

JOHN MERROW: Boushall Middle School in Richmond, Va. is struggling. The new principal, Parker Land, has a lot to fix.

PARKER LAND, Principal Boushall Middle School: We're missing shades. We're missing a clock. It's ugly. That's a statement to a kid that speaks volumes.

JOHN MERROW: Land would get the clock fixed in time for opening day, but there was little he could do to soften the message at the front door.

PARKER LAND: I don't like the fact that the first thing a kid does when he walks in the building is have to go through metal detector. One of my personal goals is that we won't have to do that for very much longer.

PARKER LAND: Good morning. Good morning, everybody. How are you doing?

JOHN MERROW: On opening day Parker Land kicks off what he hopes will be a year of major change and improvement for the 735 students at Boushall. Right now his new school is on a state warning list, put there by a nearly 50 percent failure rate in reading. It's a school that's gone through three principals in seven years. Where last year alone staff issued some 2,500 infractions for student misconduct.

And yet to come here, Parker Land gave up a prize position in the affluent suburbs, left a school he had led for nine years, even took a cut in pay, all for a chance to change Boushall.

PARKER LAND: I truly believe, I take this serious. I truly believe that if we don't solve the problems of inner city schools, our democracy is going to suffer.
Becoming a turnaround specialist

JOHN MERROW: The path that brought land from the suburbs to the inner city began here at the Darden School of Business at the University of Virginia.

TEACHER: See if you can capture in a single sentence what the core key message of the story is.

JOHN MERROW: In early summer land joined an elite group of principals, participants in a state program that gave them nine days of training and sent them to take over failing schools. The newest, hottest idea in education is happening in many states. Borrowing from business, they call these principals turn- around specialists.

PARKER LAND: I have been able to create a kind of an expectation in the schools I've worked in that improvement is the norm. Change is the norm.

JOHN MERROW: Parker Land brings the best of intentions and 31 years of experience to his new school, where three and four students live in poverty and nearly all are

African-American. Can he take what worked for him in the suburbs and make it work at Boushall? He has a year to find out.

PARKER LAND: Good morning. How are you?

JOHN MERROW: Day one began with greetings for students.

PARKER LAND: Good morning. How are you?

STUDENT: Fine.

PARKER LAND: What's your name?

STUDENT: Lawrence.

PARKER LAND: Lawrence. I'm Mr. Land, Lawrence.

JOHN MERROW: Visibility is so important. Kids have got to see that the principal will come up to me and will be a part of my world and will ask questions and will show interest.

PARKER LAND: What's your name?

STUDENT: Ernest.

PARKER LAND: Ernest.

PARKER LAND: What I want to get across to kids is that this is a real caring environment and it's a helping environment.

POLICEWOMAN: Take your belts off.

JOHN MERROW: But at the front door land's message collided with the realities of an urban school.

PARKER LAND: Is there anybody that can go to the front door right now and start to hold people as they come in?

Not prepared for the pandemonium

PARKER LAND: I was not prepared for the pandemonium at that entry area. It's all due to the fact that we have to get all those kids through the metal detector. I just wasn't used to that. I wasn't prepared for that.

JOHN MERROW: Land spent most of his first day visiting classes.

PARKER LAND: Hi, just stopping in to say hello.

PARKER LAND: This was a real high-stress day. Being on the hall is real important.

PARKER LAND: Hello, y'all.

PARKER LAND: Staff and teachers, they need to know that there's an investment. One way you show them that is you're there. You're there with them.

PARKER LAND: Just go ahead. You're working hard. Keep at it.

JOHN MERROW: Teachers spent much of their day reading the rules.

PARKER LAND: That's real typical of first day.

TEACHER: All right. Number two, what does it say? Follow directions.

TEACHER: No talking.

PARKER LAND: It establishes with these kids a feeling of stability.

TEACHER: Are we going to be eating sunflower seeds?

PARKER LAND: And if they're hearing it pretty consistently from one class to another, that's -- that increases their feeling of stability.

JOHN MERROW: But despite talk about rules, kids were all over the hallways.

PARKER LAND: You're going back to class. Go on.

PARKER LAND: Some folks are sending kids out of class without passes and I'm thinking, what's the rationale behind that? What are you thinking?

