

Paula M. Evans and Nancy Mohr, "Professional Development For Principals: Seven Core Beliefs," *Phi Delta Kappan*, Vol. 80, No. 7, March 1999, pp. 530-532.

By Paula M. Evans and Nancy Mohr

Can principals' professional development truly improve practice? Can we encourage new behaviors that allow principals to make a genuine difference in their schools? Can we support principals as they strive to be grounded and focused, bold and unafraid? Ms. Evans and Ms. Mohr share answers to these questions — answers learned through their work at the Annenberg Institute for School Reform.

PROGRAMS IN school leadership abound. Participants often remember the workshops as stimulating and productive and assume that their own effectiveness will improve more or less automatically as a result of their attendance. Too often, however, the workshop experience seems to fade surprisingly quickly. The principal returns to school with little more than a few insights that have already begun to dim.

We have asked ourselves, "Can principals' professional development truly improve practice? Can we encourage new behaviors that allow principals to make a genuine difference in their schools? Can we support principals as they strive to be grounded and focused, bold and unafraid?" At the Annenberg Institute for School Reform, we have learned how to help principals become much more effective in their schools. Moreover, our experience has taught us how to support the principal's growing effectiveness once the formal workshop has drawn to a close.

Annenberg Principals, all in the midst of substantial efforts to improve their schools, are drawn from schools across the country. They work in urban, rural, and suburban settings and in schools with all grade-level combinations. Participants make at least a year's commitment to the group. The seminar meets four times per year, and we encourage regular communication between meetings. Each seminar group is no larger than 35.

Teaching principals how to lead schools by giving them predigested "in-basket" training hardly leads to new thinking about leadership, teaching, or learning. We expect participants to read and write in preparation for each session, to articulate their own goals and dilemmas, and to be constructively critical of their own work and that of their colleagues. The learning experience promotes patterns of behavior and new habits that we hope to see brought back to the school.

We also know that the learning experience for principals must be intellectually rigorous and must provoke the questioning of long-held assumptions. Reinforcing

old patterns and hearing speakers who mouth familiar platitudes about the “effective” principal may make people feel comfortable, but it does not lead to substantive change. We deliberately encourage principals to question their practice, attempt change, and hold one another’s feet to the fire.

Our work is consciously shaped by a set of seven beliefs. These beliefs are complex — they are conundrums not to be resolved but to be wrestled with. Their very complexity mirrors that of principals’ daily dilemmas and long-term challenges.

Seven Beliefs

1. Principals’ learning is personal and yet takes place most effectively while working in groups. The centerpiece of the Annenberg Principals’ work is continuous discussion in small and large groups. Work in groups reinforces the value of building on one another’s thinking and of being willing to let go of earlier thinking in order to construct knowledge together. Our work as facilitators is not to “deliver the goods” but to design the ways in which this learning takes place.

The relationships that evolve out of these ongoing seminars sustain the work between gatherings. Participants stay in touch through e-mail and telephone — and sometimes airplanes. They become very familiar with one another’s contexts and are therefore able to encourage and prod one another in helpful ways. They make commitments to one another and build a web of “lateral accountability.”

2. Principals foster more powerful faculty and student learning by focusing on their own learning. Principals have difficulty discovering that it is not selfish to take time for their own learning. To lead well requires that principals be learners. Our work is focused on their learning, their interpretation of text, their issues, their problem solving. It is terribly tempting for principals to want to focus on what “others” (teachers, students, superintendents) should do differently. We bring principals back to themselves and, at the same time, stay close to the core of school — students, teachers, and content. What does that triangle look like in your school? What will you — not your faculty, your parents, your central office but you — do to facilitate positive changes in that triangle?

Every time we gather, we examine a piece or two of student work, and all Annenberg Principals include examples of student work in their professional portfolios. One participant noted, “The sharing of student work pointed out how much that work reveals about the culture of the school as well as about curriculum and level of performance.” Again, the focus is on the principal’s understanding of that student work and how her leadership relates to the quality of that work.

3. While we honor principals' thinking and voices, we want to push principals to move beyond their assumptions. One way to get beyond comfortable but ineffectual practices and habits is to learn different ways of communicating that involve counterintuitive behavior. Text-based discussions are an example of this approach. Participants are required to stick very closely to an intellectually challenging text and to milk it for new knowledge. Principals are not allowed to simply tell stories. Discussions are framed by questions designed to be open-ended and to allow for the building of new knowledge. We learn to listen hard and to expand on or change our original thinking.

