Meeting the Learning Needs of Students: A Rural High-Need School District's Systemic Leadership Development Initiative

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The Principals Excellence Program (PEP), a cohort-based professional development project for administrator-certified practitioners, is one of 24 projects across the United States supported by federal funds from the No Child Left Behind legislation. The three-year program is conducted through a partnership between Pike County School District, a high-need rural system in Central Appalachia, and the University of Kentucky, located 150 miles away. A major goal for PEP is improved school leadership focused on enhanced student learning. Findings in this paper include in-progress evaluations of program impact toward (a) preparing school leaders to promote learning success for all, (b) engaging cohort members in authentic practice with mentor principals, (c) addressing high-stakes accountability issues, and (d) delivering effective leadership preparation. Perspectives from all stakeholder groups (i.e., cohort participants, mentor principals, district leaders, program instructors) are integrated to provide holistic assessment of PEP.

Appalachia is a term that elicits multiple interpretations encompassing the historical development of America, conflicting political perspectives, and distinct cultural traditions (Drake, 2001). Geographically, Appalachia is a region in North America composed of ancient mountains, valleys, waterways, and broad-leafed deciduous forests spanning from Newfoundland in Canada to central Alabama in the United States. Economically, Appalachia is a designation for the approximate 200,000 square mile region from southern New York to northern Mississippi that historically has experienced economic hardship. This area, which hugs the spine of the Appalachian Mountains, includes all of West Virginia and portions of 13 other states, including most of eastern Kentucky (Owens, 2000).

Appalachia is transforming from an economic region of almost uniform poverty and unemployment to one of significant contrasts, changing needs, and divergent prospects. Since 1964, the number of counties classified by the Appalachian Regional Commission as "distressed" (i.e., those with three-year average poverty and unemployment rates at least 1.5 times the nation's average) has reduced from 219 to 111 (Hilston, 2000; Isserman, 1996). Although census data show that the population in Appalachia grew to nearly 23 million people by the close of the 20th century (US Census Bureau, 2000), growth was not uniform. The most dramatic population increases occurred in southern counties adjacent to cities with burgeoning economies such as Atlanta, Birmingham and Huntsville, Asheville and Charlotte, Greenville and Spartanburg, Chattanooga and Knoxville (Drake, 2001). Many counties in Central Appalachia, a mountainous region where 85 percent of the residents live in isolated rural areas, however, continue to be characterized as economically distressed. These counties lost their major source of revenue when the coal mining industry was cut nearly in half in the late 1900s, leaving many residents without employment opportunities and

county governments without tax revenues for education (Isserman, 1996; Jones, 2000). Eastern Kentucky counties were among the hardest hit (Drake, 2001).

This paper shares findings from an exploratory case study about an advanced leadership development program for administrator-certified practitioners in a Central Appalachian school district. The goal of the Principals Excellence Program (PEP), one of 24 projects supported by federal funds through the NCLB School Leadership Development Program, is to develop visionary instructional leaders able to increase student learning in high-need rural schools. The program is delivered through a partnership between Pike County School District (PCSD) and the University of Kentucky (UKY). A team of university professors and administrative practitioners facilitates learning experiences in the district for principals, assistant principals, and administrator-certified teachers seeking administrative positions.

The next two sections provide information about the contextual conditions that define the district as high need and an overview of the program's design. The third section presents findings related to in-progress goal achievement toward (a) preparing school leaders to promote learning success for all students, (b) engaging participants in authentic practice with mentor principals, and (c) addressing high-stakes accountability issues. Perspectives from representatives of all stakeholder groups are integrated to provide holistic assessment of the program. The paper closes with a discussion about the effectiveness of PEP and some important lessons learned thus far.

Context of Leadership Challenges: Pike County School District

Pike County comprises the easternmost tip of Kentucky that borders Virginia and West Virginia, miles distant from

any metropolitan center. Pikeville, the county's largest town, was designated by the Appalachian Regional Commission as a growth center and benefited from the influx of millions of dollars to finance infrastructure development (Drake, 2001). However, Pike County remains economically distressed. Data from the last decade indicated that its population decreased by 5.3 percent and that 33 percent of the households report annual incomes under $15,000 (US Census Bureau, 2000). Since the introduction of welfare during the New Deal era and its expansion through the War on Poverty, the county now has multiple generations of its residents relying solely on governmental support (Drake, 2001).

While the population of the Commonwealth of Kentucky is 90 percent "white persons, not of Hispanic/Latino origin" (US Census Bureau, 2000), in Pike County it is 98 percent. Most residents were born there or in nearby counties and have resided in the region most of their lives. According to PCSD leaders, many children have never traveled outside of Pike County, and a few in remote hollows have never visited Pikeville. While 62 percent of the population over age 25 are high school graduates, only 10 percent within that group have completed a post-secondary degree (US Census Bureau, 2000), despite the local availability of Pikeville College. Hence, diversity within the county population is based upon socioeconomic status, level of education, work and life experiences, and residence location—not ethnicity, race, or nationality.

