

# **High Performance Learning Communities Project Final Report (0017{4.7.c}) Contract #RC-96-137002**

This is a report on the third year of the High Performance Learning Communities project which is studying an urban schooling success story in Community School District # 2 in New York City. The option year two research in District #2 dealt primarily with the challenges connected to the establishment and maintenance of strong school leadership. Principals have been described as the linchpin of District #2's reform strategy and the demands placed upon them are high. As instructional leaders in their schools, they spear-head the implementation of the district's content-driven initiatives in mathematics and literacy, literally working side-by-side with their teachers to improve instruction. At the same time, they are responsible for all the traditional duties of a principal, from building maintenance to budgeting to parent relations.

Under the best of circumstances these multiple roles are difficult to negotiate. Moreover, the role of instructional leadership in the service of increased student learning is not one that most principals have played in the past. These have, however, been a common set of expectations for principals in District #2 for some time. In this sense, District #2 can be seen as a precursor for all districts facing emerging issues of leadership.

District #2 leadership has not been blind to the pressures that high expectations and increases in performance accountability place upon their school leaders. They have already developed an extensive support system for principals as well as a nascent recruiting and induction system for building leadership within the district. These systems attempt to support new principals as they learn the nuts and bolts of leadership (Elmore & Burney, 1999) while pushing experienced principals to deepen their practice (Fink & Resnick, 1999) and helping them all to become instructional leaders in multiple-subject areas (Stein & D'Amico, 1999).

What emerges from the research undertaken this year is the critical role that principals serve in District #2's instructional improvement plan. We report here on some major conclusions that can be drawn from the third-year studies of the district, school and classroom learning communities to illustrate and better illuminate the role that principals play, the challenges they face, and the supports the district provides for them. References to the papers reporting the research at each level of the system are given for those who wish to inquire more deeply into the roles principals play in District #2.

## Need for Strong School Leaders

Increasing pressure for school-level accountability for student performance is pushing principals into bearing primary responsibility for school improvement. Yet, those principals currently in service are often ill-equipped to serve as instructional leaders. Despite claims of “excellent or good preparation in instructional leadership” most principals spend little time serving in that role (Graham, 1997). In a study conducted by Michael Graham (1997) involving over 500 elementary, middle and senior high school principals, more than two-thirds (68%) considered themselves to be general managers, while only one-fourth (25%) perceived themselves to be instructional leaders. The average principal reported spending between ten and twelve hours per day at work, with the majority of this time focused by "administrivia", defined as routine duties, paperwork, and phone calls. Principals reported spending less than five hours per week on curriculum, instruction and teacher evaluations.

District #2, on the other hand, has a long history of commitment to content-driven reform which requires principals to spend much of their time on instruction related activities (Elmore & Burney, 1996). As part of their role as instructional leaders in literacy, principals run teacher inservices in the school on instructional techniques in literacy, make decisions on the professional development supports each of their teachers needs in literacy, visit classrooms regularly to provide feedback to teachers on their literacy instruction, and participate in district-wide study groups focused on improving the district’s literacy program. Many of these principals were chosen due to their deep knowledge of literacy instruction and District #2 built an impressive system for supporting them in their role as instructional leaders (Fink & Resnick, 1999).

As District #2’s newer Mathematics Initiative gains prominence and focus within the district’s reform work, the limits of the current support system for principals are being tested. In order to provide intellectual leadership for instruction in more than one subject area, principals must understand the manner in which classroom practices and curricular programming differ across them, as well as the different needs that teachers have with respect to each subject area. Only then will they be able to wisely select among the plethora of professional development programs, to evaluate the quality of instructional practices, and to validly select and interpret the results of student assessments. Yet, the principals and District #2 leadership generally know less about mathematics than they do literacy and until recently mathematics has played a much smaller role than literacy within the support system for principals. The need for principals and district leaders to serve as instructional leaders in this second subject area has raised questions about how deeply and in what ways one must know a subject to serve as an instructional leader (Stein & D’Amico, 1999).

The challenges of instructional leadership in multiple-subject areas are even more numerous for new principals. Elmore & Burney (1999) note that the demand for principals is growing nationally, while the number of highly capable applicants is dropping (Anderson, 1991). As the pool of administrators who began their careers in the 60's reach retirement age, many are taking advantage of retirement incentives offered in many districts and states. About one half of the districts surveyed in 1998 by the Educational Research Service reported that they did not have enough qualified candidates to fill vacant principal positions. The shortages occur among rural districts (52%), suburban districts (45%) and urban districts (47%). The shortages also occur at all educational levels: elementary (47%); middle schools (55%), and senior high (55%).

