Maine program helps teachers learn from that voice

BY SARAH V. MACKENZIE AND GEORGE F. MARNIK

School systems need ways to develop leaders and leadership. The need is especially critical as schools face increasing demands to change and be more effective with all students. Meanwhile, those willing to take on leadership roles are in short supply.

School districts have tried paying for individuals’ coursework in graduate programs to learn about educational leadership, but this approach has not been effective, mainly due to the lack of convenient access to such programs, the time they take outside the job, their disconnection from one’s school context, shrinking school budgets, and the emphasis on fulfilling accountability requirements. Campus-based

The I-C-I leadership model provides the framework.

MAINE: Continued on page 56

Inner voice tells teachers how to grow

BY GORDON A. DONALDSOON JR.

Debbie felt her frustration rise as Norm voiced, for what seemed like the hundredth time, the reasons “we shouldn’t have to do all this alignment paperwork just because the legislature thinks they know more than we do.”

As chair of the social studies department, Debbie was by now too familiar with living in the vise between top-down mandates and bottom-up resistance. Lately, meetings had become dumping sessions where the gripes of several vocal colleagues overwhelmed her efforts to improve practice and, in the process, meet new state requirements. The district’s strategic plan and her principal had made it clear: Each department had to have its curriculum aligned and new outcome-based assessment procedures in place by September. But how could she get her colleagues to take this work seriously?

Debbie was in a bind that tested her leadership abilities. Nothing in her teacher preparation helped her know how to lead her department through the jaws of the top-down vs. bottom-up vise. She was appointed department chair because she was a well-respected teacher and had collaborated well with colleagues. But these skills weren’t sufficient for the leadership challenges she now faced, challenges that called not only on her expertise in curriculum and assess-
GORDON A. DONALDSON JR. is a professor of education at the University of Maine and faculty chair of the Maine School Leadership Network. You can contact him at 5749 Merrill Hall, University of Maine, Orono, ME 04469-5749, (207) 581-2450, fax: (207) 581-3120, e-mail: Gordon.donaldson@umit.maine.edu.

SARAH V. MACKENZIE and GEORGE F. MARNIK are assistant professors of educational leadership at the University of Maine and facilitators in the Maine School Leadership Network. You can contact them at 5749 Merrill Hall, Room 118, University of Maine, Orono, ME 04469-5749, fax (207) 581-3120. You can contact Mackenzie at (207) 581-2734, e-mail: sarah.mackenzie@umit.maine.edu, and Marnik at (207) 581-2738, e-mail: george.marnik@umit.maine.edu.

• How well do I understand these issues?
• What’s my relationship to the others and their relationships with each other?
• How are my feelings and beliefs influencing my part in this situation?

• I don’t understand any of this.
• I wonder why they wanted me at this meeting.
• I shouldn’t have to do this.
opportunities are not for everyone, especially teachers who may not think of themselves as leaders and don’t think they want to change their position in schools.

The Maine Educational Leadership Consortium and the University of Maine sponsor a statewide effort to meet this need through the Maine School Leadership Network. Thirty-five school systems have enrolled from one to eight leaders in cycles of a two-year, graduate-credit program that is distinctly different from traditional graduate work. School systems join the network to develop the leadership talents of capable and promising educators already on staff, giving them opportunities to grow as leaders in their own schools.

Participants receive 15 graduate credits in either master’s level or Certificate of Advanced Studies programs at the university. School districts pay most of the cost, although individuals pay a nominal fee. Although the annual fee is about double the cost of traditional credit hours, participants are individually coached as they work to implement school improvement plans, and they participate in cohort groups and colleague-critic teams.

Individuals have access to a facilitator through regular e-mail and phone conversations, as well as monthly personal visits. Not only do the participants benefit from support, critique, and coaching from their facilitator, but also their schools have immediate access to and frequent visits by someone who knows the school and staff members and consults on issues relevant to the school’s plans for achieving its goals.

When they complete their school analysis and plan, individuals ask themselves: As a school leader, what do I need to know and be able to do to effectively implement this plan?

THE FRAMEWORK

Building leadership capacity in schools is a developmental process that focuses on what individual leaders need for professional growth. Participants learn about leadership behavior within their own schools through developing a school improvement plan to affect student achievement, working to implement the plan, and reflecting on their practice. At the same time, they develop connections with a range of school leaders scattered across a large, rural state with regional differences.

The network comprises a broad mix of K-12 teacher leaders (both formal and informal), principals and other school administrators, such as assistant principals, guidance personnel, curriculum and English as a Second Language coordinators, librarians, and special education directors.

Participants are organized in colleague-critic teams of three to four people, and regional cohorts of 15-20 colleagues, and supported by facilitators, faculty, and other resource people. Participants analyze their schools’ needs and capacity in a case study. They then develop their own school improvement and individualized leadership development plans.

Participants closely examine their schools, the school’s needs, and past efforts at school improvement. They work with colleagues and their facilitator, as well as receive feedback from members of their groups, to identify programmatic or schoolwide improvement goals that will help improve student learning.

