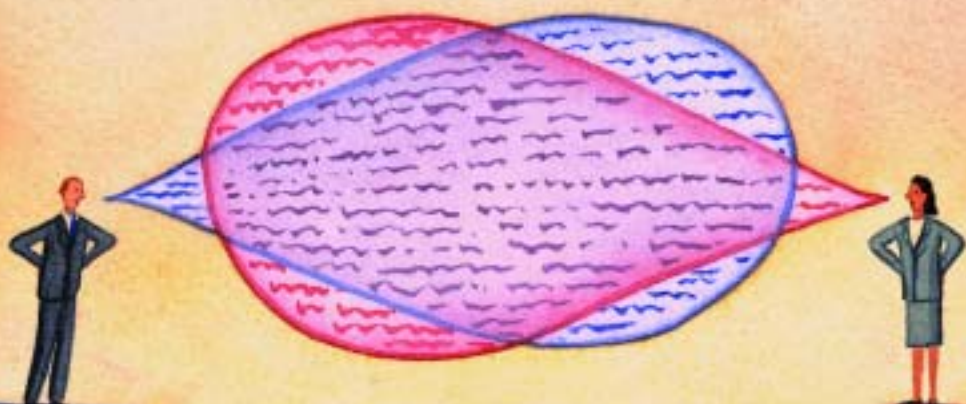


*Meetings of Minds
Along the Merrimack:*

Principals Networking
to Enhance Instruction



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*National Association of
Elementary School Principals*

AN INITIATIVE OF THE PRINCIPALS
LEADERSHIP NETWORK (PLN)
AT THE EDUCATION ALLIANCE
AT BROWN UNIVERSITY



IN COLLABORATION WITH THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF
ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PRINCIPALS

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Northeast and Islands Regional Educational Laboratory

A program of The Education Alliance at Brown University

The LAB, a program of The Education Alliance at Brown University, is one of ten educational laboratories funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Educational Sciences. Our goals are to improve teaching and learning, advance school improvement, build capacity for reform, and develop strategic alliances with key members of the region's education and policymaking community.

The LAB develops educational products and services for school administrators, policymakers, teachers, and parents in New England, New York, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands. Central to our efforts is a commitment to equity and excellence.

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This publication is based on work supported by the Institute of Educational Services (IES), United States Department of Education, under Contract Number ED-01-CO-0010. Any opinions, conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material do not necessarily reflect the views of IES, the U.S. Department of Education or any other agency of the U. S. Government.

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THE PRINCIPALS' LEADERSHIP NETWORK

The Principals' Leadership Network (PLN) is a regional program of The Education Alliance at Brown University in partnership with the National Association of Elementary School Principals. Members are drawn from New England, New York, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands. The strength of the network allows K-12 principals to explore solutions to the leadership challenges they face during this time of educational change, and bring their voices to the reform table. The PLN is an organization by, for, and of principals. Its advisory council members are drawn from K-12 principals in the region.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Cheryl Riggins Newby, Ed.D. is Associate Executive Director for the Leadership Academy and Urban Alliances at the National Association of Elementary School Principals. Dr. Riggins Newby has recently launched Urban Connections, an NAESP resource that serves as the foundation for a network for Urban Principals. She assumes lead responsibility for the development and implementation of regional Principals' Leadership Networks in collaboration with the Education Alliance at Brown University. A former principal, she earned her doctorate from the George Washington University.

Meetings of Minds Along the Merrimack:

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INTRODUCTION

Two minds, it is said, are better than one. This is especially true when we are trying to break out of old patterns and ways of doing things to create ways of doing things that are better fitted to the present and its needs. Attempting to change heavily entrenched institutions and patterns of behavior without the power of many minds engaged together is an exercise in futility. And, our failures to change the habitual forms of teaching and learning that were, maybe, better fitted to a long-bygone era are costing our children dearly. The cost for the failure to change the intellectual culture of our mostly second millennium schools is borne disproportionately by our most vulnerable children: those for whom schooling does not come “naturally.” Insofar as our school leaders are the fulcrum upon which change is levered, it is absolutely necessary that they be afforded the opportunity and means to have an ongoing meeting of minds; a place where they might pool their experiences, knowledge, wisdom, and especially their strong motivation to better the lives of the children in their charge.

