

FROM DRUGS, GRAFFITI, AND FIGHTS TO A NATIONAL SCHOOL OF EXCELLENCE, SALT LAKE'S OLDEST HIGH SCHOOL WAS TRANSFORMED BY ONE MAN'S VISION.

WEST

Miracle at West High



You can find fine administrators who lack vision, and you can find visionaries with little feel for the nuts and bolts. Finding both qualities in the same man isn't all that easy. But once in awhile you find a person like Harold Trussel, principal of Salt Lake City's West High School. ■ When Trussel took the reins at West seven years ago, he had plenty of vision; he dreamed of no less than a West High Renaissance. He also had the know-how, the perseverance, and the people skills to carry it off. ■ The results are astonishing; last year, West High — a school that once banned night football because of the fights and crime — was one of 23 American high schools to receive a national "Drug Free Award." It was also named a national "School of Excellence," the only high school in the nation to win both awards. ■ It's been quite a turn-around. Years ago, when the local community thought of West in terms of New York's "Westside Story" and gossiped about the drugs and thugs, finger-pointing among educators ran rampant. Now, when the school's newfound credibility and class are discussed, all the fingers seem to point in one direction: at Harold Trussel. ■ Rather predictably, Trussel's quick to pass along the credit, but never the buck. "The faculty has really been great, as have the parents. And the students; it's amazing the leadership they have shown," he says. ■ At a time when Hollywood depicts modern high school administrators as wimpish incompetents or tough-talking wardens with baseball bats, Trussel fails to fit either type. A graying 54-year old father-figure with a gentle, generous Western manner and understated style, Trussel comes across more like a small-town pastor. He lacks the flamboyance to make a good TV hero. But no one who has seen him operate would ever call him a wimp.

BY GREGORY P. HAWKINS AND JERRY JOHNSTON



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When Trussel first set foot on the West High campus, coming from an outstanding success in transforming Salt Lake's Brynnt Junior High School, he could see the school needed much more than a minor tune-up. It needed a complete overhaul. He rolled up his sleeves and went to work.

"When I first got to West," he says, "the kids were proud of their image as fighters—a macho group. As for the building, the glass was broken in the candy machine, there were cracks in the glass in the trophy case and in the cement of the sidewalks. There was graffiti and dirt everywhere. Stains from tobacco spit stretched from the floor to the ceiling. I wondered how they could spit that far.

"When I asked a custodian about the sad state of the building, he shrugged and told me it was simply an old building."

So where do you start in making over a place like that? Trussel started with what was most obvious—the physical environment. His first official act as principal was to ask that custodian to scrape the accumulation of wax off the hall floors. It was, of course, a symbolic act. His real goal was to scrape the grime and grit that had accumulated on the reputation of a fine old institution.

Next, he organized the students to help with cleaning up the place.

"Before you can discipline and teach, you have to change the environment," he insists. "How can you tell the kids, this is important, when the physical facility says it is not?"

West High, despite its rowdy reputation, did have a fine heritage. It was built in 1921 on the site of the predecessor to the University of Utah. LDS President Joseph F. Smith grew up on the ground where the seminary building stands, and the surrounding neighborhood brims over with tradition and Utah history. Some of Utah's most distinguished civic, business, and church leaders proudly claimed West as their school.

But that was in the past. Now, there was a monumental task ahead.

Trussel's strategy was to clean and freshen the physical side of things in hopes of digging deeper, to the core, and replacing the run-down state of school with individual spirit and pride.

"I knew I couldn't do it alone, but when the community saw what was happening, money and support came from every direction. I invited the school board to visit, after which they allocated special funds for the projects I wanted. I believe that school buildings should be the most beautiful buildings in the community."

Today, it's still an old building. But it is

sparkling clean. Classical music floats over the loudspeaker system, and, instead of graffiti,

framed prints from the masters and pictures of U.S. Presidents line the walls. Watching the kids mill through the halls between classes, the influence of this kind of environment on their attitudes and actions is obvious.

While the face-lifting was going on, Trussel worked with the faculty and patrons to set new and high academic and social goals.

"We put out a mission statement that shocked everyone," he says. "Many people in Salt Lake City were willing to relegate West to the status of 'tech high school.' We declared that instead, we were going to become one of the top 10 high schools in the country. And we published a five-year plan to start the process.

