



## For Immediate Release

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## Two Educators Show That Leadership Makes a Difference at Tough Public Schools in POV's "The Principal Story," Tuesday, Sept. 15, 2009, on PBS

Documentary Goes Inside Public Schools in Chicago and Springfield, Illinois to Follow Two Principals' Challenges and Victories Over the Course of a School Year

**The Principal Story** captures a year in the life of two dynamic public school principals in Illinois. Veteran principal Kerry Purcell has led Harvard Park Elementary in the state capital of Springfield for six years; Tresa D. Dunbar, Ph.D., is a second-year principal at Chicago's Henry H. Nash Elementary on the city's tough west side. They differ in temperament, age, race and experience. Yet they share a startling demographic challenge. Their students are overwhelmingly from low-income families. At Harvard Park, the number is 87%. At Nash, virtually every student — a shocking 98% of the student body — comes from a low-income family. With this fact come a host of familiar problems — lack of funding, teacher turnover, low attendance rates, low scores and the corresponding lures of drugs, gangs and violence.

Fortunately, as **The Principal Story** makes clear, Purcell and Dunbar share a couple of other things. One is an irrepressible determination to see that poverty doesn't prevent their students from getting a good education. The other is an uncanny knack for delivering on that determination.

**The Principal Story**, by award-winning filmmakers Tod Lending ("Omar & Pete" POV, 2005) and David Mrazek, has its national broadcast premiere **Tuesday, Sept. 15, 2009**, at 10:30 p.m. on PBS as part of the 22nd season of **POV** (Check local listings.) American television's longest-running independent documentary series, **POV** is the winner of a Special Emmy for Excellence in Television Documentary Filmmaking. The series continues through Tuesday, Sept. 22 at 10 p.m. and returns with specials on Wednesday, Nov. 11 and Dec. 30.

**The Principal Story** is two real-life suspense stories in one. In six years at Harvard Park (pre-K-5), Purcell has taken a school where student behavior was out of hand, test scores were "in the gutter" and staff morale was low, and dramatically increased attendance, test scores and order in the classrooms. The numbers alone show her success. Yet the numbers can be treacherous under policies such as No Child Left Behind that emphasize uniform test results. With success, "the standards keep going up," as Purcell ruefully notes. In her sixth year at Harvard Park, rather than resting on her laurels, she faces the daunting task of raising the students' proficiency rates in reading and math from 65% to 95%.

At Nash Elementary (pre-K-8), second-year principal Dunbar faces a particularly dire situation. The school has been on probation for 12 years, on the academic watch list for eight, and had gone through six principals in five years before appointing the former assistant principal (who returned to the school after multi-year principal training) as principal. In her first year, Dunbar had barely begun rallying the teaching staff and reaching out to her students and their families. Now the challenge is stark — if she and her staff cannot significantly raise test scores this year, Nash Elementary will be closed.

Against this background, Lending and Mrazek have crafted an intimate, vérité-style account of each principal's year as she deals with a dizzying array of students, teachers, parents, school staff and school district officials. All the deeper qualities these two women share become apparent — buoyant dedication, rapport with the students and a sympathetic focus on teacher development and support. "The teacher is the single most important factor in a student's success," says Purcell without hesitation. Dunbar understands this as well as anyone. Having inherited a teaching staff she figures is no more than 35% effective — and with 12 new teachers on the roll — she knows that the key to saving Nash is teacher development.

Unlike many principals who are perceived as remote figures, **The Principal Story** reveals Purcell and Dunbar to be in constant motion — and in constant contact with both students and teachers. They are literally hands-on leaders, working punishing hours including extra-curricular support programs for teachers and students. They also keep their staffs in ongoing self-examination as both women are determined to use data on student performance to improve classroom and administrative effectiveness. Perhaps the most remarkable feature shared by Purcell and Dunbar is the striking ability to show sympathy, understanding and affection without compromising their authority with teachers or students.

