

Dr. Bonilla uses simple and pragmatic approaches to organizational leadership that promotes universal buy-in from all stakeholders. His experience and on-the-job strategies should be a guide for all school and/or district administrators.

Manuel Ferrer, EdD  
The Education Doctor, Inc.  
Ft. Lauderdale, FL

In his book *I'm in the Principal's Seat, Now What?*, Dr. Allan Bonilla has done a masterful job of depicting responsibilities and duties that a school principal faces on a daily basis in the performance of his or her duties. I consider this book a must-read for every aspiring school principal who wishes to gain an insight into the role that he or she will play as a school principal.

Dr. Ada B. Hernandez, Retired Principal  
Miami Dade County Public Schools System  
Interns' Supervisor for Florida International University  
Miami, FL

For ten years I've had the personal and professional gratification of closely and enthusiastically observing Dr. Allan Bonilla "walk the talk" and "be in the principal's seat" at Palm Springs Middle School in Miami. As his consultant on instruction, curriculum, and student learning, I found that his leadership engendered one of the most exciting and productive learning communities I've encountered as a consultant, teacher, leader, and professor. *I'm in the Principal's Seat, Now What?* is a "must" resource for every serious school leader!

Dr. Clint Bunke, National Leadership  
Consultant and Reform Specialist  
President, CDRM Corp.  
Marco Island, FL

As a professor in the graduate school of education, I find that these strategies would be an excellent addition to teacher education courses, school operations, and management.

Dr. Steven Roth, Professor  
Keiser University  
Ft. Lauderdale, FL

“If you talk the talk, then you must walk the walk.” Dr. Allan Bonilla is one prime example of an administrator who did just that in turning around a school that was at the lower rungs of a ladder and who elevated the staff and students through the prescription he set forth. The triad of relationships, collaboration, and team building are the key ingredients to changing a school’s culture. Allan orchestrated and coordinated the faculty, the staff, and all of the stakeholders so the students could achieve their best. His plan was carried out daily by being visible throughout the day (morning, afternoons, evenings, and weekends) to parents, teachers, students, and community leaders, and I saw this as one of Dr. Bonilla’s assistant principals. It is a prescription that will work at any school, any business, or any place where teamwork is the key to success. The principles Allan sets forth are the key ingredients for success in any setting where people working together can achieve anything if they work as a team. I, for one, am proud to have been a part of the success that Dr. Allan Bonilla achieved through his vision many years before this educational trend came into being.

Howard Popowitz, Retired Administrator  
Miami-Dade County Public Schools  
American Book Services  
Pembroke Pines, FL

*I’m in the Principal’s Seat, Now What?* is a must-read for all current and aspiring school site administrators. The book focuses on developing and implementing effective strategies that will transform schools from ordinary to exemplary learning institutions. The book was authored by Dr. Allan Bonilla, who distinguished himself serving as principal of one of the district’s most challenging schools. Dr. Bonilla is recognized as an effective principal, having received the Principal of the Year distinction from the nation’s fourth largest school district.

Delio G. Diaz, Executive Director  
Dade Association of School Administrators (DASA)  
Miami, FL

Dr. Bonilla’s book is a true and refreshing account and how-to guide. His extensive experience and knowledge result in a powerful combination that guarantees achievement and educational excellence.

Martha Montiel, Administrative Director  
Education Transformation Office (ETO) at the  
Miami-Dade County Public Schools  
Miami, FL

The how-to guide, coupled with practical experience, adds authority to the author’s voice. With essential questions at the end of the chapters, this work will provide a thoughtful and compelling read for new and veteran administrators alike.

Rick Yee, Principal  
McAuliffe School  
Saratoga, CA

The theme of visibility presented has already challenged my thinking and provoked reflection on my current and previous practice. It has helped me to see gaps and holes that may have been there. This text would support my work with principals in helping them to see these as key traits/practices.

Arnna Graham, Leadership Coach  
Vanderbilt University  
Nashville, TN

I am taken by Allan's approach to learning and leadership. He recognizes that culture matters—a lot—and he offers specific strategies to help everyone in a school learn and grow.

