A Promise to Renew

An award-winning series from *The Hechinger Report*

Sara Neufeld
Contents

Introduction
Foreword: Children Vanishing
Chapter 1 The Education of Principal Glover
Chapter 2 A New Teacher Class
Chapter 3 Reform Reincarnated
Chapter 4 Crossing the Tracks
Chapter 5 Nurturing the Neediest
Chapter 6 Schooled by Substitutes
Chapter 7 A Race Against Time
Chapter 8 Try and Try Again
Chapter 9 Up in the Air
Chapter 10 Family Matters
Chapter 11 Turning a Corner
About Sara Neufeld
About The Hechinger Report
Introduction

On April 19, 2012, I took the train from New York City to Newark for what was essentially a casting call.

Newark’s new superintendent, Cami Anderson, had agreed that a team of reporters could spend a year trailing one of eight long-struggling schools she had just targeted for intensive reforms. That Thursday, I was supposed to visit four of these so-called “renew schools” with John Mooney of NJ Spotlight and Nancy Solomon from WNYC Public Radio to determine where we would do our project. We needed a principal who would make a compelling character and give us an uncensored view of school operations.

John picked me up at Newark Penn Station that morning and drove to the corner of Quitman and West Kinney streets. He was a veteran local education reporter, and as we got out of his silver Volkswagen Passat and met up with Nancy, he said he had once witnessed gunshots fired out of two cars a block away, seeing their windshields shattered as he drove onto the sidewalk to avoid potential crossfire.

And so I braced for chaos as I walked through the doors of Quitman Street Renew School for the first time. I had seen the test scores, and they were dismal. After nearly a decade covering public education for daily newspapers in California and Maryland, I thought I knew what a failing school looked like.

I was wrong.

Quitman’s halls were relatively quiet, the walls hand-painted in bright colors with Disney and Dr. Seuss characters. In the office, we met Principal Erskine Glover, a tall man with long dreadlocks and a short tie whose sincerity was immediately apparent. Yes, he was open to being followed for the next academic year — assuming he was still in his job; he was at the time re-interviewing with Superintendent Anderson. Glover thought the outside scrutiny would keep him and his staff on their toes and provide an opportunity for reflection on their practices. Some of the teachers might not like it, he said, but some of the teachers might not be sticking around. A key feature of the reform was giving carefully-selected principals the authority to handpick their own staff. The challenge at Quitman was assembling a team capable of getting students learning, not just occupied with busywork.

The meeting seemed serendipitous when I realized that Quitman shared a parking lot with Samuel L. Berliner, a now-closed school for students with behavioral disabilities. During my years at The Baltimore Sun, I had spent 18 months on a series about Baltimore schools chief Andrés Alonso, who began his teaching career at Berliner and ended up adopting one of his students there. A few months after that series ran in 2009, I volunteered to be laid off from the newspaper because after a brutal round of staff cuts, I thought I would not have the opportunity to do such in-depth work again. I was just finding my way back to journalism at the time of the Quitman visit, and as a new freelancer for The Hechinger Report, my involvement in the project was not confirmed beyond the first installment. Still, it felt in some way that the universe was giving me a chance to pick up where I left off.
John, Nancy and I briefly stopped by another school that day as a formality, but it didn’t matter to me that the principal never came out to meet us. I was sold on Quitman.

Erskine Glover was reappointed soon thereafter, and as John and Nancy became consumed with the daily responsibilities of their news organizations, the bulk of the reporting and writing on the Quitman project fell to me. I stayed with it for nearly three years.

If Quitman had been what I first expected — a school where everything was going wrong — I don’t think I would have found it such an interesting place. Instead, I was captivated by the story of adults working incredibly hard, sometimes with very little to show for it, and with a huge number of demands competing for their attention. For the children, poverty produces a daily barrage of distractions and crises, and I saw students served in ways that will never be reflected in their test scores. I wrote about a special education teacher who ate lunch with her students to help them acclimate and socialize. One day I watched Glover check in repeatedly with two young brothers just back to school after their mother’s murder. I learned about a boy who ran away from home but continued reporting to class every day for a week before school officials were alerted that he was missing; Quitman provided the one safe haven in his life.

Over time, as Glover’s trust in me grew, I found myself with access that far exceeded my hopes when the project began. I worked hard to tell fair and accurate stories so as not to violate that trust. But I was a journalist there to tell the truth, not to sugarcoat it, and that would inevitably result in conflict. I am deeply grateful to Glover for allowing me to keep coming back despite criticism of some of my articles by his bosses and staff. The most significant backlash came after an installment about several teachers quitting midyear, since it directly questioned the core of the reform strategy.

During the final year of the project, I felt my perspective change as I experienced a major life change: becoming a mother. During my pregnancy, I became particularly interested in the individual lives of Quitman students. I used to say that the series could continue until I had told all 600 of their stories, but I ended up selecting two sixth-graders to follow, since middle school is a pivotal time when a life could go in any direction. One student was having more academic success than the other. I thought often about how much their families and the school had invested into them, with the outcome so uncertain. On my first trip back to Quitman after my son’s birth, when he was eight weeks old, I stood in the hall struck by the basic reality that each child is to someone what my baby is to me.

As you’ll read in the pages ahead, a lot at Quitman has gotten better since 2012. But much still needs to change — particularly outside the classroom, where violence and drug addiction are all too common — before the students there are afforded the same opportunities that my son will have growing up in a middle-class home. This is a glimpse into their reality.

— Sara Neufeld, March 2015
Foreword:
Children Vanishing

Eighteenth Avenue School was shut down after years of declining enrollment and lackluster academic performance. (Photo: Amanda Brown)

After more than 130 years in Newark’s Central Ward, the Eighteenth Avenue School didn’t open its doors to new and returning students in the fall of 2012.

The demise of the once-stately brick building is indicative of what’s happening in cities across the country: enrollment down to 250, decaying walls and infrastructure, and student test scores on the low end in a city where the norm is nothing to cheer about.

In sum, the school built in 1876 in this hardscrabble neighborhood was an easy target for Superintendent Cami Anderson, seeking to raise expectations in a district suddenly in the national spotlight.

As part of her plan, Anderson started new and “renew” schools elsewhere in the city, each with her pledge of improvement. One of them a half-mile away, Quitman Street Renew School, is the subject of this book. At least 75 former Eighteenth Avenue students were transferred there.

I first walked through the red front door of Eighteenth Avenue in the spring of 2004, when I was an education reporter at The Star-Ledger. The newspaper wanted to do a yearlong project about a struggling inner-city school, and this place certainly fit the bill.

The school was already familiar with state mandates to improve or face the consequences. After five years of test scores at the back end of the curve, it had been targeted by the federal No Child Left Behind Act.

In the early 2000s, just half of Eighteenth Avenue fourth-graders were proficient in language arts, and a quarter were proficient in math. The numbers inched above 60 percent by 2004, but the school still earned the label of “in need of improvement.”
It wasn’t just test scores. The neighborhood was as beaten down as any in Newark. The school was just around the corner from the police precinct house where the city’s infamous 1967 riots unofficially began. Instead of new retail development and housing scattered elsewhere in the Central Ward, it was home to public housing and empty lots.

Across the street stood the new steel and glass Central High School, which made the contrast even sharper with Eighteenth Avenue, built in the aftermath of the Civil War and last expanded in 1920s. It was surviving on stopgaps and scaffolding, with some charm in its tin ceilings, but what it delivered was far from a contemporary educational experience.

The principal at Eighteenth Avenue in 2004 and through June 2012 was Barbara Ervin, a soft-spoken but stern educator. She was wary, to say the least, about having a reporter and photographer in her building for the next 10 months. But she acquiesced, saying the public needed to hear and see more than just the popular assumptions about poor schools in poor neighborhoods, especially those serving mostly black or Hispanic students.

She was anything but starry-eyed. The school was in one of the toughest sections of Newark, the poverty and crime of the nearby Felix Fuld housing project a very real part of daily life. (I witnessed this firsthand when a lunchtime trip was interrupted by gunfire between two cars at the nearby intersection of Quitman Street and Muhammad Ali Boulevard.)

“When somebody is just looking at the figures and hasn’t been here and seen what we do and the time we put in, the labels can be disheartening,” special education teacher Dorothy Zignauskas said at the time. “But you dust yourself off and get back to it.”

There was no shortage of dusting off that year. Two teachers were gone by winter and replaced by substitutes for the rest of the year. The state’s intervention team never showed after all. The new crisis counselor, who addressed the toughest student challenges, was transferred midyear and never replaced. Promised additional federal resources amounted to all of $11,000.

Boxes of new books were delivered, but half of the new computers were never wired for the Internet, at a time when one teacher pointed out that other schools in the state were going wireless.

“That’s the story of urban schools: By the time we catch up, everyone else has moved on,” teacher Greg Robinson said.
Barbara Ervin was the last principal of Eighteenth Avenue School. (Photo: John Mooney)

And when the last standardized test was scored that spring, the results were inconclusive: Some subjects were up, others down. Eighteenth Avenue would remain on the No Child Left Behind watch list for another year.

But even in a school fighting against the odds, there was rarely a sense of surrender, and the school year was marked by triumphs that didn’t show up on the state’s report cards.

The kindergarten’s class trip to an apple orchard in Freehold was the first journey outside the city for some kids. There was a growing special education population, as well as a fledgling special education class for preschoolers.

In a new third-grade class for students with emotional disorders, one particularly challenging boy attained some peace and structure. Under No Child Left Behind, families in these low-performing schools had the option to transfer to a better school, but barely any of them did.

Jump to 2012 . . .

Another reform push had arrived, bringing a few more resources and training for the school’s staff.

But one challenge proved too tough to overcome: The children simply went away. As populations dropped in cities like Detroit and Chicago, so did public school enrollments. It was a combination of factors, from the recession’s body-blow to inner cities to the growth of charter schools in places like Newark.

At Eighteenth Avenue, the vacant and ghostly Felix Fuld housing project down the block was shuttered in 2008, its windows now boarded up.

The closing of “Little Bricks” — the neighborhood name for the housing project — was meant to help disperse some of the acute poverty that can strangle neighborhoods as well as their schools. Little Bricks’ impact on Eighteenth Avenue was no exception, but the housing project also provided many of the school’s students and families.
A new park was built next door to the school, across from Central High, but that didn’t bring the children back.

The school did make some small gains in achievement. It fell out of the No Child Left Behind’s “in need of improvement” category. That didn’t count for much as each grade went down to a single classroom.

“One teacher at each grade level does not allow teachers to grow,” Ervin said. “All the research will tell you that the best way to improve teacher quality is to have teachers meet, work together, observe each other and give each other feedback.”

The news of Eighteenth Avenue’s impending closing in 2012 was hardly a surprise, not after it had been a candidate for closing the previous year as well, and the one before that. Superintendent Anderson explained there was too much working against the school to wait any longer.

Still, it was painful. Schools are often community pillars, and their closings can destabilize neighborhoods.

“This year was really, really emotional for me, because I knew this was it,” physical education teacher John Strickland said in Eighteenth Avenue’s final days. “I am not one who believes it is necessary to close schools down, especially in struggling communities.”

***

Yet as one story ended, a new one began.

Three years ago, *NJ Spotlight*, an online news outlet that I co-founded in 2010, partnered with *The Hechinger Report* and WNYC Public Radio to embark on a similar project examining a school on the brink. In this case, it was Quitman — where dozens of students from Eighteenth Avenue now traveled.

Here, too, was a cautionary lesson, a school among the lowest-performing in the city now at the nation’s epicenter of education reform.

We planned it to be a series lasting a year. Sara Neufeld stayed for three.

Principal Erskine Glover granted Sara and *NJ Spotlight* photographer Amanda Brown extraordinary access. He was frank in the challenges and hopeful about what he and his staff could change.

But he also knew so much mattered in what happened in the neighborhoods and homes around his school, in the hours before and after Quitman opened its doors, on the weekends and during the long summer heat of the city.

The recipe for renewal that Superintendent Anderson handed Glover was not revolutionary: a longer school day, more intensive instruction, more leadership autonomy. Much of it was familiar from what happened up the hill on Eighteenth Avenue. Both relied on one clear intangible, the talents and persistence of the individual in the principal’s office.
And like that old school, since sold to a charter school network, there were also many of the same challenges of struggling homes and too-stretched resources that didn’t always match that promise of change.

Sara was there every step of the way, part of the school and community herself after three years but also a keen and insightful observer who brought her own award-winning talents to bear. She has taken the reader into the lives of individuals like Glover and his staff and students that transcend the policymaking and national debates over education reform.

In the end, Quitman Street Renew School is a story of urban education that is taking place across the country. It’s the story of one school that helps explain the chances — part frustrating, part hopeful — of so many. Anyone who cares about those chances should read on.

— John Mooney
Chapter 1
The Education of Principal Glover

Erskine Glover, principal of Quitman Street Community School, tries to set an example for his students with his formal attire. (Photo: Stephen Nessen)

June 14, 2012 — Erskine Glover has interviewed for his job as principal of Quitman Street Community School three times in the past two years — undergoing a total of 15 hours of questioning. With his latest rehiring a few weeks ago, he was given authority to decide which of his teachers will return for another year with him.

Glover believes weeding out subpar instruction is the single most important action he can take to lift Quitman out of New Jersey’s academic doldrums. But the anxiety for staff members waiting to find out by Friday, June 15, if they are coming back only adds to the school’s challenges and distractions in the waning days of this academic year.

Walking the halls last week, Glover was infuriated to find one teacher sitting at the computer while students did as they pleased. At a planning session with colleagues, another teacher slammed her hands down on a table in frustration, then stepped out to catch her breath.

Quitman — a school of 493 pre-kindergartners through eighth-graders in Newark’s high-crime, high-poverty Central Ward — has become a symbol of Superintendent Cami Anderson’s new push to turn around the city’s struggling schools by closing down the worst of them and replacing staff at others. At the same time, the school has become a target of a new statewide reform effort that calls for selective staff replacement, a strategy the Obama administration is prescribing for the lowest-performing schools around the country.

Glover is trying to be humane about his impending decisions, communicating with teachers as he gets information from the district and scheduling individual meetings so people don’t learn their fates via form letter. But he is simultaneously relieved to have the power to make changes and worried that he won’t be able to go far enough if the district doesn’t allow him to make outside hires.
We can’t ignore history. This has been a low-performing school, and we have done something wrong collectively in order to get to this point,” Glover said. “That makes all of us held accountable. … So if it means reorganizing the staff, that’s what it means.”

Rebecca Mays, a pre-kindergarten teacher who is retiring this year, has seen a lot of principals come and go since her arrival in 1987. Every two years, it seems, there’s been a new curriculum. Mays can’t help but wonder how this time will be different, but she is glad Glover will be returning.

“We aren’t going to change overnight,” Mays said. “You have to give people a chance to tell if something works.”

After all the false starts and dashed hopes, will this really be Quitman’s turning point?

The prospect has Glover, 42, cautiously optimistic. As a boy growing up in Rochester, N.Y., he saw anything less than an A in school as unacceptable. On the basketball court, he could practice longer, stronger, harder to boost his chances of victory. Before coming to work in public education in Newark, Glover didn’t know losing, and he doesn’t like losing.

Yet here he is leading a school that time and again has been labeled a loser, and no matter how many hours he works and how prepared he is, some things have been beyond his ability to

PROFILE

Erskine R. Glover

Age: 42
Hometown: Rochester, N.Y.
Family: Lives in North Brunswick with wife Yolanda Kennard-Glover, who trains probation officers at Rutgers University; son, 15, in ninth grade; and daughter, 12, in sixth grade.
Education: Bachelor’s in statistics from University of South Carolina. Master’s in early childhood and elementary education from Temple University. Master’s in administration from Columbia Teachers College. Working on doctoral dissertation in early childhood and urban education at Columbia.
Career: Began as a substitute teacher in Columbia, S.C., teaching assistant in Rochester and student-teacher in Philadelphia. Has worked in Newark public schools since 1995 as a sixth-grade teacher, math staff developer and technology coordinator (Belmont-Runyon Elementary, 1995-2007); assistant principal (Peshine Avenue Preparatory School, 2007-2010); and principal of Quitman since 2010. Adjunct professor in early childhood education at Kean University.
change. Now he’s getting to make changes — with more discretion over his budget, as well as over staffing — but he’s still waiting for answers to critical questions, especially about whether he can hire from outside the district.

“I’m excited,” he said, “if I’m going to be able to really be the leader that I know I can be.”

Glover’s leadership will be subject to a lot of scrutiny in the coming year. Anderson is looking for dramatic gains at Quitman and seven other “renew schools” that will be absorbing students from six schools she’s shutting down. “When you’re stuck at 21 percent proficiency, incremental growth is just not going to get us where we need to go without losing a generation of kids,” Anderson said.

New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie wants results from the 258 schools he’s targeted for extra state help; Quitman is one of 75 in the group labeled “priority.” Quitman is also one of seven schools in the Newark Global Village School Zone, modeled after the Harlem Children’s Zone in New York City, which links education and social services.

Under the auspices of New York University, Global Village is funding everything from an extended school day at Quitman to student eyeglasses to teacher and administrator training. It, too, provides watchful eyes over Glover.

**Quitman Street Community School**

**Enrollment:** 493, grades pre-kindergarten through eight; enrollment expected to rise to 600 to 625 with absorption of students from closing Eighteenth Avenue School

**Demographics:** 93 percent of students on free and reduced-price lunch; 92 percent African American, 7 percent Latino, 1 percent other

**Budget:** $4.59 million

But Glover’s toughest evaluation is the one he’s giving himself. What would success look like to him?

“Minimum, minimum 85 percent of my students being excellent learners where they could compete with any student in the state of New Jersey and in America, where my school is ranked one of the best in the country,” he said from a conference table in what he’s turned into Quitman’s war room for data analysis. The skill comes naturally to him given his undergraduate major in statistics, but is less natural to much of his staff.

“It does not mean we pass [state tests] and we’re proficient,” Glover said. “That’s a very low bar for me.”
Yet last year, Quitman’s highest pass rate on the annual New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge, known as NJ ASK, was 49 percent in fifth-grade math. Its lowest was in fifth-grade language arts, 13.7 percent. A third of students or fewer demonstrated proficiency in eight of 12 tested areas. Scores weren’t even reported in seventh-grade language arts, where the teacher was on leave almost the entire year.

In Glover’s view, an intangible institutional complacency among staff is at the heart of Quitman’s troubles, a focus on ritual compliance rather than student outcomes. Have students been working? Yes. Learning? Not necessarily. He is investing heavily in teacher training and collaboration. Teachers interviewed said they’re doing the best they can with children who arrive with major academic deficits in one of the poorest neighborhoods in one of America’s poorest big cities.

As Glover makes decisions about who stays and who goes, he has had to ask tough questions of them.

“Education is no longer about, ‘I have a job, I’m at a school and I’ll stay there 25 years,’” he said. “It’s really about, ‘Am I the best fit for the location I’m in?’”

He asks his teachers: “Do you really want to stay at Quitman, or do you want a job? There’s a difference.”

One May afternoon on Quitman’s stuffy third floor, a dozen seventh-grade boys in royal blue polo shirts and khaki pants trickle into their English class over a 15-minute period, alternately slamming the door behind them and leaving again to use the bathroom. (Glover has divided the middle grades into single-gender classes, dubbed “kings” and “queens.”)

One boy comes in playfully hitting another; the teacher kicks them out. The students are working on the same assignments as the eighth-grade boys were the prior period: finishing opinion essays on school dress codes, “I Am” poems and color poems. (One boy’s musings on green: Collard greens on a plate / String beans that I never ate / Spinach that I’ll never take / Green soda going down your throat.)

The teacher, who is also getting ready to retire after a quarter-century there, says it’s hard to keep students’ attention at the end of the day, especially with lunch at 10:30 a.m.

One boy puts his head down on his desk, proclaiming himself finished. Another complains to the teacher: “I already did this, but I didn’t give it to you.”

“If you didn’t give it to me, you didn’t do it,” she replies.

The boy who says he’s done gets up and leaves. “See y’all at gym,” he says on the way out.

A boy in the back row walks over to a bookshelf, picks up an autobiography by the puppeteer behind the Muppet Elmo, returns to his desk and starts reading. Another boy who isn’t doing anything begins to tease him.

One in the front of the room is singing. One in the middle who has been trying to work complains about all the door-slamming. He puts down his pen and goes to talk to a friend
working on a computer at the back of the room. The screen shuffles between a grammar assignment (“Which sentence uses correct capitalization?”) and NBA standings.

At 2:05 p.m., the boys charge swiftly out the door, passing a desk where a stack of “I Am” essays from the last class is sitting.

On top is this one: *I am tall and smart / ... I worry sometimes I won’t make it / ... I understand life is hard / I say man is wrong about everything / I dream (of) becoming BIG / I try to do good at all times / I hope life doesn’t end / I am tall and smart.*

**Not All Wrong**

In evaluating a historically low-performing school, it’s easy to assume that everything needs changing. At Quitman, that would be a faulty assumption. Start with the physical appearance of the building, kept immaculately clean. It was constructed in 1963, which is practically new by Newark public school standards, even if the absence of air conditioning does present breathing difficulties for students with asthma.

Haydee Gonzalez, a tiny graying woman who teaches Spanish, took it upon herself a few years back to paint every last inch of hallway, and proved herself a remarkable artist. A palate of magenta, orange, turquoise, yellow, purple and other bright hues provides the backdrop for the walls, which Gonzalez then brought to life with Disney and Dr. Seuss characters and illustrated nursery rhymes in the preschool wing. Her favorite display is the Hawaiian vacation scene she did on the second floor. Under the title “Read Baby Read,” she painted six kids and a dog on a beach blanket hovering around a book titled *Hawaii*, a lobster, starfish and dolphin in the water beneath them. A parrot nearby is repeating, “Read, read baby.”

A Spanish teacher hand-painted the halls at Quitman. (Photo: Stephen Nessen)

The security guards at the school’s entrance as well as the secretaries in the front office offer warm, welcoming smiles, which aren’t always easy to come by in a so-called failing school. A medical clinic is on the premises, a parents’ group is small but growing and very active, and students can choose among several extracurricular offerings, including an in-school television news network. New townhouses from Newark’s redevelopment efforts line the streets surrounding the school.
“Before you wouldn’t be able to walk across the street from Quitman,” said Stephanie Ruff, the school’s parent liaison and a native of the neighborhood. Quitman does still draw from some of Newark’s toughest housing projects, where Ruff and the school social worker have been known to pound on doors at 9 p.m. to track down parents. Every day they round up kids out of uniform and drag them home to get changed.

Quitman has high attendance rates, and major disciplinary incidents are rare. Many urban public schools face a lot of teacher turnover, but not this one. Teacher turnover is perhaps too low in Glover’s opinion; he believes every staff needs a mix of stability with an infusion of new energy and ideas.

A married African-American man at a school where 92 percent of students are African American, 93 percent qualify as low-income and many don’t have dads at home, Glover knows some kids see in him a father figure. He tries to set an example, starting with his style of dress. At 6-foot-3, he wears flashy suits that typically involve a matching bowtie and vest or handkerchief, with his long dreadlocks neatly pulled back.

“For my students, I need them to see that being a well-groomed man, being a well-groomed individual, doesn’t mean you have sold out, doesn’t mean that you’re not in tune with the urban trends,” he said.

Glover sets a standard for staff in punctuality, accessibility and professional development. Despite what are often 13-hour days at school, he is enrolled in a doctoral program at Teachers College, Columbia University, in New York City, at work on a dissertation about the use of technology in math instruction for African-American males. On Tuesday nights, he teaches early childhood education as an adjunct instructor at Kean University in Union, N.J.

He doesn’t see many of his teachers working as hard as he does. He estimates that only a quarter would have the drive to work in a “no-excuses” charter school where they’d be expected to be available for families around the clock.

“They have the baggage and the teaching styles of a Newark Public Schools teacher,” he said. “And what does that mean? You’re under a union; you can get off at 3:05. You operate as if, ‘Well, I’m still gonna get my contract once I get tenure, so if my students don’t do well…””

Newark Teachers Union President Joseph Del Grosso said the principal is responsible when that type of mentality arises. “The principal is supposed to be the leader of the building and should create a certain morale,” he said. “People don’t have any reservation about blaming the teacher … When teachers fail, the principal failed.”

Joyce Henry-Faller, a Quitman reading teacher for first through third grades and the school’s union representative, said teachers are trying, but each year children show up with less developed academic skills.

Mays, the retiring pre-kindergarten teacher, believes one of Quitman’s biggest challenges is the stigma attached to the school. “Once you get a name and a reputation, it’s hard to shake it,” she said. “The children want to learn. We’ve seen children go on to college and military. There’s been some success stories here.”
Glover, who rose through the ranks of public education from humble beginnings as a teacher’s aide and substitute, was once a union rep himself. As one of only two college graduates in his entire extended family, his motivation is deeply personal. His own son and daughter attend more successful public schools in North Brunswick where they don’t have any trouble with the basic-skills tests that bedevil the children at Quitman.

Passion for his students’ welfare has carried Glover through his three job interviews and some rocky terrain during his first two years at Quitman.

The first interview was in 2010 with Clifford Janey, who named Glover principal in one of his final acts before his ouster as Newark’s superintendent.

Replacing Janey, Anderson promptly placed Quitman on a potential closure list. The struggle to save it proved a mammoth distraction for the rest of the academic year. Parents and community members mobilized — but over survival rather than academic support — and some staff worried more about their jobs than the quality of their school. In giving Quitman another chance, Anderson re-interviewed and rehired Glover.

This year, Quitman is caught in a battle between the Newark Teachers Union and the district over impending staff changes. Tenured teachers are legally entitled to a position somewhere in the district and can still collect their salaries if the district doesn’t place them. A bill in the state legislature would allow the district to eventually dismiss those who aren’t placed, but even if it passes, many technicalities are at play, and the union is poised for a showdown.

“The tenured teacher has a right to a position under the law, and we will enforce that part of the law,” said Del Grosso, the union president. He said decisions are being made “based on whether a principal likes you or dislikes you.”

As principal of a renew school, Glover had to re-interview for his job yet again this spring. He and the other renew school principals got only four weeks to assemble their staffs after their own hiring or rehiring on May 17. Although Glover will be held personally accountable for the school’s performance each year, Anderson said she expects it to take time for him to assemble a dream team.

“Over the course of the next couple years, I think he will have the authority and time and empowerment to get the team he needs,” she said. “I don’t think it is either reasonable or achievable to think that can be done in four weeks.”

The district will evaluate its budget and resources after June 15, the deadline for principals to extend offers to current Newark teachers. Glover worries about the prospect of having to fill openings with teachers who weren’t placed elsewhere rather than hiring from the outside.

“I’m really fearful,” he said, “if we have to bring back disgruntled staff members.”

Instilling Work Ethic

If Erskine Glover could rule the world, he would freeze all his middle school students at their current grade level until he could instill in them a sense of urgency and responsibility for
their work. Even more than any academic deficits, a work ethic is the critical component he sees lacking in kids who have grown up with a string of long-term substitutes and a history of low expectations.

Of Quitman’s 47 eighth-graders, Glover estimates that only seven are truly prepared for high school, and another 28 could be with the right summer school program. Many read on grade level, most don’t skip school, and only one or two have significant behavioral issues, he said. But they have yet to learn the importance of working hard. Glover said he hates — *hates* — social promotion, but is unable to require more than a handful of students in each grade to repeat the year without getting bogged down in legal challenges that would only derail his efforts.

Glover convenes the entire school in its combined cafeteria-auditorium each morning at 8:25 to set his expectations for both students and staff. On the morning of May 10, he asks for an update on a reading competition where the boy and the girl in each grade who read the most books that month will win a “monetary award” (a Barnes & Noble gift card).

“How many students so far this month [among] eighth-grade girls have read five books, THIS MONTH?” he says into a microphone. “Stand up. I want to see who’s in the lead.” A few girls stand.

“Alright, come up to the front.” He goes through each grade. “Sixth-grade girls … This month, not the whole year. I’m only on the month of May. Fifth grade, who’s your highest reader?”

By third grade, 15 students are standing in the front. “And second.” A few dozen little ones run up.

“So,” Glover says, “I’m gonna honestly say that I don’t believe you, and you have to prove it to me.” He calls up the school librarian, responsible for overseeing the project, and reminds her of the poster-size chart he requested to track the competition publicly. He asks for the highest number of books students have read so far. Only the second-graders have documented reading more than five books in the first 10 days of May.

“So let’s try this again,” he says. “You talk, I talk — that’s a problem. That’s adults and students. … I’ll wait, ’cause even adults aren’t ready. … If there’s 31 days in this month, theoretically … you could read at least 31 books. … Zero is not acceptable for readers who want to become leaders. Are we clear?”

The room is quiet.

“Are we clear?!”

“Yes!!!!”

“Alright.”

Among younger children, Glover’s aim is to train parents to demand academic excellence. The issue isn’t that they aren’t involved, he said, “but I think that parents look at safety first: ‘Is the school safe? Will my child have a good teacher in front of them who protects
the child’s safety and well being?’ And we sometimes forego — parents, and then teachers sometimes fall into this — the educational aspect.”

Last month, after children’s author Mary Pope Osborne donated copies of her 28-book “Magic Tree House” series to every third-grader in Newark, Glover threw a catered luncheon for third-grade parents to promote summer reading. It was held in the “cafetorium,” where staff and students built a giant tree house out of cardboard and construction paper.

Olivia Benders, a hairdresser, appreciated the efforts on behalf of her son. “The last principal wasn’t as excited for the kids,” she said. Her older child transferred from Quitman to a charter school a few years ago, but she’ll be bringing him back next year.

Lawrence Polen, a dad sitting two tables over with his third-grade boy, said he’s noticed a big cultural improvement at Quitman in recent years. “Back when my other son was going here, it was more a streetwise school, [with] trouble bullying,” he said. “Now they don’t tolerate that here.”

His other son also attends a charter now, North Star Academy. Asked how the two schools compare, Polen seemed taken aback, as if it were a silly question. “North Star is a tough school,” he said. “It’s more of a challenge.”

The luncheon came on the same day as a newspaper article announcing Glover’s reappointment as principal, and he used his time at the podium to address the issue.

“This is the third time in two years that I’ve had to reapply for the principalship of Quitman Street School, so there are many people who say it’s destined for me to stay here,” he said. “I don’t know if they think I’m not competent, capable — I don’t know. But what I believe is that there’s a reason I’m here. I believe that if given two more years, this school will be one of those schools that people are knocking on the doors to get into.”

Privately, Glover cites another factor he’ll use to gauge his success. The reforms need to outlast him. He lists off organizations with success ingrained into their cultures regardless of who’s in charge: IBM, Manchester United. It bothers him deeply that urban public schools in high-poverty neighborhoods don’t have that.

“If Erskine Glover leaves in two and a half years and he’s off to sitting on an island in Barbados and comes back five years later, will he still be excited about what he sees?” he asked. “If not, Erskine Glover failed.”
Percent scoring proficient or better on 2011 NJ ASK:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language Arts</th>
<th>Mathematics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>16.7%</td>
<td>18.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25.9%</td>
<td>42.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.7%</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16.3%</td>
<td>28.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Reported</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34.1%</td>
<td>31.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: New Jersey Department of Education
Erskine Glover, at a back-to-school barbecue, had a long summer interviewing teacher candidates. (Photo: Amanda Brown)

Sept. 6, 2012 — It was a fight to the finish, but Erskine Glover can honestly say he’s happy with the team of teachers who will be instructing his students this fall.

