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Introduction: A Principaled Approach

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**INTRODUCTION:
A PRINCIPAL APPROACH**

patricia a. wasley & judith rizzo

PATRICIA A. WASLEY is currently Dean of the College of Education, University of Washington. Her current research projects include a study of Chicago's small schools initiative and a national action project to provide better support for new teachers.

Dr. Wasley started her career as a public school teacher and administrator. She was the Senior Researcher for School Change at the Coalition of Essential Schools and at the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University from 1989 to 1996. She is the author of numerous articles and several books on school reform.

Dr. Wasley serves on a number of advisory boards and committees concerned with the improvement of public education, including The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. Before moving to Seattle, she was Dean of the Graduate School of Education at Bank Street College.

JUDITH RIZZO has been Deputy Chancellor for Instruction for the New York City Board of Education since 1995. She began her career in the Boston Public Schools 30 years ago as a teacher and has held a number of administrative positions. Dr. Rizzo's reform efforts in the New York City schools and her work with superintendents and principals have redefined leadership at the district and school levels. That, combined with her own experience as a principal, is reflected in her continued commitment to develop and support school leaders.

Finding principals for our nation's schools is no easy task these days. Across the country, shortages of qualified and committed principals are causing many educators, community members, and policy makers to create new incentives, to search far and wide, and to recruit from outside the field of education. Further, colleges of education, foundations, and think-tank organizations are focused on rethinking principal-preparation programs. Nowhere is the shortage of principals more acute than in New York City, which has the largest school system in the nation. There are more than 1,100 large and small schools serving over 1.1 million students. In the next three to five years, this system will lose two thirds of its experienced principals due to retirement, promotions, and higher paying, less challenging jobs in suburban districts. To fill the vacancies, the system needs to prepare a steady stream of principals, assistant principals, other supervisors, and teachers to assume leadership in schools. To accomplish this requires a partnership between public schools and colleges.

For the last ten years, Bank Street College, in partnership with the New York City Board of Education, has developed an approach to preparing principals that has proved highly effective. While it is constantly evolving, we think that it holds promise for other cities, for other collaborations. We'd like briefly to describe its history and its evolution, and will conclude by analyzing why it has worked so well and what we would do to further strengthen the approach.

The Principals Institute was established in 1989 as a scholarship master's degree/certification program. Its central goal was, and still is, to recruit and prepare women and minorities to enter the principalship. Since its inception, 327 students have graduated. Currently, about 90 are enrolled. Graduates have assumed leadership roles in public schools as principals, assistant principals, and directors of small schools or alternative schools. They have successfully written grants to establish their own new schools, and some have gone on to do doctoral work in administration. Currently, some 46 hold principalships in the city, and an additional 207 are assistant principals, supervisors, administrators, staff developers, and directors.

PROGRAM SPECIFICS

Candidates for the Principals Institute come from all over the city's public school system. Each year, as the Institute's reputation has grown, far more candidates apply than are accepted. The program, which takes 18 months to complete, includes courses, an internship, and a final project.

Courses

Students enter the Principals Institute as members of a cohort. The 25 to 30 students take all of their courses together. Students must complete the work in a timely manner and pass all courses; failure to do either results in dismissal from the program. Courses are taught by experienced, practicing principals and professors who are able to provide a balance between practice and theory. Each year, course work is complemented by a seminar series conducted by prominent educators and business leaders who discuss current exigencies within the system. A graduate describes the course work: "Even though we complained about some of the instructors at the time, on reflection, I think that we profited from the variety of voices from our very skilled and experienced instructors."

Internship

Students are placed in an internship that is a one-semester, duty-free, focused experience. Interns are expected to watch and learn how a principal manages and leads the school.

My mentor principal placed me on her side of her desk. I had the opportunity to see how all business was conducted in the office, including cabinet meetings, parent-principal meetings, post-observation conferences, and so forth. I accompanied the principal through her daily tour of the schools and learned to look at the building in terms of students' safety. She actively taught me how she did her job. She made her thinking processes explicit concerning instructional goals, leadership, staff development, and interpersonal relationships with parents, teachers, students, and the site council.

During the internship, leadership students are visited on site regularly by their advisor, again an experienced principal, who meets with both the intern and

the mentor principal. In addition, students attend “conference group” with a smaller group of students from their cohort for two hours each week. In conference group, participants are expected to bring the problems they are encountering in their internship to the group for mutual problem solving. The aim here is to help principals-in-training learn to participate in a support group of colleagues, to give and take feedback that will help them to grow and strengthen their work. With the advisor’s guidance, practice is analyzed and a variety of viewpoints are exchanged. The advisor’s role is important in that s/he models appropriate leadership skills and fosters collaboration, crisp communication skills, and deeper probing.

Further, during the internship, students are required to visit a number of other schools in order to see how different leaders organize their time and their efforts. Each year, the group travels to another state to examine different practices in leadership in order to broaden their understanding of the interrelationship between the context of schooling and the principal’s role. Students have visited Chicago, Louisville, Baltimore, and Dade County. After the visit, students complete an analysis of what they observed and report their findings at an open forum.

The final project

Towards the completion of their course work and internship, students are required to design the school that they would like to lead. Attention is paid to staffing, to curriculum, to student enrollment, to interaction with families. These projects have formed the basis for a number of new schools that now exist in the city.

