



The POWER *of* CONNECTIVITY

MULTILAYERED
PROGRAM GROOMS
ASSISTANT PRINCIPALS'
LEADERSHIP SKILLS

By Eleanor Drago-Severson and Janet Lynch Aravena

Every teacher knows that exposure to new information is one small part in the teaching and learning process. Before students truly learn a concept, they must actively engage with material — discussing, sharing, seeing, and practicing it — to make it their own. In other words, they need to *connect* with concepts and have opportunities to apply them spontaneously. As we know, learning involves making connections — or what we call “the power of connectivity.” This powerful process is central to supporting children’s and adults’ learning and development.

Here we share one powerful program that is built around connectivity. This program focuses specifically on professional development for assistant principals as they

grow in their efforts to become more effective leaders and ultimately assume a principalship.

The Executive Leadership Institute is the professional development arm of the New York City Council of Supervisors and Administrators, a not-for-profit organization designed to offer relevant professional development for school leaders in New York City. The Executive Leadership Institute’s programs include professional development for principals, newly appointed assistant principals, education administrators, and day care directors. In 2005, the institute created the Advanced Leadership Program for Assistant Principals and carefully incorporated into its structure the powerful and multilayered connectivity process in support of adult learning.

THE URGENT NEED

The Advanced Leadership Program for Assistant Principals was created in 2005 in response to New York City's clear need to build capacity within the existing pool of assistant principals aspiring to principalship. Principal retirements and New York's small schools initiative created a demand for many new principals. In addition, the leadership program was designed to provide a venue for assistant principals with two or more years of experience to grow from intensive leadership development. This organizational need and the importance of strong, inspired, effective school leaders at all levels were the foundational inspirations for the program.

PROGRAM COMPONENTS

The leadership program is a yearlong learning experience offering assistant principals the opportunity to hone existing skills and explore the complex nature of decision making and authentic leadership required for the principalship. The program embodies the best practices known to support adult learning. Assistant principals with two or more years of administrative experience are accepted based on their applications and nominations of principals and superintendents.

The learning experience includes four components:

1. Advanced leadership seminars;
2. Mentoring of assistant principals by New York City principals;
3. Networking and coaching buddies; and
4. Optional after-school sessions.

1. Leadership seminars

The program begins with three full-day leadership seminars in July, followed by four seminars during the academic year. In the full-day seminars, participants work with and learn from leading educators and authors. Seminars focus on building effective leadership skills in areas such as communication, adult learning, and developmental leadership (Drago-Severson, 2004, 2009), change leadership (Wagner et al., 2005), instructional rounds (City, Elmore, Fiarman, & Teitel, 2009), coaching conversations (Cheliotis & Reilly, 2010), collecting and analyzing data,

supporting learning for all students, and collaboration and team building. These topics are based on and closely aligned with the New York City Department of Education school leadership competencies, which, in New York City, are foundational to principal selection and evaluations. The five competencies are:

- **Personal leadership:** Fosters a culture of excellence through personal leadership;
- **Data:** Uses data to set high learning goals and increase student achievement;
- **Curriculum and instruction:** Leverages deep knowledge of curriculum, instruction, and assessment to improve student learning;
- **Staff and community:** Develops staff, appropriately shares leadership, and builds strong school communities; and
- **Resources and operations:** Manages resources and operations to improve student learning.

An integral part of the first seminar in July is participants' competency-based self-assessment using the Department of Education rubrics. Participants also write two SMART goals related to growing their school leadership competencies during the year. They share their goals with their mentor principal, coaching buddy, and mentee cohort. Throughout the year, this support system connects the competencies and the individual goals. A school leadership competency post-assessment is part of the reflective process in the final seminar, which occurs in April.

Seminar topic emphasis is refined each year to reflect particular Department of Education initiatives, prior seminar evaluation findings, and needs for the current year. A recent refinement in 2009-10 was the creation of a buddy partnership, where participants are paired to enhance communication and networking.

Professional resources accompany each seminar, and participants are expected to complete assigned readings to prepare for the discussion topics. Resources include books such as Drago-Severson's *Helping Teachers Learn* (2004) and *Leading Adult Learning* (2009), McEwan's *10 Traits*

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Photo by JANET LYNCH ARAVENA

Connected through the Advanced Leadership Program for Assistant Principals (from left): Kimberly Fisher, Janet Hackshaw Smith, mentor principal Mary Padilla, Iris Clariot, Craig Monteverde, and Marybelle Ferreira.

of *Highly Effective Principals* (2003), and Cheliotis and Reilly's *Coaching Conversations* (2010). Assigned readings enable participants to enter seminars with a working knowledge of the topic and resources for future professional inquiry.

2. Mentoring

Leadership program mentors are active New York City principals with distinguished records of service. The Department of Education and the Council of Supervisors and Administrators choose them jointly. Each of the 12 mentors works with a cohort of five assistant principals.