Glover, principal of what’s momentarily known as Quitman Street Renew School, had a grueling summer interviewing more than 100 candidates for instructional positions, with dozens more weeded out by a recruiter. Fewer than half of the 60 teachers greeting children when they arrive back were on staff when classes let out in June.

Research is clear that having a great teacher affects how a student performs, even years afterward. Glover went from one interview to the next fueled by his students’ dire need for great teaching. Enrollment this year is up to 530.

In picking his staff, he looked for passion, drive, and the capacity to pore over data and effectively use technology to drive instruction. He wanted teachers who could create an engaging classroom culture. He demanded an unequivocal belief that the poor, minority children Quitman serves can and will rise to great achievements, not just locally but on a global scale.

“There are a lot of misperceptions we have to deal with about this school,” the principal told his new team on the first day they assembled, “and you are the folks we have chosen to deal with those through a long, hard process.”

Glover wants every grade level scoring at a minimum 50 percent proficiency this year and by the end of next year, 85 percent. “I will never again stand up before you and say 80 percent of our children are failing,” he said, referring to Quitman’s past performance on standardized tests. But he was quick to add: “We don’t cheat. We do it the right way.”
Some of the teachers who left Quitman secured transfers to other Newark public schools, but a handful were lingering in an “employees without placement” pool where the district must pay them even if they don’t have anything to do.

Superintendent Cami Anderson said she would make use of teachers in the pool as substitutes, aides in special education classes and extra hands in places where enrollment turns out higher than expected.

The chance to entirely reshape a staff is not one that comes around often. Principals typically face limits on hiring and firing because tenured teachers have job security under union contract rules.

Anderson took a big financial gamble by allowing the principals in Newark’s eight renew schools so much liberty, since the district needs to pay all tenured teachers regardless of whether they are placed elsewhere. The renew schools are receiving additional resources in attempt to turn around years of low performance while absorbing students from other schools that were closed.

“The key to school success is making sure you have a highly selective principal and that they have as much latitude as possible to pick at team not only of folks who are really high quality and meet the criteria that they lay out but also who are a good fit for the vision and mission of the school,” Anderson said.

Building a Team

With such a rare opportunity, Glover wanted to be picky about his choices. He rejected three prospective music teachers, for example, before hiring the fourth candidate he met. At the same time, he was afraid he would be forced to take teachers no other principals wanted if he didn’t hire quickly enough.

Glover introduces Evelyn Vargas, his new vice principal, to students and parents. (Photo: Amanda Brown)

“Everybody in the pool is probably not bad,” Glover said in late July, when he had 20 hires remaining. In fact, the teachers union points out that the majority of teachers in it have received satisfactory ratings. The prospect of having to hire disgruntled or subpar staff nonetheless frightened the principal.
To fill his 36 vacancies, Glover first looked at existing Newark teachers interested in transfers. Then he and the other renew school principals were permitted to hire from the outside on a case-by-case basis with district permission for up to 30 percent of their positions.

The first week in August, he still had 12 openings, mostly in early childhood and special education: Quitman housed five self-contained classes for young children with autism and mild to severe disabilities last year. This year, since the school is absorbing the special needs population from newly closed Eighteenth Avenue School, it will have 11 self-contained classes, more than half of them serving pre-kindergarten and kindergarten.

By Aug. 13, vacancies were down to seven. By Aug. 15, it would be just two or three, assuming the district signed off on Glover making outside hires.

“If the district doesn’t approve my new hires,” he said, “it would be a major problem for me.”

Glover thought Aug. 15 was the deadline when the district would start assigning him teachers without placement, but the following week, he was still able to push though his pick for a kindergarten teacher from Orlando, Fla. By the last week in August, the district had signed off on his choice of a vice principal from the Bronx.

In the end, Glover took just one teacher from the pool — one with excellent references — for a supplementary instructional position. Two of Quitman’s previous teachers whom Glover brought up on disciplinary charges and did not want to rehire are being sent back, since they are legally required to have an opportunity to improve in their old positions before they can potentially be stripped of tenure.

Glover is grateful for the support he received from Superintendent Anderson’s administration, which approved 15 external candidates and funded a new administrative position. He brought in three teachers from Florida, one from New Orleans and three from New York state. The new staff includes a children’s book author and the founder of a nonprofit serving children of incarcerated parents. Last year’s vice principal was promoted to be the new “chief innovation officer” overseeing building operations and literacy and math programs.

Citywide, 50 percent of 1,229 instructional vacancies were filled by candidates principals chose, according to a letter Anderson sent to principals that was released by the teachers’ union. Another 20 percent were filled by principals picking from existing candidates, and 20 percent were forced placements.

“No one is more frustrated than I am that we cannot simply allow for selections made exclusively on quality and fit — but that’s not the way it works under state law,” Anderson wrote in the letter. “We did everything possible to allow for as much principal choice as possible without breaking the bank or the law.”

Tatana Pitts, 39, moved to Newark from Miami over the summer and will teach seventh- and eighth-grade math at Quitman. Pitts grew up in the Czech Republic under a communist system where “to make it somewhere, you had to push yourself harder than everyone else.” She said she is inspired to work at Quitman because “here we are in the United States where you have so many opportunities, but these kids don’t get to see it.”
To get hired — or rehired — at Quitman this year, Glover made everyone go through a group interview session where he played two videos.

The first was a clip from the HBO series “The Wire,” in which middle school students in inner-city Baltimore dominate the room as a new teacher tries to teach fractions. Colleagues later advise him that “you don’t teach math; you teach the test” and “the first year isn’t about the kids; it’s about you surviving.” Such a scenario, though fictionalized, has been all too common at places like Quitman.

The second was the true story of a middle school in Tucson, Ariz., that has successfully turned itself around. According to a student, the stereotype of failure “pushes us harder, makes us want to prove them wrong.” An administrator speaks of the “moral imperative” to give children what they need.

After the screenings, Glover divided the teachers into groups to discuss what they’d seen. The candidates with a collective sense of purpose were invited for a second round.

Rosemary Coyle, 28, from another Newark school that closed, said she was so inspired by Glover’s passion during her interviews that she “screamed and yelled” when she received her transfer papers to teach seventh- and eighth-grade social studies at Quitman. “I thought,” she said, “maybe we would have a chance to excel.”

**Staffed to Succeed**

To make a school succeed, put a highly effective teacher in every classroom. Glover has learned that a measure so simple in theory can be enormously complex in practice, particularly when hiring effective teachers first requires the removal of ineffective ones.

Tatana Pitts, who moved from Miami over the summer and will teach math at Quitman, meets students at the back-to-school barbeque. (Photo: Amanda Brown)

In May, as Gov. Chris Christie made the case for reforming New Jersey’s tenure law during a speech in Jersey City, he mentioned a public school teacher whose removal a few years back took 17 months and cost $450,000 in legal fees. Christie said that the teacher came from Newark but did not name his school. It was Quitman.
Glover arrived just after that teacher finally left the school. He inherited other teachers who were not producing results. For his first two years on the job, a number of teachers on his staff struggled to keep students engaged.

“Students were working, but they weren’t learning,” Glover said. “And I don’t think teachers knew what that looked like. There’s that term ‘ritual compliance’ … I think teachers were continuing to focus — I don’t think they knew they were doing it — on ritual compliance.”

Despite extensive teacher training, the school’s test scores remained dismal. This year, Glover is hoping to take professional development to a much higher level.

Last week, as the custodial staff scrambled to prepare the building at Quitman, the teachers gathered in a muggy basement lecture hall at nearby Central High School. Glover had them evaluate themselves against the school’s core tenets, from data-driven instruction to a mindset of continuous improvement.

Regarding high expectations for student behavior, he asked, “How many have that on a lock?” Most hands went up. But is it high expectations if you belittle a child? Walk in front of your class as students trail behind in the hallway?

“Sometimes we say it, we write it on our bulletin boards, but we don’t live it,” Glover said.

Regarding high levels of student engagement, he asked again, “How many have that on a lock?” Again, most raised their hands.

“I want you all to put your hands down because I have yet to see it, and I’m not being disrespectful,” he said. “High levels of student engagement, it’s not easy. We’re going to work on that together and challenge each other.”

This summer, Christie signed into law a tenure reform bill including new annual evaluations for teachers and principals and a provision making it easier to remove teachers after two consecutive years of negative evaluations.

But the bill, criticized by Newark Mayor Cory Booker and others for not going far enough, did not change anything for Glover this year.

**Seeking a New Home**

As part of reform efforts, Newark schools ran a new online system over the spring and summer that allowed any teachers unhappy with their placements to easily look for a match elsewhere. At Quitman, many of the teachers Glover did not want to hire back didn’t want to return anyway — Glover had not been shy about the demands in store — and they requested in-district transfers.

Seven teachers Glover would have rehired also asked for new placements. Some were wary of the extra hours and pressure involved in working in a renew school, and teachers union leaders are wary generally of the renew school reform process.
“I’ve stopped calling them renewal schools and started calling them dream schools,” said Joseph Del Grosso, the Newark Teachers Union president. “There hasn’t been a lot of planning; there haven’t been a lot of discussions about what constitutes a renewal school. … I think it demonstrates one of Newark’s systemic failures that they continue to repeat over and over again, and that is rushing into things without planning them.”

Del Grosso said he couldn’t understand how the district could justify the spending on outside hires when hundreds of teachers with satisfactory ratings remained without placement. “What’s the logic?” he asked.

As of last week, the union reported that 490 of Newark’s 4,000 teachers were in the unassigned pool, a figure Anderson said was inflated. This week, the district said the number was down to about 200; union officials concurred that there had been a flurry of placements over Labor Day weekend.

While teachers in the pool were reluctant to speak on the record, Del Grosso said they were facing enormous stress and frustration.

“I felt very degraded and very underrated,” said Cynthia Wade, a music teacher and union vice president who finally was assigned to a school a few days ago. She said many principals favored young recruits, and “experienced teachers were left until the end for placement.”

The district asked renew school principals to bring back 50 percent of their previous staffs, to avoid having too much change for children who often lack continuity in their home lives. Glover would have met that target had everyone he extended offers to accepted. As it turned out, 44 percent of his staff is returning. “I’m worried about kids adjusting,” he said, “but if the teachers are on point, the kids will quickly gravitate.”

**A Chaotic Summer**

Erskine Glover’s only time off this summer was a few days to take care of his wife after she had rotator cuff surgery. Back at Quitman, phones rang incessantly as two regional summer school programs and a recreation program operated out of his building.

![Veteran teacher Angela Johnson (front) will mentor Tiffany Arce, a new recruit. Both teach early childhood education. (Photo: Amanda Brown)](image-url)
Each of the summer schools had a separate principal and separate front office staff, which created widespread confusion. There was a secretary who would not allow a returning Quitman teacher to use the photocopier since the paper came from the summer school’s budget, and the time Glover sat waiting in his office to meet with a teacher who was told he wasn’t there.

The district invested heavily in physical upgrades and new technology for the renew schools this summer, which Glover appreciated — except that much of the work had to happen hastily or in late August because of all the activity.

One morning Glover arrived to find classrooms painted the wrong shades of green, yellow and blue. A shabby home economics classroom being converted into a pre-kindergarten room was in shambles in early August, with stoves pulled out of the walls. “Four weeks,” Glover said with a sigh as he looked at the mess.

Last week, Glover had to turn the school’s grand re-opening for the community into an outdoor barbecue since the building was not ready.

Numerous complications got in the way of the 10 days of professional development for teachers before school began. Glover did not want to start before he was done hiring, so those brought on board last wouldn’t enter already behind.

What’s more, the union filed an unfair labor practice charge over the additional work that renew schools were asking of teachers over the summer; Glover made attendance optional and paid staff for the hours, but at least one other principal had characterized the time as mandatory.

Glover also was awaiting word on the Newark Global Village School Zone, a partnership with New York University that has provided Quitman with extensive social services and staff training in the past few years. Three of the other seven schools in the zone were closed this spring and all but one other principal turned over, causing the initiative to be re-evaluated. “We are very hopeful that we’ll have an ongoing partnership,” Anderson said.

Making a First Impression

In early August, Glover convened a few days of brainstorming sessions with his instructional leadership team, including teachers, the technology coordinator and the social worker, plus a consultant the district provided.

On a Wednesday morning, Glover entered the classroom with a turquoise rolling chair he’d pushed down the hall piled high with binders and books: “Teach Like a Champion,” “Fires in the Middle School Bathroom,” “Driven by Data,” and his recent personal favorite, “The Pedagogy of Confidence.” The walls were covered in poster-sized paper with learning goals they had been working on for each grade. (Second grade: Alphabetize to the third letter; tell time on the hour and half-hour; choose the correct word to complete a sentence.)

How would they change the culture of the school? How would they signal that things are really different this year?

“People will be quick to say it’s the same-old, same-old,” said the consultant, Dorian Burton.
“That is what people are saying,” Glover replied. “How is this different than when we walked out June 24?”

Students and parents will immediately notice the new paint in the office, cafeteria and classrooms and the new technology, which includes SMART Tables or SMART Boards in nearly every classroom, more laptops for grades five to eight, and iPads in autistic classes.

Beyond the physical, suggestions ranged from designating parent leaders in each classroom to naming different parts of the school after businesses and regions of the world. The team decided that all students will establish goals for their learning and behavior for the year, with little ones checking from a list and older students writing their own. They will keep portfolios to document their progress.

There’s talk of changing the school name, but the majority of 50 parents who attended a recent community meeting on that topic opposed the suggestion.

Glover has charged the new music teacher with writing a school song, a challenging assignment given that Quitman might not stay Quitman. Glover’s suggestion is QUEST Global Village Academy. The acronym would stand for Quitman Unifying Educational Environment around Science and Technology — or something like that. He’ll sort out the details if the suggestion gains momentum. For now, the district has changed the school name from Quitman Street Community School to Quitman Street Renew School.

Should the mascot stay the peacocks? What should be the procedure for collecting parent feedback? Every detail was up for discussion.

The drilling went deeper still last week as the staff finally did gather for training. Glover divided the teachers into groups to brainstorm: What does a culture of caring look like, and how do you create it?

How do you create a strong culture in the classroom, in the hallways, in special activities? How do you celebrate student milestones even if the kids are getting on your nerves? Quitman’s basketball and cheerleading teams are number one in the city’s elementary division, but how do you get attention for the competitive accomplishments of the robotics team and the cinematography club? Why would a parent opt to send a child to Quitman over a charter school?

“You get one chance to restart a school like you get one chance to make a first impression,” Burton told Glover on that initial meeting day. “This is your first impression.”

Mix and Match

Late on the morning of Aug. 24, about 30 adults in business-casual attire signed in to the Quitman visitor log. The new teachers, still awaiting their school IDs, gathered in the lobby with a palpable mix of first-day excitement and jitters.

“I’m young. I’m open-minded. Just point me in the right direction,” said Giovanni Mavilla, 33, a new sixth- and seventh-grade math teacher.

The social worker, Ca Misha Hill, came in and led them to the cafeteria, newly repainted in the school colors of ivory and blue. The scene was a little surreal for the veterans coming in.
“It’s a lot of new faces,” said Joyce Henry-Faller, a reading teacher and the union representative. Angela Johnson, a pre-kindergarten teacher, said she’d never seen so many changes in her 18 years at the school.

Charlette Givens, a special education teacher, pranced in practically giddy, liberally dispensing hugs. “I’m back!” she announced. “Oh, I’m back! … I see a lot of new faces. Let me go mingle.”

Hill and another veteran, Christina Patterson-Bright, began taping pieces of paper on everyone’s back with names like Cher, who would need to find Sonny, and Jelly, in search of Peanut Butter.

“Good morning, everyone,” said Hill, one of a handful of recruits Glover was able to bring in the previous year. “If you notice, you have a paper on your back. Does it say, ‘Hit me’? No, it says, ‘Choke me, spank me, pull my hair.’” Seriously, now: She instructed them to work the room to find their pairs with questions like, “Am I a cartoon character? Am I a woman? Do I drop it like it’s hot?”

While they’re at it, she said, get to know each other: “What did you have for dinner last night? Are you lactose intolerant?” OK, maybe that’s a little too personal. How about, “What grade will you teach?”

Glover was pleasantly surprised to see two teachers there who had just gotten contracts from the district; he had not yet been informed that their hiring was approved. “I’m pretty excited,” he said watching as Lois Lane found Superman and Beyoncé found Jay-Z, and then the pairs introduced each other.

“I’m Aimee,” said one of the teachers in a “See No Evil, Hear No Evil, Speak No Evil” trio. “I believe I’m middle-school science.”

“I hope you’re middle-school science,” Glover said.

In one of his signature stylish suits, this one paired with a lavender bow-tie, he stood to welcome them. “I’m gonna tell you,” he said, “it’s great to have a good team.”

They all had the option to choose another school, he said. If they aren’t on board, they still can. To succeed, he told them, they all need to move in the same direction: “There is no room on this boat, ship, plane — I like planes better because they go farther — for us to be going in different directions.”

He reminded them that they’re all on a one-year contract and said he doesn’t have much room for error. When someone inquired about school hours, he replied that “in our interviews, we all discussed what the expectations will be.”

What are his expectations? “We will be effective. We will be on point. We will be what everyone believes a great academic institution should be,” he said. “We need to do a great job for our children.”

And with that: “I welcome you to the 2012-2013 school year. Please give yourselves a round of applause.”
Chapter 3
Reform Reincarnated

The demise of the Newark Global Village Zone was a setback for community engagement efforts at Quitman and surrounding schools. (Photo: Amanda Brown)

Nov. 29, 2012 — She thought of herself as an ordinary mother of four, one who did what she could to advocate for her kids in Newark public schools.

But Carol Tagoe’s advocacy caught the eye of a New York University education reformer. And suddenly, the disarmingly friendly Trinidad native was working for the Newark Global Village School Zone, a partnership that heralded the promise of both educational and community revival in the city’s impoverished Central Ward.

Tagoe’s role was community mobilization. Over the 2011-2012 academic year, she organized dozens of “Chat and Chews” for hundreds of parents who came out to discuss how to support their children. There was even a “spring training” just for dads. Momentum built and as Tagoe helped other parents find their voices, she strengthened her own.

“Who would’ve thought that me, an average mom, could mobilize parents to come out and seek the best interests of their children as well as the community?” said Tagoe, who is married to a manufacturing company manager and describes herself as “40ish.”

Then last August, out of nowhere, Tagoe got an email from NYU saying her services would no longer be needed. The university had pulled the plug, citing a lack of responsiveness from the district. The Global Village initiative was over.

Global Village had arrived in Newark with great fanfare just three years earlier. During its short life, it extended the school day for many children at the seven schools it served, provided eyeglasses to students who needed them, distributed books to build home libraries, and connected parents with a variety of social services, from mental health care to housing assistance.
Much like the highly publicized Harlem Children’s Zone, Global Village focused on the needs of entire families. It aimed to strengthen academics and help lift children in one of Newark’s toughest neighborhoods out of poverty.

The partnership between Newark public schools and NYU would be less expensive than the one in Harlem, potentially making it a model to be replicated nationwide. During the 2008 presidential campaign, then-candidate Barack Obama said he wanted to create 20 such zones around the country. Foundations were willing to pay for it.

But as with so many prior attempts at reform, things didn’t go according to plan.

On the national scale, President Obama shifted strategy to provide immediate direct aid through an economic stimulus package rather than investing a few billion dollars a year to create anti-poverty zones that would take longer to show results.

And in Newark, what had been billed as one of this downtrodden city’s most ambitious reforms collapsed just before this school year started. NYU blamed the failure on a lack of support from Newark Superintendent Cami Anderson and Mayor Cory Booker. Anderson has since begun a new reform initiative absorbing many Global Village concepts, notably the extended school day.

One Reform Begets Another

The life and death — and now, the reincarnation — of Global Village illustrate the complexities of turning around the nation’s lowest performing schools.

Among them is Quitman Street Renew School, where two of Tagoe’s children are enrolled.

Long struggling academically, Quitman has been subject to many a turnaround effort. It survived a district proposal to shut it down two years ago. It is the only Global Village elementary school with the same principal as when the initiative began in 2010.

Pedro Noguera, the NYU professor who spearheaded the initiative and is widely considered one of the nation’s leading authorities on urban school reform, says Anderson never got behind Global Village when she became Newark’s superintendent in 2011, nor did Booker. This year, Anderson closed three Global Village schools.

Now the remaining Global Village elementary schools, including Quitman, are targets of a new effort. They are among Newark’s eight “renew schools” that received building and technological upgrades last summer, as their principals hand-picked their own staff. They are also slated to have longer days.

Anderson’s administration said foundations will work directly with the renew schools to fund the services they need without NYU taking a cut as middleman. And those services will be provided against a backdrop of much stronger principal and teacher accountability for academic outcomes, including the new teacher performance bonuses included in a historic contract ratified in mid-November.
“For the first time, Newark Public Schools is putting forth a comprehensive turnaround strategy,” Assistant Superintendent Peter Turnamian said. With Global Village, he said, NYU had assumed many functions of a school district — it provided strategic direction and valuable training in addition to being an intermediary for social service grants — and the district was no longer willing to outsource its responsibilities.

Low-performing schools tend to get stuck in what Noguera calls “reform churn,” where nothing stays in place long enough to take hold. Although components of Global Village continue under the renew school initiative, services were disrupted during the transition and parents felt let down again.

“Newark’s been through so much in terms of having promises made and not fulfilled, and I think that’s the worst part of this,” Noguera said.

At the same time, schools like those in the Global Village zone are often subject to many reform efforts at once, resulting in inefficient and impractical measures that can be confusing and maddening for staff.

Quitman is now a renew school. It is also getting state monitoring and money through yet another program, Gov. Chris Christie’s initiative for low-performing schools. As November drew to a close, Quitman’s principal was finalizing details on how he will use money from the state program combined with funding from the new teachers contract to restore the extended day for the rest of the academic year.

Beyond bureaucratic complications is the difficulty of tackling education in tandem with poverty. The philosophy behind Global Village was that poverty is inextricably linked with academic performance, a force more than schools are able to handle on their own.

“If you want to really build sustainable school reform then you have to take into account poverty, the conditions of communities, and you have to work intentionally and systemically to weave all kinds of relationships and supports,” Lauren Wells, who administered Global Village for NYU, told WNYC last spring.

It was Wells who hired Tagoe to work with the community in support of its children.

Rather than using poverty as an excuse, Wells said, “you have to consider poverty and the impacts of poverty in everything that you do to support kids’ success in the schools.”

‘The Most Ambitious Reform’

In a July 2010 article in *The New York Times* about the launch of Global Village in Newark, educators and parents called it “the most ambitious reform to be tried here in decades.”

The idea was to focus intensely on the needs of students and families at the city’s Central High School and its six feeder elementary/middle schools. There would be longer school days, summer classes, health clinics and access to healthy food for the zone’s 3,500 students, in addition to extensive training for teachers and principals to improve academics.
“We’re going to give them every opportunity to succeed,” then-Superintendent Clifford Janey told The Times. “We’re going to get out of the way when necessary and enable leadership to grow and flourish.”

A widely distributed PowerPoint presentation outlining the plans included a slide titled “Our Challenge.”

“Our challenge,” it said, “is to ensure that bureaucratic policies [and] political agendas … do not overwhelm this potentially powerful seedling before it has an opportunity to take hold.”

Shortly after the start of the Global Village initiative, Janey had stepped down as superintendent, forced out by the governor who saw him as not strong enough on systemic reforms and too soft on teachers unions.

The American education reform world is often divided: One camp wants increased accountability for the adults in schools, and the other believes change must start at home. The first puts a premium on reforms like merit pay and charter schools and often butts heads with unions. The second, backed by unions, prioritizes social interventions.

Global Village was clearly part of Camp No. 2. The Newark Teachers Union was an enthusiastic supporter.

Noguera said it might have failed because its agenda “was not sexy enough” in a city where the mayor is a major charter school advocate and the governor is pushing stronger school accountability. Although the test scores of Global Village schools remained low, he said the schools were undergoing structural changes needed for an academic turnaround.

When Cami Anderson replaced Janey as superintendent, “she kept thinking of what we were doing as just about community engagement, which was marginalizing it because therefore it wasn’t about academics,” Noguera said. “Urban superintendents know they’re going to be judged by test scores so unless something bumps up scores, it takes a much lower priority for them.”

Neither Anderson nor Booker would respond to Noguera’s comments directly. But Anderson’s administrators say she is deeply committed to community engagement and providing social services — in the context of academic progress.

Besides the tensions between the district and NYU, several people involved in the Global Village initiative point to other issues involved in its collapse and raised questions about its sustainability.

How much money was necessary to be effective? The Harlem Children’s Zone has an annual budget of $70 million. Noguera said Global Village raised and spent about $1 million in three years. The cost structure was still in flux, but was it unrealistically low?

Should a separate nonprofit have been created to run daily operations rather than allow NYU to manage the program and take a cut of the funding?

Could Global Village have survived in the face of dwindling enrollment due to factors including the recession and the growth of charter schools?
Finally, was it worth investing in professional development when some staff members, tired and burnt out, didn’t appear invested in the process?

Parent liaison Stephanie Ruff collects paperwork for students to receive free and reduced-price lunch. (Photo: Amanda Brown)

Needs on All Fronts

Quitman Principal Erskine Glover says his school illustrates the need for both accountability-driven and anti-poverty reforms; in his eyes, the two dueling camps are both right.

With Global Village funding in the past two years, Quitman staff received extensive professional development supervised by Wells and NYU. Glover said the training was extremely high quality, so high that he hopes to be able to dip into his own budget to keep Wells on as a consultant. But it didn’t change the fact that several teachers on his staff were not putting their all into their jobs.

“I see people working really, really hard, and not getting movement, and I know that’s a difficult place for a person to exist,” Wells said in her May interview with WNYC. (She left NYU in July and has declined to comment since.) “I also see people not working very hard at all, and that’s just beyond comprehension to me.”

This year, thanks to the power that Anderson granted Glover through the renew school process, the principal replaced more than half the teachers on staff. He said the changes were a prerequisite for success at Quitman and vital if the school is to stand a chance of turning around.

With an energetic shift ushered in by the new teachers, Glover said, “you would’ve seen the results very quickly this year” if the staff training provided by Global Village had continued. Now he’s leading trainings on his own.

Glover said he believed the Global Village initiative could have worked well alongside the renew school reforms; with funders still willing and enthusiastic, he didn’t see why they had to be mutually exclusive.
He said he needs help meeting the many social, emotional and health challenges that his students bring to school. “It’s very hard when you have one social worker for 500 students to make sure you meet all of the needs,” he said.

Many Quitman students benefitted from Global Village’s ability to connect families with existing community resources, Glover said. One Global Village partnership did free vision testing for hundreds of Quitman students and provided eyeglasses to about 75 children found to need them. Another provided books that helped families build home libraries.

Global Village funded an extended school day for first- through fourth-graders at Quitman. From September until now, that extra time has been on hold.

Glover just figured out a way to restore and expand the extended day with the state and contract money. Starting in mid-December, all kindergartners through fifth-graders will stay until at least 4 p.m. instead of 2:55. More than 100 middle school students targeted for academic intervention will also be required to stay late, and the remaining middle school students can participate in optional clubs and tutoring.

A longer day is important to help students with academics and to keep them off the streets during the hours when young people are most likely to get into trouble.

Irene Cooper-Basch, executive officer of the Victoria Foundation, said she and other Global Village funders are still giving money, but it is being redirected. They are contributing $1.2 million this year for the Newark Education Trust to divide among the renew schools and a handful of other initiatives.

It’s too soon to say whether that will reinstate all the other services that were lost. Turnamian, the assistant superintendent, said some consolidation in positions as well as school closings were necessary to fund the renew schools.

The district took a heavy hit financially to give principals staffing autonomy since it must pay salaries of tenured teachers who were not given placements. About 200 teachers remain in that pool, according to district officials. They are being paid even though they don’t have daily teaching assignments.

Glover had been looking forward to his students receiving access to organic food through Global Village. There was also talk of mobile dental vans to do teeth cleaning. Glover said many of his students don’t go to the dentist, and those who do often don’t have quality dental care, as evidenced by the preponderance of silver caps on their teeth. It’s a small point, but it bothers him.

While Quitman has its own on-site health clinic funded by the Jewish Renaissance Medical Center, children at other Global Village schools were relying on the initiative for access to health care beyond emergency room visits.

Tagoe’s assistance with parental involvement was a key component of Global Village. Although district officials noted that each renew school already had a full-time parent liaison, in places where parents historically have not been engaged, such efforts hardly seem duplicative to those in the trenches.
Quitman’s liaison, Stephanie Ruff, pitches in on everything from cafeteria duty to subsidized lunch applications to getting children school uniforms and shoes and then enforcing that they wear them. Late into the evenings, she and the school social worker march into housing projects and pound on doors to track down parents.

The liaisons also organize events: a year-end luncheon to promote summer reading, a back-to-school barbecue and a voter registration drive, plus district-mandated meetings about the renew school process.

Tagoe’s meetings, aimed at parents from all seven schools in the zone and throughout the Central Ward, gave an opportunity to discuss the particulars of parenting. “I just offered something different from what a parent liaison would offer,” Tagoe said.

**Power for Parents**

Andrea Peters is the mother of two girls at Quitman, in first and fifth grades. Last year she attended several Global Village “Chat and Chews” and found the sessions useful in her parenting.

“At one they had a doctor there that discussed children’s attitudes and how you can go about, instead of yelling at them, trying to do a different technique,” she recalled. “I got a lot of helpful information that I could use at home as far as reading with the kids … opening up more of a dialogue with the kids so if they have a bad day they’re not afraid to tell you.”

Peters said she appreciated the information that Tagoe regularly provided to parents about the activities of schools in the zone. “It was good to communicate with other parents from different schools and other parents in general,” she said.

Noguera said Global Village sought to right the wrongs of prior urban school reform efforts, and that meant empowering and organizing parents.

“If you go into affluent communities and you ask the educators who they’re accountable to, they always say, ‘to the parents we serve,’” he said. “That’s important because it means the parents they serve matter. … If you feel as though you can disregard the parents, it’s probably going to influence the way you treat their children, too.”

When Erskine Glover thinks about the differences between Newark and the suburban district in North Brunswick where his own two children go to school, stability is the first thing that comes to mind. “There’s an element of consistency that exists in their schooling,” he said. “There’s a system and structure in place.” Turnover among superintendents, principals and academic programs is extremely rare in the suburbs.

On the flip side, Glover sometimes worries that his son, 15, and daughter, 12, miss out on “the hardcore challenge of really having to stretch that rubber band.”

“I mean, there’s something about being a child growing up in a tough community. There’s a level of resilience that makes you who you are, and you bring it into the classroom. You’re faced with an obstacle and you fight harder,” he said. “My son’s fight is to be a starter on
the soccer team. … My daughter’s fight is to make sure she stays in cool with her circle of friends. It’s not the same.”