JOHN MERROW: Land sent them back to class and told teachers it was unacceptable. In Land's view most school problems trace back to the same source.

PARKER LAND: So much of misbehavior is a result of teachers just being poorly planned.

I am trying to get across in everything I do that the teacher is accountable. The teacher is accountable for every kid who is out in the hall and for every kid that's asleep in their class -- all those things.

PARKER LAND: I don't let kids sleep. I'm sorry. I come in and wake them up. Do you know the class number, the room number?

JOHN MERROW: By mid morning Land was feeling good about his opening day.

PARKER LAND: 235. Go to your right up there.

PARKER LAND: Everything went pretty well I thought. Pretty good opening. Pretty good opening.

A student who refuses to go to class

JOHN MERROW: But by the time he returned to his office ten minutes later, a situation had developed that would put him to the test.

PARKER LAND: I have a student who basically is refusing to go to class.

PARKER LAND: I have to say in all of my years I've never had this happen where a student refused to go into a class -- just refused.

JOHN MERROW: Land called the student's mother in for a meeting.

PARKER LAND: He came to us in 7th grade. This would be his second year.

MOTHER: This would be his second year.

PARKER LAND: What's keeping you from going in there?

JOHN MERROW: Since coming here a year ago, the student has had trouble fitting in. His mother recalled what the school psychologist told her.

MOTHER: They said he had some emotional problems. He wouldn't really talk to anyone. He wouldn't relate to anyone like the other children were.

JOHN MERROW: Like this young man, nearly one quarter of the students in Land's new school are in special education. That's two-and-a-half times the national average. Misidentification of students, especially black males, is a national problem.

PARKER LAND: Are we part of that? I don't know. I don't want to latch on too quickly to what -- how we -- how Boushall finds itself where it is right now. But if we're over identifying black males it's not right.

JOHN MERROW: Land knew the Boushall's special education numbers were high, but did this student belong in special ed? Land had some information about his problems last year.

PARKER LAND: His history is one of being absent a lot and when he is here at school, fading into the little nooks and crannies of the school.

MOTHER: All he does is walk the halls I guess and sit in the office. I'm called up here quite often.

PARKER LAND: It reached the point that last year they had to home school him. In other words, they delivered the educational services at his home.

TEACHER: What are the consequences? First, we have a verbal warning.

JOHN MERROW: This is the class the young man walked out of last year and now refuses to enter. It's for students the school considers emotionally disturbed.

TEACHER: Raise up, Baby. You know how it works. Chris, turn around.

JOHN MERROW: Angela Wheeler is one of two teachers assigned here.

ANGELA WHEELER: Academically they're okay but it's more behavior. They'll go off whenever – verbal assaults -- walking out of the classroom -- flipping desks -- throwing chairs.

PARKER LAND: He feels like the kids don't behave and he doesn't want to be a part of that.

JOHN MERROW: What the young man and his mother want is for him to be placed in a regular class.

MOTHER: He hasn't been doing absolutely anything. I don't want that to continue for another year.

JOHN MERROW: The question for Land: could a student who appeared so withdrawn withdrawn make it in a leg class?

PARKER LAND: As I look at it, we have a range of options from taking him out completely to starting his day in the class and moving out for a lot of his day. What I don't want is to get into a struggling match of putting him in right now. Nobody wins in that.

JOHN MERROW: Land asked for time to review the young man's private records and to consult with school psychologists and others familiar with the student's case.

PARKER LAND: Okay.

JOHN MERROW: Days later he told mother and son the school's recommendation: He belonged in the special class.

PARKER LAND: He failed in a regular class. He failed miserably. His track record was of real concern to staff that dealt with him over the course of those years -- staff that I really respect. The consensus was pretty clear that this is the best environment for him.

JOHN MERROW: What did he do when you told him that?

PARKER LAND: He literally put his head down on his arm and stared at the floor for next ten, fifteen minutes –

PARKER LAND: What may appear as heartless on the outside is really almost an act of tough love. It's how are we going to move this kid closer to a sense of independence where he can be independent? Right now he just can't be independent.

JOHN MERROW: Reluctantly the young man returned to the class although he soon walked out again. At last report, he was settling in.

As for Principal Parker Land, his first week on the job gave him a taste of just how challenging an inner city school can be. And he's just getting started.