Building Leadership Capacity in Native American Schools: The Principal Leadership Academy

from The State Role in School Turnaround: Emerging Best Practices

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○ Promoting Cooperative Labor-Management Relations

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○ Engaging Families and Communities

○ Building Political Will for Dramatic Change

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The Need for Change

On a warm fall day in November 2012, 30 principals and 8 mentors gathered for a three-day Basic Leadership Training in Albuquerque to launch the Principal Leadership Academy (PLA), a collaboration between the Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) and Academic Development Institute (ADI). The PLA is a 9-month long training and support initiative for principals. The PLA's mission is to improve the performance of schools by building principals' skills and practices. The BIE "oversees a total of 183 elementary, secondary, residential and peripheral dormitories across 23 states. 126 schools are tribally controlled under P.L. 93-638 Indian Self Determination Contracts or P. L. 100-297 Tribally Controlled Grant Schools Act. 57 schools are operated by the Bureau of Indian Education" (Bureau of Indian Education website).[1] This cohort only included principals in BIE-operated schools. The principals in the BIE cohort all serve predominantly American Indian students. Some of the schools were identified as the lowest 5% and were receiving School Improvement Grant funds, and some schools had been in either school improvement, corrective action, or restructuring status for many years.

The BIE cohort included high school, elementary, and middle school principals. The schools in the cohort included dormitory as well as day schools. There were schools in heavily populated areas as well as a school located at the bottom of the Grand Canyon. School enrollment ranged from 110 students to 400 students. While all these factors are relevant, the bottom line—and the premise of PLA—is the same: All schools need good leadership, and that leadership starts

[1]http://www.bie.edu/

with the principal. The PLA was designed by ADI, in partnership with the BIE, to significantly bolster principals' leadership skills in order to support their efforts to markedly improve student outcomes. The program's web-based tools document principal actions, the work of the leadership team, a portfolio of projects, and mentor–principal interactions.

The need to build the skill sets of principals already serving in BIE schools—as opposed to principal replacement—is symptomatic of the difficulty these schools have typically experienced attracting and retaining highly qualified candidates for their leadership roles (Knapp, Copland, & Talbert, 2003). When no principal candidate is available, other staff members are "detailed" to fill an "acting" principal position. These staff members may be ill-prepared to step into the role of an instructional leader while also trying to organize and operate the day-to-day functions of the school (Levine, 2005; Young & Fox, 2002).

BIE schools suffer the same challenges as other rural schools in which the population is impoverished in resources, supports, organizations, or other educational institutions that may be available in more urban areas (see Redding & Walberg in this book; see also Johnson & Strange, 2007; Mackety & Linder-VanBerschot, 2008; Monk, 2007). While these issues are not unique in rural schools, BIE schools face additional challenges. For instance, many BIE schools are located in very isolated rural areas, and policies governing Native American Reservations (e.g., limitations regarding who is permitted to own property) can make it difficult to attract or retain personnel who would like to settle in the community long-term. Schools may also have a Native preference stipulation attached to hiring principals and teachers in their schools. Consequently, for most BIE-operated schools, hiring new teachers or principals is extremely difficult. Whereas other communities may have access to a labor pool to replace staff, it is imperative for BIE schools to focus on improving the capacity and performance of their existing staff (Barley, 2009; Idaho Rural Education Task Force, 2008; McCullough & Johnson, 2007). All of these factors contribute to the need for BIE schools to invest in the principals they have and raise their skill levels to support the schools they are serving.

Topics and Components of PLA

To strategically tackle raising the skill sets of all principals while taking into account that every principal begins the PLA with varying levels of skills already present, the PLA centered around four major topics and utilized four key components. The major topics were (a) Setting the Direction of Change: Rapid Improvement Leader Plan; (b) Managing Change: Leadership and Decision Making; (c) Engaging People: Culture and Language Project;[2] and (d) Instruction: Seeing Change Through to the Classroom. Cutting across all four topics were these key

[2]A culture and language project was selected because of the significance and relevance to BIE schools. The topic of Engaging People could be centered around any number of topics relevant to the SEA/LEA/organization using the PLA.

components of the PLA: mentoring, site visits, leadership teams, and a rapid improvement leader plan.

Mentoring

The PLA leadership team designed the program to take principals through nine months of intensive work to receive certification as a rapid improvement leader. Principals who meet the program's rigorous requirements will be awarded a certificate from Temple University. Each principal was paired with a mentor who supported the principal through the nine months. Bhatt and Behrstock (2010) identified seven factors to address when hiring and retaining qualified and effective staff. These include: preparation, recruitment and hiring, induction and *mentoring*, professional development, compensations and other financial incentives, working conditions, and performance management. In the most common scenario, however, principals go through preservice preparation programs to learn a set of skills and knowledge that research demonstrates they should have to effectively lead a school. Their continuing professional development is left to their own discretion with the assumption that they will seek out the appropriate training opportunities to continue to develop and refine their skills. However, what is missing in the equation is the complexity of individual and very different educational environments (Zellner et al., 2002). Schools serving American Indian students on remote reservations are unique on two fronts—the students they serve and the governance context in which they operate. The PLA mentors are principals and administrators selected by the BIE for their demonstrated leadership in BIE schools. Therefore, the mentors are very familiar with the settings and circumstances the BIE principals face in their own schools.

