

Thurgood marshall

Profession, Teacher



9-494-070 NOVEMBER 18, 1993 JOHN J. GABARRO Thurgood Marshall High School On July 15, David Kane became principal of the Thurgood Marshall High School, the newest of the six high schools in Great Falls, Illinois. The school had opened two years earlier amid national acclaim for being an important breakthrough in inner-city education. Among its many features, the school was specially designed and constructed for the "house system" concept. Marshall High's organization was broken down into four "houses," each of which contained 300 students, a faculty of 18, and a housemaster. The Marshall complex was designed so that each house was in a separate building connected to the "core facilities" and other houses by an enclosed outside passageway. Each house had its own entrance, classrooms, toilets, conference rooms, and housemaster's office. (See Exhibit 1 for the layout.) Kane knew that Marshall High was not intended to be an ordinary school. It had been hailed as a major innovation in inner-city education, and a Chicago television station had made a documentary about it shortly after it opened. Marshall High had opened with a carefully selected staff of teachers; many were chosen from other Great Falls schools and at least a dozen had been especially recruited from out-of-state. Indeed, Kane knew his faculty included graduates from several East and West Coast schools such as Stanford, Yale, and Princeton, as well as several of the very best midwestern schools. Even the racial mix of students had been carefully balanced so that African-Americans, whites, and Hispanics each constituted a third of the student body (although Kane also knew—perhaps better than its planners—that Marshall's students were drawn from the toughest and poorest areas of the city). The building itself was also widely admired for its beauty and

functionality and had won several national architectural awards. Despite these careful and elaborate preparations, Marshall High School was in serious difficulty by the time Kane became its principal. It had been wracked by violence the preceding year, having been closed twice by student disturbances and once by a teacher walkout. It was also widely reported (although Kane did not know for sure) that achievement scores of its ninth and tenth grade students had actually declined during the last two years, while no significant improvement could be found in the scores of eleventh and twelfth graders' tests. Marshall High School had fallen far short of its planners' hopes and expectations. 1 The core facilities included the cafeteria, nurses' room, guidance offices, the boys' and girls' gyms, the offices, the shops, and auditorium.

_____ Professor John J. Gabarro prepared this case. HBS cases are developed solely as the basis for class discussion. This case is a revised and rediguided version of “ Robert F. Kennedy High School, ” HBS No. 474-183. Cases are not intended to serve as endorsements, sources of primary data, or illustrations of effective or ineffective management. Copyright © 1993 President and Fellows of Harvard College. To order copies or request permission to reproduce materials, call 1-800-545-7685, write Harvard Business School Publishing, Boston, MA 02163, or go to [www. hbsp. harvard. edu/educators](http://www.hbsp.harvard.edu/educators). This publication may not be digitized, photocopied, or otherwise reproduced, posted, or transmitted, without the permission of Harvard Business School. 494-070 Thurgood Marshall High School David Kane An athletic man who stood over 6 feet 4

inches tall, David Kane was born and raised in Great Falls, Illinois. His father was one of the city's first African-American principals; thus Kane was not only familiar with the city but with its school system as well. After serving a tour of duty with the U. S. Marine Corps in Viet Nam, Kane decided to follow his father's footsteps and went to Great Falls State College, from which he received both his bachelor's and master's degrees in education. Kane was certified in elementary and secondary school administration, English, and physical education. Kane had taught English and had coached in a predominantly African-American middle school until ten years ago, when he was asked to become the school's assistant principal. After five years in that post, he was asked to take over the George La Rochelle Middle School, which had 900 pupils and was reputed to be the most difficult middle school in the city. While at La Rochelle, Kane gained a citywide reputation for being a gifted and popular administrator and was credited with turning La Rochelle around from the worst middle school in the system to one of the best. He had been very effective in building community support, recruiting new faculty, and raising academic standards. He was also credited with turning out basketball and baseball teams that won state and county middle school championships. Kane knew that he had been selected for the Marshall job over several more senior candidates because of his ability to handle tough situations. The superintendent had made that clear when he offered Kane the job. The superintendent had also told him that he would need every bit of skill and luck he could muster. Kane knew of the formidable credentials of Dr. Louis Parker, his predecessor at Marshall High. Parker, a white, had been the superintendent of a small, local township school system before becoming

Marshall's first principal. He had also written a book on the house system concept as well as a second book on inner-city education. Parker had earned a Ph. D. from the University of Chicago and a divinity degree from Harvard. Yet despite his impressive background and obvious ability, Parker had resigned in disillusionment and was described by many as a broken man. In fact, Kane remembered seeing the physical change that Parker had undergone over that two-year period. Parker's appearance had become progressively more fatigued and strained until he developed what appeared to be permanent dark rings under his eyes and a perpetual stoop. Kane remembered how he had pitied him and wondered how Parker could find the job worth the obvious personal toll it was taking.