Tagoe is a Central Ward resident — she has a son and a daughter at Quitman and a son at Central, plus a daughter in college — and found that much of her job took place at the supermarket and the laundromat. The point, she said, was to “meet the community where they’re at.”

Sometimes her role was simply to lend an ear or offer a welcoming smile and hello to parents who weren’t used to getting a warm reception at school. “Even saying a good morning breaks the ice of any parent,” she said. “Just say, ‘Hey, how’s it going?’ and all of a sudden they become like putty in your hand.”

She gets frustrated by the stereotype that “we as parents don’t care and we don’t know what we want.”

“We do know what we want,” she said, “but no one ever took the time to ask us.”

It pains her now when parents ask when the Chat and Chews will start up again. Glover, too, said he’s been getting inquiries.

Tagoe is searching for another job but still volunteers to help when parents and students seek assistance or information, as many did in the days following Hurricane Sandy. Even though she isn’t being paid anymore, the community’s needs remain.

“I do what I do,” she said. “I’m still there, but not on the grand scale.”
Initiatives at Quitman Street Renew School

Newark Global Village School Zone: an anti-poverty program run by NYU and funded by foundations that brought professional development, parent organizing, an extended academic day and a host of social services to Quitman and six other schools. Ended in the summer of 2012.

Newark Renewal Schools: Superintendent Cami Anderson’s turnaround strategy for eight low-performing schools that began in 2012 as Global Village was ending. Quitman received technological and building upgrades and, more significantly, principal autonomy over staffing. More than half the school’s staff was replaced this year as a result. An extended school day will play a role with support from some of the same foundations that funded Global Village.

New Jersey Priority Schools: increased monitoring and funding from Gov. Chris Christie’s administration for 75 low-performing schools statewide.
Dec. 19, 2012 — Two miles separating two schools were far enough that students and parents had never met, yet close enough that they had made up their minds about one another.

To the west of the railroad tracks and McCarter Highway sat Quitman Street Community School: low test scores, predominantly African-American, a crime-ridden neighborhood. To the east was Wilson Avenue School: high performing, mostly Portuguese and Brazilian, still working class but in a bustling commercial district.

The Ironbound neighborhood where Wilson is located could hardly be considered affluent by suburban standards, but that was the perception among students at Quitman. And while Quitman is a safe place despite its community’s challenges, Wilson families thought the school and its occupants dangerous.

In September 2011, those assumptions were put to the test when Wilson’s 130-year-old building was deemed uninhabitable in the wake of Hurricane Irene. Newark district officials had only a few days before the start of the school year to place more than 800 students, and Quitman could fit 450 of them.

Wilson’s fourth- through eighth-graders would have to cross the tracks.

Their parents erupted in fury, staging protests and packing community meeting. The students were frightened and upset.

“I heard that they would do scary things,” said Sarah Freitas, 13, who was a seventh-grader at Wilson at the time.

“I thought our grades were going to drop, and the kids weren’t going to be friendly,” added her classmate Laura Ferreira.
Amiatta Amara, then in seventh grade at Quitman, wasn’t thrilled by the news, either. “I felt intimidated that they were going to take over and Quitman was going to sink to the bottom,” she said. After all, a gulf upward of 50 percentage points separates the schools’ test scores in some areas, a fact about which the thoughtful girl is painfully aware.

“When you heard of Wilson Avenue School, you heard about how they’re all academically talented,” the 14-year-old said. “When you compare Wilson Avenue to Quitman, it’s like, the scores are not even. So they’ll actually come to Quitman?”

They actually did.

The four months that followed were a learning experience only Mother Nature could have orchestrated. Two communities that otherwise never would have had reason to interact bonded in a way no one expected. Stereotypes that form while living in isolation from other racial and ethnic groups were shattered, expanding students’ perspective.

On the first morning buses pulled up, about 100 Quitman parents and staff members stood on the sidewalk waving and cheering. “Welcome!” they said, clapping as the students walked into the vestibule. “Welcome to your new home.”

The two separate schools operated in the same hallways — a Quitman class in one room, a Wilson class in the next — and took turns in the cafeteria.

Students soon took the PSAT together, did a class project together and performed a holiday concert together. A few middle school crushes ensued. As Amiatta put it, “we all sort of, like, rose above.”

When January came and Wilson students returned to their own school building, many people — children and adults from both schools — were sorry to see them go. Some of the girls even cried.

“For a blink of an eye,” Quitman Principal Erskine Glover said, “we were the most diverse, the most integrated school in the city.”

Today, a year later, the two schools are back to their separate routines. Some kids still keep in touch on Facebook. Some wish they could visit, and some wish they’d gotten to know one another better while they had a chance.

Glover reminds his students of the academic excellence they saw from their Wilson classmates, challenging them to meet the same bar. In the spring, as guest speaker at Wilson’s honor society induction, he thanked the students for inspiring Quitman and challenged them “to continue to have an open mind and think globally.”

“The world expands greatly,” he said, “when you walk outside your own doors.”

This year, with Quitman the target of a district turnaround effort, Glover has control over certain things that he didn’t before: staff selection, budgetary discretion.

One of the things he can’t control is Quitman’s racial and economic isolation, a circumstance that is the norm in Newark. The school is up to 550 students, about 90 percent of
them black and 10 percent Hispanic; less than 1 percent is white. An analysis of state data by The Hechinger Report shows that 41 of Newark’s 48 elementary schools last year had a white population less than 5 percent.

Quitman fifth-grader Emiliana Murphy enjoyed performing in a concert with students from Wilson, but she wishes she’d gotten to know them better. (Photo: Amanda Brown)

Studies have repeatedly shown the benefits of integration for poor and minority children, but the nation’s appetite for busing waned years ago, and in Newark, it was never there to begin with. While other Northeastern cities battled over forced busing policies, Newark in the early 1960s was quietly allowing white students into schools outside their neighborhoods so they would not have to attend majority-black schools, according to longtime civic leader Robert Curvin. New Jersey’s desegregation lawsuits in the decades that followed morphed into a suit over equitable school funding.

Schools end up segregated where housing patterns are segregated, which they are in many places and to an extreme in Newark. New Deal-era federal housing policy made it irresistible for whites to move to the suburbs while blacks could not get a mortgage. Housing projects constructed with good intentions, to shelter the poor in central cities, exacerbated the problem.

In the 1950s, three major towers — Curvin calls them “vertical ghettoes” — went up in Newark’s Central Ward, where Quitman opened in 1963. After Newark’s 1967 riots tore through the area, its already struggling schools slumped even further.

Before the Great Depression, the Central Ward was a primarily Jewish enclave, poor but vivacious with shops and small entrepreneurial businesses. Clement Price, a widely respected Rutgers history professor, said the neighborhood resembled today’s Ironbound.

Also known as Little Portugal, the Ironbound is filled with modest yet vibrant shops selling flowers, jewelry, cold cuts and imported cigars. In the midst of the commercial hub sits Wilson Avenue School.

About 85 percent of Wilson students qualify for free and reduced-price lunch, giving the school one of the lowest poverty rates in Newark.
Among Newark elementary schools, Wilson also had the highest proportion of white students last year: 56 percent. Students of Portuguese and Spanish descent are designated white, while the remainder hailing from South America are considered Hispanic.

In 2011, 85 percent of Wilson eighth-graders passed the state standardized test in math. At Quitman the number was just 29 percent.

What Quitman does have is a building that, at nearly 50 years old, is considered new by Newark public school standards. Wilson’s building has been in operation since 1881, when it opened as the Hamburg Platt Public School to serve what was then a largely German population.

In April 2010, Wilson closed after floodwater in the gym was found to contain the toxic chemical benzene. Students spent the spring at a temporarily vacant private school building nearby.

Wilson was back in operation for the 2010-2011 school year. Then Hurricane Irene struck the last weekend of August 2011. On Sept. 2, Principal Margarita Hernandez learned that unsafe mold levels had been discovered in the building. Mushrooms were growing in the gym. The students, returning from summer vacation four days later, would have to go elsewhere again.

‘We Want to Stay Here!’

No matter where the Wilson students went, their parents were going to be furious. They had been waiting for years for the state to renovate their dilapidating building, and they were tired of seeing schools with poorer academic performance get all the resources while their kids lost precious instructional time being shuttled around the city.

Quitman eighth-grader Amiatta Amara was initially intimidated by students coming from Wilson but said everyone “rose above.” (Photo: Amanda Brown)

“This time we had had enough,” said Luis Correia, an Ironbound community activist with four godchildren at Wilson. “It’s shameful that two times in less than 18 months, the same school was closed for environmental issues.”
Before television cameras outside the building, parents and students shouted, “We want to stay here!”

But no viable option existed. Kindergartners stayed in an annex in the Wilson parking lot. First- through third-graders went to St. Anthony’s School in Belleville.

The older children went to Quitman. Tents were hoisted outside Wilson to shield students from rain and cold as they waited for buses each morning.

Quitman had been considered for closure that year, yet it had a facility far superior to Wilson, a sore spot for many Wilson parents. Why didn’t they have a beautiful new playground like the one being built there? “We pay the most taxes in the city, and we have two basketball hoops that together probably cost 40 bucks,” Correia said.

Add to that the typical anxieties parents face when sending their children to a new place. What if a child got sick, parents were working and a grandmother had to navigate the city’s public buses? “It was like a strange land for them,” said Hernandez, the Wilson principal. “They didn’t even know how to get there.”

So parents had many reasons for their frustration that had nothing to do with the people at Quitman, but that’s where some of it got directed. “There were some pretty harsh things said about our students and this community,” said Ca Misha Hill, Quitman’s social worker, who attended a raucous school meeting in the Ironbound where Wilson parents hammered into public officials about their children’s placement at Quitman.

Carol Tagoe, the mother of two Quitman students who was at the time coordinating community engagement in the neighborhood, sought out conversations with English-speaking Wilson parents. “People had this perception that down here in the Central Ward, there’s crack, drugs, shootings and what not,” she said. She told them she doesn’t believe in putting her children in the line of fire, and if the school is good enough for her children, it’s good enough for theirs.

“We reassured them that your kids become our kids, and we’re not the belly of the beast,” she said.

What happened next reminded Tagoe of Eastern Europe in the late 1980s. “You know Reagan saying, ‘Mr. Gorbachev, tear down those walls?’” she said. “That’s what it was. … The Berlin Wall was torn down by the kids crossing the tracks.”

With Open Arms

Consider another historical image: the nine black children facing a violent white mob to desegregate Central High School in Little Rock, Ark., in September 1957. Take that scene and reverse it — white and Hispanic children approaching a majority-black school, to cheers and claps rather than fury — and that’s what happened outside Quitman on Sept. 6, 2011. A few dozen Quitman parents continued a welcome brigade each morning throughout the co-location.
“I was really shocked to see that they were there welcoming us with open arms,” said Laura Ferreira, who is now 14. “I don’t even have words for it. I felt really happy and really shocked that they were OK with us and they were happy that we were there.”

Sarah Freitas recalls being approached by a girl from Quitman on the first day. “She said, ‘I hope you feel comfortable here in your new home,’” Sarah recalled. “I was like, ‘Oh my God. That’s so awesome.’”

Not all the students were open to the warm reception. “They didn’t know us at first, so they were all scared,” said Quitman student Genesis Canela, 13. “They wouldn’t even talk to us. Every time we’d try to get close to them, they would all try to get away.”

Quickly, though, word spread that the Quitman kids weren’t so bad. “They found out that we’re actually really nice students and that even though some of us are challenged on an academic level, there are actually some bright future scholars in Quitman,” Amiatta said.

Some of the younger children were confused about what was going on. “I was actually surprised that somebody from a different school would be coming to our school,” said Emiliana Murphy, 11, who was in fourth grade at Quitman at the time. “If anything, I would think we’d be going to their school. … We usually take trips to other people’s schools and museums and stuff.” She was referring to college visits that older students at Quitman take.

Opportunities for student interaction were limited. The first priority had to be on running both schools smoothly, which required massive amounts of logistical collaboration by the two staffs. They had to figure out bus times, meal times and room assignments, to coordinate Wilson’s district cafeteria workers with Quitman’s outside food contractor, to synch different rules and norms like whether breakfast was allowed in the classrooms.

It helped that Wilson’s vice principal assigned to the site, Angela Piombo, had worked with several Quitman staff members previously as a district instructional coach.

With Wilson students arriving after Quitman students had started classes and leaving immediately at the end of the day for after-school activities in the Ironbound, hallway pass time became the most fertile ground for conversation. Salvatore Chiaravalloti, who was Wilson’s seventh- and eighth-grade science teacher, recalled that “at one point, the biggest problem became that students wanted to go into the hallway when students from Quitman were changing classes so they could talk to their friends.”

The two fifth-grade classes did a joint project where pairs of students — one Quitman, one Wilson — made lists of their shared likes and dislikes and turned them into a bulletin board. In liking pizza and disliking the music of Justin Bieber, they discovered common ground.

A new Wilson student who spoke only Arabic was tutored by Quitman’s Arabic-speaking pre-kindergarten teacher. A handful of Spanish-speaking Quitman students who needed more intensive bilingual instruction joined in Wilson’s bilingual classes.

Glover frequently entertained calls and visits from Wilson parents, putting them at ease, and he made daily visits to all classrooms in the building. He was impressed by the Wilson teachers’ bulletin boards and began taking his staff to study them during grade-level meetings.
Then Quitman teachers started having their students look at the Wilson students’ work. Piombo said the Wilson staff took note of some excellent Quitman displays, too.

“It made me want to push myself farther and sort of, like, be up on their level, challenge myself,” Amiatta said.

“We actually do thank them because they inspired some of our own students to do better,” Genesis added.

Quitman students sat in when Wilson students made their speeches for student council elections and put greater attention on the process themselves this year, when Genesis was elected president. She has her hopes set on being Quitman’s eighth-grade valedictorian this spring, after hearing the emphasis that Wilson put on who would have the honor.

One morning, qualifying seventh- and eighth-graders from the two schools sat together to take the PSAT. “There were like 50 of them and only 10 of us,” Genesis said. The Quitman students were nervous, but it turned out that testing anxiety was universal.

Bruno Fernandes, 14, who was Wilson’s 2012 valedictorian and is now a freshman at Seton Hall Prep in West Orange, was upset by the disparity in the numbers. “I was appalled when I saw the number of Quitman students compared with the number of Wilson students,” he said. “There was a major gap, I guess.”

No one knew when the Wilson building would be ready to reopen, so some joint projects that started never saw completion. Students were planning a dance, while administrators and teachers applied for a grant to do staff training and student field trips together. The point was to continue collaboration after Wilson’s return to its own building, but the foundation considering the application denied it because the schools would no longer be on the same campus.

Going Separate Ways

Before the end of the co-location last December, the two schools came together for two holiday concerts. One is a Wilson tradition where teachers perform holiday songs in English, Spanish and Portuguese for their students. They held the event at Quitman so its students could join in the fun.

Wilson and Quitman students also did a concert performing together. The Wilson students were impressed by the Quitman performers’ singing abilities. But dozens of Wilson students were trained to play musical instruments versus only a few at Quitman. That inspired Glover to boost Quitman’s band program this year.

Emiliana enjoyed her role as the mother in a musical skit acting out the lyrics to “I’m Getting’ Nuttin’ For Christmas.” (I’m gettin’ nuttin’ For Christmas / Mommy and Daddy are mad / I’m getting’ nuttin’ for Christmas / Cause I ain’t been nuttin’ but bad.) Anytime the Wilson student in the lead role did something bad (putting a tack on a teacher’s chair or tying a knot in Suzie’s hair, for instance), Emiliana would shake her finger and say, “You’re getting nothing for Christmas!”
Still, Emiliana was sorry she never asked the Wilson students the questions she had about them. “I would like to know their name, their hobbies, and if they have brothers and sisters like I do,” said the current fifth-grader, who has one brother and one sister and wants to be a singer, dancer, actress and chef when she grows up.

Glover, too, was sorry the Wilson students couldn’t stay longer. “It meant a lot to the city to see two distinct communities actually warming up harmoniously,” he said. “It changed the lens of how we communicate.”

Genesis Canela, Quitman’s projected eighth-grade valedictorian, said Wilson students inspired her to excel academically. (Photo: Amanda Brown)

At the same time, he said: “Listen, I’m not a fool, either. I don’t think we’re all going to have these Kumbaya moments and change our homes just to change the demographics of the community.”

Given the demographics, Glover knows he must broaden his students’ limited lens on reality for them to imagine possibilities beyond the Central Ward. Both he and the Wilson administration say they would like to continue getting their students together, but so far the demands of daily life have gotten in the way and they have not applied for any other grants. Glover is proposing a joint student council activity.

“It’s funny,” he said. “Schools are supposed to be the places where we encourage children to make unique connections and operate in spaces outside of their norms, but how do we facilitate that outside of competitive events?”

When Glover returned to Wilson as the honor society speaker, the students gave the black, dreadlocked principal a reception that he said made him feel like “president of the United States.”

“We all got up and applauded for him,” Laura said. “He did in some way change our life, accepting us into that school. He along with the school changed our life because if it weren’t for them, I’d have still been scared to go to another school and make new friends.”
“It was a blessing in disguise because if it weren’t for the fact that we went through something bad, which was our school being evacuated, we wouldn’t have had the opportunity to meet them.”

**ANALYSIS**

**Isolation in Newark Schools**

An analysis by *The Hechinger Report* of 2011 demographic information from the New Jersey Department of Education for Newark’s 48 elementary schools* shows the following:

- Thirteen had zero white students.
- White students represented less than 5 percent of the enrollment at 41 of the 48 schools.
- Wilson had the highest population of students classified as white, 56 percent, followed by Ann Street School with 52 percent and Oliver Street School with 35 percent.
- Black students represented more than 90 percent of the enrollment at 13 schools.
- George Washington Carver and Harriet Tubman schools had the highest proportion of black students, 98 percent, followed by Lincoln at 97 percent.
- Six schools were more than 80 percent Hispanic, and 17 schools were majority Hispanic.
- All schools had a high percentage of students living in poverty. All but three had more than 80 percent of students on free and reduced-price lunch. All had more than 70 percent. With 86 percent of students on free and reduced-price lunch, Wilson had one of the lowest poverty rates in the city.

*Charter schools not included.
March 5, 2013 — Four boys and four girls sit quietly along a cafeteria bench, focused on their trays of lunch: turkey with gravy and sweet potatoes, and cartons of 1 percent milk. They are 10 and 11 years old, but one still needs a reminder to use a fork or spoon rather than his fingers with the gravy. Around them, other children glide in and out of their seats, giggling, playing hand-clapping games and otherwise socializing. Occasionally, accidentally, someone running through the aisle bumps one of the eight pupils from behind.

“Girls, girls, are you playing nicely?” a protective Charlette Givens asks in a telling sort of way. Givens teaches the joint fourth- and fifth-grade “multiple disabilities” class here at Quitman Street Renew School. With an aide on hand to supervise, Givens is technically on break now, but she places her plastic container of homemade macaroni salad on the yellow-topped table nonetheless. Every day, she volunteers to join her students for lunch and recess alongside their non-disabled peers, gently encouraging interaction whenever she can.

All eight of Givens’ students are new to Quitman this year, and the 36-year-old teacher — whose career was inspired by her son’s speech and academic delays — wants to be sure they make the transition smoothly.

Her class is part of a citywide program that moved to Quitman in September following the closure of Eighteenth Avenue School. The program serves students from around Newark who have a variety of cognitive and physical disabilities and are typically several grade levels behind. The school had already been housing a separate citywide program for young children with autism.

Quitman’s 558 students include 136 in special education, 24.4 percent of the enrollment, according to school data. That compares with 15.8 percent citywide in Newark and 13.1 percent nationally. Last year, Quitman served 89 students with disabilities.
This academic year, in exchange for autonomy and resources, Newark’s eight renew schools received students from failing, under-enrolled schools that were shut down. Nearly all the students transferred to Quitman have significant disabilities; the district purchased iPads for autistic children.

Housing such a vulnerable population has added challenges for an already challenged school.

Quitman has had a teaching vacancy since September that means 14 middle school students with disabilities get their math intervention from an untrained substitute. Despite his increased hiring power, Principal Erskine Glover needs the central office to fill the position with a teacher from the district’s “employees without placement” pool. The district sent two candidates in November and December. Neither one showed up. District officials say they are aware of the problem and working to resolve it.

With special education students bused to Quitman’s Central Ward location from all over Newark and pickups routinely late, transportation is a logistical headache. So is keeping 40 programmatic and personal aide positions staffed with qualified applicants.

Nonetheless, Quitman clearly has had success in creating a nurturing, engaging environment where many parents of students with disabilities — on the whole more involved than the general parent population, especially at the younger grades — feel their children are well-served. Families are seeking placements there, something Glover wants to eventually see as a trend for the school at large, instilling hope for the school’s potential for transformation.

Lana Sanders-Hughes is beyond thrilled that her 4-year-old son Syshé, in Celita Green’s pre-kindergarten autistic class, has learned to count to 20 and speak in complete sentences. Her husband and two older daughters live in Texas, where she had intended to rejoin them after a brief stay in Newark, but Sy’s success at Quitman has caused her to rethink that plan. “I don’t want to move him away from the school,” she said.

When Zakhai Demby started at Quitman in the fall of 2011, his mother had tried everything she could think of to potty train him. Within a month, he was in underwear. Now in Green’s class, the 4-year-old has learned to draw a straight line and trace his name from dotted letters — and he’s starting to speak. “He comes home singing these songs,” said Denisha Mason, who first did a Google search for autism symptoms when her son was a year and a half old because he wasn’t talking like other kids his age. “Half the time I don’t know what he’s saying, but I’m like, ‘OK, sing it!’”

Glover said he is pleased with the way most of the school’s 10 self-contained special education classes are running, though he said not all teachers are as nurturing as Givens, Green and others. He actually asked for the district to grow Quitman’s autism program, which for years served only preschool, to avoid a disruptive move for the youngsters come kindergarten. The autistic classes, serving six to eight children each, now run through first grade with a plan to continue adding a grade a year.

The presence of two special education programs drawing from a citywide population has added some racial and ethnic diversity to Quitman, which is otherwise almost entirely African-American: Six of the school’s 10 white students are in special education, according to data the
school provided. Latino students, a small but sizable minority, make up a greater share of the population in special education than in the school at large. Eight of the 20 children in the autism program are Hispanic.

But the autistic classes in particular are extremely imbalanced from a gender perspective, reflecting the disproportionate share of boys diagnosed with autism worldwide. In six years teaching autistic pre-kindergartners, Green has never had a girl in her class.

Quitman has found itself at the forefront of Newark’s special education reforms. Like most districts in New Jersey, the city has long educated students with disabilities in separate classrooms more than alongside their non-disabled peers. Research overwhelmingly points to inclusion with necessary supports as the preferable model, and federal law requires that students be served in the “least restrictive environment” appropriate for their individual circumstances. New Jersey’s schools are among the nation’s most segregated in the teaching of children with disabilities and faces a five-year-old lawsuit in the discovery phase. (Special education litigation around the country is notoriously long and costly.)

Lauren Katzman, hired last spring as Newark’s new special education director, faces a mammoth task in changing the way the district serves its disabled children. Citywide, half of them are educated in segregated environments, compared with a quarter nationwide, and the national consensus is that a quarter is still too much, Katzman said. She wants to see special education considered a service rather than a place.

At Quitman, 77 of the 136 special education students, or 57 percent, are in self-contained classes located throughout the building, school data show. The remainder receive pullout instruction in particular subjects such as reading and math, get supports in class, or have services like speech therapy outside class.

Glover and several of his teachers are proponents of moving more students toward inclusion to encourage them to meet their potential — provided the district can provide the necessary support.

Many Quitman parents, meanwhile, want their children in the comfort of a self-contained setting. Forleasadon Harper moved her family back to Newark after two years in North Carolina specifically because she could get a self-contained placement here for her 11-year-old daughter, Déja, who is now in Givens’ class. In Raleigh, the girl was mainstreamed into a fourth-grade class without enough help.

“Last year was a horrible year for her, and I never wanted her to go through that again,” said Harper, a stay-at-home mom. Under Givens’ tutelage and attending a communications disorder clinic at Montclair State University after school, Déja has gone from grunting to speaking complete sentences. She recently challenged a visitor to her classroom to a game of Hangman.

“Children are cruel — we know this — and you don’t want to be the child that’s picked on all the time because you’re behind,” Harper said. “The name calling, it hurts. For my child, this class setting is what’s best for her. … She’s at a comfort level where she’s able to excel.”
It is an emotional experience for any mother to discover that her child has a disability, and learning to navigate a web of services and placements is often overwhelming. Charlette Givens understands this all too well.

Charlette Givens gives up her breaks to help her fourth- and fifth-grade special education students, all new to Quitman this school year, adjust during lunch and recess with non-disabled peers. (Photo: Amanda Brown)

Thirteen years ago, she was working as a social worker when her son, her only child, was born with a cleft palate. A major surgery left him unable to speak properly and in need of academic intervention by the time he entered preschool in Jersey City, where Givens has lived nearly all her life. Trying to help him, she ran into one frustration after another.

“When my son was diagnosed early on — and I hate to say this but it’s the truth — there were so many teachers who told me what he couldn’t do, I almost gave up,” she said.

Instead, she harnessed a mother’s unstoppable determination. She went back to college at New Jersey City University to get what would become two masters’ degrees: one in early childhood education and one in special education. “I used to say, ‘If this is what he can’t do, what can he do?’ and that’s the part they didn’t tell me,” she said. “As I went to college, I would come home and I would tutor him and I would teach him things that I learned.”

She became a teaching assistant in special education classrooms in Jersey City, keeping that role for a decade, long after she was fully certified to lead her own classroom, because she wanted to have enough time for her son. “I worked hand and foot to help him master the skills at each grade level,” Givens said. Two years ago, when the boy was mainstretched into regular seventh-grade classes, she decided she was comfortable enough with his progress that she could dedicate herself to teaching full time. That’s when Glover hired her at Quitman.

Her first year, she did math and language arts intervention for fourth- and fifth-graders. Last summer, with the multiple disabilities program headed to the school, Glover asked her to take on a self-contained class. “My eyes lit up like Christmas,” Givens said. “I said, ‘Um, Sir, what do you want me to do again?’ He said, ‘Don’t worry, Ms. Givens. I’m going to show you.’”

Glover, who was hungry for teachers with Givens’ enthusiasm and work ethic, walked her through the furniture arrangement and what to put on the walls. “You can’t hang it up if the students didn’t do it,” Givens said. They went over how she would keep a data binder to continuously assess each child’s progress and to determine when to re-teach material.
Today, little empty wall space exists in her third-floor classroom — “the penthouse,” she calls it. There are Givens’ handmade posters from a geography unit (“Where is New Jersey?”) and a recycling unit (“Our Planet Earth”), math papers where students earned high scores for correctly adding such problems as 56.3 plus 22.1, and artwork including a boy’s first name in blue glitter. A standup poster outlines the plot and characters of “When I Am Old With You,” a book about a small boy envisioning his life with his grandfather that the publisher suggests for ages 4 to 8. Books lining shelves include “The Hungry Kitten” and “One Tiny Turtle.” By late February, the class was halfway to a goal of collectively reading 1,000 books this year.

Déja, who carries a Little Mermaid purse and is one of the most advanced children in the group, wrote in pencil on a student accomplishment board alongside her drawings of a star and a stick figure: “I wanted to read better. I practiced everyday and now I can read.”

One morning late last year, the class worked on spelling the word “December.” In black pants and a black headband, Givens showed a new aide how to help a boy make a p into a b (“-ber”): He is a visual learner, so the aide needed to write something for him to copy. Looking over another boy’s shoulder, Givens gently reminded him: “Capital D because it’s a special word. It’s the month.”

Moving on to vocabulary, she instructed all children to look at the alphabet chart on the wall. They reviewed the difference between letters and sounds: “A-apple-aah, B-bat-buh, c-cat-cuh” and so on. She helped the boy who was confusing p and b point to letters with a purple wand. Then it was time for a quiz on beginning and ending sounds. “In the word ‘school,’ what’s the first beginning letter?” she asks. “Sound out SCHool. School. You’re not sharing. This is a quiz.”

Givens evaluates students based on how they converse, interact with peers, write words, draw pictures and use technology. She appointed Forleasadon Harper the classroom parent ambassador and arranges for other parents to come in regularly to volunteer. She arrives at 7 a.m., often stays until 7 p.m., and takes work home nights and weekends. “Planning takes time, especially when you’re just starting out like myself,” she said. “As the years go on, it’ll be much easier.”

Several of her students are showing great strides: A boy who began the year frequently crying and accidentally urinating in his pants now goes weeks without doing either. Another can now recognize the letters of the alphabet and write his name, surpassing the yearly goals set in his individual education plan, or IEP.

Still, they are far from grade level. Yet in April and May they all will take the state’s grade-level standardized tests.

New Jersey schools are allowed to count up to 1 percent of their populations as exempt from the exams and provide an alternate assessment. But the school teams that create each child’s IEP, which include parents, have determined in virtually every case at Quitman to administer the regular test with approved accommodations such as extra time and questions read aloud. The individual reasons for those decisions vary, but in general, the teams want students to experience the challenge of the exams even though they are unlikely to pass.
For the most part, their scores won’t count against Quitman in its overall results: Those who live outside Quitman’s attendance area and are sent by the central office for a special education program will have their scores included in home school tallies. On the flip side, Quitman is marked down for the results of a few dozen children in its attendance area who are placed elsewhere.

As Glover evaluates his teachers and central office administrators evaluate Glover, all say they are measuring based on growth, not raw scores.

“If they pull down the school data, I’m at peace with that as long as we can show they grew,” Glover said. “Some can’t write their names much less sit for a two-and-a-half-hour test.”

He does not dodge responsibility for his students’ scores. “They’re here at my school,” he said, “and I’m responsible for educating them.”

Celita Green works with Daniel Sanchez. With three aides to assist her in a class of eight children, she can spend time teaching students one on one. (Photo: Amanda Brown)

The Inclusion Evolution

In the 1930s, New Jersey was one of the first states in the nation to establish laws mandating the education of students with disabilities. Elsewhere, they received no services at all. “Kids were literally at home, in institutions, attics. I’m not being overly dramatic. It’s our history,” said Ruth Lowenkron, an attorney for the Newark-based Education Law Center, which represents the plaintiffs in the state inclusion lawsuit and last year settled a long-running Newark case over the timely provision of special education services. “New Jersey, on the other hand, was realizing we have to educate kids with disabilities.”

The state began to serve children using what’s known as the medical model: Those with visual impairments went to schools for the blind, those with hearing impairments went to schools for the deaf, and so on. In the 1970s, Congress approved the first civil rights legislation creating special education nationally and required that segregation be minimized.

By that point, Lowenkron said, New Jersey had a “cottage industry” in special education programs to sustain. But not all motives were profit-based, she added: “Lord knows we don’t want to repeat our other part of history, when we took our adults and kids with disabilities out of
institutions and dumped them in the community without support. The state’s heart is in the right place, but they just have not been able to get out from under to turn this around.”