Taken as a whole, the program is rigorous. It focuses on teaching, learning, and leading. A student described the workload:

The workload—the workload! As I was doing the assignments, I never for a moment doubted their importance. I am thankful that you drove us so hard. We learned and developed. I often speak with people who are working on parallel programs; they had an easier time of it while they were studying, and are having a very difficult time now that they are practicing. The hard work and the interesting quality and the relevance of the assignments were much appreciated.

EVALUATION

Each year, the Principals Institute is evaluated by those who run the program and by an external team of reviewers from the Board of Education. Each year, graduates are asked to give feedback about the quality of the program and about changes that should be made. For example, in June 1998, the staff asked: "How might we better prepare our principals for the work administrators face? Are we current with Board policies and goals?" As a result of this examination, the New York State Standards and the City's New Standards were infused into both course work and advisory sessions. In June 1999, the staff asked: "How do we help students become more knowledgeable about leading successful urban schools in low-performing communities?" As a result, faculty have located internships with strong principals who are turning around low-performing schools.

The perspective of the New York City Board of Education

Years of research and experience confirm that the role of principal is a critical factor in school success and that they need a variety of skills to lead today's schools. The most successful principals are both great managers and solid instructional leaders, yet the conditions under which they apply these skills are ever-changing. Any program that purports to prepare principals must reflect current working conditions and expectations, be ready to adapt to new ones, and be thoughtful in anticipating future needs.

In order to accomplish these goals, those who design and implement a principal-preparation program must work closely with school districts and be responsive to changes in system priorities. An open and mutually respectful relationship is key to such a partnership. This kind of relationship exists between Bank Street College and the New York City Public Schools. Each year, we meet and review the program and the city's goals and focus. Each year, some modification to the program takes place. For example, the New York City school system is performance-based and has a clearly articulated instructional focus on high standards. Prior to the introduction of new language arts standards in November 1997, the Board of Education began the work of transforming both state and city testing programs into a more comprehensive, performance-based assessment system that would be aligned with those standards. At the same time, the Board began to develop an early childhood assessment system. A

number of interrelated initiatives were also begun, each of which was designed to provide a wealth of data and information about students, classrooms, and schools. These efforts included the implementation of a performance assessment of schools systemwide (PASS), school- and district-based comprehensive education plans (CEP), school leadership teams (SLT), and a new promotion policy. Also, the Board has instituted a comprehensive reform of special education that redefines the way that services are provided to eligible students. Together, these elements of reform have begun to reshape the way that schools are organized and managed.

Because of the relationship between Bank Street College and the New York City Public Schools, the principal-preparation program was adapted to the new and emerging changes that were taking place. Equally important was the dialogue between the two institutions that resulted in anticipating the skills that principals would need as the next phases of reform were introduced. These discussions led to specific changes in some of the learning experiences that Bank Street would provide, and helped faculty to reassess the basic skills and knowledge that principals would continue to need.

The ability and willingness of Bank Street faculty to adapt to changes in the system's instructional agenda were not the only ways in which it responded to the needs of the city's schools. Along with the systemwide focus on academic performance in all of its schools came a vigorous and aggressive focus on its lowest performing schools and districts. Characteristically, these schools and districts were the most difficult to staff at both the classroom and principal levels. While the current crisis in school leadership is a national one, urban schools, particularly the low-achieving ones, have been experiencing this problem for some time. These are the schools most in need of strong, skilled leaders, but are traditionally the least able to attract them. Almost without exception, they are in the poorest neighborhoods, serving the neediest youngsters. Many professionals are reluctant to take on the daunting challenge of improving low-performing schools.

In Spring 1998, the New York City school system asked Bank Street to help in preparing and recruiting principals for hard-to-staff districts. The intent was to create, in partnership with the district superintendents, cohorts of future principals within specific districts. The Board of Education, along with these districts, agreed to provide the resources needed for scholarships for 10 to 15 promising principal

candidates within five districts. Bank Street hired faculty and got the programs up and running. Each year, we've added a new cohort in another district. This new focus was added to the longstanding principal-preparation program that Bank Street continues to offer for candidates from throughout the city. Because of the reputation of the original program, applicants number in the hundreds, and district superintendents are calling daily to organize their own district-based programs. In June 2000, Bank Street graduated some 56 successful principal candidates.

These graduates are prepared with the skills and knowledge that has evolved from the partnership between Bank Street and the public school system. Their training has been influenced by the unique needs of the targeted districts, and much of their experience has been grounded in the specific realities of schooling in these districts. This combination of research-based practice and a clinical internship prepares graduates confidently to assume the leadership of a school. Superintendents seek out these graduates to fill vacancies, knowing that they understand the needs of school communities and can effectively marshal resources and strategically employ them on their behalf.

Currently, staff members from both Bank Street College and the New York City school system are engaged in refining the principal preparation program to increase the number and depth of students' experiences in developing management skills. The school system is decentralizing much of the budget and personnel decisions to the district and school levels, and principals must have the skills and knowledge necessary to read, understand, and utilize operational data. They must be able to decipher spreadsheets, make budget and purchasing transactions through technology, and develop strategic plans based on a variety of data. Principals must understand and navigate collective bargaining agreements, communicate clearly to a variety of constituents, and evaluate personnel and programs. Our history of collaborative planning and responsive programming provides the framework for incorporating these changes into the curriculum and internship experiences that Bank Street will provide.

The collaboration between Bank Street College and the New York City Public Schools has resulted in a highly successful program for aspiring principals. It continues to be a work in progress because both partners are committed to continuous evaluation and improvement, mirroring precisely the skills that we know effective school principals need.