

10 RUNGS

TO
PROFICIENCY

**District
partners with
universities to
create
Principals'
Academy**

BY PETE HALL AND RICK HARRIS

In the Washoe County School District (WCSD), in Reno, Nev., school leaders climb a steep ladder from the moment they contemplate a career in administration. Fortunately, they are supported at each step in the process, thanks to the Principals' Academy. This approach helps principals fulfill their critical mission of providing a link between policy and student achievement, articulating vision and strengthening instructional delivery, working directly with students and teachers, and playing a key role in a district's administrative agenda. WCSD principals follow an articulated plan of career development that supports their growing expertise for the sake of improved student achievement.

The Principals' Academy is a 10-tier approach to recruiting, building, developing,

and strengthening principal leadership. Following the tenets of the professional learning community concept (DuFour & Eaker, 1998) and driven by the active instructional leadership vehicle of the walk-through process (Werlinich, 2004), the 10-tier model professionalizes the principalship, from prenovice to distinguished expertise. The Principals' Academy is a collaborative effort of the WCSD, the University of Nevada, the University of Phoenix, the University of Pittsburgh, and WestEd.

Covering 6,600 square miles, WCSD is Nevada's second-largest school district. Since its inception in 2001, the Principals' Academy has provided leadership training, mentorship, coaching, and professional learning to practicing administrators and other professionals in many roles throughout the school system. Along that journey, every aspect of each tier holds to the guiding principles of the Principals' Academy (see box at right).

THE 10-TIER APPROACH TO PRINCIPAL DEVELOPMENT

TIER 1: Diving Into administration

The foundation of the 10-tier model is a recruiting tool designed to introduce school administration to the participants. Principals encourage their lead teachers, instructional coaches, and other staff with clear leadership strengths to participate in a series of workshops.

These five three-hour sessions provide the framework and background knowledge for certified per-

PETE HALL, a graduate of the Washoe County (Nev.) School District's Principals' Academy, is principal of Sheridan Elementary School in the Spokane (Wash.) Public Schools. Contact him at petehall@educationhall.com.

RICK HARRIS, deputy superintendent of the Washoe County School District in Reno, Nev., is also director of the Principals' Academy. Contact him at rjharris@washoe.k12.nv.us.

Guiding principles of the Principals' Academy

- All academy activities and events will be professional and high quality.
- All activities will have current principals involved in planning, instruction, and mentoring.
- For activities that include direct instruction, instructors:
 - Should be guides, not directors.
 - Use the Socratic method rather than merely teaching facts.
 - Will help principals see other perspectives and push their limits.
 - Will show respect for principals' opinions.
 - Will focus on activities that are intellectually stimulating.
 - Will include principal discussions and reflection in all activities.
 - Will exhibit passion and humor.

sonnel interested in entering administration. The first three sessions are designed around the eight dimensions of leadership outlined by the WCSD principals' evaluation system. The remaining two sessions reintroduce participants to the driving forces behind district leadership emphases: the walk-through process and professional learning communities. Current WCSD principals lead all of the sessions.

TIER 2: Apprenticeship

The Principals' Academy joins the University of Nevada, Reno, and the University of Phoenix (Nevada campus) to offer for-credit internships for new and aspiring administrators and doctoral candidates. This program

gives the intern practical experience outside of his or her current school setting, offering new perspectives and information. Collaborating with established leadership teams and principals, the interns work directly with students, staff, parents, teachers, and other administrators on a variety of initiatives at the school and district level.

TIER 3: Leadership institute

Recognizing that many lead teachers and deans are almost ready for their first administrative position, the Leadership Institute provides relevant preservice training to aspiring administrators. Educators who hold or are close to achieving administrative certification can attend Institute sessions led by Principals' Academy instructors and faculty of the University of Pittsburgh or the University of Nevada, Reno. The sessions include such topics as budgeting, teacher evaluation, public relations, data-driven dialogue, and many others. In addition, these candidates are eligible for short-term administrative assignments as needed by the district, where they will receive mentoring support.

TIER 4: Deanship

An early step into the administrative realm is the post of dean of students. Like an assistant principal, but with a teacher's salary and no authority to evaluate staff, this position provides a range of administrative experiences. A dean cohort meets monthly to discuss challenges, share ideas, and support one another. Led by a building-level administrator teamed with a Principals' Academy leader, these

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meetings offer opportunities for problem-solving, networking, and continued administrative preparation. Participants receive recertification credit.

TIER 5: New administrator training

All new principals and assistant principals participate in the “First Years” training series. First- and second-year administrators are divided into cohorts that meet regularly with peers, network with experienced mentor principals, and engage in challenging problem-solving exercises. Mentors meet with smaller communities of new administrators to engage in team walk-throughs, cooperative job shadowing episodes, book studies, and other collaborative efforts to build relationships and leadership capacity in newer administrators.

TIER 6: Mentorship

Both active and retired principals and assistant principals provide a number of services to the district through the Principals’ Academy as mentors. Some mentors coach first- and second-year administrators; others work one-on-one with aspiring administrative candidates. A select group of mentors assists specific schools with their school improvement processes and helps identify strengths and areas of need, while other mentors serve as instructors in Principals’ Academy workshops. Realizing that providing ongoing support for the mentoring program is essential, all mentors meet on a regular basis to share strategies and methods for effective mentoring.