Research has overwhelmingly showed academic benefits for all children in inclusive classrooms, which sometimes have a special education teacher working alongside a general education teacher. Parents like Forleasandon Harper know all too well the perils when inclusion is done wrong. But when inclusion is done right, students with disabilities grow socially and emotionally while their non-disabled peers gain appreciation for diversity, and everyone benefits from material being presented in multiple formats to suit different learning styles. Inclusion can also be less expensive.

Newark schools spend an average of $18,427 per year for every student in the district, according to district officials. Spending is higher for students with disabilities. Those with autism are most expensive to educate because of a required staffing ratio of one adult for every two students in autistic classrooms. (The state, by contrast, mandates a one-to-three ratio.)

Measuring the cost of special education at Quitman is difficult because some of the money comes out of the school’s budget, and various central office funds cover the rest. The school budget line item for special education is $544,000, 11 percent of the total, but that doesn’t include major items like preschool, transportation or personal aides. Katzman, the new special education director, said she is working to make reporting more transparent.

Even if widespread inclusion were a reality in Newark, there will always be some children who require a self-contained environment. Particularly at the elementary grades, Newark does a better job than many other districts in educating its most severely disabled students in house instead of having to pay for hugely expensive private school placements, Katzman said. In addition to multiple disabilities and autism programs like those at Quitman, schools elsewhere in the city house students with severe behavior problems and children who are medically fragile. All eight renew schools have high special education populations.

Quitman shares a parking lot with Samuel Berliner School, which enrolls only 38 students, all with behavioral disorders. Berliner is targeted to be closed at the end of this academic year, with a district preference that even self-contained programs be housed in regular schools. Berliner’s students will likely be dispersed among several schools. District officials have not yet said if Quitman will be one of them, but Glover expects it will. He’s fine with that — even though that’s not a special education population Quitman now serves and would bring a whole new set of challenges — provided that extra support follows, including additional counselors and training for the entire staff on how to handle behavioral triggers.

In receiving new students this year, Glover said he would have requested more help had he known the extent of their needs, but deficits were understated in the information he received. He had to scramble to contract out for additional speech therapists and wishes another counselor was on staff to address the many self-esteem issues.

Transportation has been another difficulty. Coming from all over Newark, children as young as 3 ride the bus for up to an hour, sometimes even more. Glover describes the service as “inconsistent.” One bus company was fined for repeated tardiness.
“In a district our size when you have to contract out all of your transportation needs, there’s bound to be mistakes,” Glover said. “This year we’ve seen just too many mistakes with students not being picked up on time, students being brought to school late.”

Ten-year-old Ashley McGee, a tall girl with red sneakers who is Déja Harper’s best friend in Charlotte Givens’ class, lives only a few blocks from Quitman, so she was one of the last students to be picked up on the way to school. The problem was, the bus repeated the same route at the end of the day. “They would take her all the way across town like they were picking up the first kid,” said her mother, Linda McGee. After calling the bus company and not getting anywhere, “I had to call the school and say, ‘Look, I prefer if she just walks.’”

Quitman is Ashley’s third school in five years. Her mother hopes she can remain there through eighth grade even though she isn’t on the honor roll like she used to be at Eighteenth Avenue. Glover has struggled with how to grade special education students several years behind. For report card purposes, he is mindful of their individual goals but generally holds them to the same standards as others in their grade so as not to give them and parents an inflated view of their abilities that’s shattered come high school. While that often results in low marks, teachers emphasize student portfolios documenting their progress when they meet with parents, who are required to come in to pick up their children’s report cards.

Finding appropriate high school placements for students with severe disabilities is difficult in Newark. The majority of the city’s approximately 700 students receiving private or out-of-district placements because the district can’t meet their needs are in high school. (The city’s total special education population is about 7,000.) The district currently has no high school multiple disabilities programs. Glover hopes the problem will sort out as Superintendent Cami Anderson turns her attention to high school reform.

District officials are also working to reduce the frequency of school transfers for special education students. And they are examining Newark’s widespread use of personal and shared aides amid research finding that their work doesn’t yield substantial academic benefits. Personal aides are assigned to work with individual children and shared aides assigned to specific groups, while programmatic aides assist a teacher with an entire class.
Quitman had a few occurrences of teasing and bullying among older children at the beginning of the year, but school officials say that has declined as the staff monitors interactions between disabled and non-disabled students closely. Givens has a big purple net bag of foam balls, jump ropes and hula hoops for her students to use at recess, and others gravitate to play with them. A few of her colleagues also give up break time to supervise on the playground.

“The teachers play an important role,” Givens said. “Sometimes kids don’t know how to act with one another. … In the beginning I feared that children wouldn’t treat children fairly. That’s just how children are. So we kind of facilitated the cooperative play and the fair play, and now it just goes smoothly.”

Beyond lunch and recess, students in Quitman’s multiple disabilities program interact with their non-disabled peers during non-academic classes such as music and gym. In January, the school lengthened its day by an hour for kindergarten through eighth grade, and older students come together for part of their extended learning time from 2:55 to 3:55 p.m. Givens’ class joins a general education third-grade class for a financial literacy program on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

“We’re preparing them as college-ready students, and in order to give them that opportunity, we must give them the opportunity to grow in a variety of settings,” Givens said. With her son, “if the mindset were to leave him in a fixed environment, he never would have had the opportunity to advance out.”

In late February, Givens’ students performed in a play for African-American History Month alongside third- and fourth-graders. It was called “A Timeline of African-American History: Past, Present and Future,” and many non-disabled students had speaking roles as figures including Frederick Douglass, Thurgood Marshall, Oprah Winfrey, and Barack and Michelle Obama.

Déja initially prepared for a part as Maya Angelou, but she ended up joining the rest of her class in the ensemble, and her name was accidentally left out of the program. She was front and center in a West African Lamba dance performed by 10 girls — the four in Givens’ class plus six others — to the beat of djembe drums played by 10 boys. The dance, involving synchronized movements, is a custom to celebrate life and the spirit of happiness.

Givens solicited a professional dancer to help her choreograph the routine, which the students practiced for a month. She bought all of the drums and costumes herself, including bright patterned fabric that she sewed into headscarves and skirts for the girls and black T-shirts for the boys. Glover asked if she needed funding for costumes, but she said no because the school has so many other needs. She ended up spending $600 of her own money.

In the final act, representing the future, all 110 students participating stood on stage in white T-shirts on which they had drawn or painted the name of a college they wish to attend and their graduating year: Cornell University, Class of 2026, for example. For her eight students, Givens ironed fabric paper with college logos and the children’s photos onto the shirts. Ashley chose Fisk University and Déja opted for Spelman College, both Class of 2024.

Together, the students waved their hands in the air and sang the R. Kelly song “The World’s Greatest”: If anybody asks you who I am / Just stand up tall / Look ’em in the face and
say / I’m that star up in the sky / I’m that mountain peak up high / Hey, I made it / I’m the world’s greatest / I’m that little bit of hope / When my back’s against the ropes / I can feel it / I’m the world’s greatest ...
Chapter 6
Schooled by Substitutes

English teacher Christina Patterson-Bright, a 19-year Quitman veteran, has become a stable presence for her students amid staff turnover. “They’ll work for you if they feel you’re genuine,” she says. (Photo: Amanda Brown)

May 28, 2013 — The first teacher to go was grieving over the death of a loved one. Those who followed gave reasons more directly tied to frustrations at the school: long hours taking a toll on family life, the minimal pay increase when the academic day was extended in January, feeling discounted in curricular decisions.

One after another, they kept leaving. Between December and February, five teachers at Quitman Street Renew School quit, including the entire staff for middle school science and math, subjects now staffed by long-term substitutes.

Two of those who resigned had disciplinary charges pending against them, and Principal Erskine Glover had to rehire them in September to give them a legally required opportunity to improve. No one was shocked that they didn’t last the year. But the other three teachers were among those Glover carefully handpicked after an entire summer conducting interviews. More than half the instructional staff of 66 was new in the fall at Quitman. Administrators and families alike were counting on the overhaul to finally turn things around.

The departures dealt a major psychological blow to the school community. Students felt hurt, angry and confused. Teacher reaction ranged from heightened determination to heartbreak to defeatism. Glover spent sleepless nights agonizing over what he could have done differently.

In the wake of the turnover, he had to restructure intensive intervention classes for a challenging group of eighth-grade boys and cut the added time at the end of the day for all seventh- and eighth-graders. While kindergarten through sixth grade still dismiss at 3:55 p.m., the older children now leave at 3:10, with targeted students assigned to after-school tutoring.

“The spirit of what we were trying to do just stopped,” Glover said one day in April when he was feeling particularly down. Yet his despair alternates, sometimes moment to moment, with optimism, depending on which classroom he’s in: Improvement in the early grades at Quitman is palpable, and some of his new hires are proving remarkable success stories.
One who keeps him going is a kindergarten teacher who was so inspired by Quitman’s potential that she pulled her own two young children out of their home suburban school and enrolled them there. They are the only white pupils in their predominantly African-American, minority Hispanic kindergarten and first-grade classes, and they are thriving alongside their peers.

In another first-grade class down the hall, though, the teacher was among those who quit midyear.

“I don’t know why all the teachers left before they were supposed to,” said Tanisha Foster, 14, an eighth-grader whose math and science teachers resigned and whose younger sister is in the first-grade class that lost its teacher. “They could’ve just kept going throughout the year, and then next year they didn’t have to come if they didn’t want to.”

Tanisha was particularly frustrated that her teachers left before the New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (NJ ASK), the state’s standardized tests that were administered in late April and early May in third through eighth grades. Even though the stakes attached to the exams count for the school, not Tanisha personally, she wanted to do her best. “I was mad because the NJ ASK was getting close,” she said. “I expected them to leave after the NJ ASK so they could teach us more than they taught us. That wasn’t right.”

New Jersey requires its eighth-graders to take tests in science as well as English and math, and several Quitman students said they felt unprepared for the science portion in particular. “Our previous science teacher, she taught us, like, maybe one-third or half of what was on the NJ ASK, but then the other half, we didn’t understand,” said Genesis Canela, 13, the student council president and projected eighth-grade valedictorian. The departures also came as Genesis and her classmates were applying to the city’s selective public high schools, with some relying on teacher recommendations.

Although initial internal testing shows progress among the youngest students, the state exam scores will come this summer. No one expected a quick fix. In giving Glover unprecedented authority to select his staff last spring, Newark Superintendent Cami Anderson said she expected it would take a few years for him to get the right people in place. “I think he and others will take a real step forward, and just like recruiting any team, you make some picks you thought were great that turn out to be not so great,” she said in a June 2012 interview. “It’s a process.”

Peter Turnamian, the assistant superintendent overseeing renew schools, said the administration stands by that position today. “When a school develops its values and creates a more rigorous environment, one of the unfortunate consequences is not all teachers are comfortable working in that environment,” he said.

Six of Newark’s other seven renew schools — while still facing challenges over the quality of instruction — haven’t seen midyear turnover like Quitman. One other renew school, Thirteenth Avenue, lost its principal midyear.

Glover fears based on internal assessments that his school won’t fare well in comparison when the NJ ASK scores come in. “I don’t have a feeling that we’re going to be one of those
schools they talk about as showing growth,” he said. “And I think the question’s going to come, ‘What happened to Quitman?’”

Enthusiasm Deflated

The year began with so much excitement.

“I’m young. I’m open-minded. Just point me in the right direction,” Giovanni Mavilla, a new sixth- and seventh-grade math teacher who comes from a family of Newark educators, said at an orientation in August. His mother was once an administrator in the building. He said he wanted to give back to his community.

Aimee Firestin, coming from another district to teach seventh- and eighth-grade science, said at a back-to-school barbecue that she hoped to stay in Newark Public Schools until retirement. She is now in her late 30s.

And Tatana Pitts, a veteran Miami educator who moved from Florida last year, spoke passionately about wanting to give her students the chance to live the American dream. The seventh- and eighth-grade math teacher grew up under communism in the Czech Republic, where “to make it somewhere, you had to push yourself harder than everyone else.”

None of the three would last six months.

“For me it was just personal reasons, and I want to leave it at that,” Mavilla said. Firestine and Pitts both cited issues related in part to the extension of the school day in January.

Glover had been scrambling to get an extended day program back in place since the collapse of a district partnership that funded one last year. He started the year with a standard schedule. Later in the fall, as part of the city teachers union’s new contract, renew school teachers were given the option to sign on for an extended day under negotiated terms.

Glover wished he could have paid staff more, but he could not go beyond what was negotiated: Teachers would receive a prorated stipend of $2,400 that would cover an extra hour teaching at the end of the day from January to June plus training sessions, including three or four Saturdays and time in the summer. It wasn’t much, but he expected them to get on board, especially since improvements in student performance could make them eligible for higher pay under the new contract. Next year the stipend will increase to $3,000.

Pitts was among those outraged. She said Glover had assured her during her interview that compensation for an extended day would be in line with her regular pay, which she said was more than $35 an hour. Teachers calculated that it would amount to $7 hourly. “Do you find this type of compensation appropriate for educated professionals?” she wrote in an email responding to my inquiry about why she left. (Glover said he told Pitts he would try for comparable pay but made no assurances. The math Pitts cited is hard to verify since the professional development schedule isn’t final, and preparation time varies by individual.) She said she was told her chances of being re-hired at Quitman next year were “zero percent” if she did not agree to the terms. She signed on, as did all but three of the school’s teachers. (Glover said the union told non-tenured teachers they would need to agree to an extended day to continue working at a renew school but
could find placements elsewhere in the district. One of the teachers who did not sign on is tenured and coming back to Quitman next year; the other two are among those who quit.)

Pitts said Glover also discounted work she and other middle school teachers had done planning for various clubs during the extended time, opting instead for tutoring. And she was frustrated by a lack of planning time, and by being told her evaluation would be negatively impacted if she missed a week of work to have surgery. (Glover said the time would not have been held against her, and he encouraged her to do what she needed for her health.)

“My ideas were never listened to,” Pitts wrote in the email. “What was the point of hiring new and talented staff when things seemed to be geared [to] the old ways, and new ideas of these talented people were never considered? … I knew I didn’t want to come back next year so I rather left sooner not later.”

She said her decision to leave “had nothing to do with the students of the school at all. In fact, it is still bothering me very much that I left a group of kids that needed me so much, and I was one of the people in their life who abandoned them.”

But several students interviewed thought Pitts’ departure had everything to do with them. They said many of their peers, boys in particular, did not behave in her classes because they were turned off by rules stricter than the rest of the school. She wanted all boys to tuck in their royal blue polo shirts, for example, while Glover was just happy for them to come in uniform. Pitts did not respond to a request to address these issues.

“I felt upset because there was really a lot of students that really did want to learn,” said Genesis, who wants to be a lawyer and whose mother won’t let her use Facebook. “And we didn’t get that opportunity, because other students wanted to be ignorant and didn’t want to appreciate what Mr. Glover had been through to get us the teachers that we need. And we also heard that she said that she’d never teach at a Newark public school again, from the experience that she had at Quitman. And that’s not the message that we want to send out to other people who are not at Quitman. We want to send out a positive message about how Quitman is.”

Glover and many students and teachers confirmed that Pitts left without notice after some heated class confrontations, and Glover was left scrambling to find coverage. For a few weeks, “we just had substitute after substitute after substitute,” Genesis said. “And they didn’t teach us nothing. They didn’t give us work. We were just sitting there. They just kept telling us, ‘Read an independent book.’” Finally Glover found a long-term substitute who committed to teaching them for the rest of the year.

While many students felt angry over what happened with Pitts, the prevailing sentiments about Firestine were sadness and confusion. They did behave for her, they said, and they didn’t understand why she was leaving. Firestine, who also replied to my interview request with an email, said it was a difficult choice, but “I could not keep [up with] the demands of the administrators.” She did give notice before she left, and she spent time training a long-term substitute, who has some teaching experience but no subject-matter expertise.

“The addition of the extended day in January was difficult for me,” Firestine wrote. “I spoke with the administrators that the teachers are asked to do many additional assignments and I was having a difficult time keeping up with the demands for my class and then additional add
ons. Principal Glover told me he did not understand and did not think it was an issue. I feel I was unable to be an effective teacher with ‘extra homework’ assignments. I truly am sorry I could not finish out the year for my students, but the work atmosphere was very stressed. I had no trouble getting along with colleagues, but everyone is very stressed and some are just trying to get through the year in hopes of finding another job elsewhere next year.”

The departures made it impossible for Glover to continue the extended day for seventh and eighth grades. Substitutes weren’t all able to stay the extra time, and the program was falling into chaos. Glover also had to change the schedule for eight of the most challenged boys, for whom he had created a separate class earlier in the year. The boys, many of whom are repeating eighth grade, now get their instruction from fewer teachers. They still receive supports including counseling and yoga.

Christina Patterson-Bright, a 19-year Quitman veteran who teaches seventh- and eighth-grade English, was frustrated by the impact her colleagues’ departures had on students. Being overworked is the norm at any inner-city school, she said. “Everyone … may not have the same passion as you have to educate our population of children,” said Patterson-Bright, who began at Quitman as a 21-year-old rookie in 1984. “We thought they did, because they came in saying they had that background, and that they were ready for it, and that they’d experienced it all before. But self-reflection was something that was not there.

“If something in my class doesn’t work, I’ll try something else. If that doesn’t work, I’ll try something else. … If I can’t figure it out, I’ll ask someone, and I’ll try what they say before I disregard it and try something new, and I don’t think that happened. I think they gave up. And I think they gave up too soon, and I think they gave up for the wrong reasons.”

‘Never Give Up On You’

Each morning, the entire school at Quitman gathers for a brief convocation. One Friday in February, as the resignations were picking up, sixth- and seventh-grade English teacher Theresa Perry-Lewis took the microphone from Glover as he was about to adjourn the meeting.

“There are people here who will never give up on you,” Perry-Lewis, who has persisted in her job despite health problems, said as she faced the middle school students directly. “You’re just as good as anyone else.”

Classmates Amiatta Amara (left) and Genesis Canela, working on an English project, have long-term substitutes in their math and science classes. (Photo: Amanda Brown)
Glover, in a beige suit, red bowtie and red sneakers, took the microphone back. (He had to abandon dress shoes after developing a hip condition that has had him on crutches much of the year.) He hadn’t planned to address the departures in front of the whole school that day, but the moment came and he went for it.

“You guys need to start owning some of your behavior,” he said to the students, as the teachers listened on. (Firestine had resigned but not yet left at that point. Pitts was in her final days. Mavilla was long gone.) “Now you’re going to lose some teachers along the way, but you have a whole lot more in this building who want you to be successful. … I don’t believe in giving up on kids. Because If I give up on you, if my teachers give up on you, who’s left to help you? … Who’s left to be able to help Corey when he has his meltdown to be able to calm down so that he can still get into the high school he wants to and be successful as a father, as a husband, as a citizen? So I wasn’t going to go there this morning, but Ms. Perry-Lewis kind of opened that door. Yes, you’re going to lose some people along the way. You’re going to lose some people who think you’re not the right fit for them; your shoes don’t fit their feet very well. And that’s fine because not every pair of shoes does fit. But … there are more teachers who want you to be successful. And for those who don’t, you have no problem coming to me and saying, ‘Mr. Glover, she doesn’t have our back,’ or ‘He doesn’t have our back.’ …

“I’m going to finish it on this note. I’m excited about you every day coming to my school because I love seeing you.” When eighth-graders come to ask him for help getting into a high school, “I love that,” he said. “What I don’t enjoy are the negative words that come out of your mouth, the actions that distort and dishearten.” He said his goal is for Quitman to have its name on a banner on Newark’s McCarter Highway that currently recognizes an academically exceptional charter school in town. “The only way that can happen is by my students, mine, doing what you’re supposed to. Some of you may not cut it, don’t even care. Most of you do understand when I say that it’s time to really start thinking about how we want the rest of this society to view us. Because we’re not animals. We’re not savages. Every day a teacher comes in the building and sees you as a human being, give back to them that you’re a human being who wants to learn. …

“Some teachers are going to be upset that this child is throwing footballs in the halls or running the halls. I get that. I love you still. And Monday we’re going to come back and do it all over. That’s what we do.”

‘Take a Chance With Me’

Alicia Wiltshire emailed Erskine Glover, oh, “a million times,” as she recalls, before he agreed to see her for an interview last summer.

A year earlier, mulling a career change, she had picked up the book “Teaching As Leadership: The Highly Effective Teacher’s Guide to Closing the Achievement Gap.” For months on her daily commute from Newark to Manhattan, “I just read it over and over again until it was written in my heart,” she said. Now, the 29-year-old was ready to quit her job in human resources at a social service agency and dive in with no experience. She would need to enroll in an alternative certification program. Would she be able to cut it?
Second-grade teacher Alicia Wiltshire says she is “completely obsessed” with getting her students ready for third grade. She persevered after a challenging start to the year. (Photo: Amanda Brown)

“I remember sitting in the office and he just looked like, ‘I don’t know if I could take a chance,’” Wiltshire recalled. “And I’m just sitting there like, ‘Yes, take a chance, take a chance. Take a chance with me, please! I can do this.’ And I remember him asking me, ‘Well, why do you want to work in Newark?’ And I couldn’t imagine working anywhere else. I felt like this is where I was needed. This is where I wanted to put my time and energy.” She had her fiancé drive her around the neighborhood to explore. “My fiancé was like, ‘Babe, this is a tough area,’” she said. “And I was like, ‘I’m not afraid.’”

Glover agreed, reluctantly, to hire her for second grade. “I’m not going to lie,” he said. “I had reservations about everybody. Because, you know, there was just so much pressure to get it right.” But while Glover saw Tatana Pitts — a newly relocated veteran of Miami schools — as one of his most promising prospects, he worried a lot about Wiltshire.

Wiltshire, though, was worrying enough for herself. Growing up in Brownsville, a tough neighborhood in Brooklyn, her own experience in second grade was a negative one, and she was determined to do better for her students. She went to Barnes & Noble and bought the book “What Your Second-Grader Needs To Know.” After memorizing it, she went on to “What Your Third-Grader Needs To Know.”

“I’m completely obsessed with getting my kids ready for third grade,” she said.

That’s true of her work in general. “I go to church in Brooklyn, and so on the drive to Brooklyn, I have my mother drive, because I’m grading papers in the car,” she said. “And on the way back, I’m grading papers in the car. If I go to the salon, I’m grading papers under the dryer. … I have no weekends. I have no evenings. I put it all in.”

About a month into the school year, Glover asked Wiltshire how many times she had cried so far over the job. “She looked at me, and she started laughing, and she said, ‘How did you know I’m crying?’” he recalled. “And I said, ‘Everybody goes through it. … That’s the nature of our game.’”

Wiltshire’s second-floor classroom today bustles with activity. Harkening back to her days in HR, she requires students to interview for classroom jobs: The equipment manager takes out toys for recess, the paper manager passes out papers, the facilities manager straightens desks,
and the event coordinator suggests classroom activities. An 8-year-old “teacher’s assistant” consults with Wiltshire in the interviewing process. Glover now considers her “a star in the making.” She practically apologized as she told him that she’s pregnant and will need a few months of maternity leave in the fall.

Now when he sees her and asks how she’s doing, he said she’ll reply: “Mr. Glover, I love my kids. My day was fabulous.” He’ll ask, “Are you crying?” And she’ll respond, “No, now I’m a little overemotional because I’m pregnant.”

For next year, Glover has committed to hiring four new graduates of Montclair State University’s urban teacher residency program, hoping they’ll come with an attitude like Wiltshire’s.

Many candidates say everything right, he said. Many “give me the famous line, ‘I love kids, and I want to see all kids succeed.’” But there’s something he can’t measure in an interview. “I can’t measure your soul,” he said. “I can’t measure your commitment.”

**Enrolling Her Own**

Principals often face the choice in hiring: Do you pick someone who’s a good fit for the school culture, or someone with teaching experience and content-area expertise? Glover said it’s rare to find the whole package, but he believes he did with a few of his new hires. Among them is Kimberly Dias. Not only does Glover consider her teaching practices exemplary — one recent Thursday, she kept 21 children engaged and self-directed in activities around the classroom as she worked with small groups — but in January she enrolled her own children, 7-year-old Arabella and 5-year-old Alden.

Dias, too, moved to New Jersey from Florida last summer, because of her husband’s job at a college textbook company. In Ramsey, where the family lives, Alden began a half-day kindergarten program for two hours a day. He was struggling, and his parents were contemplating whether he would need to repeat the year. Since the introduction of the extended day at Quitman, kindergartners are in school from 8:25 a.m. until 3:55 p.m. Dias thought Alden could use the additional time. Arabella, meanwhile, performs above grade level, and she wasn’t being sufficiently challenged in Ramsey, prompting her to act out from boredom. “It’s a lovely town. It’s a lovely school district. It just wasn’t meeting the needs that I wanted for my children,” said Dias, 32, whose children both share her thin frame and sandy blonde hair.
Kimberly Dias (right) looks over daughter Arabella’s homework for the day. Arabella and brother Alden are the only white children in their classes at Quitman. (Photo: Amanda Brown)

Friends, family and neighbors in Bergen County thought Dias was crazy when she pulled her kids out of their local school in favor of Quitman. “Some people were like, ‘Oh, you’re taking them just because it’s so much easier on your schedule,’” Dias said. “And I’m like, ‘That’s not really the only reason. … It was to enhance their education.’”

The risk is paying off for both children, who are in classrooms down the hall from their mother.

On the Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) exam that Quitman administers to gauge performance internally, Alden’s target was 8 points of growth. He grew by more than 30 points and is now performing on a beginning first-grade level. “My husband and I are beyond happy,” Dias said. “When we got their MAP scores … we were just so ecstatic about how much growth he’s made. We were so worried about possibly having to retain him.”

Arabella, who has been getting harder work along with other top performers in Planties Simon’s first-grade class, performed at a third-grade level. “We knew she would probably be higher than we anticipated, but we didn’t anticipate her being that high,” Dias said.

In Dias’s own class, where another two Quitman teachers have their children enrolled, all but a handful performed above grade-level on the assessment. (The NJ ASK, which counts for the school’s rating, isn’t administered until third grade. Quitman’s most promising performance is coming in pre-kindergarten through second grade, where the staff seems to have a strong handle on tailoring instruction to individual needs. Scores on the MAP, beginning in kindergarten, confirm that trend.)

“I think the potential here to have students who are accomplishing and going above and beyond their goals is very high,” Dias said. “I know it can be very frustrating some days. It’s very tiring some days. Especially now with extended learning, it’s a much longer day. And then staff meetings make it even longer. But as long as you realize what you’re trying to accomplish, I know that our kids can do very well.”

That attitude seems to prevail among the teachers in Quitman’s youngest grades, the first-grade resignation notwithstanding. In third through fifth grades, Glover said he senses the teachers’ energy has waned. In the middle school, where four of the eight main content teachers have left, he’s proud of those remaining for being there, for providing high-quality instruction and stability, for pulling the students through.

‘Given a Disservice’

Quitman’s 53 eighth-graders have grown up facing challenges in their education. Through the years, they found numerous classes boring or insufficiently engaging, and they’ve had a long-term substitute at least once before in recent years.

Back in October, when I interviewed a group of eighth-graders running for positions on Quitman’s student council about the staff changes, they were struck by the new teachers’ higher expectations.
“Our new teachers are phenomenal,” Genesis Canela said.

“Eighth grade is going to be amazing,” added her friend Amiatta Amara.

Social studies teacher Rosemary Coyle has maintained high expectations for her students amid staff changes in their other classes. (Photo: Amanda Brown)

Of Glover, Genesis said, “He fired a lot of teachers that we like, but he actually has brought better teachers.”

The girls singled out Rosemary Coyle, their new social studies teacher, for giving them more challenging work. Last year in social studies, Genesis said, “we watched movies over and over and over, and it was getting tiring.” Of “Lean on Me,” she said, “I actually think I know every line in that movie.”

“We watched it a lot of times,” said another friend, Leonor Tavarez, 14. Other students mentioned repeated viewings of “Roots” and “Ruby Bridges.”

“Can you believe some eighth-graders don’t know nothing about the Revolutionary War?” Genesis said. “We were supposed to learn that in sixth grade. … We were mostly focused on Rosa Parks, Dr. Martin Luther King [but] we needed to learn about the whole country.”

“Sixth grade, then going onto seventh grade, the same thing,” Leonor said.

“I bet eighth grade was gonna be pretty similar, too,” Genesis continued. “But now Ms. Coyle, she’s teaching us about so many things we didn’t know.”

As it turned out, Coyle and Christina Patterson-Bright, the veteran English teacher, would become the eighth-grade stalwarts.

“Even though some of the other content areas have completely broken down, we still have each other, and we’re still here,” said Coyle, 28, who saw similar turnover at her last school in Newark before it was shut down last year. At Quitman, her presence as a young white teacher helped to diffuse student fears that the departures of teachers who are also relatively young and white were racially motivated.

Patterson-Bright has a reputation for treating her students like her own children. (The youngest of her three sons is in Kimberly Dias’s kindergarten class.) When students are off task
in another class, sometimes they’ll ask Patterson-Bright if they can come complete their work in her room. “They’ll work for you if they feel you’re genuine,” she said.

Coyle and Patterson-Bright have discussed Quitman’s challenges with their students. “They’ve realized that they’ve been given a disservice,” Coyle said. But Patterson-Bright doesn’t want them to use that as an excuse. She has directed students to websites where they can get their own math lessons, and she and Coyle tutor in all subjects after school. “I always tell them, ‘you have the right to an education. But it’s your responsibility to make sure you get it,’” she said.

Quitman separates its middle school classes by gender into “kings” and “queens.” Coyle and Patterson-Bright see the girls retaining their motivation more than the boys. Results on the MAP and other internal assessments show growth in English among the seventh- and eighth-grade girls, but not the boys. For the optional after-school tutoring, “it’s the girls’ classes that are packed,” Patterson-Bright said. “It’s the eighth-grade boys’ class that literally shut down. We’re trying to rope them back in.”

**Fate in an Envelope**

On a Friday in early May, Glover begins morning convocation by calling Coyle, Patterson-Bright and all the other middle school teachers to the stage. He recognizes them for being “Peacocks on point” overseeing NJ ASK administration. (The peacock is the Quitman mascot.) Then he has some news for the eighth-graders: Their high school acceptance letters are in. To the students’ chagrin, they must wait until the end of the day to receive them in the library. “You’ve waited this long,” Glover tells Genesis when she protests. She has her hopes set on admission to the academically competitive Science Park High School.

“I wanna know!” Amiatta says on the way to first period, Spanish for the eighth-grade girls. The class has a substitute with no assignment for them, so Amiatta and Genesis go to the office to submit paperwork for ordering stuffed animals for their mothers for Mother’s Day. Ca Misha Hill, a school social worker and student council adviser, wants to know why they don’t have a hall pass. They say the substitute didn’t give them one.

“Substitutes don’t know the rules,” Hill says. “Student council knows the rules.”

Back in Spanish, Tanisha Foster passes out textbooks at 9:10, a half-hour into the period, once the substitute has finally finished taking attendance. “Everyone wants to go to the bathroom at the same time. No more bathroom,” says the substitute, a short, bald man with no demonstrable knowledge of Spanish. “You guys are taking advantage of me.” He comes up with a task from the book: Write the numbers one to 30 in Spanish and English. One girl is able to start at 9:25 and finish in time for the end of class at 9:30. At 9:35, Genesis tells the substitute it’s time to go.