District #2 is not immune to the difficulties associated with recruiting qualified principals. About three years ago, Anthony Alvarado, then Superintendent of the district, and Elaine Fink, then Deputy Superintendent, began to see a looming crisis. Most (77%) of their principals were women, recruited out of the ranks of exceptional teachers, moved into principalships in mid-career, and now, in many cases, approaching the final years of their careers. As more experienced principals approached retirement or were lured away from the district by higher-paying suburban districts, District #2 faced the difficult task of finding highly-qualified candidates for the vacated positions. The knowledge and skill levels of these candidates had to be very high by the district's standards or the district would risk losing ground in its overall strategy of improvement. These concerns led the district to develop a recruitment and induction system for principals. This system was able to build upon the already substantial assistance provided by District #2's extensive professional development and support system for principals.

## **Professional Development & Support System for School Leaders**

Fink and Resnick (1999) describe the professional development system for principals in District #2 as an example of what cognitive scientists have come to call *cognitive apprenticeship* (Collins, Brown & Newmann, 1989). The emerging theory of cognitive apprenticeship attempts to take the lessons of apprenticeship structures into modern domains of learning. These differ in two important ways from traditional craft apprenticeships. First, intellect is valued in its own right, not just as a means of learning practical skills and knowledge. Second, variability and invention are valued over simple repetition of the master's way of doing things. The District #2 professional development program for principals is shaped by both of these values. Shared intellectual activity is a hallmark. People are reading and thinking together all the time. But the shared theories of learning and instruction (the "intellectual glue" of the system) are played out in highly individualized learning settings—in small study and support groups, in peer interactions, and in a structured system of coaching and supervision that is individually tailored.

As we have outlined in an earlier report (HPLC Annual Report, 1998) at the core of District #2's design is a concept of nested learning communities: individual classrooms are conceived as learning communities guided and facilitated by the teacher; schools are thought of as learning organizations that, under their principals' leadership, are continuously improving their capacity to teach children; and the district is structured as a learning community which focuses on improving the ability of adult educators throughout the system to provide quality instruction for children. Their views on the nature of learning are consistent in each level of the nested learning community which provides coherence to their efforts at supporting the learning of both adults and students (Stein, D'Amico & Johnstone, 1999). Thus, like their instructional program in literacy and their professional development system for teachers, District #2's professional development system for principals contains a number of interlocking components. Each of these components provides a different kind of support for the principals; together, they function to meet a wide-range of principal needs (Fink & Resnick, 1999).

*Intellectual Glue: Principals' conferences and institutes.* Monthly principals' conferences ensure that District #2's school leaders share a common view of the kind of learning environments and opportunities its schools should be providing to their diverse student body. Every principal in the district attends these day long meetings. They learn about new instructional initiatives or discuss and evaluate old ones, often in the light of the district's achievement results. Frequently, the conferences are held at district schools so that observations of and reflections on student work and teaching practice are part of the days activities. As rich as they are, these conferences are not sufficient to convey all of the information that principals will need to serve as instructional leaders in schools implementing the often complex instructional reform that the district espouses. To build deeper knowledge, each principal is required to enroll in at least one institute or seminar focused on a specific instructional program of some kind. These are sometimes provided by the district, but more frequently the principals attend those offered by other organizations. Most go to several a year.

*Leadership for instruction: Support groups and study groups.* Support groups run by the superintendent or deputy superintendents for new principals or principals with particularly challenging schools to lead (e.g. the Focused Literacy Network) are designed to build leadership skills. In these support groups, principals share their challenges and problems in order to receive feedback and advice from the group. This problem centered strategy is aimed at creating a culture of mutual dependency, one in which the other principals and the superintendent and deputies are viewed as a supportive colleagues. Similarly, principals' study groups are formed in response to principals' needs based on their schools' goals and objectives to study particular content areas or issues of instructional practice. They may be led by district leaders or the principals themselves.

*Communities of practice: Peer learning.* Principals also receive support directly from their peers. Some of these support mechanisms are informal ones. Principals find one or two “buddies” among the other principals with whom they meet informally, but frequently, to share problems and strategies. Sometimes professional buddies become long-term friends; other times they have short-term relationships in which one principal asks another for help on some current problem. Other peer learning opportunities are more formal, as when principals visit one another’s schools to learn about strong practices put into place around the district. These “intervisitations” may be initiated by the principals themselves, or at the behest of the district leadership to meet the specific needs of a principal.

