

# Creating a Professional Learning Partnership

With a boost from the state department of education, a group of Maryland principals launched programs to support statewide networks, professional seminars, and school change.

Designers of staff development often forget that adults learn when they perceive there is a need to learn. Answering a question that the adult learner has not asked is usually a waste of time. A group of 25 principals in Maryland, however, have not only asked questions, they have begun to seek the answers together.

At the end of a one-year training program for principals sponsored by the Maryland State Department of Education, several of the participants knew they needed to continue to develop their skills. One principal observed, "We're just now beginning to know what we need." Another asked, "Who can I talk to to keep up with the latest

research?" And a third, "Where do we go from here to learn more? A year is not enough."

The principals' questions stimulated them to work together to look for answers. Together they applied for a grant, obtained funding, and, piggy-backing on the original state department-planned and funded experience, they designed their own skill development program.

## Maryland's Staff Development Institutes

The principals' commitment to self-improvement began with their participation in a Maryland Professional Development Academy (MPDA) Institute called School Improvement: The Principal as Staff Developer. The institute is one of nine year-long training experiences conducted annually for building-level leaders. Designed to improve educational leadership in Maryland's 24 school systems, each MPDA Institute serves 25-30 participants.

The Institute on School Improvement and Staff Development is a second-level experience, planned for educators who have already attended one institute and are ready to extend their skills. Offered for the first time in 1985-86, this institute is designed to help principals to be change agents with their school staffs, applying institute content to general school improvement issues.

A wide range of activities helps principals develop a conceptual framework, and attain new skills that will transfer to their own job sites. As one principal said, "In the Academy, the



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bottom line was whether people would change how they did their jobs. From the first planning meeting on, we started talking about action plans and our own school needs. We left the institute with the clear expectation that we would and could use what we had learned."

### Developing Collegial Support

The year-long institute begins in April with a one-day planning workshop. The state department coordinator outlines the institute's objectives, and participants work together in large and small groups to relate their own training needs to the institute topic.

During the summer the principals attend an intensive five-day retreat with the institute coordinator and expert trainers brought in from all over the country. Both the setting and the evening programs help participants cultivate collegial and social relationships. Many principals feel that these relationships are one of the major benefits of the institute. Said one, "It's the first time since college that I've established real, meaningful professional relationships. I have a new support group now to help me problem solve." These relationships among participants form the basis for a principals' network throughout the state.

During summer training, participants begin to develop individual action plans for using their new skills on the job. They also form self-selected networking teams of four to eight participants. These teams agree to meet monthly throughout the school year to share problems and concerns. Also during the year the institute hosts two additional two-day residential sessions to help principals continue to develop their skills and to assess their progress on the action plans. Strong group rapport undergirds the supportive learning that the principals experience in these two sessions.

Because the implementation of many action plans requires resources beyond those normally available to schools, the state department of education makes some small grants available to participants. The grants for building-level changes are available to individual principals, and grants for system-level change are available to groups of principals from a school system.



Photograph by John Van Schoonenbeek

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### Taking Charge of Professional Development

The networks formed during the Institute on School Improvement and Staff Development are unusually strong and enthusiastic. One team, meeting regularly to share concerns about action plans, began to discuss their need for further training. In the summer of 1986, a full year after the original institute, team members began informally to contact other institute participants from around the state. They found that others shared their needs for further training. A subgroup of the original 25 participants met to propose a second year of training to be directed by the principals themselves.

Their objectives were to bring the original group together again for joint problem solving, to learn about the latest research on school-level change and staff development, and to allow group members an opportunity to generate further questions and find answers.

The principals applied for an MPDA grant. Since MPDA guidelines have established the maximum amount of money any one school system may receive, the proposal writers enlisted the support of three school superintendents, all of whom approved and signed their grant request. The state

department funded the proposal, which was the first ever to address the needs of principals on a statewide basis.

Funding in hand, the original proposal writers—three elementary principals and a middle school principal from one of the larger school systems in the state—formed a planning committee. Working with three high school principals and a principal of a special education center, each from a different region and school system, the committee planned a two-day residential meeting in the fall and another in the spring.

### Developing a Training Agenda

The planning committee voiced a number of concerns. For example, one of the speakers at the original summer session had introduced the principals to characteristics of adult learners. The committee wanted to hear another presentation that would focus on the most current research in this area.

In addition, since budgets for school-level staff development usually are low, participants had begun to work on their own presentation skills. They wanted to arrange for further practice and receive feedback from the group.

Almost everyone who had participated in the original institute had embarked on a school effectiveness or school improvement process. They were determining their schools needs in various ways, forming school teams, and examining characteristics of effective schools. Many participants had used their networking teams to develop and share survey instruments. They all expressed a need for help with the process, rather than with the content, of school improvement.

"It's easy to find all the information you need on school effectiveness," said one principal. "Every journal you pick up lately has something, and our system is bombarding us with surveys and tapes and advice. But it's all just one more silly notion from the principal's office if you can't get your staff to take ownership of an improvement effort. We need the skills to do that."

The 25 original institute participants responded enthusiastically to the follow-up plan. In response to a short

questionnaire sent by the planning committee on the current status of the action plans, blockages to implementing them, and needs and interests, the committee learned that principals wanted skills that they could readily apply to help their schools function better. But they also wanted to know the latest research and professional literature, and they were interested in applying practices of other schools and school systems. By September almost all the original participants had agreed to attend the follow-up sessions.

At the fall training session, participants formed working groups to share the progress and impediments they had experienced with their action plans. They heard an update on the latest research on adult learners, staff development, and school change. They practiced coaching skills and solved problems. They also began to ask the questions that will guide the committee in planning for their spring meeting.

### Principals Take Control

Many programs that try to support administrators' skill development set them adrift in a sea of piecemeal workshops, readings, and courses. One-shot speakers come and go, leaving the principals with a page of notes for their files but with little real direction for making their schools better. In contrast, the conceptual framework and skills provided by the state-sponsored institute empowered 25 principals to become partners, taking control of and designing their own training. As colleagues they have risked the discomforts and discontinuities of change. Their support of one another has enabled them to improve their schools. □

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