The efforts of the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP), the Northeast and Islands Regional Laboratory at Brown University (LAB) and a group of serving principals in old industrial New England were focused on the creation of a collaboration-driven initiative to find practical solutions to the fundamental questions of the practice of education in the third millennium for the benefit of their most vulnerable children.

A NETWORK OF NETWORKS

The Principals' Leadership Network (PLN) was started in 2000 through the support of the LAB and NAESP. The aim of the network was to help practitioners redefine the role of the principal as instructional leader through the creation of a network of likeminded principals. The major focus of this initiative was to address the challenges common to leaders attempting to transform an institution all too often set in patterns of outdated practices and goals. These leaders decided that they could benefit most by serving each other. The PLN therefore is a network for the self-improvement of instructional leaders through mutual mentoring. The idea of professionals aiding each other is both time-honored and powerful. And it works!

In order to bring the benefits of this powerful model of professional self-development to a wider group of school leaders and to particularize it to the actual needs of schools with similar problems in similar situations, NAESP is facilitating the creation of a localized principal leadership network comprised of leaders from schools situated in the towns of Methuen, Haverhill, and Lowell, Massachusetts. One charter member of the Advisory Board of the PLN at the LAB, Richard Raiche, will facilitate the Merrimack Network. Robin Welch, also a member of the Advisory group will co-facilitate the project. This group will meet as a learning community monthly in person and more frequently by phone and e-mail to create a psychological space where they can fortify themselves and each other with the knowledge and motivation to successfully engage in the difficult work of making their schools places where exemplary teaching is provided to each and every student, and where each of these students will actually learn a challenging and meaningful curriculum.

MUTUAL MENTORING AND ISSUES OF SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Each of the leader-members of the new Merrimack learning community is already a student of school improvement. The new network will, however, allow these leader-members to “de-isolate” themselves and gather in a social space where they can put aside the day-to-day distractions and demands of the principalship and engage in a more dispassionate and objective study of school improvement. Experiences of the joys of learning will, it is hoped, replace the stress of having to act as if “I’m really on top of that,” at least for a time.

According to the participants themselves and the vast literature on principal leadership, these self-improvement studies must address the following school improvement questions and provide useful blueprints and strategies to answer them:

- What are the cultural, social, and practical barriers to higher quality teaching?
- What supports are lacking for principals in their efforts to improve teaching?
- How can the often poor public image of the principal be overcome?
- How can the principal balance the managerial, day-to-day operations of a school with the role of principal as instructional leader?
- How can principals work with teachers-as-they-are to become teachers-as-they-should-be?
- How can teachers acquire a stronger sense of responsibility for their students' learning?
- How can principals hold teachers accountable for their successes and shortcomings?
- How can practitioners choose practices and programs that are actually effective?
- How can better and subsequently, best teaching practices come to influence day-to-day teaching?
- How can teachers use data to improve an individual student's learning?
- How can staff use data to improve a school?
- How can the evaluation of teachers be made a meaningful exercise in school improvement?
- How can a principal recognize the intellectual value, or want of value, in teachers' lessons?
- How can principals create a social space for teachers where constructive criticism is welcomed and put to good use?
- How can principals become the intellect-in-chief of their school?
- What steps are necessary to help disadvantaged students perform as well as those who come to school already prepared?

AN IN-DEPTH LOOK AT INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES TAKES PRECEDENCE

The Merrimack network's reason for being is to arm participating instructional leaders with an arsenal of principles, values, and tools by which they can lead their schools towards higher intellectual standards and achievement for each and every student. Through conversations and site visits with the initial members of the network, the following specific areas of instructional change emerged as the areas most in need of address and redress.