Next, the girls have a double period in math with their long-term substitute, Idris Westbrook. A tall man with a gentle demeanor, Westbrook began working for Newark Public Schools in 2005 as a personal aide to special education students. He earned his associate’s degree in education and became a substitute three years ago. Now 15 credits shy of a bachelor’s in English at Rutgers-Newark, this is his first time running a classroom for a prolonged period.
The lights are down, and Westbrook posts problems to solve on an overhead projector: 

Find the volume of a triangular pyramid with base edges of 8 inches, base height of 4 inches and a pyramid height of 10 inches.

Some girls work while others comb each other’s hair, play with lip gloss and rest their heads on the desk. Tanisha, who attended another school in Newark until her family moved across town last year, asks Westbrook to slow down switching the problems on the projector. Westbrook, 32, has spent considerable time figuring out what the students are supposed to be learning and trying to find appropriate materials. He said the only textbooks in the room when he arrived in March were too easy.

He begins to ask the class questions: “What kind of base does this pyramid have? … What do I do with a rectangular base?”

“I know they gave this on NJ ASK,” he says. He did what he could to prepare them.

“No, they didn’t,” a girl replies.

“Someone just told me they did.”

Westbrook reminds a student she should be writing in pencil, not pen. She doesn’t listen and walks out into the hall with a friend. They come back a little while later, and she picks up her pen again. Another girl takes a bunch of pencils to the sharpener in Ms. Coyle’s room next door. Nonetheless, the majority do get the assignment done, which is more than Westbrook can say most days about his eighth-grade boys’ class. “You have a few girls who do what they do, but for the most part, class moves around in the way that I want it to,” he said. “With the boys, sometimes we might not get to anything because it’s just them playing and me keeping them off each other. There are good days and there are trying days, but probably mostly there are trying days with the boys.”

Glover and others are grateful to Westbrook for pitching in under very difficult circumstances, but Westbrook wishes he could do more. “I’m doing the best I can,” he said. “I’m trying to do a job, but I don’t have all the training necessary to do it.”

In the girls’ social studies class later that morning, Coyle is a more authoritative presence. Two girls who haven’t done anything in the prior classes try sitting in the back, giggling. “I get that you sporadically come to school,” Coyle tells them. “I get that you’ve been with substitutes all morning, but I am not a substitute. … Whatever you need to figure out, figure it out.”

In a long gray sweater, and flats, with a pen holding her dark hair in a bun, Coyle goes around the room inspecting notebooks on the American Revolution. “These aren’t even complete sentences,” she says to one student. “‘A failed attack.’ A failed attack on what?” To another: “You have no title. You have to put a title.” To one of those in the back: “You haven’t been to school in, like, three weeks. You’re entitled to a free, public education, and instead of utilizing that, you come in and act foolish. And it’s a shame because you’re a bright young lady.”

Later, while the girls are in science, the boys are in math. They walk in and out of the room at their leisure. Coyle stops one boy in the hall. “We’re not doing anything,” he tells her.
“I’m aware of that,” she says. “At least be where you’re supposed to be.”

In the math room, the boys are speculating about why Ms. Pitts left. “It’s all us,” says one in a brown and beige hoodie. “Nobody didn’t show her no respect.”

Kevin Ramos — a 13-year-old with glasses and a camouflage jacket over his uniform — holds his hand up for several minutes, trying to ask a question about the day’s problem set. But Westbrook is distracted by all the students off task. Kevin finally walks up to him to have his work checked. Of nine boys in the class targeted for tutoring at the end of the day, Kevin is the only one who has been showing up regularly.

In science, he is initially one of only three boys to sit down at a desk. Some are on the windowsill; others wrestle over a book.

The day’s activity involves testing memory skills as part of a unit on the human brain. The students are supposed to see how many items on a list of 10 they can remember (salt shaker, coin, bobby pin...) when the long-term substitute reads them aloud versus posting them briefly on the overhead projector. Not understanding the idea of an experiment for learning’s sake rather than a grade, most of the boys try to jot down the list before the timer has started. “Basically, you’re cheating for no reason at all,” the teacher tells them.

A tall, stocky boy normally in an English as a Second Language class sits at a computer playing a game on EnglishBanana.com; he doesn’t understand the class conversation. His regular ESL teacher is out today, too.

At the end of the day, the entire grade gathers in the library. Genesis’s cheeks turn red as Glover walks in with the envelopes holding their fate for high school. “I’m excited for y’all,” Christina Patterson-Bright says.

Glover catches a girl coming in who had skipped school that day. He tells her to go home; she can get her letter Monday. He also sends home the same two girls who were goofing off in social studies.

One by one, he calls the others to the front.

Tanisha starts dancing when she sees she got her first-choice assignment, to University High School of the Humanities.

Amiatta is too nervous to open her letter in public. Later, she’ll get the disappointing news that she was assigned to the zoned neighborhood school, Central High. Glover will try to intervene on her behalf. Kevin buries his head on the table after learning he’s been assigned to Central, too. “I’m not going to that school,” he says.

More than half of the Quitman eighth-graders are assigned to Central. The school has improved a lot in recent years, and now the principal is running for mayor, but some students still don’t see it as a desirable placement.

Genesis opens her letter and sees she got her second choice, American History High. That’s the school Amiatta wanted, and many of her classmates would love to be in her shoes. But
her heart was set on Science Park. She goes back to her chair and slumps as the tears begin to fall. She did everything she could. But what else could have been done for her?
June 28, 2013 — This is what Erskine Glover considers a lazy Wednesday morning: He wakes up at 5 a.m. instead of his usual 4:30, flips the television to SportsCenter on ESPN, and eats a fried egg white and a toasted waffle before leaving for work at 6:45. By then, the principal of Quitman Street Renew School normally would have spent at least an hour responding to emails.

“This morning I was a lazy bum,” Glover, now 43, says on the Wednesday two weeks and two days before the last day of school on June 28. He’s wearing white and beige striped pants with a matching, thicker-striped shirt and solid beige bow tie, his long dreads pulled neatly back. With hip surgery impending this summer, he selected light brown sneakers to color-coordinate in lieu of dress shoes.

Glover is curious what schedules are like for principals in places that don’t face as many challenges as Quitman, where he is completing his third year. It’s not a responsibility he takes lightly, and he feels guilty when he isn’t being productive, even as the school has started to show some successes.

After driving nearly an hour in his silver Volkswagen Passat from North Brunswick, Glover arrives in Newark’s impoverished Central Ward, where his school draws community members with its medical clinic and new playground. He discovers that he left his lunch, a takeout salad, at home. He’s been trying to eat lunch these days because he knows he should, but he’d prefer a leisurely meal to a scarfed one, even if it means waiting nine more hours to get it.

In his cluttered office, he spends a precious few moments alone reviewing a brochure for an open house Quitman will hold for families at a nearby charter school being shut down for poor performance. Some of the charter school’s students — how many, Glover does not yet know — will end up at Quitman in the fall. So will some from a school across the parking lot that serves behaviorally challenged children and is being closed, too.
In the sea of royal blue polo shirts and khaki pants and skirts streaming into the halls at 8:25 a.m., the presence of two young boys out of uniform catches Glover off guard: Their mother, Laqueebah Murray, was killed two weeks earlier in a shootout in the courtyard of her sister’s apartment complex, not far from Quitman. When he visited the family at home, Glover asked the boys’ father to let him know when they’d be returning to school so he could have a counselor ready. But there they were, one brother returning to his second-grade classroom, the other to first grade, and the social worker was off site for a training session. Glover would have to wear the counselor’s hat himself.

At the daily morning convocation in the “cafetorium” (combined cafeteria-auditorium), he congratulates the girls’ basketball and cheerleading teams, which will be honored at a banquet at Rutgers that night. As the convocation is dismissing, a boy throws a cup of yogurt. Glover makes him clean up the mess on the floor and directs staff to call his mother.

At 8:58 a.m., Glover goes on the loud speaker explaining logistics on a book fair in the gym where, thanks to a donation, everyone can make four summer reading selections today. He announces a cake celebration in the library for the classes that met independent reading goals this spring. He pauses. A half-dozen middle school boys are playing in the hall. “Who’s the teacher with them?” he asks. There isn’t one. He ushers them upstairs. Back on the microphone, Glover announces that for the first time in the school’s history, nearly every eighth-grader passed a New Jersey test for technology proficiency.

Erskine Glover gets a hug from a student following an assembly. About three-quarters of Quitman students responded in a survey that they feel welcome in the school and they believe staff members care about their success. (Photo: Amanda Brown)

In the minutes and hours ahead, circumstances will demand Glover’s metamorphosis over and over again. In addition to social worker, cheerleader and disciplinarian, he’s an instructional coach, a visionary, a paper-pusher and a micromanager of things he’d rather not be worrying about, but someone has to. “What do I look like, Office Depot?” he says to two girls coming to him for a stapler. He knows that many of his 556 students, most of them African-American like he is and nearly all of them poor, look to him to fill another role: dad. He does what he can, but his priority must be his own teenage son and daughter as well as his wife. His daughter, 13, was still in bed when he kissed her goodbye that morning.

Time. Glover doesn’t know where it goes, but he knows he needs more of it. On the walls of a small conference room where he’ll conduct teacher meetings today are eight pieces of
yellow poster paper where he’s mapping out next year’s professional development schedule. He knows teachers won’t necessarily like it at first, but he’s going to require that they do certain things during their planning period each day: Tuesdays and Thursdays review student work, Wednesdays prepare for the rollout of the national Common Core education standards, Fridays plan together with colleagues, and Mondays everything else, from training in technology to a positive student behavior reward program. Since teachers’ time is so crunched, not everyone is completing required tasks. He needs to spell out a schedule. He’ll also require teachers to work another half-hour next year, increasing slightly a stipend they already receive for a longer day than most Newark schools. Instruction will start and end earlier for students, from 8 a.m. to 3:30 p.m., with the staff continuing until 4.

**Focus and Distraction**

Glover’s first meeting of the morning is with Rosemary Coyle, the seventh- and eighth-grade social studies teacher. Coyle, who was new to the school last fall, turned into one of his stalwarts when four other middle school teachers quit midyear, frustrated and overwhelmed.

Glover asks Coyle, dressed in the same colors as the students, if she is recommending anyone to be held back a year. She mentions two girls in seventh grade and two girls in eighth, though one of the seventh-graders has already been retained once before.

They discuss the suspension of a girl who hit another girl who falsely accused her of stealing money from Coyle’s desk.

Most of the conversation is about a multidisciplinary project that Glover is requiring of all students at the end of the year. Seventh- and eighth-graders are building two- and three-dimensional representations of monuments with the theme of Quitman creating globally conscious citizens. They’re using geometry in the design, and social studies and English to research and write essays, all to persuade the principal to commission the construction of their monument outside the school. (The exercise is theoretical, but Glover says he’s open to the idea.)

The meeting is interrupted by a distraught woman in hot pink pants, mother of the boy who threw yogurt. “He had his medication this morning,” she says, appearing defensive. Glover directs her to the boy’s classroom to check on him, then turns back to Coyle to discuss the rubric, or grading scale, she’s developed for the social studies portion of the monument project. He’ll be reviewing teachers’ project rubrics throughout the day: He wants to make sure his staff is setting high expectations and communicating them clearly to students. He’s required everyone to read the book “How to Create and Use Rubrics for Formative Assessment and Grading.”

He calls in an order for 60 Quitman T-shirts for the open house to entice families from the closing charter, who can choose among neighborhood schools. He makes his way through a stack of state evaluation forms mandatory for the seven teachers who were new to the profession this year or from states without licensing reciprocity in New Jersey. If he signs off, as he does for five of them, the teachers get their New Jersey teaching credentials. If he doesn’t, they get another year to improve. He goes that route for two teachers after consulting with Maria DeRios, who was his vice principal last year and now holds the position of “chief innovation officer.” They joke that the title means she does whatever work he doesn’t want to do. DeRios and Glover
were vice principals together at Peshine Avenue School before Glover was hired at Quitman, and he trusts her implicitly.

Evelyn Vargas, Quitman’s current vice principal, pops in to tell Glover to look at the cakes for the reading celebration: DeRios had emailed images of four popular book covers, from “Green Eggs and Ham” to “The Very Hungry Caterpillar,” to the bakery at ShopRite. The images have been recreated in meticulously detailed frosting.

Coyle returns to show Glover revisions to her rubric. Vargas is back with an incident report about a fight in the neighborhood involving sixth-grade girls. “What do you want to do about this?” she asks. “The mom can file a police report,” he replies. The fight happened outside of school. It isn’t Quitman’s responsibility.

Next come two first-grade teachers, Annie Kim and Planties Simon, whose classes are building a replica of the solar system hanging from the ceiling in the second-floor hallway. Glover will deliver the good news that he’s selected them for a summer academy at Quitman to prepare instructional leaders in science, technology and math — news that will cause Simon to shriek with joy. But first, Glover checks in with Kim, who has the younger of Laqueebah Murray’s sons in her class. She says the other kids were happy to see him, and he seemed fine until about 15 minutes ago, when he began to look sad. She asked him what was wrong, and he replied, “I miss Mommy.” She told him that’s a normal feeling, and she’s here for him. He’s playing a math computer game now while they’re meeting.

Joyce Henry-Faller, the reading intervention teacher and union representative, files in. She’ll deliver some of Glover’s best news of the day with individual assessment results for a few dozen struggling young readers. They have improved dramatically.

“Can you believe it?” Henry-Faller says, referring to a second-grade boy who began the year far behind.

“You’ve got to highlight this,” Glover replies, asking her to prepare a report so he can spread the word.

After the meeting, Glover checks his Blackberry for the time. “Eleven o’clock?” he says in disbelief. “I don’t feel like I accomplished anything.”
Erskine Glover spends much of his time visiting classrooms. (Photo: Amanda Brown)

In the hall, he stops a fourth-grader, one of the award-winning cheerleaders. Out of uniform, she explains that she slept at her aunt’s house last night. “You’re supposed to be a smart, highly-educated student,” he says. “Planning is important.” He notes two cell phones in the back pockets of her jeans. She says one belongs to a friend who doesn’t have a pocket in her uniform pants.

He passes by the cake celebration, where multicolored helium balloons have been imprinted with “BOOKS ROCK!” and other such sayings. He stops to check in with the second-grade teacher who has the slain mother’s older son in her class.

As he walks, he picks up the occasional chip or candy wrapper from the floor. The third floor is unusually quiet, with the sixth grade on a field trip to the Bronx Zoo.

His hip hurts. Last September, he was diagnosed with avascular necrosis, a disease that restricts blood flow to his left hip joint. He said his doctor attributes the condition to a medication he took for bronchitis. He’s been on and off crutches all year, walking at times with a limp. Though his stride appears almost normal today, the pain has been intensifying the last few weeks. He’s scheduled for surgery the last Monday in July, likely a total hip replacement, but he’s still hoping to get by with less invasive hip resurfacing. At least he’ll have time to work on his Columbia doctoral dissertation during four weeks in bed. It’s been sitting stagnant for months.

Waiting to Exhale

Being an inner-city principal is arguably one of the hardest jobs in America, and getting an underperforming school to turn around is harder work still.

Assuming the position at Quitman in the fall of 2010, Glover inherited some of the lowest test scores in New Jersey. Only about a quarter of students were reading at proficiency levels. He is charged with personally galvanizing a staff and a community, yet the changes must be able to outlast him. He is responsible for everything that happens in his building, yet a person can only operate at his current pace for so long. And so much is beyond his control.

For this academic year, Newark Superintendent Cami Anderson put something big in Glover’s control, something he had felt trapped without: hiring power. He felt squarely to blame, then, when three of his hires quit midyear, creating significant disruption.

But at least one key factor in the departures was out of his hands: The district and the teachers’ union agreed to a stipend for participating in an extended school day that the recruits saw as offensively low. The longer day began at the eight renew schools in January. (A new union contract provides opportunities for further compensation based on student growth.)

Another six of the new hires are opting not to come back next year, and Glover is not renewing the contracts of two others. In all, about a third of those he selected didn’t pan out. He expects he’ll need to make about 15 hires this summer, at the same time that budget cuts have required him to eliminate the positions of a clerk, a bilingual-education teacher, a computer teacher and a first-grade teacher. (The first-grade and computer positions are already vacant,
staffed by long-term substitutes. Next year the remaining two first-grade classes, Simon’s and Kim’s, will be larger.)

Glover’s wife reminds him to give himself some credit when he comes home hyper-analyzing what he could have done better. “He’s very self-critical, and I have to tell him, ‘You’re doing a great job,’” said Yolanda Kennard-Glover, who met her husband when she was a freshman at the University of South Carolina and he was a junior, and they tutored grade-school children together. Being an educator is “part of his DNA and his destiny,” she said.

How long will his destiny be at Quitman?

Anderson said she intends to give the renew school principals time to demonstrate results before determining whether to keep them on. “If you look at the research on turnarounds, three years is the amount of time that is required to see major gains, and I would expect there to be variations in the pace of those gains depending on a lot of factors,” she said. “One thing we know about turnaround work is that it doesn’t happen overnight, and if it does, then probably something’s not right.” She called Glover a “transformational leader.”

Glover hopes he’ll be able to see the work through. He’s open to future positions as a central office administrator or as a professor. (This spring was the first time in years that he did not teach a graduate-level course in early childhood education at Kean University.) But one thing he knows for sure: He does not want to restart another school. That means Quitman will be his only shot as a principal.

It’s too soon to say what the outcome will be — for Glover, for Quitman and for Newark school reform overall.

Results of the state’s standardized tests aren’t due back until mid-summer, but online national assessments administered for internal use at Quitman show major progress, particularly in the early grades.

State standardized tests in New Jersey and nationwide have long been criticized for rating schools based on the number of students at grade level, rather than the amount students improve in their care. For example, if a sixth-grader begins the year reading like a second-grader and makes three years’ worth of growth, he still won’t pass a grade-level exam despite having made tremendous progress. Glover is wary of the state standardized exams for that reason, which is why he opted this year to also administer the Measures of Academic Progress. MAP is a well-regarded online national exam that sets an automated goal for yearly progress for each child based on where she began in September.

A whopping 94 percent of Quitman’s kindergartners met their yearly growth targets in English on the spring MAP exam, as did 90 percent in math, according to preliminary results that have yet to factor in makeup tests. By sixth grade, 67 percent met targets in English, and 51 percent met them in math.

The data are hugely promising, but looking at the number of students on or above grade level on the same test still tells a sobering story.
Again, the best news is in the early grades: In math, 40 percent of kindergartners began at or above grade level, a figure that grew to 62 percent by the end of the year. In reading, proficiency percentage among first-graders rose from 37 to 55.

Among the graduating eighth-graders, however, only 5 percent began the year at or above grade level in both subjects. By the end of the year, that figure had increased to 13 percent in English and 14 percent in math. Their proficiency rate had more than doubled, but Glover still has far to go before he can exhale.

‘The End of the Rainbow’

Next academic year, Anderson is expanding the turnaround strategy to three high schools that will join the original eight elementary/middles. The strategy gives principals autonomy, added resources and training, with participating school leaders meeting regularly.

Anderson said she’s pleased with the quality of leadership in the first crop of renew schools and with the community engagement that those principals have inspired. She’s impressed, too, with their stringent new hiring processes — even if not everyone lasts. “There’s only so much you can assess in an interview,” she said. Of Glover and others, she added, “They’ve created a culture of excellence where teachers who may not want to work that hard or who are not as committed to maintaining a level of excellence don’t fit, and I think that’s great.”

Erskine Glover helps a kindergarten student with his writing. Many students look to Glover as a father figure. (Photo: Amanda Brown)

Vargas, the Quitman vice principal, said a lesson she’ll take away from this year is that “we have to be more transparent in why there’s a sense of urgency … in why what we’re asking you to do not only needs to get done, but it needs to get done well. … Oftentimes you don’t understand while you’re in the classroom why you’re asked to do the thousands of things you’re asked to do.” She said some of the new hires didn’t understand what they were getting themselves into.

“Not only are we a renew school, but we’re Glover’s school,” said Vargas, who taught for seven years in New York City before Glover hired her last summer. “He has very high expectations. I don’t think they’re unreasonable. I think once you understand them and you live that vision and that mission, you get it. There is a sense of urgency here, and we have to do hard work, work long hours for these kids.” She kept hours comparable to his this year while planning her Memorial Day weekend wedding in Mexico.
Glover, Vargas and other key staff members are fueled by optimism that their work will pay off.

“I believe at the end of the rainbow, there’s gonna be a pot of gold,” said Stephanie Ruff, the school’s parent liaison, who lives in the neighborhood and spends nights banging on doors to get families involved. She’s constantly on the prowl for partnerships and donations to help mitigate the blows of poverty: After Hurricane Sandy, which hurt Quitman’s attendance through the end of 2012, she secured meals, bottled water and blankets for nearly 200 families at the school and helped parents apply for additional food stamps. Every Friday, a partnership with a local food bank enables her to send a child home with a backpack full of meals to last the weekend. She collected $500 for the family of Laqueebah Murray, including a gift card to a store that carries Quitman uniforms.

Maria DeRios, who oversees many of the school’s operational aspects while Vargas focuses more on instruction, said people often ask her, “Why are you always smiling?”

“Why not?” she asked. “To every problem there is a solution.”

Most of the time, Glover felt powerless and deeply pained last week when an 8-year-old student was reported missing by his mother. (The boy was found with a neighbor late at night, as Glover waited anxiously at school for an update.) The following evening, as he chaperoned the eighth-grade dance, he stood back feeling good about Quitman’s prospects as he reflected on individual students’ growth.

Glover considers improvements in school culture his biggest success thus far. When he started, the building was neat, with the hallway walls lovingly painted by a Spanish teacher. These days, the hallway bulletin boards have come alive with student work. Current displays include a pre-kindergarten art project about fish under the header “GOODBYE TO A FINTASTIC YEAR!” While disciplinary incidents still consume a disproportionate amount of time, they tend to involve the same relatively small group of students. Many children have bought into a culture of positive reinforcement for being good students, diminishing the need to act out to get attention.

In a recent survey of a few hundred Quitman parents, 91 percent said they receive positive feedback about their children through notes, emails or phone calls. Ninety-four percent said they feel welcome at Quitman. About three-quarters of students, taking a similar survey in class, agreed that they feel welcome and that staff members care about their success.

To keep reform sustainable, Glover knows he must find a way to distribute Quitman’s workload more evenly. He’s trying to seek out leadership roles for more staff members so that projects and extra assignments don’t always fall to the same group. On the day I followed Glover, Vargas was busy running the book giveaway, a responsibility that she hopes to be able to delegate in the future. She would have otherwise handled some of the disciplinary incidents that fell to him.

Overloaded as he is, Glover insists on carving out time for his family on the weekends. His 16-year-old son is on a traveling soccer team, and as a former athlete, Glover finds great joy in attending nearly all his boy’s games, even if doing so adds to his exhaustion with weekends out of town. He scheduled his surgery for late July to ensure he can finish out the season. He also
maintains a position organizing his town’s youth soccer league. Last weekend, he refereed a charity basketball tournament run by his wife’s friend: half court, so he didn’t have to attempt to run.

As Glover is home recovering in August, hopefully with all his hiring completed, he’ll have seven teachers attending the science-technology-math intensive at Quitman and 10 beginning a 47-week program for “Black Belt Certification” in the Common Core standards. He’s recommended another three for a yearlong emerging leaders program run by a national nonprofit.

If given enough time, Glover is confident that Quitman can become an institution of academic excellence, yet a sense of urgency is continually looming in his world. What eats at him isn’t so much that this is his one opportunity to prove himself as a principal. It’s the fact that his students don’t get another shot at elementary and middle school.

From Day to Night

On that Wednesday in the waning days of the school year, Glover continues with his daily rounds of the building. As noon approaches, he finds a special education student getting help from his teacher during lunch. The principal, who was an undergraduate statistics major and often gives his own kids late-night help with math homework, helps the boy to reduce the fraction 3/12 to 1/4.

Moments later, he comes upon three third-graders — two boys and a girl — standing in the hall after being kicked out of class. The boys had punched one another. The girl, in maroon leggings beneath her khaki skirt, was disrespectful after perceiving the teacher as ignoring her complaint that a classmate shoved her in the lunch line. She is crying.

Glover ushers them back into their classroom, where he asks students for an update on their project making rock candy. One of the boys from the hall struggles to answer questions about the scientific experiment.

“It’s interesting. You have a project up there, and you’re not in class enough to know the facts,” Glover says. “I have a fact … Students who tend to consistently get in disputes usually don’t make it to the next grade level in a timely manner.”

He keeps the three children behind as he sends the rest of the class and the teacher to the cake celebration, where those who logged at least six independent reading hours — 14 of 16 in this group — will get Six Flags gift certificates through an incentive program the amusement park chain runs.

Sitting at a small desk beside his charges, Glover asks the trio what happened. Each of the boys accuses the other of starting the pushing, which also transpired in the lunch line. “Both of you are not telling Mr. Glover the truth, and I don’t like that,” Glover says. He sends one of them in tears to the nurse for a small scratch on the top of his chest that’s showing above his gray T-shirt. Then he takes the others to join their classmates in the library. Returning with a Band-Aid, the boy collects his Six Flags ticket. Now his nemesis, who didn’t earn one, is crouched in the corner crying.
“How does it feel to be recognized for something good?” Glover asks the first boy as he escorts the pair to his conference room. The second boy is crying hard now, his little shoulders rounded so far forward that the logo on his T-shirt (which is at least the correct color for a Quitman uniform) is blocked. The first boy extends his bottle of water: a peace offering. “Thank you,” the second boy says, gulping his words. Glover decides to call their parents but refrain from suspension. He takes them to the gym to collect their books for summer reading. They both select installments from the “Diary of a Wimpy Kid” series.

Across the hall in the cafetorium, he questions the kitchen workers about the wrong food order arriving for an upcoming outdoor activity day in a park. He pulls a janitor aside and points out water on the floor. It’s unacceptable, he says.

He goes outside to visit a vegetable and herb garden that pre-kindergarten and kindergarten classes are planting by the playground.

Walking through the main office en route to the conference room at 12:50 p.m., Glover finds Michael, the older of the brothers whose mother died, sitting with an ice pack on his leg. He says he injured it playing at home. They talk.

In the conference room, one of the school secretaries hands Glover a bag of honey-roasted cashews. That will be his only lunch. His wife used to pack him meals, but he would come home with them uneaten. He munches on the nuts, hoping to at last turn to the school’s strategic plan, which is due to the district office the next day, as is his own self-evaluation for his annual review.

But first, he’s called upon to help find the lost keys to a room storing electronic equipment. And then a social worker for children with disabilities enters with a new crisis: A third-grade student announced in class that he wants to kill himself. The staff member talked to the boy extensively, and she doesn’t believe he is in danger. Nevertheless, someone needs to call the child’s mother. Glover agrees to do it.

He heads to Michael’s second-grade class to make sure he got back all right. While out in the hall, he stops in a handful of rooms to check lesson plans. He asks all his teachers to keep a binder by their classroom doors so he can come check their plans at any time. In Annie Kim’s first-grade class, Glover sits in the back of the room with her binder for awhile, keeping an eye on Michael’s little brother. The boy, who has dreadlocks hanging over his eyes just like Michael does, uses his mouth to blow up balloons for the solar system project while his classmates take a test on material that he missed. On the wall, a poster Kim made lists things they learned in first grade, like how to count to 120 forwards and backwards.

School is dismissing at 3 p.m. today, instead of the usual 4, for professional development. In the cafetorium, Glover introduces representatives of the YMCA who will train staff in a curriculum promoting healthy eating and exercise. Afterward, he meets with a few dozen teachers in the library and discusses more project rubrics. They adjourn at 4:45, giving him an hour to check email and work on the strategic plan and self-evaluation before leaving for Rutgers, where Quitman’s cheerleaders and basketball players are among numerous teams being honored at a banquet. He doesn’t get far, pausing to discuss the incoming assessment results with the school technology coordinator.
“Principal Glover needs a nap,” he says at 5:15, yawning. On his self-evaluation, he lists time management as an area where he can improve.

After the banquet, where he eats a salad, Glover returns to Quitman and spends more than an hour working, grateful for the silence. He leaves the school around 9:30 and arrives home at 10:15 p.m. His wife and son are still up. His daughter is asleep. At last, he sits down to a pasta dinner.

The next morning, he sleeps in until 5:30.
BUT STILL FAR TO GO

Percentage at or above grade level

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Math</th>
<th>English/Language arts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kindergarten</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fourth</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fifth</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sixth</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seventh</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eighth</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Data are from the spring Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) exam.
March 3, 2014 — Erskine Glover was home recovering from hip replacement surgery last summer when the scores arrived.

The principal of Quitman Street Renew School knew based on internal assessments that more than 80 percent of his students had shown growth during the 2012-2013 academic year. But he also knew that most were still not performing at grade level, and the state’s standardized tests are grade-level exams. And so he was hoping for the best but bracing for bad news.

Still, when the pass rates landed in Glover’s email box, he felt like he’d been punched in the gut. Fourth-grade reading: 9 percent of students proficient. Fourth-grade math: 17 percent. Not all numbers were that low, but the best performance, in eighth-grade English, was 50 percent proficiency. Most grades and subjects saw declines, and overall, fewer than a quarter of students scored at or above grade level, placing Quitman in the bottom 2 percent of schools statewide.

“It looks like we’re not even doing anything,” Glover said. Nothing could have been further from the truth. He and numerous staff members have been putting in tremendous hours, in some cases — his included — at the expense of their own health.

He wondered if he should step aside and allow someone else the chance to turn around one of Newark’s historically low-performing schools. It took a serious pep talk from his boss, Assistant Superintendent Peter Turnamian, to persuade him to stay the course. If anyone could be the right fit for Quitman, it should be Glover, a highly educated and painfully sincere African-American leader in a predominantly African-American school. At 44, he commands widespread respect from colleagues and parents, and many students look to him — the father of two teenagers — as a paternal figure.

Although Glover has been principal of Quitman since 2010, it had only been a year since the start of Newark’s renew school reform initiative, giving him and seven other principals hiring
power and increased resources and budgetary discretion. Superintendent Cami Anderson said from the beginning she knew the payoff wouldn’t come overnight, and she would wait a few years before passing judgment on the principals’ success or failure. They were, after all, trying to reverse decades of inadequacies.

What’s more, several factors beyond Glover’s control influenced the outcome of the New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (NJ ASK) at Quitman. For one thing, the tests themselves were harder as the state began phasing in the tough national Common Core education standards. For another, Quitman’s student population is rapidly changing: There was an influx of children with special needs when their school closed last academic year, and meanwhile some of the highest-performing students are being recruited away by well-regarded charter schools. And much of Quitman’s best progress has occurred in the early grades that don’t take the state tests. (NJ ASK assesses third grade through eighth.)

So Glover decided to keep trying, buoyed by the belief that vastly different results can come from the same children depending on the actions of adults. Yet again he resolved to prove to the world that he is not a failure, and his students are just as capable as children anywhere.

