Sharing the mystery

Leadership program adds support to the administrative mix

By John Norton

On a quiet residential street in Chapel Hill, some of North Carolina’s newest principals pick through the remains of box dinners as they sit in small groups, sharing war stories and reflecting on a collection of first-person essays, The First Year as Principal.

The conversation, held in the home of a Principals’ Executive Program (PEP) staff member, begins with frustrated tales of unopened mail, unanswered phone messages, unmanageable students, and unsympathetic veteran teachers. After 10 minutes or so, the talk turns from the unavoidable minutiae of school administration to deeper — and potentially more worrisome — issues of school leadership.

A young principal shares the challenge of communicating his vision to an aging school staff in a neighborhood that has become poorer and more blighted with time. After two years of frustration, he believes he’s turned the corner. “We have new teachers coming in, teachers with a different attitude about the kids we have today. Teachers will stay in a high-risk school if they believe they can make a difference.”

A bearded man in his mid-30s reveals that he’s the fifth principal in seven years at his high school, where he arrived in October with no previous principal experience. “The teachers are still waiting to see if I’m the ‘flavor of the month,’” he says. His first priority has been to create a safe school. “I’m accessible, but teachers complain that I’m not in classrooms enough. That’s my frustration. You’re supposed to be an instructional leader, but you have all this other stuff to do — all the paperwork, the discipline, the appeals of student suspensions.”

A young principal from an isolated mountain county near the Virginia border has just replaced a 25-year administrator. Many of the teachers in his elementary school are approaching retirement. “They’ve accepted me very well,” he says. “The thing I’ve struggled with is new ideas. It’s hard to get them off the dead horses.”

Sitting quietly in a corner of the comfortable living room, Darrell Powell nods as each newly minted administrator relates the mystery and frustration of school leadership. After two years as director of PEP’s Leadership Program for New Principals, Powell can predict the issues that will arise in these small group sessions.

“We used to invite brand-new principals into our program, but we learned fairly quickly that they’re too preoccupied with opening their first schools and surviving their first year on the job to fully engage in this work,” says Powell, a former elementary principal and high school English teacher. “Now principals must be at least in their second year, and we prefer the third year. When they have some experience under their belts, they really get more out of the training because they have real context. The issues we discuss are not theoretical to them anymore.”

The PEP curriculum covers typical principal challenges, he says — from dealing with difficult people and negotiating with parents, to managing teachers and using best practices in

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More than 2,800 school administrators — including half of the principals currently working in North Carolina — have completed at least one of PEP’s residential programs.

Expanding a talented core staff with specialists in leadership and technology, Jenkins set out to reinvent PEP’s professional development offerings. The trio of “one-size-fits-all” programs was replaced with nine year-long seminars: The Leadership Program for Assistant Principals, the Leadership Program for New Principals, the Higher School Performance Program, the Leadership Program for Career Principals, the Leadership Program for High School Principals, Principals as Technology Leaders, the Central Office Leadership Program, the Leadership Seminar in the Humanities, and the Principal Fellows Seminars. A 10th program, Developing Future Leaders, helps school systems address principal shortages by encouraging teachers with leadership potential to pursue administrative careers.

The curriculum focuses on “both the hard and soft edges of school leadership,” Jenkins says, and seeks to augment university studies. On the ‘soft side,’ Jenkins adds, participants learn “the importance of relationship building ... that leadership is inherently moral, and that the perception of their integrity is the basic sustenance of effective leadership.”

The program uses a variety of instructional techniques, including didactic lectures, interactive discussions, Socratic seminars on key readings, case studies, problem or project-based learning, independent studies in skills-intensive technology clinics, as well as networking and conversations with each other.

RESIDENTIAL APPROACH TO TRAINING

One aspect of PEP that has not broken with tradition is its reliance on residential training. Most participants travel to UNC’s main campus in Chapel Hill a half-dozen times during the school year, for sessions that last two or three days each. (A few programs, including the year-old “Future Leaders” initiative, are offered in other regions of the state.)

Powell and Jenkins say the residential approach is the most economically feasible and will likely continue as PEP moves into a state-of-the-art training facility now under construction on the UNC campus.

How does PEP’s “you come to us” training system match up with the national trend toward job-embedded, results-driven professional development? Jenkins believes PEP’s revamped curricula, which relate seminar training “to the nature of the job being confronted,” address the issue, at least in part. Before 1998, he says, “the curriculum was unaligned. It was a collection of what someone thought principals needed. There was no attempt to serve anyone else’s agenda except our own.” Today, each curriculum is aligned to either the State Board of Education’s Strategic Priorities or to the 10 Standards of Professional Practice established by the state Standards Board for Public School Administration. PEP also incorporates the six leadership standards promulgated by the Council of Chief State School Officers.

