Leadership for Excellence: Research-Based Training for Principals

A new training program being field-tested this year by the Northwest Regional Educational Lab puts principals through a year-long series of workshops.

After two years of development and pilot testing, the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory is conducting field tests of Leadership for Excellence, a program designed to help principals apply research on leadership and school effectiveness (Andrews et al. 1986, Edmonds 1979, Hall and Loucks 1978, Hall et al. 1984, Leithwood and Montgomery 1982, Sweeney 1982). Also incorporating research on program implementation, change, and adult learning theory (fig. 1), Leadership for Excellence builds knowledge and skills through a year-long series of workshops in five content strands:

1. Vision building. Principals work to develop a clear statement of where their schools are going, an understanding of how to build commitment to that vision, and the know-how to communicate it to staff, students, parents, and others. One principal said that the strand "helped me focus on my priorities and how they are linked to values." Another remarked on a new sense of the "need to develop a district vision and an individual school vision that are congruent with each other."

2. School climate and culture. Principals learn to assess and improve the school environment through strategies that create an atmosphere conducive to teaching and learning. By building staff and student morale and motivation and by promoting collegiality and cooperative decision making, the principal works to establish a common set of norms, beliefs, and principles to which all members of the organization can be committed.

3. Curriculum implementation. Principals examine ways to establish and maintain their schools' focus on teaching to priority goals and objectives. The emphasis in this strand is on aligning curriculum elements—objectives, resources, instructional strate-
gies and assessments—to increase student achievement of priority goals.

4. Improving instruction. Principals consider quality instructional practices, strategies, and techniques for involving the whole staff in working together to improve teaching.

5. Monitoring school performance. This strand emphasizes resources and procedures for determining school performance. Principals monitor information on student performance, staff use of effective instructional practices, and schoolwide use of effective schooling practices.

These five strands were derived from a synthesis of research (fig. 2) on practices of effective principals (NWREL 1984).

Peer-Assisted Leadership

In addition to studying leadership skills in one strand, all participants learn to assist one another in the learning process. The Peer-Assisted Leadership (PAL) process provides the mechanism for systematic feedback to participants as they apply in their own schools the new skills and knowledge learned in strand workshops. PAL is a common set of skills that all participants learn.

In the PAL program, developed by Bruce Barnett (1986) and others at the Far West Laboratory for Educational Research and Development, principals are assigned to pairs with the charge that each will assist his or her partner to improve leadership skills. Partners "shadow" each other and then conduct "reflective interviews" with one another.

"Shadowing" entails one partner's accompanying the other throughout all duties for a set period of time (usually a day) and recording observations of what the partner actually does. The shadow takes extensive notes on activities and interactions and quotes actual conversations when possible. Shortly after the shadowing, the partners meet, and the shadow principal interviews the other partner about the observations made, asking for clarification and comment on actions that were observed and recorded. These "reflective interviews" are guided by questions raised in the course of the shadow's observations and are useful in helping the observed principals evaluate their own actions and behaviors.

The Leadership for Excellence Process

Participation in Leadership for Excellence begins with an introduction to the program. Interested principals attend an awareness workshop to learn about the research on effective leadership and about the program's structure. At this workshop, participants complete a self-assessment instrument focusing on practices in the five content strands to help them identify their leadership strengths and weaknesses.

Principals then must decide whether to make a commitment to the year-long series of seminars and workshops. If a principal decides to participate in the program, he or she must select a content strand to pursue. In choosing a strand, participants consider several criteria:

- results from the self-assessment instrument,
- the nature of the individual's role as principal in any school improvement effort,
- personal interests and needs for professional development,
- individual growth needs identified through formal evaluation of each person's performance, and
- district priorities and goals that may affect individual professional growth.

Once principals determine which strands they will follow, the seminars and workshops begin. Figure 3 shows overall design of the program and the relationship between strand activities (in this case, for a principal who chooses the "Vision" strand) and common activities. First, participants in all strands meet in a cross-strand seminar for training in the Peer-Assisted Leadership process. During this seminar, principals receive an overview of the PAL process and are assigned partners within their chosen strand. They are
then taught the procedures for shadowing their partners and the skills needed for gathering data about their partners’ leadership behaviors.

The next activity is the first strand workshop. This workshop includes an overview of the strand format and content, initial skill- and knowledge-building activities, and assignment of application activities to be completed prior to their next meeting. The application activities include shadowing as learned in the first cross-strand seminar. Principals return to their home schools and proceed with the assigned leadership and shadowing activities.

After a short interval, all strand participants meet together for a second cross-strand seminar to learn PAL procedures for giving partners reflective feedback. They then attend a second strand workshop to debrief the application experiences, learn additional strand content, and receive a new application assignment, which incorporates both shadowing and reflective feedback.

A Look Back and Ahead
We spent the past two years firming up the training design and pilot testing individual workshops. We also collected valuable feedback from participants. While the content of most workshops was well received, the main criticisms related to time (keep individual training workshops short, one-half day); individualization (let individual participants choose the areas in which they work); and immediate applicability of skills and concepts (give us tools and materials that we can use immediately). The training design described in this article responds to these suggestions. Wink Miller, Director of Staff Development, Salem-Keizer Public Schools, commented on the model’s design in follow-up interviews we conducted with participants.