Today, six months later, several new initiatives are in place at Quitman. All classes now have a half-hour a day of “sustained reading” — with students quietly reading a passage and answering analytical questions — to prepare for the next round of state exams this spring. The school day is now 7.5 hours long, compared with a national average of 6.5. A hundred students have been asked to stay for an additional hour and a half of daily tutoring, and about 80 of them typically do. The most advanced middle school students now have their own honors classes.

Glover is spending more than $80,000 for a consultant from the company that makes Quitman’s new math curriculum to work on site with his teachers. It is a lot of money, he knows, but the district required schools to adopt new textbooks last fall, and Glover felt his team needed considerable support to instruct the material effectively. He said the investment is already paying dividends in the quality of teaching he observes.

“We’re counting on these things to launch us to another level,” said Evelyn Vargas, the vice principal.

Quitman was one of four Newark schools recently selected by the district to try what’s known as “blended learning” in third through fifth grades, some of the classes with the lowest test scores. The schools were chosen based on academic need, coupled with officials’ belief in their technological capacity and leadership ability to roll out yet another new initiative smoothly.
Quitman Principal Erskine Glover watches student Jordan Brown-Wright work on her spelling. He spends much of his day visiting classrooms, where the hard work of students and teachers inspires him to keep going despite the school’s shortcomings. (Photo: Amanda Brown)

In February, Quitman’s third- through fifth-grade classes began dividing into small, rotating groups: one at any given time working with the teacher, one doing a group activity or project, and one online working on assignments individualized to address a child’s specific deficiencies. Glover had invested $75,000 getting his teachers trained and buying the necessary laptops and digital content.

Blended learning is one of the most rapidly growing trends in education because it gives teachers the ability to simultaneously meet the needs of various ability levels. Glover does not yet know whether it will help turn the tide for the school, but in his heart he knows this:

It is Quitman’s make-or-break year.

Not only is the principal self-imposing a deadline to show results or seriously reconsider his path ahead, he wants to avoid the possibility of Quitman being placed on a school closure list next year. For both those reasons, significant improvement on NJ ASK is essential. Thanks to the extraordinary performance of a handful of teachers and the hard work of numerous others, Glover believes it is possible.

Yet the challenge to get scores up grows steeper still, as Quitman’s student population continues to grow even needier. This year, the school received 60 new students from two charter schools closed for poor performance. Most arrived far behind academically. Six students from a school for children with behavioral disabilities that was also shut down were sent to Quitman as well. Staff members throughout the building are identifying more students with untreated mental health issues.
Glover now needs his other hip, the right one, replaced because of his disease restricting blood flow. His doctor wants him to do it soon. But with so much at stake for Quitman, he will not consider a surgery date before the end of June.

A New Teaching Strategy

Seeing the promise in Quitman’s NJ ASK scores requires a look behind the raw numbers. The best performance came in eighth-grade English, where the pass rate was 50 percent. That might not sound like much, but consider that, in 2012 as seventh-graders, only 4 percent of those same students passed the state English exam.

To Glover, the improvement is proof of the power of excellent teaching. The eighth-grade English teacher is Christina Patterson-Bright, a longtime veteran of the school known for motivating instruction and a deep commitment to the students. Last year, she worked closely with Rosemary Coyle, one of Glover’s new recruits, who emphasized literacy skills in her social studies classes. Patterson-Bright and Coyle pushed the students to persevere when their math and science teachers quit midyear. Though half achieved grade-level proficiency in English, the pass rate in math was a mere 11 percent — demonstrating the difference that teachers can make.

This year, Patterson-Bright remains at Quitman. Coyle reluctantly left in December to do a mandatory three-semester internship for a graduate program; though she hopes to return in the fall of 2015, her classes are now staffed by a long-term substitute. Seventh- and eighth-grade math are still taught by a teacher who isn’t certified in the subject, but Glover said he is dedicated and working hard, seeking guidance from the math consultant. To Glover, that is preferable to what he had before: a fully credentialed teacher who did not want to be there.

In his mind, last year’s midyear departures of all four sixth- through eighth-grade math and science teachers was no excuse for the middle grades’ poor performance on the state math test, but at least it offered an explanation for what were in some cases dramatic declines. Sixth-graders saw their math pass rate fall to 32 percent from 57 the year before. In seventh grade, the drop was even worse: to 4 percent proficient from 45 percent a year earlier.

Quitman fourth-grade teacher Dawn DiGiovanni works with Damir Ingram on a math problem. A second-year teacher, DiGiovanni says she’s able to meet the needs of more students this year thanks to a new “blended learning” program allowing her to work with small groups as children rotate to different activities around the room. (Photo: Amanda Brown)
While the teachers who quit all had their own reasons for leaving, they generally were overwhelmed and ill-equipped to handle the demands of their jobs, despite the fact that three of them convinced Glover otherwise when he hired them the previous summer.

More perplexing were the results for third through fifth grades, where there wasn’t anything visibly wrong but something clearly was not right. In fifth grade, for instance, only 5 percent of students passed the reading test, down from 18 percent when they were fourth-graders the year before.

Glover sensed teacher motivation lacking in some cases; in others, he said, teachers were trying hard but struggling to be effective. He hopes that blended learning will infuse new energy into those classrooms, resulting in better performance.

Dawn DiGiovanni, who teaches fourth-grade math and science, estimates that about 50 percent of her students are below grade level, 20 percent perform above average, and everyone else is somewhere in between. Last school year, her first at Quitman and in a full-time teaching position, she said she did not have the capacity to meet the wide array of needs in her classes.

This year, DiGiovanni has undergone extensive training and planning in preparation for blended learning. Even before the new initiative began, she had started dividing students into small groups and having them rotate around the room with activities better suited to their individual strengths and weaknesses.

On a recent Tuesday, DiGiovanni began the morning math period with a quick lesson on fractions with the number 1 in the numerator. She then gave the 15 children in the room a few questions to test basic understanding. (Kevin and Olivia are going to share a pizza cut into six slices…) She walked around to check their work, distributing painted popsicle sticks accordingly: Kids with all correct answers got purple, those with one wrong answer got green, and those with multiple wrong answers got red, although they were not told the reason for their placement in a particular group.

For the next 45 minutes, the children moved in 15-minute intervals. The red group began with DiGiovanni reviewing the basics with fraction puzzle pieces to show, for instance, how eight-tenths is equal to eight one-tenth pieces. The green group worked independently on drills at the Hewlett-Packard laptops along the right side of the room. The purple group played a game in pairs, adding and subtracting fractions with different denominators. When the red and green groups later had their turns for the game, they got easier problems where the denominators were all the same.

DiGiovanni said the new approach to teaching is particularly helpful to struggling students. Some of the top performers said they also are learning more as they are no longer being held back by classmates in need of remediation.

“The math is very, very great,” said Arshad Mallard, 10, a purple group member wearing a royal blue New York Giants T-shirt in lieu of Quitman’s uniform royal blue polo. He said he discovered that his textbook “has a lot of over-my-level things inside of it,” and now he’s getting to try them out.
And DiGiovanni, who said she felt overwhelmed at times last year and sought much guidance from experienced colleagues, can see herself becoming a more effective teacher. “I’m definitely meeting the needs of more children,” she said.

Southern Inspiration

Glover is particularly excited about what’s happening in the fifth-grade math and science classes of Jessica Allen, a teacher he hired in September. Allen, a 12-year teaching veteran, had just moved to New Jersey from Virginia because of her husband’s job. She chose to work in Newark despite living nearly an hour and a half away, near the Pennsylvania border, because she loves teaching urban youth, and she chose a position at Quitman over one at a charter school.

Coming in for a tour and interview, she had not expected a school labeled failing to look so inviting and engaging, and the students she met seemed genuinely happy to be there. “I walked in here, and I was just amazed,” she said. “I was amazed by the colors on the walls, the bulletin boards. I just fell in love with it.”

Allen said she wanted to cry when she saw her students’ dismal NJ ASK scores from last year as fourth-graders. In the months since, she has been working hours comparable to or even longer than Glover’s, leaving home at 4:30 each morning so she can be the first person in the building when it opens at 6:30 a.m. She stays until 7 or 8 p.m. despite having two children of her own, a daughter in sixth grade and a son in seventh.

At the beginning, middle and end of each academic year, Newark administers a test to gauge schools’ progress and compare their performance to one another. In the fall, none of Allen’s students passed the math portion. In January, her classes had the highest fifth-grade scores in the city. The scores don’t count toward Quitman’s state rankings like NJ ASK results do, but at a minimum, they serve as inspiration.

“All we had to do was try harder, and we did it,” said 10-year-old Jahson Allen (no relation to his teacher). He is one of many fifth-graders who come in early and stay late for tutoring when Jessica Allen asks them to. “She motivates us to not give up,” Jahson said. “She helps us to do our work very good.”

Some of Allen’s teaching strategies are practical ones for test preparation. She is constantly drilling students on the concepts they have learned throughout the year so they do not forget. But while many urban educators are criticized for taking the fun out of learning to get their students to score better on state exams, Allen stands out for the opposite reason. Her third-floor classroom is part garden and part zoo, with students growing corn, basil and peas, to name a few, and raising snails, turtles, beetles and frogs. The guppy fish are having babies. Students are preparing for a squid dissection, and Allen will bring in her deep fryer so they can make calamari.

She fits in more than most teachers imagine possible by being a stickler for time management, looking to save a few seconds anywhere she can. In a Southern drawl that is the source of much laughter in her classroom, Allen often speaks to her “munchkins,” as she calls her students, in fill-in-the-blank sentences (“So my answer is actually…”), awaiting their rapid reply. That’s faster and more effective than asking a question, waiting for students to raise their hands and calling on a single one, and it requires everyone to pay attention.
She designates a well-behaved child — on Feb. 18, a boy named Phillip — as the student teacher, with authority to judiciously dispense bathroom passes so she doesn’t have to waste class time on matters so mundane. When students work independently and in small groups, she gives them extra worksheets on concepts learned previously so that, if they don’t understand something and she’s occupied with their peers, no one sits around waiting. “If you cannot do it on your own, there’s another activity you can be successful at,” she tells them. There are also “table captains” selected weekly who meet with Allen to learn how to explain assignments to their classmates.

Asked how much of her own money she spends on classroom supplies, Allen replied with a giggle. “Don’t tell my husband,” she said. “I do spend a ton.”

If Quitman’s 43 fifth-grade students (Allen sees them in two groups a day) were to take NJ ASK today, the school’s internal testing indicates that 16 of them would pass. But another nine are on the cusp, and others are not far behind. Allen’s goal — she’s reluctant to say it out loud — is an 80 percent pass rate, up from 17 percent for the same class last year.

“I want 80 percent of my children to walk out of this classroom being successful and ready to go to sixth grade,” she said. “I want them to walk into the room with confidence knowing that, when they sit down with that sixth-grade teacher, they will know every previous skill they needed up until now. I don’t want them to go to another grade and feel upset. I don’t want them to feel discouraged, and I don’t want them to feel that they hate math. I don’t want them to get back to that point.”

**Behind the Numbers**

Great teachers are one critical ingredient for a school turnaround. Involved parents are another.

Parents passing through Quitman’s main office are encouraged to pick up a four-page packet sitting on the counter. It is called “School Snapshot for Families,” and in no uncertain terms it describes the challenges facing Quitman — and asks for families’ help. One heading asks, “Are Students Coming To School?” and pie charts answer the question: Last academic year, 29 percent missed more than two days per month, and 34 percent missed one to two days
monthly. “Attendance is critical for school success,” the packet says. “Be sure to get your children to school every day on time.”

Turn the page, and the topic is NJ ASK. The question is how many students performed at grade level last spring, and the answers are grim.

Reading grades three through five: 14 percent, compared with 38 percent citywide. Math in those grades: 29 percent at Quitman versus 53 in all of Newark.

Reading grades six through eight: 23 percent, compared with 46 percent citywide. Math: 14 percent for Quitman, 47 percent for Newark.

The packet does not include the good news: On another test, one administered internally to gauge progress from the fall to the spring, more than 80 percent of students met computer-generated growth targets for the year, even though most still fell short of grade-level proficiency. (That test predicted with almost complete accuracy last spring which students would pass the NJ ASK and which ones would not.) And in kindergarten, 62 percent of children ended the year on or above grade level in math, compared with 30 percent the prior September.

Herein lies the conundrum for educators in low-performing schools across the nation: If a student arrives in fifth grade reading like a first-grader and makes three years’ worth of growth, he still will not pass a grade-level state test despite major progress and clearly effective teaching.

Yet grade-level test results are the ones the public understands and were for years what policymakers used to make high-stakes decisions for schools. The system has been evolving, and New Jersey is now evaluating schools and teachers based on students’ growth compared against their peers across the state. Superintendent Anderson, too, says she cares more about growth than overall proficiency numbers. But Glover is keenly aware of how the public perceives his students, and sometimes those perceptions hurt.

At a recent citywide school enrollment fair, Glover found a fact sheet about Quitman stating that the school has a low-performing early childhood education program — a conclusion based entirely on the NJ ASK scores of older students. In fact, three of Quitman’s teachers in the early grades have been deemed model instructors by the district, meaning that their colleagues from around the city periodically come observe them at work.
Jessica Allen coached her fifth-grade math students to the highest scores in Newark on a test administered citywide in January. Although the results do not count toward Quitman’s state ranking, they serve as inspiration for the school. (Photo: Amanda Brown)

Glover has been worried about staff morale, and before the winter holidays, he and his administrative team personally paid for a teacher celebration. “This job is hard,” he said.

Throughout the fall and winter, Glover and his staff hosted three parent nights to inform families about the school’s performance and solicit their help in improving. About 50 parents in total came, generally those who are the most involved anyway, and vowed to do their part. Glover tries to slip some of the same messaging into other events like student award assemblies that tend to attract bigger crowds.

Under Newark Public Schools’ current reform strategy, Quitman faces competition from an increasing number of charter schools looking to enroll the same students. Kids who perform well and have involved families are most likely to be recruited away by high-performing charters. Twenty-one students with proficient scores on the NJ ASK transferred out of Quitman last fall, primarily to high-performing charter schools that recruited them away. One couple told Quitman administrators they saw the chance to attend a charter school as an invaluable opportunity for their older son, but they keep their younger boy in second grade at Quitman.

Last year, a grandmother named Doris Jean was approached by two charter schools interested in having her enroll her grandson D’Andre, now 11. She discussed the options with the child, who is on Quitman’s honor roll and student council, and together they decided to stay put. The boy, a sixth-grader, has attended Quitman since pre-kindergarten, and he is comfortable there. Besides, “I don’t think the charter school is that much better,” said the grandmother, who attends virtually all of Quitman’s family meetings and events. “Since he’s doing so great, why mess with it?”

She said the fact that her grandson is excelling academically and socially at Quitman is far more important to her than the school’s average test scores. And she said Glover has made great strides in improving the school culture, if not NJ ASK proficiency rates. “He turned it completely around,” she said.

The environment at Quitman is such that, when a student ran away from home last fall, he continued reporting to school every day for more than a week. Glover was eventually notified that the boy was missing and pointed his family to his classroom.

Irony and Determination

Glover’s challenge is to keep a positive culture and raise test scores while Quitman’s student population keeps getting bigger and needier. He is anticipating yet another influx of students next academic year as another of the original renew schools, Newton Street, is expected to close this spring. (Officials say they plan to turn the Newton building into a community center, a decision that has heightened anxiety at Quitman as staff members wonder if their grace period, too, might be running out.)

Then there is the matter of Glover’s health, as well as the health of his staff. The number of physical ailments in the building has become a running joke. The vice principal needs foot
surgery, which she is waiting to have until the spring. The sixth- and seventh-grade English teacher and a special education teacher are both out on medical leave. The data coach is hobbling around with torn ligaments in her knee. “Quitman is falling apart,” Glover said, only half-kidding. “I work them so hard.”

Them and himself. Glover returned to Quitman in mid-September after having his left hip replaced in late July. He still regrets missing the August teacher training sessions and the first few weeks of school, apart from the first day, when he hobbled in despite doctor’s orders to stay home. He ripped his meniscus on his left knee during rehab and began having pain in his right hip. His doctor says he needs that one replaced now and should allow six to eight months for recovery. He’ll consent to surgery on June 30 and staying home most of the summer before going back to work.

That’s assuming at least half of Quitman students pass the NJ ASK this spring. Otherwise, he said, he needs to reassess what he is doing. Glover believes the school will meet a goal of 50 percent proficiency this year, and to get there he wants his staff to focus on good teaching, not test scores. But clearly the pressure is on.

Glover is aware of the bitter irony in his personal circumstances. If he wanted to be a rising star in urban education, all he would need to do is take an easier job leading a school with a more privileged population. Test scores would be higher and easier to move upward, and he would have time to finish his Columbia doctoral dissertation, which has been sitting untouched for the past few years. Then he would have his pick of positions in a central office or in higher education.

But if he leaves Quitman without turning scores around, then what? He still has a family to help support, and his son and daughter will soon be applying to college.

He tries not to think too much about that scenario, just as he tries to tune out the physical pain he’s in walking up and down the school’s three flights of stairs to spend the majority of his days visiting classrooms. “Why complain? It’s not going to change,” he said. “I can’t stop walking. That’s just the nature of what I do.” He wears sneakers beneath his suits, has a cane but usually doesn’t use it, and bends down whenever he sees a tissue or snack wrapper on the floor.

He prefers walking the halls to being in his office, where he never can keep up with all the emails and paperwork. He hates feeling like he’s in reactionary mode rather than being proactive. But so many little things demand his attention each day, whether signing off on a student report card being released to Child Protective Services or tracking down a contract for the math consultant.

On his daily rounds of the building, he finds plenty of cause for frustration but also many reasons for inspiration in the hard work of his staff and students. Seeing them, he reminds himself to keep going.
Chapter 9
Up in the Air

July 31, 2014 — Nydresha is a small girl with big dreams about Hawaii.

In her dreams, the 12-year-old and her mother live in a beach house. There is peace, and there is quiet. There is no drama, no abandoned houses and no cursing — not even by Nydresha herself. She curses sometimes in real life but always feels badly about it afterwards.

Nydresha’s mother, known on the streets as Lil’ Bit for the tiny stature she passed on to her only child, likes how the girl thinks. She’d be up for moving to Hawaii, too, she says, if not for one problem: “I ain’t got no money.”

And so Nydresha is staying put in her hometown, where she finished sixth grade last month at Quitman Street Renew School. Quitman is part of a reform effort in a school district where petty, energy-draining bickering — the “drama” of Nydresha’s world — recently has extended to high-ranking officials. Newark’s embattled superintendent, Cami Anderson, stopped attending school board meetings this year because the acrimony has gotten so out of control. Some regarded a nationally watched mayoral election in May as a referendum on her leadership, even though the state runs Newark’s schools. The new mayor would like to see Anderson ousted and charter school expansion halted, but those aren’t his decisions.

Quitman Principal Erskine Glover believes none of the political noise will make a difference for his school. A hotly contested plan to let families select where in the city their children go to school will merely result in a small enrollment increase. While some policies do bear weight, like whether Glover will be forced to hire tenured teachers other schools did not want to fill vacancies for next academic year, he says what matters most is what he can control the least: his students’ lives beyond the academic day. What kind of homes do they return to each night, and how much time do they spend studying? Are their parents involved in their education? How well are they eating and sleeping? Are they involved in extracurricular activities that
motivate them to strive? Do they get a reaction from the adults around them when they do something well, or only when they mess up?

How to turn around failing public schools is one of the most vexing and pressing questions in American society today, and two years ago, Anderson tapped Quitman to take part in Newark’s attempt at solving the problem. The idea was to lift the school and others from the ranks of New Jersey’s lowest performers by giving exceptional principals the power to hire great teachers as well as extra technology and other resources. And while that strategy might still bear fruit, the reality at Quitman has proven to be messy and complex, as public policies intersect with private lives.

Today, the school’s fate is still up in the air. A weary Glover and his staff are waiting to see the impact of their toils — in terms of test scores and, more importantly, life prospects of their students, who are predominantly African-American and living in poverty.

Nydresha, whose last name is being withheld for her protection, is at a delicate turning point, too. She has reached a paradoxical age where she still looks like a child — she has yet to reach 5 feet tall and thinks she weighs somewhere between 60 and 70 pounds — but her decisions carry increasingly grown-up consequences.

She wants to succeed and, for a time this past year, stayed after school for tutoring, but her grades are all over the map and she sometimes gets lured into chatting with friends in class when she should be working. She will enter seventh grade in September reading and doing math at a fifth-grade level, but she won one of the six “Most Improved” awards that her math teacher distributed at a year-end assembly, having raised her grade from an F to a C-plus.

Last winter, Nydresha wanted to be a lawyer because she liked the idea of defending the innocent, but then she decided, based on courtroom TV, that people who do wrong should fend for themselves. Her aspirations in the past six months have included fashion designer, mystery writer, video editor, “someone who works with animals” and, most recently, radio talk show host.

She fiercely loves her mother, who has Nydresha’s name and a heart tattooed on her neck, yet longs for more attention from her dad, who is busy with two younger daughters from another relationship but still sees her frequently. She talks simultaneously of her desire to move, if not to Hawaii, “somewhere far, far away” and of having at Quitman “the most coolest, supportive friends ever,” as she described classmates Aliyah, Sarah, Keysha, Ashanti, Princess, Nyasia and Gloria in an English essay.
Nydresha’s career aspirations in recent months have included lawyer, fashion designer, mystery writer, video editor, “someone who works with animals” and radio talk show host. (Photo: Amanda Brown)

Deeply impressionable, self-conscious, loving and social, Nydresha is a child whose future is as unpredictable as her school’s, and the principal wants badly to steer her toward a positive course. Engagement in constructive extracurricular activities often helps guide young adolescents toward good choices, and through the years Nydresha has dabbled in many of Quitman’s after-school offerings. The one that stuck was cheerleading.

This year, the Quitman cheerleading team had a winning record to uphold, and heading toward an annual citywide tournament in June, Nydresha found herself with a major responsibility. For her light weight and advanced abilities, she was selected to be hoisted above the heads of her classmates to perform not one or two but seven stunts in a routine lasting two and a half minutes. She was their “fly girl,” as one coach called her, the team’s very own “boomerang.”

“We need someone strong to be the peak,” said Stephanie Ruff, one of Quitman’s two cheerleading coaches and the school’s parent liaison. “Nydresha is the star. We have to put the star on display.”

The most difficult of the stunts, called the yo-yo, involved three other girls throwing Nydresha up to dive face first toward the floor into a somersault. None of the other 18 teams performing in the tournament would dare to even attempt it.

For Quitman to win, Nydresha would have to land on her feet, over and over again. But whether or not that happened wasn’t entirely up to her. The coordination of each of the other girls played a part.

In the early days of the season, Nydresha’s mother was furious when she fell on the hard floor and hurt her back, informing the coaches that Nydresha would quit if they couldn’t provide a mat for her to practice on. The week before the June 7 tournament, Nydresha was thrown so high she whacked her right elbow into the ceiling of the Quitman music room.

Her situation was, in many ways, emblematic of her school itself. Quitman’s teachers and administrators are responsible for student performance that is a result of both their instruction and leadership and a million other factors beyond their control, like whether someone’s father
went to jail or there was enough food on the dinner table. However the pieces fall, they, and she, put themselves on the line.

Nydresha’s cheerleading teammates hoist her into the air for one of the seven stunts they would perform in a routine for a citywide tournament. (Photo: Amanda Brown)

**The 14-Hour Problem**

Erskine Glover will remember the 2013-2014 academic year as “the year of FMLA.” The acronym stands for Family and Medical Leave Act, the federal law that entitles employees to a job-protected leave to take care of serious medical conditions, newborn children and ailing relatives. More times than Glover cares to recall in the past year, he signed the FMLA paperwork for a staff member to take time off.

The fourth-grade math and science teacher was out the last three months of the year after falling and tearing a ligament in her knee, making her unable to climb the stairs to her third-floor classroom. The vice principal left a month early for surgery to reconstruct her foot and ankle. The social worker had a baby. A pre-kindergarten teacher’s husband died. Nydresha’s English teacher missed much of the year due to hypertension and surgery to remove what turned out to be a benign tumor.

Then there was Glover himself, missing days to care for his wife when she fell ill and had debilitating sciatica. This summer, he had resurfacing surgery on his right hip, less than a year after another operation to have his left hip replaced.

FMLA is necessary, Glover knows, but the absences frustrated him as they interrupted classroom progress.

Two school years ago, growth was stunted by five teachers quitting midyear, primarily due to job-related stresses. For the most part this past year, the coming and going wasn’t anyone’s fault. It just was what it was — with a few unfortunate exceptions.

In May, Glover and a new seventh- and eighth-grade science teacher mutually agreed for the teacher to leave because he couldn’t control his classroom. In early June, Nydresha’s homeroom and social studies teacher was placed on paid leave pending the investigation of a misconduct allegation. According to Nydresha, not much learning occurred after that in social studies, which had been one of her two favorite subjects, along with English. On the third-to-last
day of school, with many of her classmates absent, she and six other kids sat watching skydiving on television, followed by a show on Guinness World Records for things like the longest wedding dress train (4,468 feet at the time of the filming). Earlier in the year, she had enjoyed learning about ancient Greece and Egypt.

Despite the disruptions, Quitman’s climate is generally one of people working incredibly hard. Beginning at 8 a.m. and ending at 3:30 p.m., the academic day is a full hour longer than in most U.S. schools. Many students come early for breakfast, and through early June, about 80 of 100 students targeted for tutoring would stay at school until 5 p.m. The school offers activities including track, basketball, art club, music club, technology club and archery club.

But even with all that, Glover still has what he refers to as his “5 p.m. to 7 a.m. problem.” During that 14-hour span, he has students facing every societal challenge imaginable, detracting from their ability to learn. One morning when a child had an emotional meltdown so severe he had to be taken from Quitman in an ambulance, the saddest part to Glover was that it was just another day. The staff isn’t immune, either. A teacher’s aide from the neighborhood moved away midyear after being shot in the hand and leg last fall while out with her brother, who was caught up in a dispute.

Nydresha, who lives on the top floor of a three-story house with her mother, enjoys hanging out with friends, and her mom encourages her to turn off the television and her Xbox and go out. Yet outside is also where the drama she loathes is prone to occur, spilling over into school the next day. Most of it is over little stuff, she explained: “Who did what with who?” and ‘you owe me money’ and ‘where’s my stuff at?’ and anytime people get drunk.” Nydresha doesn’t feel particularly safe in her neighborhood as a result. After a big fight, which occurs once every few months, she said matter-of-factly, she’ll stay inside for approximately two days to be sure no one will “bust out a gun.”

“Sometimes, when it’s nice and quiet outside, I feel it’s gonna be a great day,” she said. “But at night, when it sunsets, there is all this drama.”

That’s why Nydresha would like to move to Hawaii, though she worries about the possibility of a tsunami there.
Student safety in Newark is far from assured, but when Glover stays up nights worrying, he doesn’t let himself dwell there simply because he can’t do anything about it. Besides, most kids have someone at home who loves them and is looking out for their well-being, he said. But when it comes to sharpening students’ minds during their 14 hours away from school, the principal could use some reinforcement. Are the children spending their time hanging out, playing video games, on social media and watching television, or are they doing homework and engaging in activities that will brighten their future prospects? That is the question that eats at him, and the answer is one he believes holds Quitman back.

**Diverging Aspirations**

In school, one of the girls on Nydresha’s “most coolest, supportive friends” list is a cheerleading teammate named Sarah. Although Sarah is still 11, one of the youngest kids in their grade, she is a full head taller than Nydresha and appears even more so with her trademark high ponytail.

Sarah doesn’t have time for hanging out like Nydresha and most of the other kids in their grade. In addition to being a Quitman cheerleader, she is a member of a traveling All Star cheerleading team based in Waldwick, a suburb 25 miles north of Newark. She is also on a tumbling team and has in the past done a Double Dutch team; whether or not she continues with Double Dutch in the coming season will depend on the practice schedule, as she has not yet been able to figure out how to be in two places at once. She had to drop a second competitive cheerleading team this summer because of a scheduling conflict.

![Nydresha (left) with her friend and teammate Sarah. The two girls excel at cheerleading, but their aspirations are different. Sarah has a singular focus, while Nydresha wants to explore new things. (Photo: Amanda Brown)](image)

For the All Star cheerleading and tumbling, Sarah is coached by Rayshine Harris, a Newark native who went on to become a 12-time tumbling world champion. She dreams of being like him, and most nights the past school year, she had All Star practice until 9 p.m., getting home around 10. Tumbling practice was on Saturdays and All Star cheerleading was Sundays. The summer brings more All Star practice, and Sarah plans to fit in a separate cheer camp and Double Dutch camp, as she has in years past.

All of this is made possible by Sarah’s sleep-deprived mother, Andrea, who works an overnight shift as a parking lot attendant at Newark Liberty International Airport. (Parents in this
story are also being referred to by their first names to protect their children’s identities.) Andrea goes to work at 10:30 p.m., leaving Sarah and her 7-year-old sister alone while they sleep, with neighbors to call on if they need anything. She heads home at 6:30 a.m. to get them to school.

The tradeoff is that Andrea is available to drive her daughters to sports practices. Her little one has taken to cheerleading and tumbling, too, and last year was the only second-grader on the Quitman team, which otherwise consists of girls in third grade through eighth. The mother rests in the morning but often returns to Quitman to bring her daughters lunch. She also helps to fundraise for the All Star team’s travel expenses.

Andrea, 43, said she enjoys living vicariously through her daughters. She wishes she could have done competitive cheerleading and tumbling herself as a girl, but her parents, immigrants from the West Indies, weren’t open to it, and besides, she didn’t know what was available. “I’m happy they’re able to do something I would have loved to have done at their age,” she said. Whenever an opportunity comes along for them to join one team or another, she can’t say no.

The mother hopes the effort — hers and her daughters’ — will one day pay off in the form of college scholarships from cheerleading or gymnastics teams. In sixth grade, though, harder classwork combined with long practice hours took a toll on Sarah’s grades, which fell to B’s and C’s after years on Quitman’s honor roll.

Sarah said she sees peers getting in trouble because they don’t have enough to do outside of school. “I feel so bad,” she said. “Sometimes I just stare at them. I look, and I’m like, ‘You guys should cheer. It’s so much better than being on Facebook and on the streets outside.’” At the same time, she recognizes that not everyone has a mother as involved as hers. Without her mom, Sarah wrote in a memory book for English class, “my life would be nothing at all.”

In sixth grade, Sarah juggled harder class work with long practice hours for cheerleading and tumbling. (Photo: Amanda Brown)

Sarah’s dedication and singular focus may be rare at Quitman, but her desire to make something of herself through athletics more than academics is not. Glover would never discourage athletic pursuits; he was a basketball player himself, and his own son hopes to play soccer in college. In himself and his son, though, he has demanded academic excellence as well. He tries to demand it of his students, too, and to get them to understand that success in school is
a surefire route out of poverty, while success in sports is not. But he is up against powerful
cultural forces, and every year, members of the team backing him up — the teachers and staff he
counts on — are rotating in and out.

