A Long-Range Approach to
Instructional Leadership

In Anchorage, Alaska, future
principals are getting on-
the-job experience through a
local intern program.

DONALD F. MCDERMOTT

The Anchorage, Alaska, school
district has devised a two-year
internship program for prospec-
tive school principals that emphasizes
instructional leadership. To be eligible
for the program, applicants must have a
Master's degree and the principal's cre-
cential, have proven their abilities as
outstanding teachers for at least three
years, and possess working knowledge of
current literature on effective schools
and effective instruction.

During the 1983-84 school year, An-
chorage had over 100 applicants—61 at
the elementary level and 45 at the sec-
ondary—for 15 slots. Interns are on a
teacher's contract, which is shorter than
an administrative contract, and their
salaries are equivalent to those of class-
room teachers with similar experience
and education.

A unique aspect of the program is that
interns assume a two-year administrative
assistant role carrying genuine admin-
istrative responsibility. They deal
with day-to-day problems of schools:
handling discipline, auxiliary services,
teacher evaluation, supervision of in-
struction, curriculum planning, and
other challenges that principals face.
Although the building principal has ul-
timate responsibility, the intern is in a
decision-making position. The experi-
ence is genuine.

Elementary-level interns spend their
first year in one building and move in
the second year through placements in a
variety of settings and programs lasting
about two months each. Secondary-
level interns usually stay in the same
building for two years, moving from one
role to another. Anchorage's secondary
schools are large enough that a variety of
experiences is available under one roof.
There is a provision in the program for
elementary interns to spend an addition-
al, third, year at a larger elementary
building. In general, though, interns
who are successful in the program are
placed as principals after two years and,
in a few cases, even before that time.

An Investment in the Future
Benefits to the district are several. Since
the intern contract is for one year at a
time, the district may reassign an unsuc-
cessful candidate after the first year or
after the second. Candidates who decide
administration is not for them also have
the option of returning to the classroom
at either point. A financial benefit to the
district is the fact that 15 administrative
assistants are working for the salary of 15
classroom teachers.

The school board is pleased with the
program since it gives teachers who
already have an investment in the com-
munity the opportunity to move into
leadership roles in their own school
system.

Anchorage's Superintendent Gene
Davis, who has been a strong force in
leading the program, lists three major
benefits of training interns. First, the
district has the opportunity to mold the
style of its new administrators. As a
result, the characteristics of administra-
tors over the years are likely to be
consonant with district philosophy.

Second, the intern program facilitates
long-range planning, which serves con-
tinuity in the administration of schools.
The district's contract with administra-
tors provides a one-time $4,000 bonus
for those who announce impending re-
tirement before signing their final year's
contract. Knowing ahead of time what
vacancies will exist allows for more effi-
cient planning to fill vacancies.

Third, the district has the opportunity
to test its administrative aspirants by fire.
Candidates demonstrate in real-life situations
how they would handle the re-
sponsibilities of the building principal.

Allowing interns to participate in
principals' meetings and the leadership
academies constitutes a genuine accep-
tance of the interns by the administra-
tion. In fact, in a budget-cutting ses-
ion early in the 1982-83 school year, the
principals voted as a group that the last
program that ought to be cut from the
budget was the intern program.

Last year, the district initiated an
in-service program specifically for the
interns. Every other week they met in a
two-hour, after-school session conduc-
ted by district principals and administra-
tors. Topics covered a range of subjects
from building management to pur-
chasing, but the emphasis was on the role
of the principal as instructional leader.

Participants and district administra-
tors alike are enthusiastic about the
internship program and what it can do
for instruction. While it is true that
principals need to be skilled managers,
research emphasizes the importance of
their being instructional leaders. In An-
chorage, school officials are doing
something about it.

Donald F. McDermott is Associate Pro-
fessor of School Administration, Univer-
sity of Alaska, Anchorage.