



Dr. Yvonne Chan is the Principal of the Vaughn Next Century Learning Center in Los Angeles which serves 1,500 PK-8<sup>th</sup> grade students living in poverty. She has been profiled by *Time* magazine, *Prime Time Live*, *Good Morning America*, *National PBS*, *Education Week* and many others. Her degrees include a B.A. in foreign languages from UCLA, a M.A. in special education from California State University, Northridge, a doctorate in education from UCLA, and post-doctoral in computer science. In addition to being a school principal, she is also an adjunct professor at UCLA and California State University. Dr. Chan is a Commissioner of the Los Angeles City Commission for Children Youth and Families. She also serves on the Board of Public/Private Venture in Philadelphia, the World Class Schools Foundation in Florida, the California State University Advisory Board, Consortium for Policy Research in Education, and the College Board-Curriculum Advisory Committee in New York. She was awarded the National Educator Award by the California State Department of Education in 1991. She was interviewed before her lecture to the Frontier Centre for Public Policy in Winnipeg on Monday, November 8, 2004.

**Frontier Centre: Your school, the Vaughn Next Century Learning Centre, serves students from disadvantaged backgrounds. What challenges does that imply?**

**Yvonne Chan:** Serving disadvantaged students means that you definitely need to put in a whole lot more supportive services, you need to be much more comprehensive in delivering the services beyond instruction. I am talking about health care, mental health and you definitely also need to work with your teaching team to be sensitive to this group of students and be resilient in the on-going, long-term plan with them.

**FC: In spite of those difficulties, the centre has rapidly improved student achievement. How did you accomplish that?**

**YC:** We accomplished this by turning the school into a high-performing school with a high-performing group of professionals. That means that the teachers are taking responsibility for student learning – with no excuses. That means that the parents are also partners with the school and work with a lot of out-of-school barriers. That means that various government, profit and non-profit agencies are linked with the schools to provide this very comprehensive service that is beyond the four walls.

**FC: Do you think that the learning industry has dumbed itself down over the last generation? Is it expecting too little of children?**

**YC:** I do believe that we have lowered our standards, just because of our perception that children from disadvantaged homes are destined to fail, or because we have so little confidence in ourselves as professionals that we couldn't beat the odds. Therefore, by working with a whole network of schools that focus on the disadvantaged, youth and their families have time and time again proven that with the support, the knowledge -- the right attitude really -- and the will-power to come together, we definitely can meet, if not all the challenges, at least a substantial number of them.

**FC: You are currently using a form of pay based on performance to reward successful teachers. How does it work?**

**YC:** The performance pay is based on a standard-based teacher evaluation with very clear expectations. It is not

merit pay. Teachers are guaranteed a base pay just for showing up, and then each one of them will have equal access to earnings based on what they know and what they do and what's expected. What they know and what they do is very clearly defined, developed by the teachers, described by the teachers, written by the teachers. Evaluation takes place through peer review, self-reflection and administrative assistance, so there are three groups of people who come up with a very, very fair and valid status about what the teacher's standing is and what are the ways in which to improve. It has become a growth process in which teachers become learners, just like the kids.

**FC: Teachers unions typically oppose merit pay. What is the difference between merit pay and performance pay?**

**YC:** Merit pay is when you have a pot of money and teachers will have to compete against each other so there will be winners and losers. It becomes competitive, it may generate ill feelings and that I understand is what a lot of people are against.

What we have is called performance pay, meaning that it is not competitive. Everybody can win, and if you are in team schematic, just like in private businesses, then everybody will help everybody to reach the best standard because you all want to be winners. Of course, the subjectivity is taken away by having a very clearly defined document with standards that define what a beginning teacher looks like, what a proficient teacher can do and what exemplary teachers should be doing. We compensate them based on their status.

**FC: What testing systems are in place to assess whether students are learning?**

**YC:** For us, assessment includes testing, observation, as well as daily records and professional judgment. So testing is one-third of a big assessment tool. What we do is do the mandatory state testing for every grade level, we also participate in the national ranking of schools under "No Child Left Behind," but meanwhile we have our internal system that looks into the student work, looks at the approach to tasks, analyzes the errors, gives a pop quiz or open-ended reflective inquiry-based questions every single week. The goal is for us to see whether we can utilize

these assessments not just to assess what students have learned but to improve instructional delivery. So it will be a nice monitoring and internal system with checks and balances, which will lead to better teaching, better teaching will lead to the next step of assessment, and the circle becomes a part of the equation.

**FC: Widespread testing was eliminated in Manitoba in 1999. Would that not cause a problem for your performance-based schooling model?**

**YC:** The elimination of standardized testing is the elimination of assessment which includes testing. You have to have some objective form. Without it, it would just take the entire circular and effective instructional system apart because how would you know that you have reached your goal? I mean, we work so hard to make sure that at every single grade level students will learn certain skills and knowledge. You need testing which correlates and verifies observation as well as the teacher's judgment on report cards. You cannot have the objective observation/judgment without really hard data.

**FC: How do you respond to the traditional criticism that testing causes teachers to teach to the test?**

**YC:** If you focus on teaching kids knowledge and skills and if the knowledge and skills are aligned to what they will be tested on, it is really a non-issue. The kids will do o.k., the kids will do fine, the kids will do well actually. So, it is a natural phenomenon, you don't teach to the test, you teach what they are supposed to learn and the test will take care of itself.

