



BEING FORWARD

Scott Laurence

Send the message that learning is for leaders, too

We've all seen it happen. A professional learning event is scheduled for the day, and a crowd of teachers is in the room. The principal walks out to introduce the speaker or facilitator, talks about the important professional learning lessons that will be imparted that day — and then walks out of the room as soon as the program begins.

Often, the principal thinks to herself, "Well, I've got a lot of work that I can catch up on now." That is the wrong approach. It sends a clear message to teachers: Professional learning isn't that important.

In fact, good professional learning is not only important for teachers, it's also vital for principals and assistant principals. A principal must be the face of your district's values, so she must show that through her actions. That's why, in my long career in district offices, I wanted to make sure that principals understood and modeled the value of quality professional learning.

That meant that the very things teachers were asking for from principals — time, coaching, and other resources — I had to give to my principals. In other words, I had to empower them. It was a fundamental necessity in establishing a healthy, coherent professional learning environment throughout the district.

To that end, here are four other key takeaways regarding leadership learning from my career in the superintendent's seat:

Don't micromanage. You need to



coach principals enough that they see the importance of professional learning, but give them enough freedom to figure out the best method to get the results you're looking for. If I told my principals, OK, now we're going to work on instructional practice in the classroom, I had to understand that might look different from site to site, but we would have a core idea of what we all wanted to ultimately achieve.

Set long-range goals. I had to prove to principals that we would have the same professional learning goals for five years, or they wouldn't believe me. They would assume professional learning was a "flavor-of-the-month" initiative. You had to say over and over, "We're going to do the same thing next year, because you're not going to fix anything in just one year." Growth over time was what we talked about constantly. It's a marathon, not a sprint. It's a continuous learning process, a continuing movement toward best practices.

Use professional learning as a recruiting tool. I can't tell you how many principals and assistant principals I

hired who, during the interviews, asked, "How does the district office support us?" Current and prospective principals would explain their area of interest and ask, "Will you help me learn and grow in that area? Will you be supportive?" That comes out in almost every interview these days, because it's at the top of everybody's mind.

Say yes every single time. How did I prove that commitment to them once they were hired? By saying "yes" every time they asked for time, money, or support for leadership professional learning that corresponded to district goals. If it wasn't in the budget, I found it in the budget. If a principal heard about a great professional learning opportunity, I would say, "OK, go. We'll figure it out." If they needed time, I gave them time. You've got to make it a priority, because it not only helps principals, it also produces teacher and student results.

Scott Laurence is president of Learning Forward's board of trustees. ■