

When hearts meet minds

DISTRICT'S LEADERSHIP TEAM USES THE POWER OF SYNERGY IN WORK WITH PRINCIPALS

BY ELLEN H. KAHAN, TONY BYRD, AND LARA DREW

Ask almost any principal why he or she feels called to this vocation. Why select a leadership role with endless demands and a relentless pace? The principal will tell you that he or she took on this daunting task to make a positive impact on the lives and education of children, to be an instructional leader. This is a noble goal that is all too soon mired in the realities of school management. The job becomes one that may only be focused erratically on leading instruction.

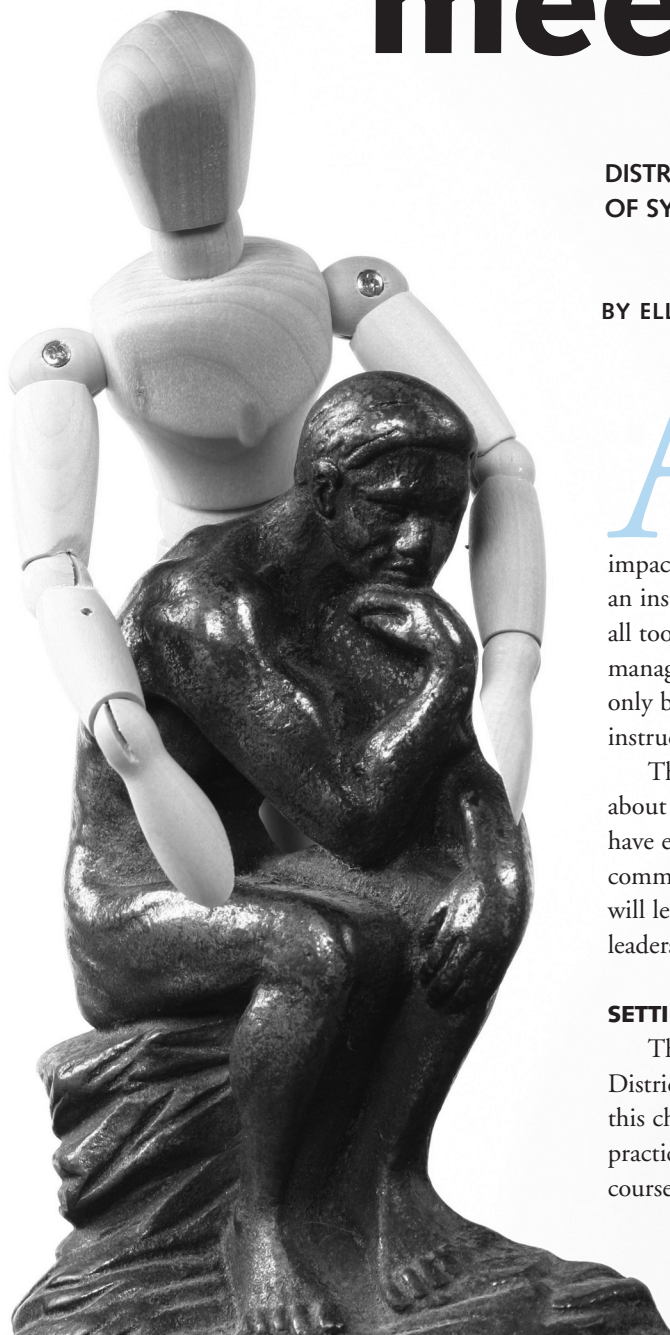
This occurs despite inspirational stories about a few great leaders in schools who have elevated their leadership above the common experience. Research tells us what will lead to the creation of great instructional leaders. The challenge is to heed what the research says.

"The perfect balance of reflective/healthful/food for the soul as well as practical things I can use with staff."
- Lynne Behrendt
Principal, Beverly Elementary

SETTING OUR FOCUS

The elementary leadership team of Edmonds School District #15 in Lynnwood, Wash., has been struggling with this challenge for several years. We have dismantled outdated practices to focus on instructional leadership and maintain our course despite efforts to pull us away. We believe our professional learning must maintain a sharp focus on three components:

1. Building a collaborative community of principal leaders;



2. Deepening content knowledge, particularly in literacy; and
3. Strengthening supervisory skills to improve classroom instruction.

Professional growth opportunities to meet the distinct needs of principals must be provided through different venues, including large groups, small study groups, and individual coaching support.

These emphases for professional learning seem obvious for a team of principals. Indeed, they are the specific goals cited in research about successful practices. But the road to implementing our program of professional learning has been challenging, primarily because it requires a shift in belief and practices, which creates anxiety.

Many principals are highly successful building managers, meeting the wide range of demands they face each day. There was not universal acclaim in our group for this new emphasis on instructional leadership, but principals must become instructional leaders to improve what transpires every day between teacher and student. Creating strong instructional leaders who understand best teaching strategies and can supervise, coach, and motivate effective teaching is essential to reaching that goal.