Getting teachers to be “every-kid” teachers: High expectations for all students

When Robin Welch, the principal at Woodrow Wilson Elementary in Framingham, Massachusetts, first took over at the school, “many of our staff were ‘bleeding heart’ liberals who had come to the school to help ‘these children.’” The problem he recounts was that the expectations these teachers held for their minority children were different than those they held for their majority children. Teachers, according to Welch, believed that it was wrong to expect minority children to learn the same challenging material as children already prepped by their parents for school success.

The well-meaning philosophy that minority children are hurt by being challenged by a thought-provoking curriculum and let's-think pedagogy can have destructive effects on students and on a school's annual yearly progress. The members of the network are extremely interested in the ways that teachers come to hold the same expectations for all students. This will surely be a source of much earnest conversation.

“We taught Native Americans for nine years:” Aligning the curriculum with state, rather than personal standards

“I had a teacher say to me,” reports Richard Raiche, principal at the Comprehensive Grammar School in Methuen, Massachusetts, “‘ I’ve got a real successful unit on Native Americans.’ And I say, ‘Yea, Native Americans are in the curriculum alright, but in a different grade.’” As Raiche recounts, his teachers were not paying sufficient attention to the state's assessment or its standards, but rather closing their doors and teaching what pleased them to teach. Aligning their schools' curricula with their state's standards,

according to network members, is the easy part. Giving teachers the motivation and tools to teach those standards is the greater challenge. Creating models of real standards-based classrooms is a must for network members, especially because they can serve as “proof of concept” to teachers that “it isn’t the kids, it’s the instruction” that matters most, according to Raiche.

Like teachers everywhere, teachers along the Merrimack, according to network participants, are not often enthusiastic about the more important role played by standardized tests in today’s environment. Like most of us, teachers resist measurement and they fear the narrowing of instruction to fit a standard mold. Network members need to find ways to overcome their teachers’ reluctance to join the accountability movement. When asked how he is able to get his teachers to flock to his office the morning state assessment scores are released, Raiche says, “I had to point out to them that they weren’t getting back just a number but a real reflection of how well their students were learning. I had to show them, item by item, that this was not trivial stuff but stuff that really mattered.” Getting teachers to appreciate the deep learning embodied in state standards, and to help them place these standards at the core of their own intellectual universes, is another “agenda item” for the network. How to give teachers the tools by which they can convert standards into daily lessons will occupy many of our principals’ conversations, to say the least.

USING DATA FOR “SELF MONITORING”

The profound revolution taking place in education today whereby outcomes data is available in enough time to make a difference in instruction presents a challenge to instructional leaders everywhere. Learning how to help teachers use feedback data early enough in their instructional cycle to make a difference for students having difficulties will be another agenda item for the principals in the network. For example, teachers and administrators at the Comprehensive Grammar School discovered, by looking at the data from state assessments, that fourth grade teachers were spending until February on basic math skills and not teaching geometry until early spring. It was no wonder that students there were having trouble meeting proficiency levels for geometry; they weren’t being given a real opportunity to learn it. Data showed that students’ basic skills were strong enough to allow geometry to be introduced earlier, giving them a meaningful opportunity to learn it. Using

data to monitor what is or is not being taught has become an important job for instructional leaders; network members hope to find ways to give teachers the skills and motivation to do this work for themselves.

READING FROM THE SAME BOOK:

Creating consistency from Kindergarten to graduation

Doing your own thing is out; creating a shared core instructional plan is in, in schools around the country, including those along the Merrimack. Easier said than done! High on the list of instructional leaders will be the creation, in their schools of a consistent core of content, effective pedagogical strategies, and behavioral rules. This “tread of purpose” as James Giuca, principal at Tenney Grammar School in Methuen, Massachusetts, calls it, is seen as critical to focusing enough educational firepower to make a difference early in the lives of disadvantaged children. Somehow, according to Giuca and the other leaders in the network, principals must be able to find ways to get their teachers to enthusiastically commit to a school-wide, incremental plan for learning and to embrace their own roles and responsibilities in building learning step by step. In other words, leaders must find ways to get teachers to be team players.

