



A program of The Education Alliance at Brown University



November 2002

# REFLECTIONS on the Principalship

NORTHEAST AND ISLANDS REGIONAL EDUCATIONAL LABORATORY AT BROWN UNIVERSITY

## The Principals' Leadership Network

### Reportings from Across the Region

*"I work upwards of 60 hours per week, including evenings and weekends. Today, I disaggregated test data, searched for a lost lunch box, spoke at a Chamber of Commerce business luncheon, taught a group of 10-year-olds how to divide, developed a spending plan for a \$30,000 grant, counseled a distraught parent about her child's school phobia, and met with the bee man to determine how to keep the swarm from attacking first graders' peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. Who am I? Why, an elementary principal, of course!"*

*Suzette Lovely, former principal and Director  
Elementary School Operations  
Capistrano Unified School District 1*

Many principals, elementary and secondary, can relate to Lovely's description of a "typical" day on the job. As she explains, "Principals must be able to work quickly, shift gears easily, and complete tasks in tiny bits and pieces throughout their day. In a job full of so many brief encounters, it comes as no surprise that principals often feel overwhelmed, disheartened, and emotionally drained."

#### THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE PRINCIPALS' LEADERSHIP NETWORK

In an effort to streamline the load for principals and positively impact our nation's public schools, the Northeast and Islands Regional Educational Laboratory at Brown University (LAB)—a program of The Education Alliance—in partnership with the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP), has established a network of K-12 principals who are working together to strengthen leadership skills for principals.

The group, collectively known as the Principals' Leadership Network (PLN), is comprised of approximately 25 outstanding principals proportionally representing each state and island served by the LAB. The leadership

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group is broken into two groups: the Executive Committee comprised of 10 principals who meet four times a year, and the Advisory Committee comprised of the Executive Committee members

and 10 additional principals who meet twice a year. The function of the Executive Committee is to examine the profession and to make recommendations for action to the Advisory Committee. The Advisory Committee reviews the recommendations and gives endorsement and/or suggestions for changes in direction.

The PLN work is guided by three important values—the work must be productive, collegial, and provide learning to the participants. Within the values, the PLN's work is guided by three essential questions:

- How can the PLN enhance the capacity of school principals to be instructional leaders?
- How can the PLN frame and accelerate mentoring opportunities for sitting and aspiring principals?
- How can the PLN communicate the complexity of the role and work of the principalship to the community and our constituencies?

Three study groups currently operate in collaboration with other organizations to examine the literature, speak with colleagues, collect data, and implement action plans that will address these questions. The intent of this activity is to offer practical solutions to the complex challenges faced by principals on a daily basis. The National Association of Secondary School Principals and

the American Federation of School Administrators actively support the partnership.

## **THE SITE VISIT PROCESS**

While acknowledging the hundreds of existing studies that report on the plights and successes of principals, the PLN Advisory Committee indicated a need for a current and accurate temperature of the profession within its own region—New York, New England, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands. Cheryl Riggins-Newby, Associate Executive Director for Urban Alliances at the NAESP, and Hal Hayden, LAB Liaison to the PLN, developed a semi-structured interview protocol shaped to focus on the three major areas suggested by the PLN:

- Mentoring
- The role of the principal as instructional leader
- Communicating the principal's complex role to the community

Equipped with specific questions to elicit concerns and suggestions from the principals, Cheryl Riggins-Newby and Hal Hayden arranged site visits to schools in the LAB's region to talk with the principals about their concerns. Participants were asked to provide reactions/thoughts/suggestions relative to the following topics:

- The role of the principal as instructional leader
- The public image of the principal
- The impact of mentoring
- Developing and retaining quality principals
- Professional development
- Factors that are barriers to the principalship
- Recommendations for improving the state of the principalship

Additional comments were encouraged.

## REPORTINGS FROM THE FIELD

Focusing on the PLN's three essential questions and additional areas of concern, participants' comments are reflected below.