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CREATING A LEARNING COMMUNITY

Building a community of leaders is vital to improving instructional leadership. School districts and the community have inadvertently placed

school leaders in competition with each other for better test scores, higher enrollment, or community accolades. All of that is contradictory to the environment required for collaborative professional growth in an organization.

Our elementary leadership team was a friendly group, but not a collaborative team. To become a team, we had to meet each other on a personal level, as individuals with our own hopes, frustrations, and experiences. Only then would we be a trusting community that would grow and learn together, recognizing each other's strengths and gifts and supporting each member.

To develop effective collaborative groups, we use small-group learning structures within our larger meeting time. This is most important when the focus is on a topic that some leaders may be successful with, while other leaders are still in the learning stages. In the past, individuals skilled in a particular area were invited to stand in front of the whole group and share what they know. This lecture-style presentation does not effectively support the learning needs of everyone in the group and can even create resentment. Our approach is to have small professional learning groups tackle difficult topics either in place of or following a large-group presentation. In small groups, people feel safe asking questions and seeking help from each other. While people may have different skill levels, no one person is set up as the "expert," and they are able to grow together.

Sometimes, small groups use protocols to structure the discussion. Our

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experience is that leaders struggle with protocols. Regardless of the established structure, leaders tend to want to jump in to solve a problem.

Learning to ask open-ended questions to help a colleague examine a problem without offering a solution is a valuable skill for coaching colleagues or teachers, but it is also a slow skill to develop. Protocols also ensure that the discussion keeps moving forward rather than having individuals repeat the same response again and again.

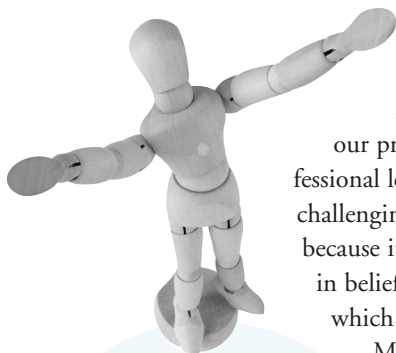
Like a class meeting, our large weekly meetings often start with the entire group of more than 30 sitting in a large circle. This brings a sense of unity and team to the group. Taking from the writing of Parker Palmer, we incorporate time to reflect together. Inspired by poetry, storytelling, or powerful prose, our shared time to reflect brings us together as a team of trusting and committed individuals, rather than a group of people trapped together at a meeting.

Summer retreats provide extended periods of time to build our community. Over the last several years, they have evolved from half-day to whole day to three-day retreats as trust grows and group members share a deep desire to work closely with one another.

As collaboration and trust have risen among group members, our discussion about the challenging work we do has become more open and honest. True collaboration is becoming the norm.

DEEPENING CONTENT KNOWLEDGE

Deepening the content knowledge of a principal is critical to becoming an instructional leader. Principals must understand what students need to know and be able to do, and they need to be able to identify specific strategies teachers can use to enhance student learning. Principals, together with a teacher from their building and



"Meetings have highlighted for me the key elements necessary to safely and rigorously reflect on goals and progress. ... I feel safe to share my authentic experiences, trials and challenges."

- Lynda Fischer
Principal, Madrona School

Edmonds School District #15
Lynnwood, Wash.

Schools: 36 (21 elementary, 3 K-8, 4 middle, 5 high, 3 special programs)

Enrollment: 20,098

Staff: 3,903

Racial ethnic mix:

White:	66%
Black:	6%
Hispanic:	10%
Asian/Pacific Islander:	14%
Native American:	1%
Other:	2%

Limited English proficient: 8%

Languages spoken: 77

Free/reduced lunch: 24%

Special education: 13%

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district staff, meet for content learning sessions and focused classroom demonstration lessons throughout the year. During these sessions, principals and teacher leaders reflect on their learning and think about how to share what they've learned with staff. Between sessions, district literacy coaches and the director of elementary education provide support to individual principals around planning professional learning and supporting individual teachers based on the new content learning and the school's improvement plan. The director of elementary education and principals go into classrooms to learn to identify what is being taught and to think about how to have conversations with their teachers about their practice. We believe that by deepening our principals' content knowledge, we enhance their ability to have meaningful and focused conversations with teachers about the most important aspect of teaching and learning — student learning and instruction.

STRENGTHENING LEADERSHIP

At the core of our elementary leadership structure of professional learning is our weekly meeting. At

these meetings, we engage as a large group in professional learning, primarily on issues of leadership style. Ours is a district with collaboration and shared decision making as its core value, making the requirements for effective leadership especially challenging. Principals sometimes fear that facing tough issues with reluctant staff members will end in their being “voted off the island.” To build a collaborative school team, principals must have exceptional people skills that engage, influence, and inspire. Professional learning must effectively address how principals can talk with teachers about instruction and coach them to improve their practice. In addition, principals must feel confident in creating school-based professional learning, growing teacher leadership, and leading staff discussions on instruction.