TIER 7: Academic initiatives

The Principals’ Academy has been

Participants discuss their experiences

“Involvement in the Principals’ Academy has made me feel like a valued member of the administrative team.”

— Kim Brant, dean of students, Glenn Duncan Elementary School

“I learned more from my deanship than any other setting I could imagine. This experience has solidified my conviction to become an outstanding administrator.”

— Derek Cordell, dean of students, Swope Middle School

“The experiences, classes, seminars, and trainings benefit not only us as instructional leaders, but also those with whom we make daily contact ... our teachers and students.”

— Michael Higgins, dean of students, Incline Elementary School

“I have grown professionally through the reading of research and the action research I have been able to implement at my school.”

— Gloria Geil, principal, Veterans Elementary School

“The doctorate cohort has been an invaluable experience for me. I have been able to work with peers who are currently practicing in the field on projects that have been relevant and engaging. The professors are knowledgeable, the coursework rigorous, and the hours convenient. It is the best way I can imagine a working administrator completing this program.”

— Reagan Virgil, assistant principal, Traner Middle School

“The National Board process required me to look closely at my current practices. As a result of this ‘forced’ reflection, I targeted areas that needed improvement. This introspection led to my National Board goals, which will improve my skills as a leader benefiting teachers and children.”

— Bob Deery, principal, Mathews Elementary School

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instrumental in designing and implementing several school district academic initiatives. Ongoing learning sessions provide principals with the research-based information they need to lead their schools. Workshops cover the walk-through process, differentiating supervision, professional learning communities, struggling teacher assistance, and other topics. This tier is perhaps the most comprehensive stage, as the Principals’ Academy has ample resources to prepare, support, and empower school leaders in these areas. The Principals’ Academy was

also influential in creating the district’s new principal evaluation system, in partnership with the University of Wisconsin at Madison. The system has been so effective that the district is building a similar tool for assistant principals and deans.

TIER 8: Veteran administrative support

Typically, newer administrators garner most of the professional learning focus in most school districts.

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However, the Principals' Academy ensures that all principals receive the tools, skills, strategies, and learning that combine to build and sustain effective leadership. Veteran principals and assistant principals use Principals' Academy funding to attend national conferences, participate in regional trainings, and host skilled consultants at district-level or school-level workshops. The Principals' Academy advisory team (seven distinguished K-12 principals) designs and co-facilitates the workshops with senior directors and consultants.

TIER 9: Executive doctorate

In fall 2006, the Principals' Academy and the University of Nevada, Reno, created an executive doctorate program. The coursework is based on the eight leadership dimensions outlined by the Principals' Academy framework document:

1. Vision
2. Student achievement
3. Political, social, economic, legal, and cultural context of learning
4. Communication/interpersonal
5. Instructional leadership/supervision
6. Organization/management
7. Decision making
8. Professional development

Instructors include university professors, district-level administrators, and distinguished principals as selected by the Principals' Academy. Participants can earn a doctorate degree in instructional leadership, while the Principals' Academy furnishes the materials and provides stipends for instructors.

Additionally, the district superintendent works alongside the advisory board to select candidates for the program.

TIER 10: National Administrator Board Certification

The Principals' Academy is participating in a collaborative partnership with the National Principals Initiative, the University of Pittsburgh, the University of Nevada, the Nevada Association of School Administrators, the Union Pacific Principal Partnership, and WestEd to establish a National Administrator Board Certification Program. Rigorous in its time and content demands, this program has established a voluntary system of advanced certification for school administrators that leads to an additional pay increase (8%, similar to National Board Certified teachers) and an increased level of professionalism. The first cohort has begun its work in the program, and the Washoe County School District has been selected to serve as a pilot host. The collaborative partnership plans for this certification program to potentially serve administrators regionally and even nationally.

PRINCIPAL DEVELOPMENT FOR POSITIVE CHANGE

On a variety of measures, the results demonstrated by WCSD students indicate the success of Principals' Academy initiatives: In 3rd-grade reading, student proficiency rose from 47% in 2002 to 56% in 2006; in 5th-grade math, student proficiency rose from 50% in 2002 to 62% in 2006; in 8th-grade writing, student proficiency rose from 62% in 2002 to 70% in 2006; and the high-school graduation rate of 73.9% dwarfs the state average of 64.9%.

Developing school principals as instructional leaders is essential to implementing meaningful school improvement (LaPointe & Davis, 2006). To answer that monumental challenge, the Principals' Academy attracts and supports individuals from the time they show interest in administration all the way through the con-

Washoe County School District
Reno, Nev.

Number of schools: 95 (65 elementary, 15 middle, 15 high)
Enrollment: 63,046
Staff: 7,220

Racial/ethnic mix:

White:	56%
African-American:	4%
Hispanic:	32%
Asian/Pacific Islander:	6%
Native American:	2%
Other:	0%

Limited English proficient: 27%
Languages spoken: 57
Free/reduced lunch: 33%
Special education: 13%
Contact: Rick Harris, deputy superintendent
E-mail: rjharris@washoe.k12.nv.us
Web site: www.washoe.k12.nv.us

tinuum as expert building principals. As Tom Brown, principal at Galena High School, stated, "I would not be in the position I am in, nor would I be able to effectively handle the challenges of my position, without the constant support and resources the Principals' Academy and the Academy's leadership has provided me over the past five years."

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