While Nydresha and Sarah both excel in cheerleading, Nydresha does not share Sarah’s

Stephanie Ruff, the Quitman parent liaison and cheerleading coach, said if Nydresha
wants to, she could have an “excellent career” cheering in high school. “Hopefully she don’t let
the little boys distract her,” Ruff said.

But Nydresha isn’t sure how long she wants to stick with the sport. Although
cheerleading has been her life’s most successful pursuit so far, she is too curious about the world
to commit for the long term. “I don’t want to do cheerleading for the rest of my life,” she said in
July after a recreational game of volleyball at Quitman’s summer school. “I think I might like
volleyball.”

Nydresha was recommended for summer school after ending the year with D’s in English
and science. She said her focus in class suffered in sixth grade because of a bullying situation,
the bully being a boy who had an unreciprocated crush on her — until she cursed him out.

‘She Could Go Anywhere’

Nydresha was born at 12:25 a.m. on Feb. 19, 2002. At 7 pounds 15 ounces, she was an
average-sized newborn, but she has been a “little doll baby” ever since, according to Lil’ Bit,
whose real name is also Andrea and who goes by Drea with family and friends.

Drea, 43, said she didn’t know she was pregnant until she was four and a half months
along. Her twin brother’s name is Andre, or Dre, and so her daughter would be Nydresha, Dresha
for short.

Drea once attended Quitman herself, and she dropped out of nearby Central High School
in 12th grade. Until Nydresha was born, she said, she was “working, hanging out, enjoying
myself.” Through the years she has worked as a barmaid, an airport maintenance worker and a
deli cashier. She’s packed boxes in a warehouse and taken care of horses and goats at the Turtle
Back Zoo, Nydresha’s favorite of her mom’s jobs.

Now a school bus aide to disabled children, Drea leaves for work early during the
academic year, Nydresha said, and calls to make sure Nydresha is awake at 6:30 a.m. An uncle
who lives downstairs checks in on the girl as she’s getting ready. At 7:24 a.m. this past year,
Nydresha would catch the No. 5 public bus to Quitman, arriving approximately 10 minutes later.
At the end of the day, her mom would be there to watch her at cheerleading practice, and they
would take the bus home together.

Other than that, Drea said she doesn’t know how else she would be involved at Quitman,
given that she works during school hours. And she thinks cheerleading provides ample
extracurricular activity. “I gotta let my baby breathe,” she said. In addition to cheering for
Quitman, Nydresha participates on a citywide team called the Brick City Lions that begins its
annual season in July and last winter afforded her the opportunity to travel to a national
cheerleading tournament at Disney World in Florida. (The team placed sixth in the age-based “Midgets” division.)

Nydresha’s math teacher, Edwina Mitchell, demanded that her parents send her to after-school math tutoring after Nydresha missed more than a week of school for the Florida trip. She did not do her work while away and was failing math upon her return. Mitchell said she initially had trouble reaching Nydresha’s parents, but eventually they came around.

“I felt like Nydresha didn’t take school seriously because the adults around her didn’t take school seriously,” said Mitchell, who also needs foot surgery but has been delaying it, not wanting to miss time with her students.

The teacher said that if Nydresha got the kind of encouragement in academics as she does in cheerleading, “she could go anywhere.” She wishes there were more academically-inclined extracurricular activities in the neighborhood. She once coached debate at another school and could see Nydresha being a natural at it, if she had the chance. At the same time, she said, cheerleading and other sports teams can provide students with a vital sense of belonging. “It models the family unit,” she said.

Drea, who wears long braids beneath a headscarf, said she did support her daughter going to tutoring and catching up in math. “I’ll do whatever needs to be done,” she said. She is satisfied with the opportunities provided to Nydresha at Quitman, and she hopes her daughter’s experience there will lead to a bright future. “I hope she get out of school, find a good job,” she said. “Hoping she follow the right track and don’t fall off, that’s all I’m praying for.”

Nydresha’s dad, Darin, said he would like her to go to college, ideally as a cheerleader. For that to happen, he said, he needs to “stay on her to do her best... to keep her in her books.”

“If you don’t stay on her, she gets kind of lazy,” said Darin, 48, a baggage crew chief for American Airlines.

Someone else rooting for Nydresha is Wydeyah Hay, a 22-year-old Virginia State University student who comes home to Newark each May and volunteers to help the Quitman cheerleaders prepare for their annual tournament. (She is a childhood friend of the daughter of one of the Quitman coaches.) Hay also coaches the Brick City Lions. Working with Nydresha on that team, Hay saw what she was capable of. Back at Quitman, she tapped her to take on more stunts, more responsibility. That increased further when three girls who were among Quitman’s top performers were kicked off the school team for getting into a fight.

Nydresha was ready to step up.

Bracing for Competition

In academics, in athletics, in life, competition motivates. Standardized tests aren’t competition per se, but everyone always looks to see how schools compare. And while Principal Glover wants student learning, not test scores, to drive what happens in his classrooms, he also hates being labeled a loser. Last year Quitman scored in the bottom 2 percent of schools in New Jersey on the state’s standardized exams. This year’s results are expected back in August.
Internal assessments project that the school will make strong gains in reading and more modest growth in math.

Nydresha was among the 100 students targeted for after-school tutoring the past year because their 2013 performance suggested that with the right intervention, they could get up to grade level and pass this time around. But Nydresha’s focus was on cheerleading practice. The state exams don’t carry personal consequences for students, but the Newark Public Schools’ annual elementary cheerleading tournament does.

Nydresha and Sarah have been on the Quitman cheerleading team since third grade. Each year, they and their teammates begin practice in October and perform during the boys’ and girls’ basketball season. Then in early May, they stop attending games and train intensely for the annual citywide competition, not unlike the last-minute test-prep seen at many underperforming schools nationally. Hay joins the two cheerleading coaches each spring when she gets home from college. Her job is to choreograph a routine to win.

“You have squads that practice from September to May, and I only have four weeks,” said Hay, who became a cheerleading coach at age 16 after her own coach on a citywide team was murdered, along with three of her teammates. “I’ve gotta make it happen within those four weeks.”

In addition to being a Quitman cheerleader, Nydresha is on a competitive citywide team that afforded her the opportunity to travel last year to Disney World. (Photo: Amanda Brown)

Last year, the Quitman girls won second place in the upper division cheer and dance category. The school also scored four individual first-place awards, one of them for Sarah, who won the title Miss Yell.

This year, more teams would be participating, and Quitman was bracing for stiff competition from Alexander Street School, which is being converted to a charter school this summer because of failing academic performance. Hay decided to include more and harder stunts than in years past. To pull them off, she would rely on Nydresha, the smallest of the middle school girls on the team. And she would require everyone to practice five days a week for two hours or more, a commitment that only 14 girls were able to keep, down from about 35 who started the season. The school also mandates that cheerleaders keep a minimum 2.0 GPA and good behavior. Nydresha at one point contemplated quitting to join the technology club, which
produces the yearbook, but the technology teacher wouldn’t allow it. She told her she had to finish what she started.

Nydresha’s seven stunts were spread throughout a tournament routine that included a 40-second performance to a music mix Hay made, a 50-second cheer and then another minute performing to the music, which included bits by Whitney Houston, Icona Pop, Rhianna and Beyoncé.

The cheer, written by Hay, went like this:

Guess who’s back/
And better than before?/
Quitman Street Peacocks/
Here to rock this floor/
Simply the greatest/
The best you can define/
Champions, you know it/
This year’s our time/
Talented, elite/
Number one by far/
Watch us as/
We reach the stars/
Our fame continues/
It’s all in the name/
Quitman Street Peacocks/
Will put them to shame/
So, yeah, that’s right/
This is our year/
Twenty-fourteen/
The team/
To/
Fear/

One Thursday in late May, at the 11th-to-last practice before the tournament, the pressure was palpable. Over and over, Hay made the girls repeat their routine until Nydresha, in turquoise shorts, could perfect the count to swing her leg around in a stunt called the pendulum. It involved doing a single-legged backbend while hoisted in the air and then whipping the lifted leg from behind her body to the front. She kept coming around on five-six and needed to wait for seven-eight.

“You know if you bend your leg, you’re going straight to the floor,” Hay said.
Nydresha begins a stunt called the yo-yo, requiring her to somersault in midair. It is so difficult that none of the other 18 teams competing in Newark’s elementary cheerleading tournament would even attempt it. (Photo: Amanda Brown)

Then practicing the yo-yo, Nydresha fell, and in pain and frustration, cursed at another girl for dropping her.

Her mother, watching in the Quitman basement next to Sarah’s mom, giggled. “I should’ve videotaped that,” she said. She took out her phone to be ready next time.

During a break, Nydresha found herself torn between her coaches, who told the girls not to eat anything until practice was over so they wouldn’t get sick, and her mother, who brought chicken wings and instructed Nydresha to eat them. She did, even though she said the meat tasted funny.

“My mom likes to get me in trouble,” Nydresha told me meekly, also apologizing for her cursing.

“I don’t care,” Drea replied. “You gotta eat. … It ain’t gonna kill you.” To which she added, within earshot of the coaches: “I’m trying to get her fat. She’s small like her mother.” She said later that she would have pulled Nydresha out of practice if the coaches pressed the issue further. “Don’t play around with my baby,” she said. “This is not your baby. This is mine. I feed my baby.”

As the practice wore on, Hay was tough on all the girls. She told them they looked “brand new” that day, that “if you all want to act like you don’t know what you’re doing, I could leave.”

“Everybody gets hit,” she said. “Everybody falls. You have to get up. You have to keep going.”

Nydresha did keep going, and by the end of practice, she was getting through the routine without mistakes. Hay hugged her as they walked out.
Wherever Life Takes Her

As the sun beat down in Newark on the morning of Saturday, June 7, hundreds of people congregated outside the locked doors of the Weequahic High School gymnasium, a gleaming three-year-old facility tucked behind a 1930s-era school building. Waiting to get inside were parents, relatives, teachers and other school staff, all there to support the 19 teams from all over Newark. When the doors finally opened at 12:15 p.m., it took more than an hour for everyone to pass through a metal detector and take a seat in the bleachers.

Nydresha’s mother sat on the floor in front of the first row, at the feet of Nydresha’s father, who was there with her 2-year-old half-sister and her paternal uncle, who is Quitman’s head custodian. For Nydresha’s big day, her parents sat together like the family they once were. Nydresha adores her current stepmother and her “fairy godmother,” as she calls the mother of her two older half-siblings, but still sometimes wishes her parents were a couple again.

The cheerleaders had been at Quitman late the night before getting their hair done by Sarah’s mom and one of the coaches. All but Nydresha had braided ponytails hanging down their backs. Her hair was tucked in a tight bun so it wouldn’t be in the way during the stunts.

At 7 a.m., less than 12 hours after they had gone home, they were back to catch a bus to the tournament site, where they ate breakfast and did a trial run. Nydresha led the team in prayer that morning. In addition to asking God for victory, she said, she asked for all the girls to be kept safe, and for them not to fall on their hair.

The teams sat in bleachers across from the audience in alphabetical order by school, which made Quitman 14th. The girls waited through three categories of cheerers in the lower division, whose teams are comprised entirely of elementary school students, and through the A-to-P-named schools in the upper division, where teams have girls of elementary and middle school age.

Despite the modern building, the air conditioning was no match for this crowd, particularly up in the high rows of bleachers where they sat. And while about half the teams wore short-sleeve uniforms, the Quitman girls had royal blue and white dresses with mock turtlenecks and long sleeves. One year, the judges deducted points because they weren’t in proper attire, and although other teams risked that happening to be more comfortable, they would not take the chance.

As the hours wore on, Nydresha’s mother brought her cookies and Gatorade from the concession stand.

Finally, it was time. At 3:54 p.m., nearly 11 hours after Nydresha woke up to shower, they were on.

Standing in line preparing to run out, she was shaking badly. “Focus,” she told herself. “You can do it.”

The Quitman team had one of the largest fan sections in the crowd, just behind the panel of 10 judges. In addition to friends and relatives, staff members who came to show their support included Quitman’s testing coordinator and Nydresha’s English teacher, whose granddaughter is
also on the cheerleading team. They stood up, shrieked and cried, “Let’s go, ladies!” Nydresha beamed.

And then there she was, up in the air. High school cheerleaders stood ready as spotters should she go flying out of control. First came the basket toss, then cartwheels and backflips across the floor, then the spin, the pendulum, the liberty, the quarter-up, another basket toss and, at last, the yo-yo. She tucked her chin, somersaulted midair and landed on her feet. She had nailed them all.

The team would have to wait another two hours and 20 minutes for the results, during which time Sarah competed in the upper division’s individual Miss Yell category, trying to defend her title.

“I finally got it over with, and I think I’m finally over my fears,” Nydresha said in the hall outside the gym with Sarah as they waited. Win or lose, “I’ll just take it,” she said. On second thought, she added, “If we don’t place, then I’ll kind of feel bad because of all the hard work.”

“But we’re going to place,” Sarah said, audibly tired.

Sarah ended up coming in second for Miss Yell. A Quitman fourth-grader took fourth place in the lower division Miss Jump contest and second place in the lower division Miss Yell. A Quitman sixth-grader tied with a girl from Wilson Avenue School for second place in the upper division Miss Jump.

The upper division team results were the last ones announced, at 6:15 p.m. It was the moment everyone was waiting for — those who were still waiting, at least. About half the crowd had already left, including Nydresha’s dad, who had to pick up another of his daughters but would watch the announcement later on television. Third place went to Camden Street School. When Alexander Street — Quitman’s main rival — got second, everyone knew who was first. The Quitman cheerleaders and their supporters were already hugging, jumping and screaming when they were called as winners.

“Girls, stop crying,” the tournament’s mistress of ceremonies said as the 14 of them in blue and white and their coaches ran down from the bleachers and gathered for the cameras. A few days later, each of them would receive a trophy at an awards banquet, but for now, for the photos, there was only one. It went to Nydresha, positioned front and center.

In the weeks that followed, she would get distracted and fail to complete her final English project and have her hopes dashed of taking a summer vacation with her mom to see relatives in Georgia, a prospect she held onto after it became clear that they were not moving to Hawaii or anywhere else. (“I could fit in people’s luggage,” she offered.) She would toy with the ideas of spending more days of the week with her dad and of transferring to a charter school, and ultimately nothing would change and she would settle into the routine of summer school and cheerleading practice, with the hopes of another trip to Florida come winter.

But for now, if just for a moment, the spotlight was hers. And wherever life takes her, she will remember how it feels to work hard and come out on top.
“We need someone strong to be the peak,” Quitman cheerleading coach Stephanie Ruff says. “Nydresha is the star. We have to put the star on display.” (Photo: Amanda Brown)
Nov. 20, 2014 — On his 12th birthday, the first Friday in June, D’Andre took the day off from school. It was out of character for the boy, an honor roll student at Quitman Street Renew School who was the sixth grade’s student council ambassador. D’Andre was elected duke of Quitman’s winter dance last January for his exemplary citizenship and in the spring won second place in Newark’s “Attend Today, Achieve Tomorrow” digital poster contest.

But the day off promised something even more appealing to D’Andre than a brighter future: time with his mother.

She was just shy of her 19th birthday when he was born, already her second child. Mother and son wanted only to be with each other when D’Andre was a baby. But she was descending into depression, and they could not stay together.

On April 23, 2006, a series of hardships brought the 3-year-old boy to the doorstep of his paternal grandmother, Doris Jean, who looked into his sad eyes and vowed to raise him. It was not what she and her husband had planned, and she had to quit her job managing a dry cleaner’s, but D’Andre quickly became their world.

From the nights Grandma Jean dried his tears as a little boy missing his mom to her constant presence at school events, D’Andre has seen the extent of her devotion time and again, and he couldn’t bear to let her down. At the same time, he has never stopped longing for his mother, and he’s held out hope that if he is successful enough, she will want a bigger role in his life.

And so he studies. He reads, and he goes to the library. Over the summer, he created his own home science projects with quarters and matches and researched such curiosities as whether Washington, D.C., is a city, a state or none of the above. He has grown into a pride of Quitman, where he has been a student since pre-kindergarten and where he was showered in awards at a year-end assembly in June, a few weeks after his birthday.
Schools everywhere, and particularly in high-poverty urban areas, grapple with how to help students who have experienced traumas such as separation from a parent or having a parent who is an addict. Research shows that these so-called “adverse childhood experiences” are highly predictive of academic failure as well as health problems later in life. D’Andre’s situation illustrates that, scholastically at least, layers of support at home and at school can help steer children into another direction, providing the safe base they need to thrive. D’Andre has that from his grandparents, from his father and from Quitman, where he’s seen the culture improve dramatically in his years there.

His grandmother, who goes by her middle name, has become a model for parent involvement, trudging up the hill each morning from their two-bedroom brick townhouse to walk D’Andre to school, getting to know his teachers and helping with homework. She routinely came to eat with him in the cafeteria until this fall, when he decided that, as a seventh-grader, he’s finally too old for Grandma to visit, even if she brings a steak and cheese sandwich far superior to lunch line fare.

She and her husband have nurtured D’Andre — Dre, they call him (last names in the family are being withheld for the children’s protection) — into an uncommonly kind, polite and studious preadolescent. Her son, D’Andre’s father, has also been a stable, caring presence in his life, as has his maternal grandmother.

As Quitman strives to reverse years of low academic performance and produce more students like D’Andre, he is a testament to the power of a highly involved caregiver, even with minimal financial resources. Jean, 68, is more protective of her grandson than she was raising her own three boys: No violent games on his Xbox, no Facebook whatsoever, and when he plays outside, she’s there watching from the living room window, with lace curtains inside and protective bars outside. He’s an inch taller than she is now, looking like a high schooler at a stocky 5-foot-6 with a size 11.5 shoe, and she knows he would be approached about unseemly activities if she weren’t around. More often, D’Andre stays indoors, watching “How It’s Made” on the Science Channel or building an elaborate dragon or tank out of Legos.

His success is fragile, though, and has yet to hold up in unfamiliar surroundings.

D’Andre’s grandmother Jean wipes his shirt clean before they head out. She is more protective of him than she was raising her own three sons. (Photo: Amanda Brown)
Quitman Principal Erskine Glover estimates that the majority of his 669 students, who are prominently African-American and nearly all poor, are being raised by young mothers or grandmothers. Their involvement tends to start out strong in pre-kindergarten and wane somewhat as children age. Nearly all students have someone who’s there when called, Glover said, but the school would catapult to a different level if all families had Jean’s vigilance. The principal, frequently looked to as a father figure in a culture where dads are most often the ones absent, sees kids who love their parents unconditionally regardless of any shortcomings. “You can stop doing certain things, and your son will always love you,” Glover said. “That’s just the human DNA.”

Amid classmates coping with various losses, D’Andre stands out for his response to adversity. He is the mini-adult who is consistently on task in class, tuning out preadolescent chit-chat. He was the one in sixth-grade English to finish his final project, an autobiography, in time to type it rather than turn in a handwritten draft. He requests makeup work from his teachers when he misses a day of school, which typically only happens when he is sick or has an asthma attack. His asthma, which seems to be triggered by extreme stress, is better now than it used to be, but it still caused him to miss more than a week last school year.

He holds doors open, removes his cap when he enters a room and cooks pancakes for his relatives. He has never had a spanking from Jean, who says his wise old soul must have been through this life before.

Jean, 68, walks her grandson D’Andre up the hill to school every day. (Photo: Amanda Brown)

But he is still only 12 years old, and his fate is far from certain. In recent months, circumstances have pushed him outside the home he’s established at Quitman and shaken the foundation his grandmother has so lovingly laid. The influences competing for his attention come not only from the surrounding world but from within his own family as his greatest dream appears to be coming true:

His mother is back in his daily life.

Sister Moves, Brother Stays

*I wish to accomplish three things in my life. For starters, I wish to get good grades throughout my school years, because I would like to be chosen to go to one of the most well*
educated schools and colleges in the nation. Second, I would like to completely accomplish school and college because I would like to get a great job in life. Lastly, I would like to play in the National Football League (NFL) after I finish college, because when I was smaller I used to enjoy playing and watching football with my father, and I still do. I expect to accomplish those goals with my head up and with a smile on my face.

— D’Andre’s sixth-grade autobiography, Chapter 1: “Who Am I?”

When D’Andre began pre-kindergarten at Quitman in the fall of 2006, he had a companion: His half-sister, Jaida, who is one year older, was briefly in a class down the hall. But Jaida was still in an unstable living situation with their mother then, according to family members. Within a year, she left to go live with their maternal grandmother, Eleanor, who was recovering from breast cancer. Eleanor took legal custody of Jaida and D’Andre and has raised Jaida ever since. (She remains D’Andre’s legal guardian, a situation Jean has never challenged for fear of hurting or losing him.)

The children’s mother said that, in giving them up, she hoped they would have a better life than she was capable of providing.

Through the years, as D’Andre stayed put, Jaida has attended four different schools within Newark, switching most recently this fall after her school was closed. Jaida, Eleanor and extended relatives also moved earlier this year after Jaida’s friend and neighbor Zaine Hailey, 13, was killed by a stray bullet last Christmas while taking out the garbage with her 7-year-old brother.

D’Andre’s sister, Jaida (left), has attended four Newark schools in the years he has been at Quitman. Their mother, Taneka (right), has both their names tattooed on her left arm. (Photo: Amanda Brown)

Beautiful and boisterous, Jaida struggles with learning difficulties and tries to get D’Andre to do to her homework when he visits. One afternoon in October, she came home thrilled to tell Eleanor that she got a C on a math test. For Halloween she dressed up as a nerd.

At Quitman, meanwhile, D’Andre has found comfort and academic growth that is consistent, if sometimes modest. At the end of fifth grade, he fell just shy of proficiency on the state reading exam, but his score of 196 on a scale where 200 is passing was still one of the highest in his class. After participating in after-school tutoring throughout sixth grade, he ended the year reading on grade level and doing math a year ahead.
This year, a controversial new school choice plan in Newark resulted in an enrollment increase at Quitman, enabling Glover to break the top 16 seventh-graders into an honors class that travels together from subject to subject. Despite the fact that assignments are supposed to be on an eighth-grade level, D’Andre says he would like a bigger challenge in math, where he has a first-year teacher, and in his favorite subject, science, where he’s had a substitute since the beginning of the year as Glover scrambles to fill the vacancy. His English teacher is a 20-year veteran of the school who is widely viewed as exceptional and has a record of producing major growth in her students.

Socially D’Andre tends to get along with everyone but isn’t a part of any particular clique. His closest friend is a fifth-grader named Arshad, who is similarly studious and looks up to him as a role model. Arshad’s parents recently took the two boys to Great Adventure, where D’Andre got to experience a roller coaster with a 132-foot drop and bought a mood ring that for weeks after he tried to keep blue (calm) and not green (nervous).

In an autobiography for English class, D’Andre wrote of Grandma Jean: “She is really the one who paved, and is paving the way for me.” (Photo: Amanda Brown)

He also has developed a friendship with Cynthia Warren, a longtime Quitman security guard who took him to see “Godzilla” the weekend of his 12th birthday. He would like to be involved in more extracurricular activities, but Quitman only has a basketball team, not football, and an archery club he’d hoped to join last year was only offered to younger grades. He’s thinking about signing up for a new math club.

A few years ago, two charter schools tried to recruit D’Andre away from Quitman, but he declined their offers. “I decided to stay here because sometimes when I go to new places, I’m nervous about meeting new people,” he said. “No one that I knew was there. It would just be myself. I’ve bonded with a lot of people here, and I am comfortable with the principal and teachers.”

Jean supported the decision given how well D’Andre has done at Quitman. No need to mess with success, she figured. In the living room, amid stacks of his books, she displays his many medals, including five for honor roll, two for Student of the Month, one for Scholar of the Year 2012-2013.
D’Andre was disappointed that the school didn’t disseminate honor roll medals each marking period last year, as in the past, but at the year-end assembly in June, he won math, English, science and honor roll awards. “Oh my God,” Jean said as his name was called again and again. “We’re gonna have to get a whole room for your stuff.” Families had not been invited to the event, held during the school day, but a secretary called to give Jean a heads up that morning because D’Andre would be so extensively recognized. She ironed a blouse and a pair of khakis and dashed out the door.

Two representatives from the school district’s Office of College and Career Readiness were at the assembly to present D’Andre with a trophy and $25 Barnes & Noble gift certificate for his second-place win in the city’s “Attend Today, Achieve Tomorrow” digital poster contest. His poster, made on Quitman computers, showed an ascending stairway, with the bottom step labeled pre-kindergarten and college at the top.

“This young man right here is a well-rounded individual, a great representative of our school,” Glover said as he called D’Andre up before all his classmates and teachers. “He comes from a very strong household. His grandmother is to be commended for the work that she has done. On behalf of Quitman, I just want to say thank you. Thank you, D’Andre. Good job putting us on the map.”

The principal told the audience about another reason he was proud: D’Andre had been selected to participate in a science and engineering summer camp at the New Jersey Institute of Technology (NJIT), a nearby college. For two weeks in July, he would live in a dorm from Sunday to Friday while attending classes on campus and taking field trips with 51 other high-achievers from around the state, chosen from among hundreds of applicants.

In the days prior to D’Andre’s July 6 departure, Jean did not allow him to visit Eleanor and Jaida because she didn’t want to risk him having an allergic reaction to their dog, a pit bull-boxer hybrid, right before such an important opportunity.

Jean also called off a trip to attend a family reunion in her native North Carolina in July, saying she wanted to be available to make sure D’Andre had a successful experience at camp.

In retrospect, she says, it was mother’s intuition, knowing she would be needed at home.

Needing To Go Home

Before I was who I am, there was my grandmother. She has helped me get through some sad and difficult times. She was always there when I would get sick. Fall and hurt myself or maybe the kids around my community were mean to me. So I can always count on her to be there. [When I was younger] I was very emotional because of my mother’s absences. Sometimes I would just cry all the time, but my grandmother would always cheer me up. ... I realized that I could go to her for anything. I really love her for that with all my heart. She is really the one who paved, and is paving the way for me.

— D’Andre’s autobiography, Chapter 2: “Before I Was, There Were”
When Jean dropped D’Andre off at NJIT, both were distraught to learn that he would not be allowed to contact home while there. D’Andre had seen a phone in the dorm during an earlier tour and thought he would be permitted to use it.

Two days after the program began, Jean got a call. A camp administrator hoped she could calm a homesick D’Andre, who had been teased and bullied by his roommate and two boys in the adjoining room of a suite.

D’Andre later said they didn’t like him because he wasn’t loud and rowdy like they were. He was teased by other kids at Quitman when he was younger, but Grandma was always there to intervene, and he said the boys at NJIT were more mean-spirited.

D’Andre’s grandmother Jean, reviewing a school map as he pointed out his new classrooms for seventh grade, is a constant presence at Quitman events. (Photo: Amanda Brown)

Jean brought her grandson home that night, and the next morning, they both went to meet the camp director, Linda Hirsch. Hirsch changed D’Andre’s room assignment, putting him with a roommate he chose and in a suite with a counselor rather than other children. She said she checked in with him daily, and each time he politely told her he was fine. He attended classes, worked with a group to design a gravity-defying toy appropriate for use in outer space, and went on a field trip to a research lab run by ExxonMobil, a sponsor of the camp.

But when Jean picked him up as scheduled that Friday, he broke down and told her he couldn’t return for the second week. A weekend at home didn’t change his mind, and only she would go back for his laundry. Later, upon reflection, D’Andre felt guilty for giving up and decided he would like to take Hirsch up on an offer to reapply next year, now that he knows what to expect. “It taught me how to handle problems and kids picking on me better,” he said.

The summer brought other trials. On June 27, there was a fire in the basement of the Belleville, N.J., house where D’Andre’s father, Adrian, lived with his girlfriend and extended relatives, leaving it uninhabitable. (Arson is suspected, and in August, their landlord was arrested and charged with insurance fraud in connection with falsified vandalism at his properties.) Living out of a hotel for more than three months was a major financial hardship for Adrian, a warehouse associate for a trucking company who gives his mom and stepdad whatever he can toward expenses for D’Andre. So his hardship became theirs, too. Besides Adrian’s contributions, Jean and her husband, Ronald, live off their Social Security income.
In October, unable to keep up with expenses, Adrian and his girlfriend moved onto an air mattress in Jean and Ronald’s living room while looking for a new apartment. They considered relocating to Strasburg, Pa., near her family. Adrian wants to stick with his job for now, but he is interested in moving in the near future — and bringing D’Andre with him.

At Quitman’s back-to-school night, D’Andre shows his mother, Taneka, a mood ring he got on a trip to Great Adventure. (Photo: Amanda Brown)

He is thrilled with how well his son has done at Quitman and thinks he would have even more opportunities living in the suburbs, particularly for extracurricular activities. He also wants to lift responsibility off his mom and stepdad as they age, though Jean would insist that they move anywhere D’Andre goes.

“I definitely want to see him in a better place than I’m in,” said Adrian, 41, who goes by “Big Dre” while D’Andre is “Little Dre.” Of his son’s academic motivation, he said, “It’s overwhelming sometimes. He does so much willingly. You don’t see that in many kids his age in the present area.”

D’Andre is torn. He has loved Pennsylvania when he’s visited, but he is also happy where he is. And now more than ever, he has reason to stay in Newark.

From Mother to Son


— Words D’Andre used to describe himself and his interests on a self-portrait, seventh-grade art class

Family members say D’Andre inherits his intelligence from his mom, Taneka. When she was his age, she also did well in school, especially math and science. Too well, according to her mother. She was teased for being too smart and too nice.

As a teenager, feeling left out among her peers, Taneka began to date older guys, Eleanor said. That filled a void created by the absence of her father, who left when she was an infant living in Okinawa, Japan. Eleanor was stationed there in the Navy, and he was a Marine. Later,
as a single mother of three back in New Jersey, Eleanor said she was working too much to supervise her daughter adequately. By 17, Taneka was pregnant with Jaida.

“She’s really not a bad mother,” Eleanor said of her daughter. “She’s just a lost person. She never found herself before she started having children.”

Taneka and Adrian, a decade her senior, did not know each other well when she got pregnant with D’Andre. Adrian was not present for D’Andre’s birth by cesarian section on June 6, 2002, and Taneka gave their son her own last name, as she had given Jaida. Someday, D’Andre says, he would like to add his dad’s surname after a hyphen.

Taneka suffered from severe postpartum depression after D’Andre was born, but she was able to remain with her children as long as they lived with Eleanor. When D’Andre was 3 and Jaida 4, Eleanor was diagnosed with breast cancer, and the family began to split up as she underwent surgery and began chemotherapy. She said a doctor warned that her immune system couldn’t handle the germ exposure that comes with being around young children. Taneka brought the kids to stay at a friend’s place on the same block as Jean and Ronald. It was wild there, and that’s how little D’Andre soon wandered outside by himself and showed up on his grandparents’ doorstep. Although he has lived with Jean and Ronald ever since, Eleanor was the one who, within a year, became his legal guardian.

For a long time after that, D’Andre saw his mother only once every few months, and she didn’t always show up to scheduled visits. She lived a few miles west of Newark in Irvington with a boyfriend Jean and Adrian believe is a negative influence, and they feared for D’Andre’s safety visiting there. Instead, the boy would go to Eleanor’s house hoping Taneka would stop by.