History of the School The First Year The school's troubles became apparent in the school's first year. Rumors of conflicts between the housemasters and the six subject area department heads were widespread by the middle of the first year. The conflicts stemmed from differences in interpretations of curriculum policy on required learning and course content. In response to these conflicts, Parker had instituted a "free market" policy by which department heads were to encourage housemasters to offer certain courses, while housemasters were to convince department heads to assign certain teachers to their houses. Many observers in the school system felt that this policy exacerbated the conflicts. To add to this climate of conflict, a teacher was assaulted in her classroom in February. The beating frightened many of the staff, particularly some of the older teachers. A delegation of eight teachers asked Parker to hire security guards a week after the assault. The request precipitated a debate within the faculty about the desirability of having guards in the

school. One group felt that the guards would instill a sense of safety within the school and thus promote a better learning climate, while the other group felt that the presence of guards would be repressive and would 2 Thurgood Marshall High School 494-070 destroy the sense of community and trust that was developing. Parker refused the request for security guards because he believed that symbolically they would represent everything the school was trying to change. In April a teacher was robbed and beaten in her classroom after school hours and the debate was rekindled, except this time a group of Latino parents threatened to boycott the school unless better security measures were instituted. Again Parker refused the request for security guards. The Second Year The school's second year was even more troubled than the first. Because of budget cutbacks ordered during the previous summer, Parker was not able to replace eight teachers who resigned during the summer; it was no longer possible, therefore, for each house to staff all of its courses with its own faculty. Parker therefore instituted a "flexible staffing" policy whereby some teachers were asked to teach students from outside their assigned house; thus, students in the eleventh and twelfth grades were able to take some elective and required courses in other houses. During this period, Wesley Chase, one of the housemasters, publicly attacked the move as a step toward destroying the house system. In a letter to the Great Falls Times, he accused the Board of Education of subverting the house concept by cutting back funds. The debate over the flexible staffing policy was heightened when two of the other housemasters joined a group of faculty and department chairpersons in opposing Wesley Chase's criticisms. This group argued that the individual house faculties of 15 to 18

teachers could never offer their students the breadth of courses that a schoolwide faculty of 65 to 70 teachers could offer and that interhouse cross registration should be encouraged for that reason. Further expansion of a cross-registration or flexible staffing policy was halted, however, because of difficulties encountered in the scheduling of classes in the fall. Several errors were found in the master schedule that had been planned during the preceding summer. Various schedule difficulties persisted until November, when the vice principal responsible for the scheduling of classes resigned. Burt Wilkins, a Marshall housemaster who had formerly planned the schedule at Central High, assumed the scheduling function in addition to his duties as housemaster. The scheduling activity took most of Wilkins's time until February. Security again became an issue when three sophomores were assaulted because they refused to give up their lunch money during a "shakedown." It was believed that the assailants were from outside the school. Several teachers approached Parker and asked him to request security guards from the Board of Education. Again he declined, but he asked Bill Jones, a vice principal at the school, to secure all doors except the entrances to each of the four houses, the main entrance to the school, and the cafeteria. This move appeared to reduce the number of outsiders in the school. In May a disturbance occurred in the cafeteria that grew out of a fight between two boys. The fight spread and resulted in considerable damage to the school, including the breaking of classroom windows and desks. The disturbance was severe enough for Parker to close the school. A number of teachers and students reported that outsiders were involved in the fight and in damaging the classrooms. Several students were taken to the hospital for

minor injuries but all were released. A similar disturbance occurred two weeks later and again the school was closed. The Board of Education then ordered a temporary detail of municipal police to the school despite Parker's advice to the contrary. In protest of the assignment of the police detail, 30 of Marshall's 68 teachers staged a walkout that was joined by over half the student body. The police detail was removed from the school, and an agreement was worked out by an ad hoc subcommittee of the Board of Education with informal representatives of teachers who were for and against assigning a police detail. The compromise called for the temporary stationing of a police cruiser near the school.

3 494-070 Thurgood Marshall High School Kane's First Week at Marshall High David Kane arrived at Marshall High on Monday, July 15, and spent most of his first week interviewing individually the school's key administrators. (See Exhibit 2 for a listing of Marshall's administrative staff as of July 15.) He also had a meeting with all of his administrators and department heads on Friday of that week. Kane's purpose in these meetings was to familiarize himself with the school, its problems, and its key people. His first interview was with William Jones, who was one of his vice principals. Jones, an AfricanAmerican, had previously worked as a counselor and then as vice principal of a middle school. Kane knew that Jones had a reputation as a tough disciplinarian and was disliked by many of the younger faculty and students. However, Kane had also heard from several teachers, whose judgment he respected, that Jones had been instrumental in keeping the school from blowing apart in the preceding year. It became clear early in the interview that Jones felt more stringent steps were needed to keep outsiders from entering the building. In particular,

