



VISIBLE LEADING

PRINCIPAL ACADEMY CONNECTS AND EMPOWERS PRINCIPALS

By Jennifer Hindman, Jan Rozzelle, Rachel Ball, and John Fahey

“I’ve conducted thousands of classroom observations and never thought to focus on what the students were doing rather than the teacher,” wrote an experienced principal participating in the School-University Research Network (SURN) Principal Academy at the College of William & Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia.

The SURN Principal Academy’s mission is to build a leadership development program that increases principals’ instructional knowledge and develops mentor principals to sustain the program. The academy is designed to connect and empower principals to improve their instructional leadership and relationship-building skills. Such professional learning results in high-

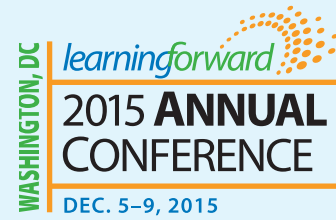
impact teaching and student learning by:

- Developing knowledge of effective teaching and learning strategies;
- Increasing formative feedback that supports teacher reflection and distributive leadership in professional learning communities;
- Providing multiyear cohort support for participating principals;
- Recruiting a cadre of expert, veteran principals to mentor early-career principals; and
- Disseminating project findings through digital/electronic media and division, regional, state, and international conferences.

ABOUT THE PRINCIPAL ACADEMY

This two-year program consists of professional learning

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days, intersession activities, coaching, and mentors using John Hattie's *Visible Learning* (2009) as one of the research foundations and leadership techniques. The program grew out of Hattie's challenge to School-University Research Network leaders in 2010 and each year involves urban, suburban, and rural leaders divided into two cohorts, each with about 25 instructional leaders and 10 mentors. Leadership team members include assistant superintendents and university faculty. The research network is a partnership of 28 public school systems, the Virginia Department of Education, and the College of William & Mary in Virginia.

Mentors lead job-alike teams from throughout Virginia. Participants include new and experienced principals working in a wide range of settings. Together, they engage in professional learning throughout the year at the College of William & Mary. They visit each other's schools to conduct collaborative observations and build their knowledge of high-impact strategies identified in *Visible Learning* and share their knowledge with their faculties.

Principals complete a minimum of 20 fall and 20 spring observations using an observation protocol called the School-University Research Network (SURN) Indicators of Student Engagement Observation Protocol (see p. 22). They conduct collaborative observations with each other, then train their staffs to conduct them as well.

This work rests on the foundation of education research from The Wallace Foundation (2013), *Visible Learning* (Hattie, 2009), Carol Dweck's *Mindset* (2006), and James Nottingham's *Encouraging Learning* (2013). *Visible Learning for Teachers* (2012) serves as the book study. Instructional leaders receive access to a closed wiki containing professional learning resources modeled during sessions

that they can use with their faculties.

Principals also receive support from School-University Research Network staff to conduct action research analyzing teacher surveys and their data from classroom observations. This research is used to identify schoolwide strengths to celebrate, as well as identify common needs for professional learning.

FOUR LEADERSHIP ACTIONS

Four key leadership actions drive the SURN Principal Academy professional learning.

1. Build relationships and a community of practice.

To develop a culture focused on student engagement and feedback, effective principals recognize their role as lead learners. At SURN Principal Academy sessions, principals engage in relationship-building activities that they can use with their faculties. They focus on establishing a culture of reciprocal trust. In order for teachers to reflect on observational data, they accept the administrator as an instructional coach who provides objective feedback aligned with research-based indicators. During this trust-building phase, principals develop shared language, use transparency when introducing the observation tool, and provide a clear picture of their vision for student success.

Recognizing that these instructional shifts are not immediate, principals engage the faculty in ongoing professional learning across multiple settings. One strategy for developing reflective practitioners is book studies. Led by their principals, teachers read and digest the research, share their interpretations, and discuss practical implications.

Through alignment of school improvement goals,

professional learning, and classroom observations, a learning community emerges. This community values the role of formative feedback, commits to ongoing learning, and consistently evaluates its impact based on evidence.

2. Observe for and talk more about learning than teaching.

Student engagement dialogue begins by asking principals what characterizes active student engagement. Teams brainstorm before crafting a definition. Participants compare their strategies with the SURN Indicators of Student Engagement Observation Protocol, which emphasizes the high-yield and lower-yield learning strategies shown on p. 22.

The tool includes 12 high-impact and five lower-yield strategies. Both types yield data useful in conferencing, planning, and goal setting. Principals first interact with the tool to identify learning strategies they observe most frequently and least frequently, then participate in frequent simulations using a video of classroom teaching and learning to experience the observation tool.

A hallmark of the Principal Academy is collaborative observation. Organized in job-alike teams with a mentor, principals meet at a school, observe at least four classrooms, use the tool on an iPad to code strategies, and discuss student engagement strategies observed.

Powerful dialogue happens when teams debrief. One example: Some observers mark writing when students complete a fill-in-the-blank worksheet. However, the high-yield strategy writing specifies “sustained writing,” such as journals and blogging. The mentor principal creates a nurturing learning environment for principals and a shared language of learning and understanding of terms and strategies evolve.

3. Provide targeted feedback: Evidence of impact on learning.

Providing feedback to teachers for their reflection on observation data presents a powerful growth opportunity, but can challenge and even stump administrators. To increase skill and comfort in leading the data dialogue, principals read articles on how to lead an effective post-observation dialogue, discuss strategies with their mentors, view an exemplary conference, and role-play conferences that hone their skills using conversation starters and questions to clarify and probe.