The night before mother and son were to spend his 12th birthday together, Ronald was sleepless worrying that Taneka wouldn’t show and D’Andre would be crushed. In the morning, D’Andre dressed in a metallic vest and fedora and waited — and waited — anxiously in the living room as the day passed. Four hours late, Taneka arrived with Eleanor and brought D’Andre to New York City as promised, going to Dave and Busters, a sports bar and arcade in Times Square.
“The best part of his day is where he’s at now, with his mom,” a relieved Jean said that afternoon as she baked a red velvet birthday cake and Ronald bought a $19 ham, both eaten as leftovers that weekend since D’Andre was too late getting home to enjoy his birthday dinner. “We’re here for whatever he needs, but if he gets the opportunity to spend some time with his mom, that’s all he asks for. It’s like he won the lottery. Even though she’s not been that active in his life, he loves her to death.”

In August, Taneka’s boyfriend moved to Texas, trying to straighten out his life, and Taneka moved back with Eleanor in the hopes of bettering hers. Suddenly, D’Andre could see his mother whenever he wanted.

On Sept. 11, D’Andre called and asked his mom to come to Quitman’s back-to-school night to meet the reporter who had been following him. She arrived with Jaida, who wore royal blue skinny jeans and red lipstick. Taneka, now 31, was in baggy jeans and a T-shirt with “#Skitdaddle” imprinted on the front that revealed tattoos of Jaida and D’Andre’s names on her left arm and her boyfriend’s nickname on her right.

They joined D’Andre and Jean in the half-full cafeteria as Principal Glover asked parents to support their children’s education by reading together and talking about the school day each night, and by enforcing appropriate bedtimes and wake-up times. They linked arms in a circle during a schoolwide game of Rochambeau, a version of rock-paper-scissors.

And they followed D’Andre to each of his classrooms and met all of his teachers except the science substitute, who wasn’t there. Taneka and Jean each took a form from the English teacher for parental contact information, and they sat at opposite-facing desks to fill it out. D’Andre’s mood ring was green as he went back and forth between Mom and Grandma, but he said he was more excited than nervous. In the hall, Jean fell behind as mother and children walked playfully together like siblings.

Back in the cafeteria, Taneka spoke candidly about her struggles, but she believes she has been present for the big events in D’Andre’s life. A mother-son dance at Quitman when D’Andre was in fourth grade stands out in both their minds.
In terms of her own recovery, she said, she’s getting there. She’s waking up earlier and looking into getting a job or returning to school. With a GED, she has been unable to find engaging work in the past. “It’s hard to get hired if you want to not be at McDonald’s, if you want a nice little desk job,” she said. She started studying to be a dental assistant but lost interest. She dreams of doing something in the medical field, an ultrasound technician, maybe. Something to make her children proud.

She said D’Andre is always in her heart, and he can call anytime he needs her. (Eleanor pays her cell phone bill for that purpose.) But on a daily basis, she feels she needs to be more attentive to Jaida since she is the one having trouble in school. “He can handle himself, no problem,” she said. Both D’Andre’s grandmothers see how hard he has worked for his mother’s attention and tell him he needs to be successful for himself.

“I cry sometimes when I look at him,” Taneka said. “Oh man, he’s only 12 years old, and to hear how he talks.”

D’Andre’s paternal grandmother, Jean, and his mother, Taneka, sit with him as his social studies teacher gives an overview of the year ahead at back-to-school night. D’Andre has lived with Jean since he was 3, and Taneka has recently become more active in his life. (Photo: Amanda Brown)

In the next few years, D’Andre’s life could go in any number of directions. As his father is hoping to move him to Pennsylvania, Taneka would like to go to Texas — whether to visit or to live is unsure — and bring her kids along. More immediately, there has been talk within the family of moving D’Andre back under Eleanor’s roof now that Taneka is there, but to Jean’s relief, Eleanor agrees with her that he should stay put.

This fall, yet another potential path emerged. The seventh-grade honors students at Quitman learned about a program run by Newark’s Wight Foundation that prepares top students in the city to apply to elite boarding schools throughout the Northeast for high school. With Jean’s encouragement, D’Andre submitted a preliminary application; Eleanor has said she will back any decision that helps him get to college. If selected in the spring after a rigorous process, he would spend a year attending local classes to build his academic, social and emotional capacity and then receive ongoing support once away.

However brief the current moment in time, D’Andre says, it feels good to have all the people he loves in the same place.
In the Quitman cafeteria that Thursday night in September, he asked Jean for permission to spend the weekend at Eleanor’s with his mom. Jean said she missed him; he had been there the prior three weekends. D’Andre pointed out that he’s with her all five days during the week.

“I love you, Grandma,” he said, hugging her tightly and pulling Taneka and Jaida into the embrace with them.

That weekend, he went to his mother, and he has gone again every weekend since except one: after his English teacher sent him home on a Friday, sick with a cold. Then he stayed with Grandma Jean, and she took care of him.
The learning environment at Quitman Street Renew School has improved significantly in Erskine Glover’s time as principal. (Photo: Amanda Brown)

Dec. 19, 2014 — The scene could have come from any school principal’s dream, but there it was before Erskine Glover’s eyes, happening in reality.

It was the first day of the 2014-2015 academic year at Quitman Street Renew School. Students and teachers were crowded into the combined cafeteria-auditorium, and Glover’s boss, Assistant Superintendent Peter Turnamian, was on stage.

He was there to congratulate them. Of all 45 elementary and middle schools in Newark, Quitman had the greatest test score gains in reading the prior spring. Its math improvement was tied for fourth-highest in the city.

“There is no greater leader in the district than Principal Glover,” Turnamian said, and the crowd cheered and applauded enthusiastically. “You have the best of the best. Get on your feet.”

Even more incredible was what Turnamian said next to the entire staff: “It is an extremely special thing to say you’ve been a part of a whole school turnaround, and you are on the road to achieving that. I know it’s been the result of frustrations and perseverance through challenges.”

Minutes earlier, Superintendent Cami Anderson had also lavished praise on Quitman and other schools striving for turnarounds at a press conference in the Quitman library. A “Celebrating Student Success” banner was behind her, and the state education commissioner was at her side. Anderson was looking for good news on a day when her new school assignment process was under heavy public attack, but of all the places in Newark she could have gone to find it, this was where she turned.

In November, Glover had another dream-like moment when a prominent education technology blog published a list called “100 Schools Worth Visiting.” And there was Quitman — long confined to the rungs of New Jersey’s lowest-performers — at No. 19.
Only two other schools in the state were on the list, which was based on programs in “blended learning,” or combined personalized-electronic instruction. Aimed at educators and reformers who want to develop “an innovation mindset,” the post on the blog Getting Smart said it was based on a few thousand school visits and recommendations from the field. It held up “schools that achieve extraordinary results, create powerful learning experiences, and/or have created innovative technology blends.”

“Quitman Elementary School in Newark is making good strides in a tough place,” the post said. The local news ran an article about Quitman’s recognition, and the city schools’ advisory board passed a resolution of praise.

Could it be? For four years since taking the helm of Quitman, Glover had been doing everything in his power to shed the school’s losing reputation, working himself to exhaustion with 4:30 a.m. alarms and untold missed family dinners — and building a staff willing to do the same. He pushed himself to continue after having his left hip replaced two summers ago and his right hip resurfaced a year later. He was in bed recovering from his first surgery when he got the news that the 2013 test scores were again rock bottom, and Turnamian had to talk him out of resigning.

But, yes, two and a half years into a turnaround initiative that gave Glover hiring power and more resources, Quitman has turned a corner. The culture is significantly improved, the staff has stabilized, and classrooms generally are filled with students who are not only working but actually learning. At last, grueling effort has translated into test score gains at a school serving poor, minority students and a continually increasing number of children with learning and emotional disabilities. Perhaps most important, there has been a psychological shift here: It now seems possible for Quitman students to achieve excellence and realize the dream of economic prosperity.

Still, there’s a long way to go. Despite the gains, scores on the New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (NJ ASK) remain an embarrassment to Glover, now 45, who is often his own worst critic, and are painfully low by any standards. The state reported 2014 pass rates ranging from 14 percent in eighth-grade math to 64 percent in fourth-grade science. In reading and math, no pass rate exceeded 40 percent — even lower than prior years, but the tests had gotten more difficult.

Erskine Glover wants to see Quitman in demand like Newark’s top charter schools. (Photo: Amanda Brown)
District officials’ conclusion about Quitman’s improvement came not from pass rates but raw numbers. NJ ASK is scored on a scale of 300 points, and 200 is passing. Quitman’s average reading score for all grades tested went from 175 to 183 this year, a bigger jump than any other school in the city. In math, the school went from 173 to 181. In other words, many students are creeping closer to the pass mark, but they aren’t there yet.

Quitman is testament to the fact that school reform done honestly takes a long time. A spike in scores tends to be the last piece to come, after strong leadership and instruction are in place. Nationally, many teachers and administrators don’t want to work under circumstances that require self-sacrifice and constant outside scrutiny.

“We have a distance to travel,” Glover said when he took the microphone from his boss that September afternoon, “but the beautiful thing about waking up every day is that we get to start all over.”

This school year, that’s true literally. Last spring was the final administration of NJ ASK, and now, New Jersey students are preparing for a much harder test to measure their knowledge of the national Common Core education standards. Glover is proud of his students’ improving analytical skills as they learn Common Core standards in their classrooms, but he worries about their ability to show what they know in the time allotted for the new exam.

Quitman also started over this year with approximately 100 additional students as a result of the city’s new school assignment plan. And for the third consecutive year, district officials have steered more special education students to Quitman because they believe they will get good services there. In November, the school received a new class of students with behavioral disabilities, the most difficult population to manage.

Enrollment remains in flux; as of mid-December, it was 667, up from 493 when the turnaround process began. Most grades added new classes so class size did not increase. Many of the new kids arrived with academic deficits and some aren’t used to a school culture that is focused and positive; one administrator often reminds longtime students to show their new classmates how to “behave like a Quitman Peacock.” But Glover is thrilled to see parents choosing his school. In most cases, it was one of families’ top three selections, and at the very least, parents are not pulling their children out. That is moving toward exactly what he wants: for Quitman to be in as high demand as Newark’s top-performing charters.

“We’re finally at the table,” he said.

Leaving the Past Behind

Turning around a failing school is one of the hardest jobs anywhere, and despite much national attention to the problem, few places have done it successfully. Starting a new school without historical baggage is far easier, which is why many cities, Newark included, have adopted the divisive strategy of closing the lowest performers and beginning fresh. That has given a major opening to charter schools, public schools that operate privately.

But Newark has too many low-performing schools to close them all, and in 2012, Superintendent Anderson targeted eight to try to put the past behind them. These “renew
“schools” had the option to change their names, but parents didn’t want to, and Quitman Street Community School simply became Quitman Street Renew School.

The school opened in 1963 in a new three-story building at 21 Quitman St. that replaced an old school torn down around the corner. It served families in new public housing towers and old tenements in the city’s Central Ward, once a bustling working class Jewish enclave. Those days were fading, and Quitman’s student enrollment has always been predominantly African-American. When race riots tore through Newark in July 1967, the National Guard stormed into Quitman and evacuated all white staff members working in a summer kindergarten preparation program. The school closed for three weeks in 1970 and 11 weeks in 1971 during teacher strikes, the longer one racially polarizing.

Through the years, a distinguishing characteristic of the school was its variability. Former staff, students and community members remember it differently, largely based on the strength of the principal at any given time. That fluctuated greatly, and so did the quality of teaching from one classroom to the next. For a while in the 1970s, the school had success grouping students by ability level, according to longtime teacher Harriet Knevals, so smart kids weren’t held back and their struggling peers could get extra attention.

There was a brief merger with a since-closed school next door for students with behavioral disabilities. Sixth- through eighth-graders were transferred elsewhere and brought back. There were years when students came from all over the city, as they do again now, and years when everyone came from the same four public housing towers, only one of which is still standing. Early days when the building was filled to capacity with more than 1,500 students and nearly 40 students in some classes gave way to plummeting enrollment.

In 2000, Turnamian — now the assistant superintendent — founded one of Newark’s first charter schools in the Central Ward in part to give families an alternative to Quitman, by then well-established in its reputation for violence and instability.

Glover arrived as principal in 2010, having worked his way through the ranks of Newark Public Schools as a sixth-grade teacher, math staff developer, technology coordinator and assistant principal. His first two years, he was required to keep teachers who were not producing results, and a threat of closure was a huge distraction. Hired by former Superintendent Clifford Janey, Glover had to re-interview for his job first when Anderson became schools chief and again when the renew school process began.

In the summer of 2012, Glover used his new hiring authority to replace half the teaching staff. Despite hundreds of hours of interviewing, not all his choices turned out to be the right ones. Five teachers had quit before the 2012-2013 academic year was out, including the entire middle school math and science team. Glover has needed to make several new hires again each of the past two summers, but this year, about half of the 17 openings were new positions because of the enrollment increase, raising the size of the teaching staff to 66. This time, he was required to make most of his new hires from a pool of district employees looking for reassignments, but he’s generally happy with the team he has currently, and he’s accepted that staffing will always be a work in progress.
In the Quitman gym, students look at the new books they received as a reward for the school’s academic progress. (Photo: Amanda Brown)

He sees his challenge as building an institution strong enough to outlast any individual’s departure — particularly, one day, his. This year he seems newly invigorated to see that job through.

Hanging in the school office is a T-shirt designed by staff members who did a walkathon for breast cancer. “We Don’t Quit, Man!” it says in red letters over a blue background.

Glover nodded toward the shirt one day as he passed by. “We sure don’t,” he said.

**Higher Standards Coming**

Another key reform has been more time, not only for students in the classroom but also for teacher training and collaboration. Quitman teachers get a $4,000 stipend to work an extra hour a day, four Saturdays a year and two weeks in the summer.

Glover says the summer time is especially critical to acclimate new staff and set the right tone for an upcoming year. Teachers at most schools, in Newark and nationally, return each August or September only two days before their students. North Star Academy, a network of 10 charter schools in Newark that are among the most highly acclaimed in the country for reversing the achievement gap, sets a higher bar: New teachers get three weeks of training each summer, all staff get two weeks, and students return a week before the rest of the city.

For the second half of August, the Quitman team set up shop in the cafeteria at the school next door, which is now an early childhood center, as custodial staff scrambled to prepare Quitman’s classrooms. On Aug. 28, with a week to go before students’ return, the cafeteria walls wereblanketed in more than 70 pieces of white and yellow poster paper. Teachers had written everything from chapter summaries of the book “Failure is NOT an Option,” required staff reading, to the materials they need to teach specific instructional standards.

Glover gave the group three minutes that morning to complete a 15-question survey on their work environment. (Timing tasks is important so not a moment is wasted. This is a strategy North Star uses with both children and adults.) Sixty-nine percent agreed or strongly agreed that their colleagues “have a culture of learning and collaboration by continuously seeking to grow their instructional practice.” Fifty-three percent said colleagues are “productive team players who
contribute to a professional school culture.” Similar surveys in prior years had comparable results. Glover said he hoped to reach 100 percent in all categories by June.

Next, he gave five minutes to do a sample problem from the new test replacing the NJ ASK. Called the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC), it will be used in 13 states and administered online.

*Part A:* A farmer plants 3/4 of the field with soybeans. Drag the soybean to the field as many times as needed to show the fraction of the field that is planted with soybeans.

*Part B:* Type a fraction different than 3/4 in the boxes that also represents the fractional part of the farmer’s field that is planted with soybeans.

That was a third-grade problem. In the days of NJ ASK, it would have shown up in fourth or fifth grade.

Next came a harder example. It required knowledge of the term “rectangular array,” which not all the teachers recognized. (It refers to equal-sized boxes making up a rectangle.) Students were asked to write a multiplication equation using R for the number of rows in a rectangular array with 56 small tiles and seven tiles per row.

Glover told them that this, too, came from the sample third-grade test.

“What?!?” someone cried out.

The principal asked all pre-kindergarten through second-grade teachers to stand. “You are the ones who need to make sure your students can do this problem,” he said. Even pre-kindergarten classes can talk about what a rectangle is and what the word “equal” means.

“No one should get to third grade,” he said, “and not know how to draw a graph.”

‘On Top of Everything’

Despite his unrelenting schedule, Glover couldn’t say no when he was recruited this fall to coach an 8-year-old boys’ soccer team in North Brunswick, the township where he and his family live. (He got involved coaching for the league when his now-17-year-old son started playing soccer at age 4, but he had never before led a team his son wasn’t on.) He initially said he was just filling in but ended up serving the entire season. He never finished work in time to make the 6 p.m. practices on Monday and Wednesday nights, and so he had soccer trainers hired to work with the children until he could get there at 6:45 or 7. He treated the 10 second-graders like professionals, analyzing what went well and what they could do better after every game. They ended the season 8-4.

Glover hated losing as a kid playing basketball, and he still does. He is constantly breaking down Quitman’s performance like a coach breaks down a game to refine strategy. This has led to numerous changes at the school again this year.

Each homeroom now begins the day with a “morning meeting” that helps address students’ social and emotional needs. School ends for students 20 minutes earlier, at 3:10 p.m. instead of 3:30. Reading and math are being woven into art, music and even physical education,
with classroom teachers attending those subjects with their students. The move is an attempt to preserve instructional minutes while giving teachers an uninterrupted hour of planning time together at the end of the day, which Glover felt necessary to bolster collaboration.

After-school tutoring this year is targeting the neediest students, versus last year when students in the middle were asked to stay. Of 169 struggling students invited, 123 enrolled in the after-school program, which runs at Quitman until 6 p.m. with YMCA employees offering arts, fitness and team-building activities. In the spring there will be swimming off site.

The school expanded its use of blended learning, an exploding trend in education nationally because of its ability to personalize instruction. Last year, Quitman’s third through fifth grades piloted the initiative in reading and math, dividing a class into three groups based on ability for a particular skill. One group works with the teacher, the second works online and the last works individually or in pairs on assignments with old-school books, pencil and paper. Every 20 minutes in most classes, the groups switch stations. This year, Quitman brought blended learning to sixth through eighth grades and to science and social studies.

On the unseasonably warm Monday before Thanksgiving, students in Tiffany Wingate’s fourth-grade reading and social studies class were learning about holidays in India. Although all three groups read the same passage, Wingate moved through it more slowly with the students who needed help with words like “considered” and “harvest” than those who paused only for “Lakshmi.”

Quitman third-grade teacher Elizabeth Rooks works with a student on a project during a day of special activities to celebrate improved test scores. (Photo: Amanda Brown)

Jackie Pugh, who helped Quitman design its blended learning program, has been impressed with the school. She works for Education Elements, a company that hosts a website where students can log on to find digital lessons Quitman purchased from many vendors all in one place. The company’s marketing director heard about the upcoming “100 Schools Worth Visiting” list, and Pugh recommended Quitman. A spokeswoman for the blog, run by former Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation executive director Tom Vander Ark, said that recommendation was how Quitman made the list.

“They’re totally on top of everything they’re doing,” Pugh said. She also nominated vice principal Evelyn Vargas-Okparaeeke to speak on a panel at a national education technology
conference; although the proposed panel was not selected, it was still an honor for Vargas-Okparaeke to be recommended from the 118 schools that Education Elements works with nationwide.

Blended learning, along with a districtwide emphasis on giving students extensive feedback, is a lot of work for teachers. Christina Patterson-Bright, a 20-year Quitman veteran who teaches seventh- and eighth-grade English, said the strategy of individualizing instruction is similar to what’s happening in special education for decades. “We’re doing the exact same thing with 23 students that a teacher with a special needs class does with six,” she said. She said the model is extremely time consuming, “but we all want what’s best, so we do it.” She grades papers at her three sons’ sports practices and does lesson plans while cooking dinner.

Patterson-Bright said all her colleagues are working similarly hard. But not all are getting the results she is. Year after year, her students have posted the highest gains in the school on NJ ASK. Asked how she does it, she paused. “I think I make them feel that they can do it, even though many of them are not on grade level,” she said. “I teach them to struggle, and I teach them that it’s OK, if you show what you know and struggle with it. That’s better than just saying you can’t do it and failing.”

The Way Forward

Data analysis has always been a strong suit for Glover, who was an undergraduate statistics major, and it was sorely lacking when he arrived at Quitman. One of his key hires has been Callie Franklin, whom he brought on in 2012 as the school “data coach.” Among many responsibilities, she analyzes student performance and works with teachers to tailor their instruction accordingly.

Franklin remembers the anxiety she felt soon after she took the job when she had to present Quitman’s student performance data for new staff members. “I’ve never had to present numbers so low,” said Franklin, who previously held a similar position at another Newark school. “You have no control of the data, but you have to own that data.”

She focuses her analyses on what the school can control, which is improvement. She’s most interested in how well Quitman has fared on the NJ ASK with students who have been there two years or more, which last spring was just over half the students tested: 161 kids in grades four through eight. Among those students, 68 percent showed growth in English and 48 percent grew in math.

Franklin also broke down the scores by “significant growth,” students who jumped 10 points or more on the testing scale of 300. Forty-four percent made significant growth in English, 34 percent had significant growth in math and 31 percent had it in both.

A breakdown of scores by classroom shows that 89 percent of Patterson-Bright’s returning students grew, and 75 percent showed significant growth. This reinforces Glover’s belief that great teaching matters.

Jessica Allen, a dynamic fifth-grade math and science teacher who puts in hours even longer than Glover’s, fell short of her goal of getting 80 percent of her students to pass NJ ASK last spring, but 78 percent of those at the school two years or more grew. She didn’t know that,
though. Glover did not have Franklin review the scores with teachers, telling them not to look back and focus instead on preparing students for the new exam, which will require completely different skills.

But on internal midyear exams, Allen was not pleased. “It’s hard to look at a score when you know you tried so hard, and you know the kids have learned a lot, and it’s just not showing in the scores at the time,” said the Virginia native, whose third-floor classroom feels similar to a class at North Star with a combination of high behavioral expectations, focus and joy. She plays silly songs like “Boogie Shoes” so students can let loose switching from one blended learning station to another, even if she only gives them 10 seconds to get there. At the station where students do pencil-and-paper work, she maintains folders for each of the 50 students she sees every day with worksheets and games on the specific skills they answered incorrectly.

The most important skill some of her students struggle with is reading, and the PARCC is filled with math word problems. “How are they going to answer the questions?” she asked.

To recognize Quitman students for their test score growth, the district had a book giveaway at the school on Nov. 19. A Scholastic sales representative dressed up as the children’s book character Clifford the Big Red Dog, and a district math specialist donned striped knee-socks as Clifford’s owner, Emily Elizabeth. The pre-kindergartners shrieked for them. Kindergartners wore red and white “Cat in the Hat” hats. The books were set up in the gym, which middle school honors students had decorated with research projects about other countries. The words “Creating Global Citizens” were painted across a handmade poster of the world, fixed to the middle of the floor. In classrooms, students spent the day on grade-wide projects.

Third grade, for instance, learned about communities, with different stations about politics, economics and transportation. Glover was impressed with what he saw when he dropped in. (He usually clocks four miles a day on his pedometer just walking around the school.) The third-grade instructional team used to be among Quitman’s weakest. No longer. But Glover is frustrated that there are still children arriving in third grade unable to read.
In December, about half the classrooms showed substantial progress on internal midyear exams. He worried about the half that stayed stagnant. “You don’t ever want to be the school that shows some gains and falls back,” he said.

**Dream and Wake**

Growing up in Rochester, N.Y., Glover learned how to navigate gang territories and had to worry about being robbed as he walked home, just like his students at Quitman. But he and his wife have raised their own two children in a very different environment.

Thirty miles south of Newark, North Brunswick is a racially diverse suburb with a relatively low poverty rate. About a third of public school students qualify for free and reduced-price lunch, versus 93 percent this year at Quitman. Glover lives with his wife, son, daughter and mother-in-law in a four-bedroom house on a quiet, tree-lined street.

He and his wife have been “pescatarians,” (vegetarians who eat fish) for health reasons since 1992, when they were college sweethearts at the University of South Carolina, and they have raised their children without meat. Yolanda Kennard-Glover trains probation officers and other law-enforcement officials at the Princeton campus of Rutgers University. The couple have five degrees between them — six if Glover ever finishes his Columbia Teachers College doctoral dissertation.

On Glover’s commute, which takes 45 minutes on a good day, he passes strip malls, car dealerships and the main Rutgers campus before merging onto the New Jersey Turnpike. Exiting the highway in his silver Volkswagen Passat, Glover drives on potholed streets with decayed housing and fast-food joints. The blocks immediately surrounding Quitman have been redeveloped with public townhouses in the past decade, and with a new senior complex on the way, Glover expects increased police presence that will help give kids safe passage in addition to protecting the elderly.

His son, Khamisi, was mischievous when he was little, and the principal often thinks of him when he sees students with similar antics. The boy has grown into a mature high school senior immersed in college applications and focused on competitive soccer. Because Khamisi is sociable and likes to please his peers, Glover knows he and his wife would have needed to worry more had they raised him in Newark, where young black males are all too susceptible to gang recruitment. Khamisi and his sister, 14-year-old Akilah, also have been raised in a house with both parents and a grandmother while many kids in Newark live with only one adult.
Quitman pre-kindergartners await the arrival of the children’s book characters Clifford the Big Red Dog and Emily Elizabeth at a celebration of the school’s progress. (Photo: Amanda Brown)

Newark and many urban cities are striving to improve student performance with personalized school environments. Newark’s middle school students stay in their elementary schools through eighth grade, and high schools tend to be small and specialized, with enrollment determined by an application process, not by neighborhood.

The suburbs, meanwhile, have kept large zoned middle and high schools with a broader range of course and extracurricular offerings. In North Brunswick, everyone attends Linwood Middle School, with more than 1,300 students, and North Brunswick High, with about 1,800. Akilah, a quiet freshman who loves to dance, takes the bus there while her big brother gets a ride from friends. They can go days without seeing each other in the building.

The Glover kids’ school day is the standard American 6.5 hours, and students do not go on as many college trips as peers in Newark, since the expectation is that their parents will take them. Khamisi recently sat in on English and psychology classes at Goucher College outside Baltimore while on a soccer trip and wondered whether he was ready. Kennard-Glover said both her children inherit their father’s self-doubt.

Khamisi’s top choices are the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and at Greensboro. He’s thinking he might want to be a criminal lawyer or, at his father’s suggestion, have a career in sports management, but he isn’t really sure. Akilah is leaning toward dance teacher or business owner, maybe of a sneaker store.

She is just one year older than the eighth-graders at Quitman. For all the differences in their schooling and upbringings, they have a lot of similarities, hoping for a bright future and unsure what it will hold.

Nayely Jimenez, 13, a Quitman eighth-grader with long hair and glasses, has already started the Rutgers Future Scholars program, which will give her extra academic support through high school and pay her tuition if she chooses to attend the university. But she can’t say yet where she’ll want to go. “My friend is planning out her life. I’m like, ‘What? You don’t know what’s gonna happen,’” said the girl, who is interested in being an art therapist or a scientist.
Her classmate Tyishina Kelly, 14, said in an interview last month that she wasn’t sold yet on college, especially if it would mean moving away from home. She was staying with her grandmother and her mother’s much younger brother, a 10-year-old Quitman fifth-grader. Tyishina said she didn’t know if she would be able to leave her mom, living in North Carolina, once they were reunited. “I just have to think over it,” she said. A few weeks later, she moved south sooner than planned. Another Quitman eighth-grader recently left when North Star had an opening, since attendance will guarantee him a coveted spot for high school.

Erskine Glover with daughter Akilah (left), wife Yolanda and son Khamisi at the family’s North Brunswick home. (Photo: Amanda Brown)

Glover has been feeling nostalgic lately that Khamisi is about to turn 18, on Jan. 9. Where did the years go? His wife was pregnant with their son when Glover took his first teaching job in Newark Public Schools. Now here he is at his senior soccer banquet, wearing a bow tie just like his dad. And his baby girl, whom he nurtured on his own for the first month of her life while his wife remained hospitalized with a pulmonary embolism, looks like a beautiful grown woman, taller than Yolanda and with features unmistakably like his.

On one hand, Glover feels guilty that his work keeps him away from home for such long hours, and he especially wishes he were around for more dinners together. (“He works a lot. Like a lot,” Khamisi said.) This fall, he made a commitment to leave early when Khamisi had soccer games on weeknights and to travel with him to weekend away games. “I give it to him,” Khamisi said. “He was there.”

Yet the rapidly passing time in his own family makes Glover all the more mindful of how urgent his job is. He, too, wonders what the future will hold, but for however long he stays at Quitman, he will never let up on the intensity he imposes on himself. Turning around a school is a long process, but his window of opportunity to impact each life is so limited. A childhood is preciously short, and then the dream is over.
About Sara Neufeld

Sara Neufeld, a contributing editor for The Hechinger Report, has been covering public education since 2000. She spent nearly a decade as a daily newspaper reporter at The Baltimore Sun and San Jose Mercury News. Her work has appeared in publications including The New York Times, The Atlantic and Slate. She spent nearly three years on “A Promise to Renew” in collaboration with NJ Spotlight and WNYC Public Radio. The series has won numerous journalism awards, including a National Award for Education Reporting from the Education Writers Association three years in a row.

Sara holds a bachelor’s degree from the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University. She lives in Astoria, Queens, with her husband and son, who was born during the final year of her reporting on the series.
About The Hechinger Report

The Hechinger Report is an independent, nonprofit newsroom that covers inequality and innovation in education with in-depth journalism that uses research, data and stories from classrooms and campuses to show the public how education can be improved and why it matters.

Why We Exist

Education is one of the most important issues of our time. Yet fewer reporters than ever cover national education issues. At the same time, politicians, education advocates and educators are sounding the alarm about unequal outcomes and stagnant performance in schools, along with issues of cost, quality and equity in higher education, and they’re unleashing a flood of ideas for how to make improvements. More than ever, the public needs deep and incisive journalism that uncovers the real problems facing our education system and examines the evidence supporting proposed solutions.

Our goal is not only to replace or supplement what’s been lost; it’s to push education reporting to new levels of quality, clarity, depth and breadth, to explain why education policy matters and how it’s affecting young people.

Our stories take readers into classrooms and onto campuses to show how students and teachers are affected by decisions made in city halls, state legislatures and Washington, D.C. We dig into data, statistics and research to discover inequities and test claims about potential fixes. And we go where others don’t — to struggling schools in the Mississippi Delta, to booming university cities in China, to isolated villages in the Bering Sea, to community colleges in Appalachia, to inner-city schools in Detroit — to find stories that will have an impact on the future of American schooling.

How We Work

You’ll find many of our stories on the pages of the nation’s biggest newspapers, magazines and websites and on the air of its most prominent broadcasters. That’s because we provide our work to them for free, to increase awareness about the important stories our journalists are reporting.

You can also find all of our stories at our website, a deep repository of some of the best journalism about education.
Our Funding

*The Hechinger Report* is an independent organization based at Teachers College, Columbia University. We rely on support from foundations and individual donors to carry out our work.

Content published by *The Hechinger Report* — or content produced and disseminated by any of its collaborators with funding from the Hechinger Institute — is editorially independent of its funders, and does not necessarily reflect the views of Teachers College, its trustees, administration or faculty.