Jones urged Kane to consider locking all of the school's 30 doors, except for the front entrance, so that everyone would enter and leave through one set of doors. Jones also told him that many of the teachers and pupils had become fearful of being in the building and that "no learning will ever begin to take place until we make it so people don't have to be afraid anymore." At the end of the interview, Jones told Kane that he had been approached by a nearby school system to become its director of counseling but that he had not yet made up his mind. He said he was committed to Marshall High and did not want to leave, but that his decision depended on how hopeful he felt about its future. As Kane talked with others, he discovered that the "door question" was one of considerable controversy within the faculty and that both pro and con feelings ran high. Two of the housemasters in particular—Wesley Chase, an African-American, and Frank Kubiak, a white—were strongly against closing the house entrances. The two men felt that such an action would symbolically reduce house autonomy and the feeling of distinctness that was a central aspect of the house identity and pride they were trying to build. Wesley Chase, master of C House, was particularly vehement on this issue as well as on the question of whether students of one house should be allowed to take classes in another house. Chase said that the flexible staffing program introduced the preceding year had nearly destroyed the house concept and that he, Chase, would resign if Kane intended to expand the crosshouse enrollment of students. Chase also complained about what he described as interference from department heads in his teachers' autonomy. Chase appeared to be an outstanding housemaster from everything Kane had heard about him— even from his many enemies. Chase had an abrasive

personality but seemed to have the best operating house in the school and was well liked by most of his teachers and pupils. His program also appeared to be the most innovative of all. However, it was also the program that was most frequently attacked by the department heads for lacking substance and for not covering the requirements outlined in the system's curriculum guide. Even with these criticisms, Kane imagined how much easier it would be if he had four housemasters like Wesley Chase. During his interviews with the other three housemasters, Kane discovered that they all felt infringed upon by the department heads, but that only Chase and Kubiak were strongly against locking the doors and that the other two housemasters actively favored crosshouse course 4 Thurgood Marshall High School 494-070 enrollments. Kane's fourth interview was with the housemaster of A House, Burtram Wilkins, an African-American in his late forties who had been an assistant to the principal of Central High before coming to Marshall. Wilkins spent most of the interview discussing how schedule pressures could be relieved. Wilkins was currently involved in developing the schedule for the new school year until an administrative vice principal was appointed. (Marshall High had allocations for two vice principals and two assistants in addition to the housemasters. See Exhibit 2.) Two pieces of information concerning Wilkins came to Kane's attention during his first week there. The first was that several teachers were circulating a letter requesting Wilkins's removal as a housemaster because they felt he could not control the house or direct the faculty. This surprised Kane, since he had heard that Wilkins was widely respected within the faculty and that he had earned a reputation for supporting high academic standards and working tirelessly with new

teachers. However, as Kane inquired further he discovered that although Wilkins was greatly liked within the faculty, he was generally recognized as a poor housemaster. The second piece of information concerned how Wilkins's house compared with the others. Although students had been randomly assigned to each house, Wilkins's house had the largest absence rate and the greatest number of disciplinary problems. Jones had also told him that Wilkins's drop-out rate for the previous year was three times that of any other house. While Kane was in the process of interviewing his staff, he was called on by Francis Harvey, chairman of the social studies department. Harvey was a native of Great Falls, white, and in his late forties. He was scheduled for an appointment the following week but asked Kane if he could see him immediately. Harvey had heard that a letter was being circulated asking for Wilkins's removal and therefore wanted to present the other side of the argument. He became very emotional during the conversation and said that Wilkins was viewed by many of the teachers and department chairpersons as the only housemaster who was making an effort to maintain high academic standards; his transfer would be seen as a blow to those concerned with quality education. Harvey also described in detail Wilkins's devotion and commitment to the school and the fact that Wilkins was the only administrator with the ability to straighten out the schedule, which he had done in addition to all his other duties. Harvey departed by saying that if Wilkins was transferred, then he, Harvey, would write a letter to the regional accreditation council telling them how standards had sunk at Marshall. Kane assured him that it would not be necessary to take such a drastic measure and that a cooperative resolution would be found. Kane was aware of the