Effective feedback opportunities occur during lesson planning and reflecting after the lesson. Teachers use the observation tool to think about the variety of ways students can interact with and learn the content. When teachers discuss upcoming lessons during shared planning time, the principal validates ideas and asks clarifying questions.

After the lesson, teachers can review the observation data and share their thoughts on student engagement. Sometimes a teacher will say, “I know I did that,” and question why an item is not marked. The instructional leader may acknowledge that

A SUPERINTENDENT’S PERSPECTIVE

By John Fahey

Three principals in my school district participated in the SURN Principal Academy. The high school principals (two within the past two years) led a school that was not fully accredited. It is now fully accredited, and math end-of-course state assessment scores have improved 40 points over the past two years. This is visible and high-yield data that increased community pride in a high school that was once labeled “a dropout factory.” The high-poverty (76%) middle school’s new principal participated in the Principal Academy with a largely new staff and new schedule. They also experienced visible growth.



John Fahey

The middle school’s transformation is visible and evident in its culture. The principal and staff reviewed every aspect of school governance to examine student engagement, high-yield strategies, and visible student and staff learning. The staff and principal engaged in professional learning that targeted tangible evidence of student engagement.

The principal led by example. He taught in classrooms to model his expectations and his focus on engaged instruction. The school became the most improved in the district. The payoff has been a much happier middle school staff, student body, and community. In two years, state assessment math scores improved by 25 points. We attribute this focus to the Principal Academy.

the teacher used a high-yield strategy, but not the students. Teachers share what occurred before and after the principal left. Discussion of relationships between particular strategies may occur, such as when students read, engage in partner or small-group discussion of the text, and question each other. The impact on learning will be higher than orally responding to a teacher’s questions in a whole-class format.

4. Empower stakeholders to assess impact.

Academy principals take on the role of lead learner as they design and lead professional learning for faculty on the observation tool and high-yield strategies. Changing the focus to student

A PRINCIPAL'S PERSPECTIVE

By Rachel Ball

My participation in the SURN Principal Academy coincided with my first year as a principal at Cool Spring Primary School in King William County (Virginia) Public Schools. As an administrator, I immediately experienced how various responsibilities and tasks compete for my time. However, the Principal Academy reiterated the need to prioritize my role as an instructional leader.



Rachel Ball

My goal for the school year was to align our professional learning, classroom observations, and decision making with John Hattie's research (Hattie, 2009). I envisioned a professional staff whose practices reflect evidence of high-yield strategies within the classroom. Through book studies, ongoing professional learning, monthly emails in which I highlight classroom applications of research-based strategies, weekly sharing of captioned images or video clips identifying high-yield strategy use observed in our school, observations, and post-conferences, staff members found themselves constantly immersed in visible learning. Conversations at faculty meetings, team planning sessions, and leadership meetings revolved around strategies that support increased student engagement.

Through full immersion in high-yield strategies, I witnessed the development of a school culture that centered on student engagement. Teachers' commitment to their own professional growth translated into positive outcomes for students. A year of observation data established the groundwork for next year's professional learning.

engagement during instruction instead of exclusively looking at teacher behavior presents a strategic risk. Teachers need to know that, as they change their instruction to have greater impact on student learning, they are safe to try and even fail.

For example, a science teacher and an art teacher co-developed a multiday lesson integrating high-yield strategies into a unit on physical and chemical changes using clay and glazes. Despite planning and high student interest, day one flopped.

After a follow-up dialogue, the teachers restructured parts of the remaining lesson to better share expectations so that students could set appropriate learning goals. Through the process, teachers and students used the "language of learning" to further their learning (Hattie, 2012, p. 165).

Principals conduct action research using the fall and spring data to monitor growth and assess impact. The data collection and analysis are multipurpose. School leadership teams can use observation data to guide planning. For example, the data can be used to identify professional learning needs and target particular strategies as part of the school improvement plan.

One high school principal said that his leadership team outlined the professional learning topics for the school year and deliberately left some days blank so topics that emerged during the year could be addressed. Principals share action research in the SURN Principal Academy's culminating session with peers, refine the presentation based on peer feedback, then present to faculty and even school boards.

IMPACT

Administrators use the SURN Indicators of Student Engagement Observation Protocol in formative observations to collect engagement data. Teachers use it when planning lessons, and students use a modified version to reflect on their learning. Then the principal and teacher engage in dialogue using the data. Here are recent results:

- 2013-14: More than 3,000 observations, with a 6.5% decrease in lower-yield strategy use and a slight increase in high-yield strategies. For example, the use of certain high-yield strategies (discussing text, problem solving, cooperative learning, meta-cognitive strategy, and learning tool use) increased 3% to 6% between the fall and spring cycles.
- 2014-15: More than 3,400 observations in 48 schools, with an overall 3% decrease in lower-yield strategies. For example, responding orally decreased by 6.8% and listening (e.g. lecture) decreased by 5.5%. Some higher-yield strategies such as applying meta-cognitive strategies increased.
- Six schools whose principals participated in the 2012-13 program were recognized for no longer being among the lowest 5% of performing schools by the Virginia Department of Education.

These data show that a shared focus and an informative tool cultivate a shared language of learning across grade levels and content areas. Relationships grow stronger and learning increases among principals, teachers, and students.

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