Leadership mentoring can foster reciprocal learning as well as develop collegial relationships. Principals and administrators are able to work with veteran practitioners in their own schools; they can observe leadership in action, and they can develop a deeper understanding of their own professional expectations (Browne-Ferrigno & Muth, 2001, 2004, 2006; Heck, 1995; Parkay & Hall, 1992). Mentoring enhances role-identity transformation, provides concurrent professional development both for the mentor and the principal, and expands leadership capacity throughout the organization (Crow & Matthews, 1998; Milstein, Bobroff, & Restine, 1991; Mullen & Lick, 1999).

Effective mentors provide professional feedback, role clarification, and socialization while lessening the sense of isolation that can be a byproduct of the role of leadership (Daresh, 2001). Principals can often feel caught between the needs of students, teachers, and district offices. Mentors become someone the principal can openly talk to about what he or she experiences and receive feedback and guidance. Mentorship is also an opportunity to provide customized, individualized, and embedded professional development (Browne-Ferrigno & Muth, 2004). Crow and Matthews (1998) found that principals cited mentors as their primary

source of assistance in becoming successful school leaders. Well-designed, properly implemented, and adequately monitored mentoring programs can lead to principals having more confidence in their professional competence, more effectively translating educational theory into practice, developing improved communication skills, and feeling more comfortable in their leadership role (Daresh, 2004). All of this leads to increased job satisfaction and retaining effective leaders.

The PLA provided structures for the mentors to be in constant communication with their principals. Through a custom-designed online system developed by ADI, the mentor and principal interacted; the mentor could view the work and progress of the principal; and the principal could review comments entered by the mentor relating to the work the principal had entered. Within the scope of the PLA, the principal was assigned tasks under each of the four major topics (setting direction, managing change, engaging people, and improving instruction). Principals were required to create two projects: a Culture and Language project to address engaging people and a roll out of the Common Core to improve instruction. They also developed plans with their school leadership teams using indicators of effective practice to improve leadership skills, teaming, and the instruction practices in their schools. Principals recorded their work via online systems; mentors reviewed the work via the online systems and were able to enter comments related to the quality and scope of the plans and projects. Mentors also met with their principals monthly via a webinar to discuss progress and address any challenges or celebrate successes. Mentors were the glue that held everything together, kept the principals on track, and provided support and guidance for the principals.

Site Visits

The second key component of the PLA was the two-day site visit. Principals were asked to arrange for the mentor to visit classrooms and meet with parents, tribal councils, school boards, and teachers. Mentors used a protocol to guide meetings and an observation form for each classroom visit. For the principals, the site visit was an opportunity to have the mentors walk in their shoes for a day—a chance to show off their schools and their staff. For the mentors, it was a chance to see the challenges and triumphs of their principals first hand, get to know the communities in which the schools reside, and meet the students and the staff. PLA participants identified the site visits as a rewarding experience for both principals and mentors. Based on the findings from the site-visits, mentors and principals collaboratively developed an action plan, keyed to the program's components, for moving the principal and school forward.

Leadership Teams

The third key component of the PLA was the work the principals did with their school leadership teams, guided by BIE's Native Star[3] online improvement system. Principals cannot change a school alone. The work of the leadership team was guided by a set of indicators of effective practices and nested within a culture of candor. The role of the principal as the captain of the ship was to be open and honest with the staff—to celebrate those practices that the school does well and to target those practices which needed shoring up. To be an instructional leader, the principal was expected to spend 50% of his or her time working with the staff on instructional practices. The leadership team assessed the school on the indicators of effective practice and then set a plan in motion to improve. The principal was responsible for ensuring the work progressed and that the plan supported improved outcomes for students. The principals in the PLA were required to assess indicators centered on leadership and decision making and instruction, create plans for the indicators, and implement the indicators with high quality.

Rapid Improvement Leader Plan

The final key component of the PLA was the work principals did individually, with the guidance of the mentors, on their personal leadership practices. This work was guided by a set of 14 indicators drawn from *School Turnarounds: Actions and Results* (Brinson, Kowal, & Hassel, 2008). *School Turnarounds* analyzed the habits of highly effective turnaround leaders and grouped these actions into four major areas: analysis and problem solving, driving for results, influencing stakeholders, and measuring and reporting improvement. For the PLA, the principal developed a personal plan based on the 14 indicators for turnaround leadership and implemented the plan throughout the project.