In **The Principal Story**, the futures of two schools and their hundreds of students hang in the balance. Yet the struggles at Harvard Park and Nash — and the successes forged by Purcell and Dunbar — lay bare the crises afflicting much of American public education. In those crises, the futures of millions of public school students — of public education itself — and of the nation certainly hang in the balance.

"David Mrazek and I learned many things about the job of being a principal and the challenges of turning around a low-performing school," says co-producer/co-director Lending. "We were surprised by how dramatic a principal's days are. We were struck by the plethora of problems that kids would bring to school. Even though I've spent years filming in low-income communities where violence and social dysfunction are rampant, I was never so aware, until this project, of the devastating impact these circumstances have on a child's ability to learn.

"Something that cannot be taught is essential to the principal's job," Lending adds. "Principals call it 'heart-work.' In making this film, I learned that it takes a tremendous amount of passion, love and 'heart-work' to be a good principal."

"For better or worse, a school is the sum of its many complicated but essential parts," adds Mrazek, Lending's producing and directing partner. "It is our hope that the film and related outreach video and print materials can be utilized by public television stations, national partners and other outreach participants to generate dialogue and build awareness about the importance of education leadership and the role of principals as instructional leaders. It is not just a case of needing more resources, but for people to 'think differently,' to paraphrase the old Apple ad. Our featured principals say it a lot, but it bears saying again: Those working in education have to make decisions based on putting children first. With that mantra in mind, you can't go wrong."

**The Principal Story** is a production of Nomadic Pictures with Funding from The Wallace Foundation.

To learn more about the principals, the schools and the national outreach campaign, visit <http://www.wallacefoundation.org/PRINCIPAL-STORY/Pages/default.aspx>.

#### **About the Filmmakers:**

##### **Tod Lending, Executive Producer/ Co-producer/Co-director/Cinematographer**

Tod Lending is an Academy Award®-nominated and national Emmy-winning producer/director/writer/cinematographer whose work has aired nationally on ABC, CBS, NBC, PBS and HBO and in Europe and Asia and has won numerous awards at film festivals around the world. He is the president and founder of Nomadic Pictures, a Chicago-based documentary film and television production company, and director of Ethno Pictures, a not-for-profit documentary film company.

Lending's feature documentary "Legacy," which he produced, directed, wrote and filmed, was broadcast on HBO/Cinemax and PBS and nominated for an Academy Award. The film won the Reel Screen Innovation in Documentary Award, was nominated for a national Emmy and two IDA awards and was broadcast internationally. "Legacy" inspired the creation and passing of The Legacy Act of 2003, a federal bill that provides low-income housing to grandparents raising grandchildren.

His other credits include the Emmy-winning ABC Afterschool Special "Shades of a Single Protein" and, for PBS, the Emmy-nominated three-part documentary series *No Time to Be a Child*, a co-production with Detroit Public Television; the Emmy-nominated POV documentary "Omar & Pete," about two friends' experiences after a lifetime in prison; "Aimee's Crossing"; and the award-winning short "Rosevelt's America."

Lending was a University of Maryland Journalism Fellow in Child and Family Policy.

### **David Mrazek, Co-producer/Co-director/Sound Recordist**

David Mrazek is an award-winning producer/director/writer of numerous primetime PBS history and science documentary series, as well as documentaries for The History Channel and Travel Channel.

His PBS credits include producer and co-writer of the four-hour series *The Kingdom of David: The Saga of the Israelites* and two programs for the *American Experience* series: "The Duel," about Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr, and "Woodrow Wilson." He was producer, director and co-writer of "Keepers of the Biosphere," the third episode of the series *Intimate Strangers: Unseen Life on Earth*, which is currently being used as a supplement in teaching science and microbiology in schools and colleges across America. In addition, he produced and co-edited multiple episodes of the landmark 10-part series *The Great War and the Shaping of the 20th Century*, which earned Peabody, Emmy and duPont-Columbia and IDA Achievement awards.

Mrazek also produced, directed, wrote and edited the feature documentary "My Prague Spring," which won the Gold Award at WorldFest Houston, Best of Festival at the Berkeley Video Festival and a Cine Golden Eagle. A graduate of the University of Illinois and the University of Southern California with a degree in English and a master of fine arts in film production, he lives in Chicago.