PEP continues to fine-tune curricula to emphasize the connection between its seminars and the realities of school leadership and management. “At the end of many of our session weeks, we typically ask our folks to design an action plan to use what they’ve learned. We call it ‘next steps.’ When they return, we start the program week with ‘new learnings.’ Some report on what they learned when they tried to apply the knowledge and skills they gained in the previous session. That, too, embeds the learning in the jobs they do.”
Last year, PEP experimented with a system of on-site mentors in its Higher School Performance Program (HSPP) — training designed to support principals in schools designated as “low performing” under North Carolina’s high-stakes accountability system. The experiment met with mixed success, says Shirley Arrington, who assumed leadership of HSPP last summer.

The experiment relied primarily on retired principals and superintendents who were asked to make least one on-site visit, “doing walk-throughs, talking to them about their concerns, and offering suggestions and support. We also did ‘temperature checks’ by phone.” But Arrington says some participants never saw their mentors. Arrington believes a better system can be developed that relies on active principals in nearby districts who can develop peer partnerships with PEP participants.

**BREAKING DOWN ISOLATION**

Although they agree that on-site support would be a plus for PEP’s programs, both Jenkins and Arrington believe that PEP’s emphasis on building networks among seminar participants provides a viable and longer-lasting alternative.

Darryl Powell describes this bonding as “one of the wonders of PEP. By the end of the program, you see people wearing their shirts, singing the song — there’s this whole campfire kind of stuff that will go on over time. They’re full of esprit de corps and hopefulness and ‘we’re going to get it done.’” That process begins from the first day, he adds, “when principals look around and see others who are in the same boat they’re in.”

Two years ago, PEP research associate Anita Ware surveyed a sample of PEP graduates to determine “satisfaction” and to gather ideas about needed program changes. “We found that one of the most valuable parts of the program is having a chance to be with other principals and being able to talk about things in a safe environment and not worrying about it getting back to your supervisor. It’s not that the conversations are negative — most of them aren’t — but they are in a safe place where they can reveal some of their uncertainties in a way they can’t do back home.”

Jenkins says PEP graduates report “consulting” with program colleagues years after graduation. Since the mid-1990s, with the emergence of the Internet and the convenience of e-mail, PEP’s graduate networks have grown stronger and more durable.

The advent of instant Internet communication and web-based resources has helped PEP address another issue peculiar to North Carolina — physical isolation. While North Carolina’s status as a “rural” state is rapidly becoming an anachronism, pockets of the population remain relatively isolated in the mountain counties along the Tennessee-Virginia border and throughout the inland coastal areas that lie west of the state’s jagged shoreline and remote Outer Banks.

PEP is cognizant of the special problems of rural school administrators, Jenkins says. He points to the organization’s “Future Leaders” program as one example of PEP’s commitment to helping small and rural communities identify and develop hard-to-find principal talent through a “grow-your-own” approach. PEP’s new emphasis on interactive technology also links isolated principals with critical friends.

**IMPACT ON PERFORMANCE**

Does participation in PEP change the way principals do their jobs? Jenkins concedes that the lack of follow-up in PEP’s programs makes it difficult to be accountable. He says finite resources limit follow-up to self-reported data at present.

Research associate Anita Ware says most of PEP’s evaluation data “is at the satisfaction level.” Over the last two years, Ware has interviewed samples of PEP graduates to determine whether and how PEP programs have influenced their job performance. “It usually comes back to comments like: ‘It validated a lot of my own beliefs about what should be happening in schools,’” she says.

The array of PEP programs and the difficulty faced by all professional development programs in connecting training with results makes the development of a reliable evaluation system a long-term project. “We definitely want to measure impact,” Ware says, noting that PEP is under pressure from the state legislature to show clear evidence of results. “But we are just really in the very beginning stages of deciding how we can do that.”

**RESOURCES**

Jenkins is convinced, however, that PEP participants “do apply, albeit selectively, the stuff they learn, sometimes as soon as they return to their ‘real’ worlds. Participants are constantly telling us, through our listservs, of things they actually did with what they learned.

“For example,” he says, “they are better able to see how they have put restrictions on their ability to lead by focusing on the easier tasks of managing — something we stress constantly in our programs. They talk of increased classroom visitations, or changing the content of faculty meetings from administrative items to a combination of administrative and instructional matters. They tell us that they use their deeper knowledge of the law to solve particular problems more effectively and efficiently. We have a lot of anecdotal evidence of changed practices. I’m not sure it’s hard evidence, but superintendents tell us they are more effective as school leaders.”

THE JOY OF SCHOOL

During the opening session of the Leadership Program for New Principals last July, Jenkins offered a warning he shares with each new PEP class. “Schooling can be hazardous to your intellectual health,” he says. “That’s ironic, but the school train travels very fast and in only one direction. The job is far too busy every day to leave much time for reflection. Yet we don’t learn much from pure experience; we learn from reflecting on experience. That’s your job during the time you spend with us.”

And Jenkins offered some advice about emotional health as well. “Every day, find somewhere in your school where you can find 15 minutes of joy, 15 minutes of excitement about teaching and learning,” Jenkins urged the often-harried rookie leaders. “Don’t deny yourself the joy of school.”