Thomas R. Hoerr, Author and Columnist  
Head of the New City School  
St. Louis, MO

*I'm in the Principal's Seat, Now What?* provides a practical guide for building a school on the vision that each student matters. Given the right organizational structure and climate, teachers will take ownership of problems; will implement proven, practical solutions; and will grow from good to great when they are supported by their principals. Middle grades and high school principals serving in low-performing, challenging schools will gain great wisdom and insight for creating a high-touch, high-performance culture for students and teachers that will result in improved outcomes in attendance, performance, and student engagement. This book provides a vision for making parents a partner in the process, celebrating student and faculty growth experiences, and building healthy competition.

Dr. Gene Bottoms, SREB Senior Vice President  
Founder and Director, High Schools That Work  
Atlanta, GA



**I'm in the Principal's  
Seat, Now What?**





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The Story of a Turnaround Principal

Allan R. Bonilla, EdD





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# Preface

## Turnaround Success

It was my pleasure to have served as principal of a large urban middle school in the nation's fourth largest school district for some fourteen years. During those years, my faculty and I were able to transform a failing and unwanted school into one that was sought after, even by those from outside our attendance zone. The needs of at-risk students were met through a program that reduced the drop-out rate to a point at which it was recognized in a national Harvard University study. The daily attendance rate went from thirty-eighth to first in a district with fifty middle schools. Student achievement on standardized testing increased to the level of A as rated by the Florida Department of Education. Gifted student enrollment increased sufficiently to provide for a complete Gifted team at each grade level as well as a Gifted class for English language learners.

## Leadership Focus

The contents of this book will assist a school leader in reaching success through the building of a positive school culture. Collaboration and team building and relationships form the foundation for what will bring about student achievement and teacher effectiveness. As I go about my current work as a conference speaker and leadership coach, I realize more and more that today's school leaders are being distracted from what is truly important in creating a great school. It was the German poet and philosopher Johann Wolfgang von Goethe who said, "Those things which matter most should never be at the mercy of those which matter least." In this book, I talk about what

matters most: being a visible leader, delegating to promote collaboration, celebrating the successes of all, involving parents in a meaningful way, creating a positive culture, incorporating a coaching style, and much more.

## **Thoughts for All**

Although this book could be considered a “how-to” volume for new principals and assistant principals, it is intended not only for this segment of education leaders. This is a book to be read and discussed by veteran principals, district educators, administrative teams, school board members, and, I hope, college students studying educational leadership and administration. The strategies presented are equally relevant for high schools, middle schools, and elementary schools, and for traditional as well as charter schools. *I'm in the Principal's Seat, Now What?* is based on evidential experience and supported by material from the world of business. Successful business practices can and should be emulated by school leaders.

## **Let's Create Exemplary Schools**

Without a doubt, the ideas outlined in this book will help the reader create an exemplary school, which should be the goal of all principals. An exemplary school is one in which everyone is successful. Teachers are highly effective, motivated, and happy; students are meeting with success, whatever their levels; support staff are appreciated and contributing; and of course community involvement is evident. I was most fortunate to be recognized as Miami-Dade County's Principal of the Year for doing exactly what is discussed in this book. This award is presented annually, after a rigorous round of school-site visits and interviews, and goes to only 1 principal among the more than 300 K–12 principals in the district.

Each chapter focuses on a significant strategy: the power of visibility, delegating the smart way, success through collaboration, and more. Not only are actual examples and stories embedded within each chapter, but “hands-on” activities are provided at the conclusion of each chapter. Such things as a visibility checklist and a delegation chart and study questions will offer useful follow-up. In addition to business references from companies such as Google, Apple, and Facebook, there are links to useful references found on the Internet.

## **Why Is This Book Different, Unique, and Thought Provoking?**

- It is written by an educator who spent forty years as a teacher, counselor, assistant principal, and principal, and it is based on real-life, evidence-based situations supported by leadership examples from the world of business. Understanding the leadership needed to create an exemplary school is key.
- It contains solutions to situations that are continually being faced by educators today, such as scheduling options, teacher retention, attendance improvement, at-risk student programs, facilitating change, promoting professional learning communities, parental involvement, teacher observation, and other challenges.
- The ideas presented can be immediately implemented by a leadership team at any given school regardless of its size or location or student population demographics. This is a true turnaround success story, accomplished without having to terminate faculty or close the school down.





