Academies for Assistant Principals

Offering formal training, on-site skills practice, and goal clarification, the Assistant Principals’ Academy in McDowell County, North Carolina, is a path to advancement for current and future assistant principals.

With more than 60 percent of administrators retiring by the end of the decade, the preparation of future leaders to replace them is of critical importance. In response, new approaches to administrator training have developed across the country. One of the newest ideas for increasing the pool of high-quality principals is assistant principals’ academies, such as one recently instituted in North Carolina, which we will discuss here.

Assistant principals’ academies differ from principals’ academies in several ways. First, these academies attract teachers, incumbent assistant principals, and other district personnel before they have been shaped by the job’s role expectations and demands. Second, they influence bright, motivated teachers to consider administration and bring women and minorities into the pool of applicants. In addition, they offer career assistant principals fresh approaches to their work and new ideas for shaping their professional expectations.

Preparing Future Administrators in North Carolina

The Assistant Principals’ Academy in McDowell County, North Carolina, fills a gap in the preparation of administrators by combining formal training and on-the-job socialization. Participants study the processes of organizational leadership and problem solving from the following frameworks suggested by Bolman and Deal (1984).

- The human relations framework depicts schools as sets of interpersonal relationships.
- The structural framework delineates the bureaucratic and administrative processes of schools.
- The political framework views schools as formed by decisions and conflicts that are settled through negotiation, compromise, and power.
- The symbolic framework notes that schools have social systems and cultures with unique sets of values, norms, and beliefs that are transmitted through rituals, ceremonies, and traditions of the organization.

These four conceptual frameworks, which are illustrated in the readings and referred to throughout problem analysis sessions, suggest varying modes of leadership and ways of facing the challenge of administration.

In addition, presentations, discussions, and case analyses emphasize the importance of research on effective schools (Purkey and Smith 1985); the characteristics of effective principals (Manasse 1985); the nature of principals’ work (Peterson 1978, Kmetz and Willower 1982); and the leadership functions of assistant principals (Greenfield et al. 1986). Participants examine their motivation to achieve administrative positions, and they discuss the role of assistant principals in instructional improvement, staff development, and fostering a strong school culture.

Drawing on research and practice, they examine the multiple functions of assistant principals (Peterson 1978, Marshall 1985) and the realities of the roles they aspire to. They examine role conflict, relationships with supervisors, separation from former colleagues, and the challenge of gaining
job satisfaction without increasing stress. Issues of gender, career inertia, demonstrating competence to superiors, and job interviews are discussed. Academy sessions deal directly with problems of career mobility (Marshall 1986). The discussion of careers and professional goals can, we believe, help recruit talented and motivated candidates, as well as support current assistant principals in clarifying their career aspirations.

Because the research recommends that the professional development of educators provide continuous support and opportunities for ameliorating deficiencies (Joyce and Showers 1982), assistant principals' academies should provide follow-up options during the school year. Such activities scheduled in McDowell County included seminars run by local corporate trainers, meetings to examine readings on educational excellence, informal discussions of career opportunities and writing résumés, and coaching by veteran administrators. Continuous training and the on-site practice of skills gives beginners a chance to try out administrative roles and responsibilities under the watchful eye of seasoned leaders.

Developing Local Assistant Principals' Academies

School districts, particularly those facing large numbers of retirements in the near future, should consider developing assistant principals' academies, bearing in mind that few risks accompany the benefits.

First, academies are more costly in both money and time than the typical one-shot workshop; the greatest cost is the time the superintendent or other administrators must devote to nurturing, teaching, and coaching these nascent leaders during the school year. Second, a district may develop an outstanding candidate for the principalship only to lose him or her to another district. Third, no guarantee exists that all participants will be promoted, and frustration may result. Fourth, tensions may develop between assertive newcomers and practicing administrators who prefer a low profile.

Nonetheless, the benefits of academies both to the district and to assistant principals and other aspirants far outweigh potential problems. For example, these local professional development activities can help the central office develop instructional leadership for the schools of the 1990s while fostering norms of collegiality, professionalism, and continued improvement. The training can also alleviate the "reality shock" new administrators experience and communicate to aspiring applicants areas where they need to increase their knowledge.

"Training can . . . alleviate the 'reality shock' new administrators experience and communicate to aspiring applicants areas where they need to increase their knowledge."

Worth It

Assistant principals' academies deliver technical training, attract new recruits, shape a culture of effectiveness, and increase the pool of qualified personnel. Despite inherent costs and risks, academies can refashion our administrative workforce to be more responsive to local needs and to issues of educational quality and equity.

References


Kent D. Peterson is Director, The Vanderbilt Principals' Institute; and Catherine Marshall is Associate Professor, both at George Peabody College for Teachers, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN 37203.

Terry Grier is Superintendent, Amarillo Independent School District, Amarillo, TX 79105; at the time this article was written, Grier was Superintendent of McDowell County Schools, Marion, North Carolina.