When they complete their school analysis and plan, individuals ask themselves: As a school leader, what do I need to know and be able to do to effectively implement this plan? Answering this question helps the individual create a leadership development plan focused on ways he or she can address the identified challenge.

Participants use a process based on three complementary dimensions of leadership knowledge: intrapersonal (the dynamics of the leader’s philosophical and personal world); cognitive (ideas and research about the technical aspects of schooling); and interpersonal (the relationships and human dynamics of leadership). The goals for network participants fall into these three categories of the I-C-I leadership development model:

Intrapersonal
- To articulate a coherent leadership philosophy that supports high student and school performance; and
- To accurately understand one’s strengths, weaknesses, and dispositions as a leader.

Cognitive
- To know and be able to implement effective learning and teaching practices; and
- To know and be able to facilitate school improvement processes.

Interpersonal
- To be highly skilled in creating effective working relationships; and
- To mobilize others for action.

The plans evolve as facilitators work with the leaders on a cycle of goal setting, action, feedback, reflection, and resetting goals. Individuals continually revise their leadership development plans based on their own analysis (in consultation with their facilitator and members of the colleague-critic team) of their skills and understandings, the schools’ evolving needs, feedback about their actions, and both quantitative and qualitative data indicating how well they are progressing toward their school improvement goals. When participants develop their school improvement plans, they decide on meaningful measures to demonstrate progress, particularly in student learning. Facilitators help in setting measurable goals. Facilitator coaching is critical to prompting, prodding, questioning, and assessing growth and
learning, but the individual’s reflection and analysis of his or her own growth and learning is key to internalizing the process for ongoing personal development.

Participants document their growth as school leaders and the impact their learning has on colleagues and student learning using leadership portfolios and exhibitions of learning at designated sessions during the year and at summer institutes. In addition, school leaders examine their values about teaching, learning, and leading, and articulate a platform of beliefs that guides their work as educational leaders.

**IMPROVED STUDENT LEARNING**

The process’s emphasis on student learning outcomes through a school improvement plan ensures that participants focus on and pay attention to critically important issues. Districts recognize that their investment in these leaders is one key to the success of their schools. The evidence that a member’s skills have grown lies in demonstrated impacts at school:

- A novice superintendent hired a high school principal who also was new to the role. The superintendent wanted to be sure the new principal was off to a good start as the school geared up to meet state and federal accountability requirements. The principal’s personal growth plan led him to create Critical Friends Groups for all the school’s teachers and paraprofessionals, so staff now regularly look at their practice and their students’ work.

- An experienced superintendent could not find a good candidate for high school principal, so she prodded a veteran teacher to take on the role for a few years. She knew he would succeed if the faculty understood and accepted a role in the school’s leadership. With the help of teacher leader participants, the principal is in his third year and is leading the school’s restructuring process around the principles found in *Promising Futures*, the state’s framework for making high schools more responsive to student needs.

  - A veteran middle school principal wanted to explore his own leadership style and effectiveness, as did several teachers. They all were enthusiastic about implementing a new approach to literacy teaching and created a cross-disciplinary approach emphasizing reading skills. In the initiative’s fourth year, leaders have seen a marked improvement in students’ reading achievement.

  - Three teachers in a small elementary school taught together for years and occasionally met on curriculum, assessment, and school policy committees. They felt they could be more effective if they collaborated on some school improvement initiatives. Their principal supported the idea, but didn’t have time to help them learn how to implement their ambitious plan. The teacher leaders gained collaborative leadership and facilitation skills, learned about professional development planning and delivery, and engaged parents in school vision setting and decision making.

Two researchers at the Center for Educational Policy, Applied Research, and Evaluation at the University of Southern Maine completed a program evaluation after the network’s second year, including interviews with participants, supervisors, and colleagues; observations; attitude surveys; and document analysis. Their report concluded that the network had effectively developed participants’ leadership capacities and “there is substantial evidence that, as the participants developed and practiced their leadership skills, they have had positive impacts on their school-based colleagues and their schools. ... Participants had multiple opportunities to test theory against practice, and to test practice against theory” (Kelly & Silvernail, 2002, pp. 21-22).

Hank Ogilby, a participant, described his learning:

“Good leadership does not reside in one domain. It is woven within the fabric of a solid knowledge base, an understanding of self, and an ability to effectively work with others. Leadership Network facilitators have continually unraveled this fabric for us. Sometimes a yard at a time so that we may see each individual thread, sometimes by the bolt so that we may see the grand design. All along the way they present us with the tools to weave this cloth for ourselves, knowing full well that if we try to follow a given formula, we will only spin a feeble copy of someone else’s design. They teach us to hope all teachers do, by providing skills, readings, ideas, and, most importantly, by challenging us to develop our own patterns of leadership.”

Each self-assessment and narrative differs because each individual faces unique challenges at his or her school. But network participants experience the same phenomenon: real learning in a real context. This is the best kind of professional development because the ultimate goal gets back to the heart and soul of schools — student learning.

**REFERENCE**