Small collaborative groups

Small-group work with principals is designed to enhance these leadership skills and is often part of our weekly meetings. For example, small cohorts recently spent three weeks examining case studies, with each principal focused on his or her work with one specific teacher. Principals presented case studies and consulted colleagues to glean strategies and practice skills that would more effectively support that teacher. We also practiced formal classroom observations as an avenue for coaching teachers. We observed a video of a teacher conducting a classroom lesson. Then, in small groups, we strategized questions and coaching techniques to use in a preobservation conference to help a teacher develop the strongest possible learning experience for students. Following that, we discussed the feedback that might be most successful in a post-observation conference.

Professional learning for principals must provide the opportunity to examine issues specific to the culture

and context in which principals lead. This is most effectively done through small-group and individual collaborative dialogue. The Critical Friends Group (CFG) model is another successful process for small-group collaborative work that has been used by one team of principals as a tool for personal growth. This team of five principals and one district leader meet every two weeks to discuss two specific questions:

1. What does good instruction look like?
2. How do principals discuss that good instruction with teachers?

To answer these questions, this CFG reviewed videos of teaching, completed walk-throughs at each classroom in their buildings, observed teachers, discussed the definition of “good instruction,” and used the book *Change Leadership*, by Wagner et al. (2006), as a knowledge backdrop and a reflective tool. These principals valued this time together, as evidenced by these comments:

“Our CFG has provided me the professional and personal support I need to be courageous in my leadership, take risks, and open the conversations with teachers that I may have avoided in the past. I also know I have close colleagues who will push my thinking and provide honest feedback.” — Steven Burleigh, principal of Westgate Elementary

“Learning takes time, and we need regular, sustained time together to think deeply and learn. That will be the only thing that will change our practice.” — Christi Kessler, principal of Sherwood Elementary

“Stepping into the role as learner of content and learner as self is not a comfortable thing to do. Working with our CFG gives me the courage to be uncomfortable with conviction.” — Hawkins Cramer, principal of Cedar Way Elementary

Individual support

Personal influence and modeling

expectations are powerful teaching tools. In keeping with that, the director of elementary education and the supervising assistant superintendent meet with each principal several times a year for a coaching session. Together, the group completes a walk-through, paying specific attention to implementation of best literacy practices. Principals are coached to maintain their focus on instructional leadership. The group develops and monitors a plan for the professional learning in each building, including the identification and growth of teacher leaders.

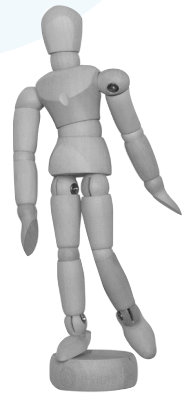
These conversations also clarify special materials or professional opportunities required by schools. District administrators can provide materials or expertise already available and draw from the same information to plan for unmet needs.

MEETING THE CHALLENGE

Professional learning for elementary leaders continues to evolve in our district. There are competing demands for our time as a leadership group, but we are insistent that we stay focused on instruction and leadership. We struggle with the principal’s changing role. We are discovering that the power of our collaborative team keeps us focused and creates a synergy that engages our minds and hearts in the work. Together, we are becoming powerful instructional leaders, committed as a team to each other, to the development of our knowledge, and to exceptional instruction in all of our schools.

We can’t say yet that our work as an elementary leadership team is having a direct impact on student achievement. What we do know is that our school leaders are increasingly able to have authentic discussions

“I’ve so much appreciated and enjoyed the professional conversations we’ve had at our Elementary Management meetings. You seem to have a sixth sense regarding what we need to grow not only as professionals but as people, and you find a way to offer it...that lets us enter from different places and still leave with something valuable. ... Thank you for creating space for us and for doing it in a way that helps us think about how to do the same for our staffs.”
- Dave Zwaschka
Principal, Lynndale Elementary



with teachers about grade-level learning expectations, subject content, and proven effective instructional techniques. Principals are developing skills to have difficult conversations with teachers about the quality of instruction. They are learning to ask teachers probing questions about their practice and to hold them to high performance expectations. Leaders are taking the professional learning community structures from our leadership team into their schools to create a culture of trust and adult learning. We know that a trusting climate, collaborative learning communities focused on student achievement, and a constant focus on improving instruction are characteristics of high-achieving schools.

REFERENCE

Wagner, T., Kegan, R., Lahey, L., Lemons, R.W., Garnier, J., Helsing, D., et al. (2006). *Change leadership: A practical guide to transforming our schools*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. ■