

The Maine Approach to Improving Principal Leadership

The Maine Principals' Academy is part of a nationwide movement of principals to take charge of their own professional development.

Within the last five years, principals' centers and academies have sprung up throughout the country. Unlike the haphazard maze of evaluation, training, and certification mandates designed to reform school leadership from the legislative and regulatory perspectives, this movement is frequently led by principals themselves (National Principals' Center Network Directory 1985, NASSP 1987).

Though sometimes spearheaded by state departments of education (as in Maryland and North Carolina), principals' academies more frequently are the work of universities, principals' associations, or voluntary groups of principals. One of these, the Maine Principals' Academy, is a joint endeavor of the state department, the public university, the elementary principals' association, and the secondary principals' association.

Since its inception in 1979, the academy's programs have consisted of summer residential institutes, school-year sessions, and informal network activities. Principals, with the assistance of university personnel, have planned, conducted, evaluated, and arranged resources for academy activities.

Photographs by Jack Wallis, University of Maine at Orono



In the isolation of Maine winters, when principals want to confer with each other about their roles, networking becomes a greater challenge.

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My involvement in the Maine Academy, first as a principal and later as a university professor, suggests that forums of this type may prove a meeting ground for the various agencies and individuals concerned with principals' preparation and performance. Our experience, like that of others (*Reflections* 1986, 1987), confirms the potential of self-propelled professional growth. A recent survey of 150 Maine Academy participants found that their single greatest gain was feeling "stimulated to do a better job" and having learned specific techniques for doing so (Donaldson and McCaul 1986). As voluntary participants in an academy that carried the blessing of university, state, and local policymakers, principals reported coming away with clarified plans for supervising staff, evaluating curriculum, and leading staff and students toward instructionally oriented goals.

What makes the Maine Academy work? First, and perhaps most important, we strive to address principals' *functions* rather than the vast array of activities they carry out. Activities such as writing handbooks, keeping attendance logs, planning fund-raisers, and selecting textbooks, while important,

are isolated pieces of a principal's work, not the backbone of his or her role, and they vary considerably among schools. The *role* centers on fulfilling the major functions of leadership: supervising adults, supervising a system of student behavioral growth, directing a program of effective teaching, shaping and maintaining an environment conducive to student participation and public access. We have found that activities that center principals' energies on these few fundamental functions affect principals deeply. They begin to see their roles more clearly and to rethink their daily work patterns to accommodate these newly understood functions.

This role clarification is contingent on several other conditions. A second reason for the academy's success is that we structure most sessions interactively and give principals time and opportunity to try out new practices and programs learned from peers and presenters. The academy typically emphasizes goal setting, supervision of

staff and programs, and evaluation of performance and outcomes, along with the communication, time management, decision-making, and conflict management skills necessary to carry out these complex functions. As a result of participating in simulation activities, action planning, and receiving feedback on implementation, many participants report that for the first time, they have found *uses* for new practices and ideas (MPA Participant Evaluations 1980-1986).

Third, principals themselves direct the program. Principals are the planners and staff for academy sessions; they establish purposes, find resource people, and structure the experience. Thus, their goals, problems, and interests as principals shape the program. In effect, the academy's success hinges on their ability to plan for their own growth and, hence, that of their peers. They have worked diligently to ensure that the experts they've brought in have interlocked thematically and that



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participants could freely confer with, question, and challenge presenters to make live the connections to daily school leadership.

Purposive engagement of this nature, of course, requires more than the appropriate focusing of activities and the leadership of peers: time, space, and climate are also vital to the academy's success. We have discovered some paradoxical effects in this regard. For instance, our two-week residential summer academy has made it possible for groups of 24 principals to develop superb levels of concentration, thought, and openness. Participants rapidly move beyond polite, distanced involvement typical of show-and-tell interaction to frank, self-revealing discussion of the dilemmas in their work. The difficulty arises with carryover to practice. Principals report that academy participation has influenced their work, but documenting exactly what these differences are and how the academy contributed to them has remained elusive. The summer institute format may not be the most effective structure for transfer purposes. Other centers use afternoon-and-supper sessions during the school year which may have greater potential for permeating the practice barrier.

Finally, the Maine Principals' Academy is designed to motivate principals for their own follow-through. We do not select activities, times, schedules, and presenters as if the academy were going to “train” all principals uniformly. Rather, we proceed on quite the opposite premise. We plan activities, first, to *engage* principals around core issues of function and role; second, to *encourage* them to explore, test, and accept a practice or idea; and, third, to *stay in touch* with one another as they try to use it. We require and oversee an action plan for their return to school and help them evaluate their progress in implementing their plans. An action plan often has a dual focus: to help a principal initiate a new practice, and to specify changes in that principal's behaviors and working relationships that are crucial to the success of the new practice. We schedule follow-up gatherings and, in some

years, regular support meetings among principals who have common goals or are geographically close.

Principals at the Helm of Reform

Principals' centers and academies are not designed to replace principal training, evaluation, and certification practices across the nation. We in Maine, however, have ample evidence that the academy can deeply affect principals' development in ways which, as one Maine principal put it, “are far more valuable than coursework.”

Clearly, the success of the academy/center effort nationwide calls for supporting these efforts as *options* for principals' professional development. Similarly, it argues against mandating principals' attendance at them, since voluntary participation and leadership appear so vital to their effectiveness. If we expect school leaders to take professional improvement to heart, the experience of principals' academies and centers compels us to avoid hasty, oversimplified, and unilaterally designed “fix-it” models. In place of such reforms, let us engage principals in leading their own professional growth. □

References

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