*Making sure it really happens: Individualized coaching.* Finally, each principal receives individualized support and coaching through a number of mechanisms in the district. They write and receive feedback on a “Goals and Objectives” statement each year, which helps them focus the improvement efforts of their school. They have considerable control over their own school budgets and a yearly budget meeting with the district leaders helps them develop and tailor their monetary plans in light of their goals and objectives. In some cases, and particularly for new principals, a mentoring relationship is established with an experienced principal to provide more individualized assistance. Finally, the Supervisory WalkThrough, is the occasion on which all elements of a principal’s activity are considered. Conducted in the context of an on-the-ground review of instruction, learning and achievement in every classroom in the school, it is perhaps the focal event of the individual coaching process.

Together these various professional development venues provide substantial support for District #2 principals. They expose them to new ideas, provide opportunities for discussion and networking, make examples of strong practice accessible, and support learning in practice. It’s a strong system and one the principals themselves value.

The system was built initially to support District #2’s literacy initiative. The topics covered in principals’ conferences, support groups and study groups centered largely on issues of literacy learning and instruction. Supervisory WalkThroughs were usually conducted in the morning when the bulk of literacy instruction took place in order to better focus on students’ literacy work and teachers’ instructional practice in literacy. Intervisitations were often scheduled to observe and reflect on new or strong literacy practices. As the District #2’s Mathematics Initiative begins to gain prominence, the focus of professional development for principals is shifting (Stein & D’Amico, 1999).

More time in the principals' conferences is being devoted to mathematics and to comparing instructional and supervisory strategies in mathematics and literacy. Since the superintendent and both deputies are literacy experts, they have hired a strong leader for their mathematics initiative. The Director of the Mathematics Initiative is beginning to go on WalkThroughs with one of the deputies to establish a supervisory path for mathematics, and the superintendent is beginning to include mathematics in her observations and discussions with principals during Supervisory WalkThroughs. These changes are on-going, however, and at this time the professional development and support system for principals in mathematics is not as strong as it is in literacy. It may not be either wise or reasonable to expect principals to have the same depth of knowledge in both literacy and mathematics. Instead, the district will need to determine what "leadership content knowledge" principals need in each subject in order to serve as instructional leaders in their schools and help them obtain support from others in subject areas where they are not as strong (Stein & D'Amico, 1999).

## **Recruitment & Induction System for School Leaders**

As an acknowledgment of the crisis in the availability of new principals, District #2 initiated two new activities, one focused on recruitment, the other on induction. The first was the Aspiring Leaders Program (ALPS), designed to recruit new candidates for the principalship from the ranks of teachers, professional developers, and support staff within the district and provide them with an intensive one-year program leading to certification for the principalship. The program, begun in 1996-97, is a collaboration between District #2 and a local university. Essentially, the district selects the participants, 8-10 per cohort, and pays the full cost of the program for each participant. The curriculum is jointly planned and taught by district personnel (usually senior principals) and by faculty of the cooperating higher education institution. District personnel contribute specific skills and knowledge related to the principal's role in professional development and instructional improvement; university faculty contribute more general content related to the state's certification requirements in such subjects as law and finance. Hence, ALPS provides a steady supply of credentialed candidates for the principalship in the district, who have already passed an initial quality screening by virtue of their experience in the district and their selection from a competitive pool, and a preparation program that meets the district's own requirements for entry-level knowledge of the principalship. Participants perform shadowing activities and internships as part of the program and are often drafted into administrative support roles, such as running supplemental summer programs, after they have completed the program. In the last year, the district has introduced a requirement for admission to the program that participants must commit to accepting one of the first three principalships they are offered in the district. Since

many of the participants come out of the ranks of talented teachers and professional developers in the district, they are sometimes reluctant to give up their positions for the principalship, even though they are credentialled and trained.

Learning to be a principal is hard work and District #2 recognized that initial training received through the ALPS program would not be sufficient. A study of six new District #2 principals in the 1999-2000 school year, shows that the challenges they face are significant (Elmore & Burney, 1999). They are striving to find strategies for working with resistant or struggling teachers, and in some cases for handling a vast number of new teachers. They are learning how to observe and write about teachers, how to work with the school chapter leader of the teacher's union, and how to order supplies. They are trying to find time to develop content or pedagogical content knowledge in areas where they feel they are lacking and trying to balance their role as an instructional leader with their other more mundane duties. All this while some of them are not even really certain they are either ready or want to become a principal. Although each of these new principals can tap into the general support system for principals provided by District #2, district leaders felt they needed some additional support, which they provide in the form of principal mentors.