Making sure that the basics of good teaching and the school’s core instructional plan are being put into practice effectively has become one of the greatest and most important demands on instructional leaders. “Measuring what I’ve asked teachers to do is critical” according to Giuca. “I like to see some evidence that they are doing what it is we agreed it was they would do. We need to trust but we also need to verify.” To say the least, effective and meaningful evaluation of teachers’ faithfulness to a school’s core instructional plan is difficult under union rules. Finding ways to create a shared sense of commitment and responsibility is certainly among the top priorities of network members. Creating school communities where self-improvement drives teachers’ professional lives would go a very long way, network members feel, towards defusing the unhappy “us-versus-them” mentality that too often gets in the way of more effective schools. Network members feel very strong pressure to create truly effective schools, not just because their jobs demand it but also because they fear dooming another generation of children to ineffective schools. As Mary Jean Fawcett, principal of the Timony Grammar School, in Methuen, puts it; good schools have always been important in the lives of disadvantaged students, but “today they are critical.”

CONSTRUCTION PROJECTS:

Good lessons embodying content that engages students' minds

Network principals are beginning to recognize that teaching “technology” has come a very long way from the days when following good forms of presentation and repetition defined a good lesson. Today, of course, content is king and form must serve content. This recognition that content drives instruction presents some of the greatest difficulties faced by progressive instructional leaders. It is much easier to observe good form in a classroom than it is to identify meaningful and accurate content. This is especially true for lessons in subjects on which principals are not expert. Math and science come to mind here. For this reason, and for others, educators around the country are anxious to have teachers use lessons that truly embody the rich and challenging content their students need. Creating the opportunities and wherewithal for teachers to work together to construct these lessons has become an important part of instructional leadership today. Accurately observing the effectiveness of these lessons, not just their form, is just another of the many difficult assignments for which network members will seek help from one another.

Gayle Feeney, principal of the An Wang School in Lowell, Massachusetts, and a member of the Merrimack Network, recognizes that creating the conditions and incentives that favor honest and sincere discussions of her teachers' work is one of her most important duties as a school leader. Third millennium instructional leaders, Ms. Feeney contends, know that the ability to take a dispassionate and clear-eyed look at teaching and learning in their buildings is the route to change—you might say, it is the beginning of wisdom. For the Merrimack network members, taking a clear-eyed and dispassionate look at their own leadership is the very first step of that beginning. That work begins with the new year and will continue until all children along the Merrimack have learned to use their minds differently

CONCLUSION:

A blueprint for the network

This principals' network, as we have said, is to be a community for the self-development of more and more effective instructional and school leaders. Because "self-development" is the driving principle of the group, its concrete goals will be determined through discussion and through the recognition of needs as they arise and as outside requirements dictate. However some overarching goals are obvious, even at this early stage in the network's development. These goals are fundamentally set by the need for school leaders to become effective users of proven strategies in the almost unlimited number of situations that define today's principalship. Through their self-mentoring discussions members may:

- Work on a set of best practices which they agree are based on evidence of effectiveness
- Create an "operating manual" or handbook of effective practices to be used in each school
- Engage in action research to test practices
- Use their learning community model among teachers in their own schools
- Provide honest feedback to one another about progress
- Create a common vocabulary of improvement
- Organize inter-school visitations where varied practices can be observed.

Merrimack network members know that they will need a detailed and sophisticated roadmap to use during their journey toward improving the intellectual work of their schools. But, if two minds are always better than one, then surely a network of minds is better still. The work of the network has begun.



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