### The Role of Principal as Instructional Leader

- Today's principal has many roles that are poorly defined and/or changed according to political flow.
- While many principals perceive themselves as instructional leaders, they acknowledge that legislation, accountability, and issues surrounding staff training, budgets, and unions are sapping their time and strength.
- The role as instructional leader is becoming very complex. For example, current pedagogy requires that principals stay current with new technology, student scheduling, and presentation processes.
- Accountability for low test scores falls on principals, not on teachers or on the lack of resources.
- Principals embrace their roles as instructional leaders because it is the core of what they do, but they are frustrated that this role is being smothered by other responsibilities.
- As curriculum facilitators who work with teachers, the state, the community, and students, they need to be flexible and fluid, which is difficult.

### Communicating the Principal's Complex Role to the Community

- A principal's public image varies from test score to test score. "The press can be the principal's worst enemy."

- Image is being shaped by negative publicity. Principals need the public to understand they are doing their best under the circumstances and need support.
- The public has misperceptions because of the press. Test scores among schools that are not similarly situated are unfairly compared.
- Most community members seem to have a good impression of their own school, but sense that public education on the whole does not have the capacity to meet the challenges of educating all students to their maximum capacity.
- Public image begins with the perceptions the principals have of themselves.
- More should be done by organizations such as the PLN, NAESP, NASSP, and NEA to enhance the image of the principal.
- Image and knowledge are closely linked in the public's eye. When the public sees what principals are doing and the conditions under which they work, they appreciate their accomplishments more.
- There is hope that someone will develop a program that can be used by even small school systems to enhance the principal's public image.

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### Mentoring

- Little is known about any formal mentoring programs, but some universities and colleges use mentoring models as part of graduate programs leading to principal certification.

- Informal mentoring ranges from a new principal being assigned a mentor by the superintendent to calling colleagues to ask advice.
- There are concerns that a poor match between mentor and principal would leave the principal feeling trapped.
- While several principals indicated an interest in being a mentor, they expressed little available time.
- Experienced principals were open to an occasional mentoring session, either in a group setting or individually, to discuss process/procedure and general issues in an enlightening and non-threatening way.

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- There is general agreement that the mentor has to be more than a good principal; he/she needs to be trained in mentoring.
- If mentoring were provided in

a systematic way, it would be beneficial to the profession and to students. Well-trained principals are far more capable of overcoming difficulties inherent in the profession.

### **Developing and Retaining Quality Principals**

- The “job is impossible.” Requirements are difficult, the rewards are inadequate, the time requirements are excessive, and there is a lack of public appreciation for accomplishments and challenges. All

of these factors negatively impact the capacity to develop and retain quality principals.

- All participants cited remuneration as a critical issue. There is general agreement that differential pay between experienced teachers and principals is insufficient when considering the added responsibilities of being a principal.
- There is a great deal of overlap in discussing mentoring and development and retention. There is general agreement that if aspiring principals received appropriate mentoring and training beyond “university courses that are virtually worthless,” then there might be hope of retaining quality principals.
- Many principals reported plans to “bail out” as soon as financially possible. Just as many expressed concern about being forced out for the same reason.
- Emotional and physical burnout is blamed for early retirement or return to the classroom. Returning to the classroom offered almost the same money for “half the work and worry.”
- There is concern that school systems are going to be in deep trouble if society does not acknowledge and take action in regard to the drastic shortage that is about to occur.
- Several principals expressed that “No one wants to work seven days a week, 24 hours a day, and be told that s/he is not doing the job.”
- Despite the downside of the job, many expressed that being a principal was the best thing that ever happened to them. They helped students, teachers, and their communities. They wished that there was more time and less pressure in order to expand their positive impact.

- Though it is a difficult job, many stated how proud they were to be viewed as community leaders, especially when the community appreciates their work.
- They feel most valued when they are “honored” by the superintendent, school committee, and/or community.