"Buddying" and networking—both forms of mentoring in some respects—have been a part of the array of professional development activities for principals from the beginning of the district's improvement strategy. This new component is merely a more formalized and structured version of principal mentorship focused largely, though not entirely, on new principals. What was new about the mentoring system, introduced in the 1997-98 school year, was the formal designation of mentors from the ranks of senior and high quality principals, their assignment to specific principals, and perhaps most importantly, formal acknowledgment of the mentor's role by giving them supplemental compensation for their work. Principals assigned to mentors are not exclusively new principals, some are more experienced and judged by district administrators to need help; but all new principals are assigned to mentors as part of their induction process. Interviews with the new principals of 1999-2000 indicate that many find the advice and support of their mentors invaluable.

As in their previous work (1997), Elmore and Burney find in their study of principal recruitment and induction that all important strategic issues in large scale instructional improvement are essentially problems of adjusting the general to the particular. In other words, systemic improvement works in District #2 because district administrators are able to adjust their overall expectations for all schools to the markedly variable specifics of individual schools and their communities (Elmore & Burney, 1997). Likewise, principal recruitment and induction in

District #2 is essentially the act of fitting the district's requirements for instructional leadership as part of its overall strategy of instructional improvement to the particularities of the school and its community and the particular talents and personal characteristics of the individual principal (Elmore & Burney, 1999). Recruitment is, from the district's perspective, a matter of finding and growing a pool of talent for instructional leadership and then attempting to match the characteristics of the individual with the demands of a particular school. From the new principal's perspective, recruitment is a process of deciding, first, whether to enter the principalship, and second, whether a particular school is a good fit with their aspirations and talents. Induction, from the district's perspective, is a matter of using the professional development and management tools at its disposal to tailor its support for principals to the particular problems of adjustment presented by a particular school. From the new principal's perspective, induction is a matter of finding the support they need to make the adjustment to the particular demands of their new jobs in the new environment.

## **Continuing Challenges**

One challenge facing District #2's support system for principals may possibly come from a recent study of the relationship between professional development and student achievement (Harwell, D'Amico, Stein & Gatti, 2000). District #2's reform strategy relies heavily upon the ability of its principals to serve as instructional leaders. One of their key roles is as supervisor and broker of their teachers' professional development. As in other districts, District #2 educators believe that strong and continuous professional development will improve teachers' skills, confidence and knowledge, and will therefore develop their capacity to deliver quality instruction. Better instruction in turn will ideally lead to more students achieving high academic standards. This year's achievement report (Harwell, D'Amico, Stein & Gatti, 2000) explored the extent to which teachers' engagement in professional development led to increases in student achievement. It also looked at decreases in achievement gaps between students of different ethnic, socio-economic and linguistic backgrounds. Although the initial findings indicate little influence of professional development on student achievement in either mathematics or literacy, a number of data collection and sampling difficulties render them inconclusive. Research now in progress is attempting to correct these difficulties as well as incorporate the role of principals into the analysis model. Future reports should be able to comment more deeply on the effect of District #2 principals' instructional leadership on teachers' professional development experiences and student achievement. If the results are similar, the district leadership may find themselves revisiting the role of professional development in their reform efforts and the role of principals vis-a-vis professional development.

District #2's systems for recruiting, inducting and supporting principals are extensive and impressive. The district continues to face challenges associated not only with recruitment, but also retainment of principals. Over the past ten years, principals have spent on average 3 to 4 years in that position in District #2 (HPLC Technical Report #1). As in most school districts, there is not much in the way of a promotional ladder in District #2. The demands upon the principals are high, the complications of their position—sandwiched as they are between district leaders, parents and teachers—are many, and the pay in New York City has been low in comparison to nearby suburbs. As a result, each year, District #2 generally has to hire approximately eight new principals (HPLC Technical Report #1).

The District leadership tries to retain their strong, experienced principals by involving them in intellectually challenging activities through the various professional development opportunities in the district and providing them with leadership roles, such as that of a mentor, a leader of a key study group, or a representative of the district to other organizations (e.g. Pew Network, Institute for Learning). These positions provide principals with prestige, but they don't lessen the work load, nor do they significantly change the pay. Thus, a combination of burn-out, retirement, and a desire for advancement make it difficult for district leaders to retain their best principals. As their system for principal professional development requires a cadre of talented and experienced principals to serve as mentors and leaders, retainment may become their next great challenge.

The third major challenge facing District #2's recruiting, inducting and support system for principals are the subject matter needs now emerging. They need a functionally equivalent, though not necessarily synonymous, support and supervision structure in mathematics. The key challenge will be to develop the capacities of administrative personnel to perform their roles within the realm of mathematics as well as it is done in literacy.

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