

District models principals' training in instructional leadership

By Wangui Njuguna

As the commencement season comes to an end, the Chambersburg Area (Pa.) School District's class of 2009 includes 26 principals and curriculum staff who received their instructional leadership certificates recently from the National Institute for School Leadership Inc.

In January 2008, Pennsylvania enacted Act 45, which mandates that principals meet continuing professional education certification requirements under the Pennsylvania Inspired Leadership Initiative. The program emphasizes professional development designed around what public school students are expected to learn.

Chambersburg decided to take a team approach that enrolled every principal from its 17 schools in the 18-month NISL leadership series at the same time, an approach Pennsylvania's Education Secretary Gerald Zahorchak called "courageous, bold and smart."

As a growing body of research points to principal leadership as a determinant of school success, Minnesota, New Hampshire, Massachusetts and Texas are among states that are expanding school administrators' roles beyond building management to include learning strategies and setting school cultural norms that lead to student achievement.

The goal is to get principals to spend 60 percent to 80 percent of their time improving instructional practices, said NISL President and CEO Robert Hughes.

Learning objectives

In Pennsylvania, a committee of teachers and superintendents first developed the leadership standards to set uniform expectations for a training program. The state Education Department then partnered with Washington, D.C.-based NISL to deliver the professional development with a focus on school administrators':

- Knowledge about how to think and plan strategically.
- Ability to access and use data to inform decision-making.
- Leadership capacity to create a culture of teaching and learning, with an emphasis on learning.

Chambersburg is the first district in the state where all principals have undergone the training. The district worked with NISL to design professional development that involved not only principals, but all school staff with leadership roles, including assistant principals, curriculum directors, and special education directors, with the goal of getting them to speak using a "common language," said Chris Bigger, the district's director of curriculum and instruction.

"There was never really a whole-scale approach before," he said. "Now we have the same platform;

when you go from building to building, everyone is using the same language. We have a shared vision."

The team approach allowed for novice and veteran administrators to share their experiences.

Lisa Crouse, assistant principal at J. Frank Faust Junior High School, said the institute has shifted the focal point from simply ensuring that teachers are providing students with instruction to addressing whether students are "actively engaged" in learning.

School administrators learn how to work collaboratively with teachers to use data as a monitoring tool to identify students in need of early intervention services "before students fail," she said.

Team-oriented training

Launched in 2005, the NISL Executive Development program has graduated 3,600 school administrators in 14 states. Created as an \$11 million initiative of the National Center on Education and the Economy, the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Broad Foundation, the NewSchools Venture Fund, and the Stupski Foundation, the program uses best practices found in the private sector.

"Working in cohorts is something we borrowed from doctors, lawyers, the military and engineering," Hughes said. "There is strength in the insight and wisdom from collective work."

The NISL program emphasizes the role of principals "as strategic thinkers, instructional leaders, and creators of a just, fair and caring culture in which all students meet high standards," according to its mission statement.

There are 14 leadership units with offerings for specialized institutes on serving students with disabilities and English-language learners, and for fostering knowledge of instructional approaches in science, math and literacy.

Hughes explained that while the training is not geared toward getting principals to be content experts, it is a movement away from one-time classroom observations to get school administrators to hone skills "to move the instruction forward from good to great" so they can interact with teachers as coaches and mentors.

In Chambersburg, Zahorchak explained that 70 percent of the training was done while the school administrators were on the job, and it involved them in an analysis of the particular needs of their school buildings with online or weekend face-to-face meetings that addressed common areas of concern across the district.

The state will use lessons learned from Chambersburg's experience to guide other districts about districtwide implementation, including how to schedule training, monitor school administrators' progress, and evaluate the training's impact on their students and teachers, Zahorchak said.