We often move beyond the participants' comfort zone by introducing questions and issues that are central to everyone's work and that are at the same time terribly difficult to confront — expectations, standards, race, and power, to name a few. After working with texts by Grace Paley and Lisa Delpit, one participant wrote, "The civil discourse and rigorous analysis of such difficult issues are marvelous. If only my faculty meetings were like this."

4. Focused reflection takes time away from "doing the work," and yet it is essential. Traditionally, professional development for principals has assumed that acquiring new techniques is the bottom line. If only administrators knew how to evaluate teachers properly. If only they had practiced the skills necessary to deal with an unhappy parent. While there is much to be said for teaching the skills directly related to management tasks, principals who are not thoughtful and who lack the ability to plan, analyze the implications of the plan, and then reflect back on what worked and what didn't are doomed to make poor decisions.

It is, therefore, important to build into the professional development experience many opportunities and ways to reflect. Before each session, every principal writes about a critical school issue and frames a related question with which he or she is wrestling. These issues are difficult and confounding. If they were simple and if they responded to simple solutions, they would have been solved long ago and would not occupy our time. Here are questions of the type we believe are worth principals' time and thought:

- How do I genuinely include all voices in the discourse and at the same time have a strong, clear agenda of my own?
- What is the difference between giving folks enough time and enabling them to procrastinate?
- How do I balance the needs of the teachers with the needs of the students?
- Do I avoid getting into classrooms because I don't know what to do about them?

- How do I make use of standards without letting them obfuscate what's really important?
- How do I stop waking up at 3 a.m.?

The principals have time to write regularly during each session, and they share their writing. They are asked to reflect orally in the full group and in smaller triads. Over time, participants learn the value of such written and oral reflection, and they grow in their ability to analyze their own behavior and feelings. They build in time in their schools for faculty and staff members to reflect. They find that time to reflect publicly leads to more effective practice and to greater consensus, even around difficult issues.

5. It takes strong leadership in order to have truly democratic learning. Leaders are most truly democratic when they listen carefully and then design the work for the group. The principals observe the facilitators working as a teaching team. They remark on our shared convictions and our willingness to disagree publicly. They then work in teams. While immersed in their own experience, they continuously step back to reflect on their role as leaders of teams back in their schools. What am I doing? What does this mean about my own learning? What does this mean about the learning of the teachers I teach back in school? And what does this mean about students' learning? How do we build teams? The principals learn that disconnected team-building activities have little impact. Instead, they should focus on demanding, supporting, and exemplifying rigorous thinking and performance.

One participant wrote, "There are times I need to be more assertive, saying consensus is fine, but right now we're going to do this, and here's why. Interestingly enough, my staff just evaluated me, and they like that I'm doing that. It took me six years to reach this point."

6. Rigorous planning is necessary for flexible and responsive implementation. Even though there are many critical issues on people's minds, we accomplish the most when we have one "essential question" and focus all our work around it. Each meeting of the Annenberg Principals must connect to and build on the previous ones. At each session, we spend time:

- creating shared understandings — connecting people to one another; reviewing agendas, goals, and norms; examining our process;
- engaging in intellectual dialogue and debate — reading and discussing recent research and publications and hearing from speakers who might provoke new thinking; and

- planning specific applications of learning — planning next steps back home, creating and critiquing a plan of action, assuming responsibility for one's own progress as well as that of others in the group.

Given this familiar framework, we are free to examine specific issues or concerns raised by the participants.

7. New learning depends on protected dissonance. Providing a safe setting within which to stretch makes all the difference. We get to know one another. We form small groups within the larger group in order to foster ongoing critical friendships that are sustained between our meetings. As the leaders of the group, we must model the willingness to be uncomfortable, wrong, and maybe foolish. Can we muster the energy and persistence we demand of participants to take risks and ask tough questions? In the midst of this very serious work it is, in part, a sense of humor that gives principals the elasticity and the willingness to face tough choices and difficult times. We have some fun — we eat and laugh together. Sometimes we cry together.

Paying close attention to the intricacies of principals' learning and to how their learning relates to their role and responsibilities has changed the way we work. Professional development used to be assessed by "feedback sheets" filled out at the end of a session. Rate the session 1-5. Did everybody feel good? Now we are more demanding of ourselves. We ask: What is something you are doing differently as a direct result of our work together this past summer? If principals aren't changing their practice, our work hasn't made an impact.

Principals' work is essential. Principals who reexamine their belief systems and transform their practice facilitate change at their schools. Good professional development for leadership scrutinizes its own belief system, content, and process. Everyone, including the facilitators, stretches and grows, and that truly makes a difference.

PAULA M. EVANS is the director of professional development at the Annenberg Institute for School Reform, Brown University, Providence, R.I. NANCY MOHR was formerly a principal in New York City and is currently a consultant on leadership there.