### Professional Development

- There is general agreement that continual education is important, especially on issues such as unions, budgets, state testing, and technology, where there is constant change.
- Better training in technology is crucial to managing instructional and non-instructional aspects of the job.
- While many reported “too many e-mails,” others liked the idea of being able to respond “on their own time schedule.”
- Professional development was not well-planned or targeted to their needs. Training was “wholesale” and wasted a lot of time for some.
- There is considerable agreement that the best professional development came from colleagues. This tied closely with the finding relative to mentoring. Principals enjoyed learning from peers who “had been there and knew what they were talking about.”
- Many reported disappointment and even “hated the one-shot deal where the expert came in to tell [them] how to do it.”
- They prefer that professional development be provided on an ongoing basis, such as the first and third Wednesday of the month. It should

focus on discrete topics such as drugs in school, school finance, discipline, and technology.

- Principals should be compensated for professional development; not necessarily money, but some recognition and/or advanced certification in an area that is recognized by an official body.
- Associations should coordinate their programs more closely with districts and/or universities so principals can get “more for their ‘time’ buck.”
- Professional development must be current and deal with today’s problems to be practical.
- “Being a principal is way too important to be left to learning how to do it day-to-day. Doctors and lawyers don’t learn that way.”

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### Factors That Are Barriers to Being a Good Principal Include but Are Not Limited to:

- Lack of superintendent support: “The capacity of the superintendent to support building principals is proportional to the political power the superintendent has.”
- Lack of time for principals to “get away” and discuss their issues and possible solutions
- School committees (especially in rural areas) that micromanage the system
- Lack of funding for schools, school/instructional programs, training, and salaries

- “Woefully inadequate” professional development
- Sixty- to eighty-hour weeks with no time for a personal life
- Regulations without concurrent funding to support their implementation
- Lack of a comprehensive public relations campaign that tells the good stories about principals
- Unfair bad press: “It’s an uphill battle when the headlines scream about how bad your school is.”
- Those who think they know the solutions but don’t offer or support ways of implementing them

### **Recommendations for Improving the State of the Principalship**

- All aspiring principals must have longer and more comprehensive training, including mentoring.
- More training in pedagogy, finance, and human relations is needed.

***Highlight the positive attitude of principals who are committed to improving the principalship***

- Highlight the positive attitude of principals who are committed to improving the principalship
- Ensure appropriate compensation structure

- Work out a system to ensure positive press whenever possible
- Identify and publicize concrete reasons for becoming a principal

- Develop and maintain smaller schools
- Provide more authority over hiring within the school
- Provide more and better uninterrupted instructional time
- Promote a national “Love Your Principal Day”

The Education Alliance at Brown University will continue to work with K-12 principals from the PLN’s Advisory Committee to develop field projects that will create ideas about ways to define the principal’s growing role, improve the public image of the principalship, and establish a mentoring program for practicing and aspiring principals.

Inquiries about this project may be directed to Phil Zarlengo, LAB Director of Special Projects at 1-800-521-9550 or Cheryl Riggins-Newby, Associate Executive Director for Urban Alliances, National Association of Elementary School Principals at (703) 684-3345.

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Lovely, S. (1999). Developing leaders from within. *Thrust for Educational Leadership*, 29, 12-13.

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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 Office of Educational Research and Improvement. 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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## **National Association of Elementary School Principals**

Serving all elementary and middle level school principals

The 28,500 members of the National Association of Elementary School Principals provide administrative and instructional leadership for public and private elementary and middle schools throughout the United States, Canada, and overseas. Founded in 1921, NAESP is today a vigorously independent professional association with its own headquarters in Alexandria, Virginia, just across the Potomac River from the nation's capital. From this special vantage point, NAESP conveys the unique perspective of the elementary and middle school principal to the highest policy councils of our national government. Through national and regional meetings, award-winning publications, and joint efforts with its 50 state affiliates, NAESP is a strong advocate both for its members and for the 33 million American children enrolled in preschool, kindergarten, and grades 1 through 8.

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