"We accomplished all the goals of our first five-year plan within three years, except one. I wanted to build a new track, the finest in the state." It's a little late in coming, but work has started across the street on a world-class track with seating for 20,000 people. It will be completed next year.

And now, West High is in the middle of its second five-year plan, with no end in sight to its progress.

Some people show a special ingenuity—or is it genius?—for taking something that's perceived as negative and giving it a positive spin. Trussel is like that.

THE GOING WISDOM when Trussel came aboard was that West High is a multi-ethnic school of warring factions and bickering minorities. Its inner-city location—where 25% of the student body is from minority groups and over one third of the students qualify for the federal lunch program because they are below the poverty level—is a major drawback.

TRUSSEL'S WISDOM: "Being an inner-city school worked to our advantage. The diversity of West's population is its greatest strength. We've had Chicano, Jewish and Korean studentbody presidents. Last year's president was Vietnamese.

"I don't think of us as a melting pot so much as a beautiful mosaic, with everyone here contributing to the total picture."

THE GOING WISDOM: All West High kids really want is enough education to get a 9 to 5 job.

TRUSSEL'S WISDOM: "A lot of these kids have been told in subtle ways that if they work hard they can become good mechanics or carpenters, but not scholars. Society, even the families, have told them not to expect too much because they don't deserve it.

"We tell them they *do* deserve it, that West High is actually a school for champions

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and scholars. We set our goals so high that, after the initial shock wore off, businesses, the faculty, the alumni and even some parents wanted to get involved."

An example: One parent, Pam Stewart, on her own initiative organized a weekly seminar where students voluntarily brown-bag their lunches to a lecture room to hear community leaders talk about careers, goal-setting, what it's like in the real world. Many of Utah's most prominent and successful people spend their lunch hours rapping with the 50 to 100 kids who attend—and love it.

THE GOING WISDOM: If you want drugs, you can get them at West High. So many of the kids there are burn-outs and drop-outs.

TRUSSEL'S WISDOM: "Drugs and alcohol abuse have to do with self-image. That is what West High is about now; about building self-image. That's what education should always be about."

For skeptics who think West High must have put on a cosmetic face and cooked the books to win a drug-free award, Trussel quickly points out that he personally brought in a private investigator for a five-month stay. The investigator discovered five instances of marijuana use, all off campus. Four of those kids are now receiving counseling and treatment.

According to Trussel, what many are calling

the "West High Miracle" has far, far to go. He claims not as many parents have come on board as he'd like. And he points to "the biggest and most difficult failure for an educator to accept, one over which no school has very much control—the home. Too often, people lose the will to control the atmosphere of their own home, the foundation for peace and character."

It's a failure Trussel doesn't intend to simply accept.

"Many of our goals for the next five years will deal with the problem of family and home," he says. "I would like to see parenting classes—for parents—for example. That would go along with our International Baccalaureate program, which allows motivated students to accomplish college-level work during high school; it will graduate its first students soon. And there's our Passport to Work plan."

Passport to Work?

"Yes, that's where employers require young workers to have a 'passport' saying they are enrolled in school and progressing. It's having a big effect in reducing dropouts."

So you look at Harold Trussel's accomplishing what seems to be the impossible, and you

wonder what makes such a man tick.

Well, dig beneath the surface—much the way he dug down to the hardwood of those West High hallways—and you find the answer. An unshakeable, unswerving faith in both human beings and God.

And where did the faith come from?

A sturdy, small town upbringing in Montpelier, Ida., certainly. But much of his optimism is spiritual in nature. A former high councilman and current High Priest Group Leader in the LDS Church, Harold Trussel bases his life on a simple, straight-forward philosophy that may well have come from his mother's knee:

"The bottom line of both religion and education is to help with the quality of life," he says. "Both great literature and the scriptures talk about service, about the glory of God being intelligence. Both my religion and my professional work point toward such ideals."

"While many of my concepts and philosophies are founded on the bedrock of the gospel, they are also the principles of every right-thinking person. What we have accomplished at West could be done by any good person."

Oh yes, along with Harold Trussel's gifts as administrator, visionary, and guide to a better life, add the gift of humility.

Mr. Hawkins is a Salt Lake lawyer, Mr. Johnston a Deseret News columnist.

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