**FC: Do you have some benchmark comparing where you were at the beginning of your adventure to where it is now, indicating that Vaughn has dramatically improved its performance? Do you have test results?**

**YC:** Yes, we definitely have a benchmark. Back in 1990, even at that time, without any hard-data testing, we know by dropout rate, by attendance, by the fact that the kids have been retained, we know by the fact that kids were not learning English. But by the time 1993 comes, we have hard data, which is the statewide data. From that point until now it is like the Phoenix out of the ashes. I mean we are outperforming schools that are not serving disadvantaged kids like ours and we went on to win the national Blue Ribbon which is the highest recognition in the nation and for a school like ours, which is against all odds. It took over ten years, but we certainly have improved not just achievement but the well-being and the social skills of these kids.

**FC: What levels of teacher satisfaction are you experiencing?**

**YC:** Based on what university research studies indicate, our teachers are very satisfied with being a professional at Vaughn. We have significantly reduced mobility or teacher leaving, we have increased the number of applicants, and also -- based on an anonymous teacher surveys and random teacher interviews completed by the University of Wisconsin in Madison over five years using us as a case study -- that definitely the morale is high, the buy-in is very high, the feeling of ownership and commitment is very high.

But all-in-all it is a feeling of confidence. They are confident with each other and they are confident of their skill levels and they are confident in the school.

**FC: What happens to a teacher who is not successful with the Vaughn Centre students?**

**YC:** We believe that adults, like kids, go through developmental levels and some can learn to be more proficient. In our system, we identify with the novice teacher who doesn't have the skills or the very senior teachers who are just feeling kind of "burnt-out." We provide all types of resources to help them, which include a substitute release, observing another, having peer coaching, having a mentor, going to conferences and workshops and more planning time. We are talking about 17 different things, and if teachers are still not being moved from below basic to at least basic or from basic to proficient over this 6-9 month period, then we do sit down with them - - although they do have due process in terms of employment as we are a public school -- and suggest that maybe teaching is not their calling. If there are career changes sometime, we do help them with that.

**FC: The Vaughn Centre is a charter school. What does that mean? Is it still a public school?**

**YC:** Vaughn is a conversion charter school. We are a public school receiving government funding, we don't charge tuition, it is non-sectarian, we are in the same neighbourhood taking kids directly from the neighbourhood with a geographic boundary -- we are public servants. The only change is school culture is due to the structural change, due to the flexibility we are given by the school board and by the state legislation in exchange for a higher standard. We are definitely a public school that provides equal access and equity to disadvantaged students which we couldn't do before.

**FC: Why is it doing a better job with the hardest cases than the regular public schools which preceded it?**

**YC:** I think we have proven that increased autonomy together with increased accountability results in increased student achievement. That is a charter school model and that is a model of self-help and self-sufficiency regardless of what sector you are in, and definitely in the public sector.

**FC: Reports suggest that students from disadvantaged backgrounds often come from dysfunctional families. How then do you engage the neighbourhood and the community as alternatives to poor parenting? Does it really take "a village to raise a child"?**

**YC:** It does take a "village" to raise a child but you don't have to have everybody who is well educated, totally 100% committed to be a "villager". The same as kids' learning and teachers' learning, families also go through developmental levels in terms of child development and parenting. You may have some who are not ready to be fully engaged in the students' activities, so what we do as a school is to be open to these families. First of all, we identify them as "non-caring" so what do you do, leave them alone? No, we don't. Rather, it is, how are we going to pull them together? For example, we go to McDonald's at night

– meet them outside of school, instead of calling them to come for a meeting -- and we actually will meet them on weekends in the laundromats. We go to swap meets to have a conference and we do home visits.

**FC: How much hostility have you faced from teachers' unions and public school boards?**

**YC:** In the very beginning, we faced tremendous hostility. However, we earned their respect because under our system we have more union, dues-paying members and also on a lot of the policy and initiatives we did the ground work. What was us yesterday, is them today.

**FC: What about school boards? Do we still need them?**

**YC:** Not really. But we still need some kind of accountability mechanism. The school has to be accountable to some group. It could be a university; it could even be some other community organization like the Rotary Club.

**FC: Public education used to be the great leveler, providing children from poor backgrounds with the opportunity to significantly improve to their economic prospects. Do you agree with that?**

**YC:** Absolutely, I am a product. And right now I have the responsibility to make sure that the taxpayers' money is spent effectively and that the Constitution and our belief in equity is maintained by providing an effective education for these disadvantaged children. It's a basic civil right.

**FC: You increased the school year. Why?**

**YC:** Our children need more learning opportunities, especially the ones they are not getting them in the neighbourhood or not being able to get them from families because of their economic circumstances. So we lengthen it and have school go until six o'clock, beginning at 7:50 a.m. with regular school until 2:45 p.m., and then the after-schools clubs pick it up until six o'clock.

The school year started as a traditional public school with 163 school days, and then 180 and from 180 it is at 200 now. They do that in China, they do that in Japan.

**FC: And the teachers bought into that?**

**YC:** The teachers again feel ownership, the school is theirs, they are self-employed and if they put in the energy they have also to gain.