The new delivery model, which has shorter workshops spread over the year with time to practice in between, will help develop collegiality among the administrators. Once the trainers leave the district, the people continue to talk about the sessions. They will have the opportunity to apply the skills and to come together to share their enthusiasm for the ideas and processes presented.

1. The principal has a clear vision of where the school is going and communicates it to staff, students, and parents by:
   - emphasizing student performance (achievement, behavior, attitude);
   - establishing clear goals, objectives, and priorities;
   - expressing high expectations of teachers, students, and self;
   - receiving satisfaction from seeing students doing well;
   - focusing communication on school goals and priorities;
   - using vision, goals, and priorities as criteria for decision making on all fronts;
   - actively seeking support and resources from district staff and outside agencies and allocating resources according to priorities.

2. The principal establishes a safe, orderly environment that facilitates teaching and learning and a positive climate and culture throughout the school by:
   - working with staff, students, and community to establish basic expectations, rules, and consequences for social behavior in the school, and ensuring that all staff apply them all consistently;
   - working with staff, students, and community to establish procedures for supporting students who have continuing behavior problems;
   - working with outside agencies as necessary to maintain a safe, orderly environment;
   - setting expectations for the quality of the physical plant and working with students, teachers, and other staff to see that expectations are met;
   - establishing a climate of trust and cooperative improvement;
   - seeking advice from staff early and continuously;
   - making teachers equal partners by sharing decision making;
   - retaining the right to choose staff to participate in innovative efforts;
   - establishing a climate for participation using teams to address particular curricular problems;
   - getting directly involved in improvements, particularly in the early stages;
   - attending planning meetings and hosting social gatherings;
   - encouraging staff to do better by working with individuals to set improvement goals and by giving priority to improvements related to curriculum and instruction;
   - expressing support publicly for new practices related to needed improvements;
   - getting teachers in touch with consultants;
   - providing teachers with time for planning and classroom improvement efforts.

3. The principal establishes and maintains curriculum related to goals and priorities by:
   - allocating time according to priorities;
   - establishing with staff clear instructional objectives;
   - coordinating goals and objectives among teachers to increase impact;
   - planning with teachers for the accomplishment of all objectives;
   - monitoring content/objectives covered and working with teachers if progress is slower than expected; and
   - working with teachers on using the right resources and strategies to achieve objectives.

4. The principal knows quality instruction and actively works with staff to improve their instructional skills by:
   - being actively involved in placing students and teachers to maximize instructional effectiveness;
   - following up on quality use of class time-on-task;
   - observing teachers regularly and providing detailed feedback to help them improve instructional skills;
   - protecting instructional time; and
   - being visible in halls and classrooms.

5. The principal monitors school performance by:
   - collecting and using a wide range of data;
   - using data to establish priorities for improvement;
   - providing feedback to individual teachers and the staff about school performance;
   - working with staff to solve problems related to weak performance in priority areas; and
   - setting up systems for evaluating programs and staff.

Fig. 2. Synthesis of Research on Principal Leadership (Wink 1984)
Fig. 3. Sequence of Activities for a Participant Choosing the "Vision" Strand of Leadership for Excellence.

1. Cross-Strand Seminar
   - Review program goals, expectations, structure
   - Learn PAL shadowing

2. Workshop One
   - Learn the elements of a vision
   - Identify personal core values, beliefs, and expectations about students, staff, self

3. Application
   - Continue more in-depth study of literature
   - Search for examples of vision statements
   - With staff, clarify values, beliefs, and expectations for the school
   - Examine with staff current school/district vision statement
   - PAL partner gathers data about efforts to set the stage for vision building

4. Cross-Strand Seminar
   - Share leadership experiences
   - Discuss PAL shadowing
   - Learn PAL reflective interviewing

5. Workshop Two
   - Share shadowing experiences
   - Learn to establish a common vision statement
   - Develop an action plan for writing a joint vision statement

6. Application
   - Develop a vision statement
   - Write, publish, and communicate vision
   - PAL partners shadow and conduct reflective interviews

7. Cross-Strand Seminar
   - Share leadership experiences
   - Debrief PAL shadowing and reflective interviewing experiences
   - Rationale and vision statements
   - Learn to communicate and reinforce the vision
   - Understand purposing behavior
   - Create a plan for communicating the vision

8. Workshop Three
   - Share PAL activities and school vision statements
   - Implement strategies for institutionalizing the vision
   - Develop school "slogan"

9. Application
   - Engage in informal communications about the vision
   - Develop action plan for communication of the vision
   - PAL partners shadow for purposing behaviors and conduct reflective interviews
   - Share leadership experiences
   - PAL processes

10. Cross-Strand Seminar
    - Share leadership experiences
    - PAL partners shadow and conduct reflective interviews

11. Workshop Four
    - Share leadership experiences
    - Develop "slogan" statements
    - Identify opportunities to institutionalize the vision
    - Document vision building project and prepare presentation
    - PAL partners shadow and interview

12. Application
    - Share leadership experiences
    - PAL processes
    - Share and debrief homework activities

13. Cross-Strand Seminar
    - Share leadership experiences
    - PAL processes
During the 1987–88 school year we are conducting field tests of the program in the Northwest. When the field tests are complete, the program will be revised and made available to educators throughout the country.

1. As we continue to develop and implement Leadership for Excellence, we would like to network with others who are developing instructional leadership training programs for principals using the research base of instructional leadership, effective schooling, and program change and implementation. If you have a similar interest, contact Dr. Robert E. Blum at the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory.

References


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