accreditation review that Marshall High faced the following April, and he did not wish to complicate the process unnecessarily. Within 20 minutes of Harvey's departure, Kane was visited by a young white teacher named Tim O'Reilly, who said he had heard that Harvey had come in to see Kane. O'Reilly said he was one of the teachers who organized the movement to get rid of Wilkins. O'Reilly said he liked and admired Wilkins because of his devotion to the school, but that Wilkins's house was so disorganized and discipline so bad that it was nearly impossible to do any good teaching. O'Reilly said that it was " a shame to lock the school when stronger leadership is all that's needed." Kane's impressions of his administrators generally matched what he had heard about them before arriving at the school. Wesley Chase seemed to be a very bright, innovative, and charismatic leader whose mere presence generated excitement. Frank Kubiak seemed to be a highly competent though not very imaginative administrator, who had earned the respect of his faculty and students. John Di Napoli, a housemaster who was only 26, seemed very bright and earnest but unseasoned and unsure of himself. Kane felt that with a little guidance and training, Di Napoli might have the greatest promise of all. At the moment, however, Di Napoli appeared to be uncertain, and tentative, and Kane suspected that Di Napoli had difficulty simply coping. Wilkins seemed to be a sincere and devoted person who had a good mind for administrative details but an incapacity for leadership. 5 494-070 Thurgood Marshall High School Kane knew that he would have the opportunity to make several administrative appointments because of three vacancies that existed. Indeed, should Jones resign as vice principal, Kane could fill both vice

principal positions. He knew that his recommendations for these positions would carry a great deal of weight with the central office. The only constraint Kane felt in making these appointments was the need to achieve some kind of racial balance among the Marshall administrative group. With his own appointment as principal, the number of African-American administrators exceeded the number of white administrators by a ratio of two to one, and Marshall did not have a single Latino administrator, even though a third of its pupils had Hispanic surnames. The Friday Afternoon Meeting In contrast to the individual interviews, Kane was surprised to find how quiet and conflict-free these same people were in the staff meeting he called on Friday. He was amazed at how slow, polite, and friendly the conversation appeared to be among people who had so vehemently expressed negative opinions of each other in private. After about 45 minutes of discussion about the upcoming accreditation review, Kane broached the subject of housemaster-department head relations. The ensuing silence was finally broken by a joke Kubiak made about the uselessness of discussing that topic. Kane probed further by asking whether everyone was happy with the current practices. Harvey suggested this was a topic that might be better discussed in a smaller group. Everyone in the room seemed to agree with Harvey except for Betsy Drobna, a white woman in her late twenties who chaired the English department. She said that one of the problems with the school was that no one was willing to tackle tough issues until they exploded. She said that relations between housemasters and department heads were terrible, and it made her job very difficult. She then attacked Wesley Chase for impeding her evaluation of a nontenured teacher in Chase's house. The two argued for several minutes

about the teacher and the quality of the experimental sophomore English course that the teacher was giving. Finally, Chase, who by now was quite angry, coldly warned Drobna that he would break her neck if she stepped into his house again. Kane intervened in an attempt to cool both their tempers and the meeting ended shortly thereafter. The following morning, Drobna called Kane at home and told him that unless Wesley Chase publicly apologized for his threat, she would file a grievance with the teachers' union and take it to court if necessary. Kane assured Drobna that he would talk with Chase on Monday. Kane then called Eleanor Dodd, one of the school's math teachers whom he had known well for many years and whose judgment he respected. Dodd was a close friend of both Chase and Drobna and was also vice president of the city's teachers' union. He learned from her that both had been long-term adversaries but that she felt both were excellent professionals. She also reported that Drobna would be a formidable opponent and could muster considerable support among the faculty. Dodd, who herself was African-American, feared that a confrontation between Drobna and Chase might create tensions along race lines within the school even though both Drobna and Chase were generally quite popular with students of all races. Dodd strongly urged Kane not to let the matter drop. She also told him she had overheard Bill Jones, the vice principal, say at a party the preceding night that he felt Kane didn't have either the stomach or the forcefulness necessary to survive at Marshall. Jones further stated that the only reason he was staying was that he did not expect Kane to last the year. Should that prove to be the case, Jones felt that he would be appointed principal. 6 Exhibit 1 494-070 -7- 494-070 Exhibit 2 Illinois Thurgood Marshall

High School Administrative Organization, Thurgood Marshall High School, Great Falls, Principal David Kane, 42 (African-American) B. Ed., M. Ed., Great Falls State College Vice Principal William Jones, 44 (African-American) B. Ed., Breakwater State College M. Ed. (counseling), Great Falls State College Vice Principal Housemaster, A House Burtram Wilkins, 47 (African-American) B. S., M. Ed., University of Illinois Housemaster, B House Frank Kubiak, 36 (white) B. S., University of Illinois M. Ed., Great Falls State College Housemaster, C House Wesley Chase, 32 (African-American) A. B., Wesleyan University B. F. A., Pratt Institute M. A. T., Yale University Housemaster, D House John Di Napoli, 26 (Italian-American) B. Ed., Great Falls State College M. Ed., Ohio State University Assistant to the Principal Vacant Assistant to the Principal (for community affairs) 8 Vacant Vacant