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# Acknowledgments

There would be no story to tell were it not for the faculty members of Palm Springs Middle School, who so warmly welcomed me to their school at the start of this journey. They were eager for change and welcomed the opportunity to form what became a collaborative and caring family. To this day, some ten years after my departure, we are still connected and communicate regularly.

I was fortunate to work with three superior assistant principals as we began our journey. Booker Long was one of the most diplomatic individuals I ever had the pleasure of working with. Booker was a master at handling parental concerns. Howie Popowitz set us on the right curricular road and was my right hand in many ways. Melissa Wolin, our rookie assistant principal, took over the reins of our large exceptional education department and our program in English as a second language.

I may not have thought of writing a book on our turnaround success had I not met Arnis Burvikovs, executive editor at Corwin. It was Arnis who heard me speak at an ASCD convention and asked if I might be interested in preparing a book proposal. The years have passed since that meeting, and thoughts have become reality.

I owe a great deal of gratitude to Mark Goldberg, PhD, whom I met shortly after my arrival in Austin, Texas. Mark and I had much in common, as we were both principals and had New York backgrounds. However, he was the author of several successful books on school leadership, and I was not. Mark became my mentor and walked me through the process of submitting a book proposal and then getting started on the actual writing.

My coaching colleague, Mike Cave, a former principal in the Dripping Springs, Texas, school district, has been my coach for several years and has been with me since the start of my book-writing goal setting. I thank him for being my thinking partner.

I received a very pleasant and surprising invitation when the current Palm Springs Middle School principal, Eric Acosta, called and asked me to be present at a special school faculty meeting. Needless to say, it was very special to reunite with many of the staff who were present from the beginning and to meet the newer faculty members. It was during this visit, which included a tour of the school with classroom visits, that I realized I had another chapter to write, the final chapter, "Where We Are Now."

A tremendous expression of appreciation to my wife Pat, a teacher herself, who has always stood beside me and encouraged and supported all my endeavors and provided me with additional supporters in my two sons, Jeff and Scott, and their wives, Lisa and Trisha.

Last, what gives me hope for the future of education is watching the learning taking place through the eyes of my three grandchildren, Jack, Kate, and Myles.

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# About the Author

**Dr. Allan R. Bonilla** was born in Orlando, Florida, a bit before Disney, and was raised in New York City, where he graduated from Forest Hills High School. After a brief stint at Hofstra College in New York, as well as a year and a half at California State Polytechnic University in Pomona, Allan returned to his home state of Florida, where he earned his BA from the University of Miami. Not knowing what career direction to take, he was told that Miami was in great need of teachers, and so there began a career in education that lasted forty years.

Teaching both English and Spanish at the middle and high school levels led this educator to a role as a counselor, after earning a master's degree at Barry University, and then to assistant principal positions in a half dozen middle schools. Feeling that he had the ideas and beliefs that could lead to creating successful schools, Allan pursued his doctorate in education at Nova University and was appointed principal of one of the largest and most troubled middle schools in the fourth largest school district in the nation.

Dr. Bonilla was indeed a "turnaround principal" and was recognized for his school's accomplishments by being selected Principal of the Year among a field of over 300 K–12 principals. Upon retiring from the Miami-Dade school system, Allan became a mentor to principals in the district and also a trainer with the Southern Regional Education Board.

Upon relocating to Austin, Texas, Allan became one of the first educators in the state to be trained through the Region X111 Education Service Center as a leadership coach. He has worked with some fifty educators, assisting them in working through difficult situations, achieving goals, and celebrating their accomplishments. In addition to coaching, Allan is a frequent speaker at state and national conferences, including those of ASCD, the National Association of

Elementary School Principals, the National Association of Secondary School Principals, High Schools That Work, National Charters, Texas Charters, and Florida Charters. He is also a faculty member of the National Principals Leadership Institute in New York City.

Allan's family includes his wife, two sons and their wives, and three genius grandchildren. Spare time, if any, is taken with reading to keep current with the changes and latest developments in the world of education.

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