The mentoring experience begins in September with a three-hour mentor/mentee get-acquainted workshop and dinner. Together, mentors and mentees explore the mentoring relationship that they are about to experience from a developmental perspective. Mentors and mentees engage in dialogue with each other in small groups. They explore questions such as:

- What are your conceptions of what makes for an effective and growth-enhancing mentoring relationship?
- What are your hopes for the mentoring relationship in the leadership program?
- What, if any, are your concerns about being able to engage in this relationship at this time?
- What challenges might interfere with making time to engage both in the program and your mentoring relationship?

After reflecting privately, all are invited to share their thoughts with their mentor principal and their cohort.

Finally, participants exchange contact information and determine dates for visits and meetings during the year. The workshop and dinner is an important first step, not only for the mentoring relationship, but also for learning about the cohort and creating networking opportunities.

Mentors visit each assistant principal in his or her cohort twice during the academic year. During this one-on-one visit, the mentor observes the assistant principal performing routine duties and interacting with the principal and staff. The mentor

also discusses the mentee's leadership competency self-assessment and goals. The information the mentor gathers from each of the mentees is important as the mentor plans for the three full-day meetings he or she will host throughout the year for the entire cohort.

Agendas for these three full-day cohort visits to the mentor's school can include classroom observations; instructional walk-throughs; seminar topic connections to everyday school life; data discussions; budget presentation and cabinet meetings; or mentor-cohort discussions focused on leadership competencies and mentees' collective progress in reaching their goals. The final seminar in April brings all mentor/mentee cohorts together for a day of sharing and reflection among the groups and a revisiting of the year's learning.

3. Networking

Working in a school can be an isolated, insular experience. Many educators rarely venture beyond their own school walls, and networking opportunities are slim. They seldom have extended time to engage in collegial discussions around best practices and improvement strategies. Networking opportunities are paramount in the leadership program's design.

The mentoring cohort, for example, is carefully designed to bring together mentees and mentors from like school levels facing similar challenges. This encourages exchanges centered on best practices. For example, a mentor principal with a large high school English language learner population would likely be an excellent mentor for assistant principals in high schools with similar student bodies.

Seating arrangements at seminars are also opportunities for relationship building, networking, and development. The program coordinator considers the seminar focus each time when determining grouping for the 60 assistant principals. Sometimes, grouping aligns with the mentor/mentee cohort. Other times, cohorts are placed together to offer opportunities for fuller discussions. For example, seating participants with their buddy or

with those from different school levels offers different benefits and opportunities to hear and appreciate alternative perspectives. Some seminars groupings even change within the day. Every opportunity is taken to maximize networking possibilities.

4. Optional after-school sessions

In addition to required seminars and mentoring sessions, the leadership program offers the following after-school optional sessions:

- Workshops to introduce participants to the components of the New York City Department of Education principal candidate pool. The Department of Education created this selection process to ensure that outstanding qualified leaders become school principals. In order to apply for a principal position, candidates must first gain entry to the pool. In the workshops, participants learn the criteria for both the essay and the subsequent in-person evaluation, a group interview.
- Informal networking sessions give participants additional opportunities to meet with colleagues. Sessions are designed to meet the needs of participants who request more discussion and information sharing around a particular topic (data, adult learning styles, etc.). The leadership program coordinator, leadership coach, or a mentor facilitates the discussion.

CONNECTIVITY

Connections create the potential for wonderful things to happen. Isolation, on the other hand, is often a death sentence for new ideas, knowledge, and growth.

The leadership program design is one of multilayered connectivity in the teaching and learning process, including the connections between leadership competencies and seminar learning and application. The program also emphasizes connections between mentor and mentee, and among those in the cohorts and buddy system. Describing the implicit care and trust fostered through these connections, assistant principals have shared the following comments:

- “The leadership program has provided me with a clearer way of looking at the big picture when it comes to running a school. Establishing priorities, motivating staff and students, building community, and maintaining a fresh and optimistic look at the possibilities for improvement are just some of the topics that have inspired me. Networking with my colleagues has been an invaluable part of the program.”
- “All the way from developing a vision for leading and learning, reflecting on our own styles of communication and those of the people we work with, working effectively in establishing professional learning communities, managing human resources, and sharing in the decision-making process to promote learning for all students, this program has been incredibly helpful in honing my skills as an educational leader.”

- “The mentoring aspect of this program adds a critical and practical dimension. My mentor helped me reflect on my own strengths and on some areas for improvement. He shared his leadership skills and was able to answer questions about curriculum, funding, scheduling, and everyday life in a school building. This mentor relationship assisted me greatly in my own professional growth as a leader.”
- “The experience that the speakers bring is priceless. The books provided are very well-chosen, and the networking that takes place enhances the possibilities to share the positive, and look at the challenges with a better-equipped perspective.”

The leadership program offers a year of professional development and a year to build relationships established in an atmosphere of trust, safety, and confidentiality. It is a safe place for people to grow together, a place in which authentic connectivity builds new and stronger school leaders.

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