The Wrap Up

The PLA was structured to give principals a heavy dose of information right at the beginning in a three-day Basic Leadership Training. Mentors arrived two days before the principal to get an overview of the content and to become familiar with the online project management tool. Principals came for three days of intensive training. When the principals left after the three days, they had their assignments—work on indicators of effective practice with their leadership teams, plan a site visit with their mentors, design and implement a Culture and Language project, design and implement a project around the Common Core, and work on a set of indicators of effective practice for rapid improvement leaders.

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[3]Native Star is the BIE's custom-developed version of Indistar®, ADI's web-based school improvement platform based on indicators of effective practice. Within PLA, principals worked on Leadership and Decision-making indicators and Instructional indicators with their leadership teams. As individuals, principals were required to create personal plans in the Rapid Improvement Leader indicators, all housed within the Indistar® platform.

The PLA design then required principals and mentors to come back together mid-year for two days to reenergize and refocus efforts that can begin to go adrift when principals get back in the trenches of their daily work in their schools. This is not unique to American Indian schools; efforts to change schools can often be derailed when insufficient attention is given to managing the change. Heath and Heath (2010) comment on this drift:

> Many leaders pride themselves on setting high-level direction: I'll set the vision and stay out of the details. It's true that a compelling vision is critical. But it's not enough. Big-picture, hands-off leadership isn't likely to work in a change situation, because the hardest part of change—the paralyzing part—is precisely in the details. (p. 53)

In order for the principals to carry through with implementing changes required to be a rapid improvement leader in their schools, they had to stay focused on the details of school improvement. The PLA was carefully structured to give training in the beginning, a boost in the middle, structured activities, and mentoring throughout the process to keep principals focused.

The final entries have been made in the PLA project management system, and portfolios of the principals' work are being created for a final review to determine those principals who were able to not just cross the finish line, but were able to document clear evidence that their schools were changing. Comments about the PLA submitted in the system were encouraging. One principal wrote, "One of the things that I enjoy and appreciate the most is our [mentor and principal] discussions that we have about the situations that each of us go through at our schools. I feel that with [my mentor's] experience and knowledge that he truly understands what I deal with at the school level. I've learned not only from the PLA but also from the knowledge and experience of [my mentor]." Another principal commented that "it has been pointed out that there are other groups of stakeholders I need to include in this change process. I tend to get so tied up working with the staff that I forget to involve parents and community." One principal commented on the need to develop his leadership skills in light of the school's recent history:

> My leadership skills need to improve before others can reach their...potential. Due to the fragmented leadership that has been in place...for the last ten years or so...those in the leadership roles have created a survival attitude. Each has done what they felt is the correct thing to do for the department they oversee. Within each of these strands are personnel that are insecure of the needed changes to reach our potential. Building a professional attitude that delivers the best in education will require that I create a collaborative attitude within this team.

Lessons Learned for Future Cohorts

At the conclusion of the first cohort of the PLA, clear lessons emerged. The original structure of the PLA was to include three face-to-face meetings: a Basic Leadership Training, Mid-Year Training, and a Summative Meeting. Each meeting had a specific purpose—Basic Leadership Training was to introduce as much information as needed to get principals started; Mid-Year Training was to revive and encourage principals to stay the course; and the Summative Meeting was to celebration and provide a chance for principals to present their projects and receive certification. Due to sequestration, the travel budget for the BIE was essentially eliminated. Consequently, the Mid-Year Training was cancelled, and the Summative Meeting was held via webinars for principals to present their projects. Also, a few mentors were not able to conduct a site visit for their principals as planned (prior to the Mid-Year Training), so those principals received an abbreviated site-visit by someone other than their mentor at the conclusion of the PLA due to the travel restrictions. While still of some value, the timing of the site visit and not having it carried out by the mentor negated most of the intended value of the site visit. These cuts significantly changed the structure and scope of the PLA and reflect a practical reality that has historically undermined many change efforts; competition for time and resources. That being said, the principals who completed the PLA and made it to the finish line found value in the process, as stated by one principal,

> The Principal Leadership Academy experience has helped my leadership at the school level be more focused. The PLA reinforced the ideas that I had been implementing and provided support for my plans moving forward. I was able to focus on setting directions, managing changes, and engaging people while improving instruction. The PLA has allowed me to continue to lead for change with confidence.

Another principal said: "As a leader I have been more open to suggestions, I have learned to delegate more. Through the delegating of tasks I have learned that team members like to feel that they are contributing in a positive way." For another principal, she realized the value of change:

> For many years, my job has felt like a juggler with 10 plates that are thrown into the air, and each one caught just before it crashes to the floor. I pick it up, and throw it really high so I have time to catch the next plate before it crashes to the floor….Changing one area always impacts other areas of the school, and making changes for improvement is constant. A school that stays static cannot improve, and can't even stay on the same level. Change is essential, and managing that change is an essential part of a Principal's job.

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