### **Credits:**

Executive Producer:	Tod Lending
Co-directors/Producers:	Tod Lending, David Mrazek
Cinematographer:	Tod Lending
Sound Recordist:	David Mrazek
Editor:	Jan Sutcliffe
Music Composer:	Philip Sheppard

Running Time: 56:46

### **National Outreach Campaign**

**The Principal Story's** national outreach campaign is managed by Outreach Extensions in collaboration with POV's Community Engagement department. Seventeen public television stations have received grants to produce local programming including town halls and other broadcasts, hold screening events and/or to use the campaign's educational resources to engage local audiences. National and local outreach partners are using the film to achieve goals related to school reform. National partners include: American Association of School Administrators, Council of Chief State School Officers, National Association of Elementary School Principals, National Association of Secondary School Principals, National Association of State Boards of Education, National Conference of State Legislatures, National Governors Association and the National Staff Development Council.

**The Principal Story** outreach campaign is made possible by a grant from The Wallace Foundation, a source of ideas for improving school leadership. Visit [www.wallacefoundation.org/principalstory](http://www.wallacefoundation.org/principalstory). For additional information and research about education leadership, visit the Wallace Knowledge Center at [www.wallacefoundation.org](http://www.wallacefoundation.org).



Produced by American Documentary, Inc. and now in its 22nd season on PBS, the award-winning POV series is the longest-running showcase on American television to feature the work of today's best independent documentary filmmakers. Airing June through September, with primetime specials during the year, POV has brought more than 275 acclaimed films to millions nationwide and has a Webby Award-winning online series, *POV's Borders*. Since 1988, POV has pioneered the art of presentation and outreach using independent nonfiction media to build new communities in conversation about today's most pressing social issues. More information is available at [www.pbs.org/pov](http://www.pbs.org/pov).

**POV Interactive** ([www.pbs.org/pov](http://www.pbs.org/pov))

POV's award-winning Web department produces special features for every POV presentation, extending the life of our films through filmmaker interviews, story updates, podcasts, streaming video and community-based and educational content that involves viewers in activities and feedback. POV Interactive also produces our Web-only showcase for interactive storytelling, *POV's Borders*. In addition, the *POV Blog* is a gathering place for documentary fans and filmmakers to discuss and debate their favorite films, get the latest news and link to further resources. The POV website, blog and film archives form a unique and extensive online resource for documentary storytelling.

**POV Community Engagement and Education**

POV works with local PBS stations, educators and community organizations to present free screenings and discussion events to inspire and engage communities in vital conversations about our world. As a leading provider of quality nonfiction programming for use in public life, POV offers an extensive menu of resources, including free discussion guides and curriculum-based lesson plans. In addition, POV's *Youth Views* works with youth organizers and students to provide them with resources and training so they may use independent documentaries as a catalyst for social change.

Major funding for POV is provided by PBS, The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, National Endowment for the Arts, The Educational Foundation of America, JPMorgan Chase Foundation, New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, New York State Council on the Arts, Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, The September 11th Fund and public television viewers. Funding for POV's *Diverse Voices Project* is provided by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts. Special support provided by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. POV is presented by a consortium of public television stations, including KCET Los Angeles, WGBH Boston and THIRTEEN in association with WNET.ORG.

**American Documentary, Inc.** ([www.amdoc.org](http://www.amdoc.org))

American Documentary, Inc. (AmDoc) is a multimedia company dedicated to creating, identifying and presenting contemporary stories that express opinions and perspectives rarely featured in mainstream media outlets. AmDoc is a catalyst for public culture, developing collaborative strategic engagement activities around socially relevant content on television, online and in community settings. These activities are designed to trigger action, from dialogue and feedback to educational opportunities and community participation. Simon Kilmurry is executive director of American Documentary | POV.

**DVD REQUESTS: Please note that a broadcast version of this film is available upon request, as the film may be edited to comply with new FCC regulations.**



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