The culture of the area is predominately patriarchy, a tradition established by Anglo-Saxon, Scottish-Irish, and German settlers in the early 1700s (Clark, 1988), yet influenced significantly by "the demands of the Appalachian frontier environment" (Drake, 2001, p. 187). The rugged terrain of steep mountains and narrow hollows isolated families and clans, creating distinctly different communities throughout the county. Residents often know where individuals grew up based upon their surnames—Belcher, Dotson, McCoy, Tackett. Newcomers are not readily accepted, thus making it difficult even for principals and teachers within the district to transfer to different schools.

The *Kentucky Kids Count* report by the Annie E. Casey Foundation (2000) paints a sobering picture of the county's high-need characteristics based upon key indicators of child well being. Children under the age of 18 comprise 26 percent of the total county population—and 30 percent of them live in poverty (US Census Bureau, 2000). Reports suggest that between 25 and 33 percent of children under the age of 5 have been neglected or physically, sexually, or emotionally abused (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2000). On average 69 percent of students in PCSD qualify to participate in free or reduced lunch programs; schools located in remote areas of the district report free or reduced lunch rates above 90 percent.

Pike County was first explored by trappers, hunters, and adventurers (Clark, 1988) and later settled by yeoman farmers and miners (Drake, 2001). The region retains many cultural characteristics that make it uniquely Central Appalachian, a distinctly different ruralism compared to other regions in America where large-scale agriculture and ranching are possible or economic conditions have improved. With its widespread welfare dependency and social challenges created by substance abuse and limited educational attainment, Pike County in many ways faces issues quite similar to those in inner cities. Educational accountability has expanded those challenges.

Addressing High-Need District Needs: New Expectations

The Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA) of 1990 reconstructed the commonwealth's entire system of P-12 public schooling and launched a demanding system of school accountability to ensure that all children learn at high levels (Foster, 1999; Pankratz & Petrosko, 2000). Though the vision for reformed public education embraces high student achievement for all students, many rural school districts in eastern Kentucky face formidable challenges. Nonetheless, the Pike County School Board maintains a sustained commitment to the belief that all children can learn. Five years ago the school board and superintendent adopted the slogan "Success For All" and then acted on it by requiring district leadership to reframe solutions associated with serving at-risk children. The district seeks principals who will both make a difference with students and make a commitment to stay in Pike County. However, recruiting and retaining the next generation of school leaders is a real and long-term challenge.

Two stumbling blocks to achieving "success for all" became apparent. First, the district leaders recognized that institutionalization of the vision demands high quality instructional leadership. A 2001 survey of the then-current principals revealed, however, that many viewed themselves as competent managers—but not as strong instructional leaders. Transforming the district leaders' vision into reality requires a cadre of principals having appropriate dispositions and necessary skills for leading instructional programs.

Second, the district faced problems in developing a well-qualified pool of candidates to fill projected vacancies in administrative positions. A glaring reality at that time was that 11 of the 25 principals were eligible to retire within five years. Although many educational practitioners in the district possess certification to hold administrative positions, few aspire to become principals. These potential leadership candidates, while self-nominated for the certification process, candidly admit their motivation to complete graduate degrees was mainly to increase salary.

PCSD faces a third challenge—beyond those related to the isolation and high poverty common to school districts in the mountainous region of Central Appalachia and beyond the need for principals oriented toward instructional leadership. According to the superintendent, who talked about this challenge during an interview in May 2004, a

deeply embedded cultural attitude about the value of education makes achieving "success for all" tremendously difficult.

> We are dealing with a different culture . . . of workers who do not put a high value on education. And as a consequence, I think that makes it more difficult for us to achieve a higher level [of schooling] than you would find in urban districts. There may be one or two pockets of poverty in urban districts but for the most part, a majority of schools [in urban areas] have great support from homes and parents who put a great value on education. . . . We have very little of that in rural Pike County or eastern Kentucky. . . . [and therefore] we need educational leaders that are the very, very best.

The district leaders realized that to achieve their goal of transforming administrative practice from school management to leadership for learning committed to higher academic achievement, they needed to develop further the knowledge and skills of current and prospective principals. Their next step toward reframed administrative practice had to focus on the high-need circumstances and new expectations within this district, yet also provide broad-based perspectives about the contemporary principalship from a national viewpoint. The goal was to create a model of advanced leadership development that would build sustainable capacity within the district. The team sought assistance from Kentucky's land-grant research university located 150 miles away in Lexington.

Addressing School-Leadership Needs: Principals Excellence Program

Working as collaborative partners, UKY leadership educators and PCSD leadership practitioners developed the framework for advanced principal preparation and then sought external funding to implement it. The proposal was selected in September 2002 by the U.S. Department of Education as one of 24 projects to be supported financially through the NCLB School Leadership Development Program. The three project objectives are the recruitment, development, and retention of high-quality educational leaders. Because participants already hold administrator certification, the project curriculum is based upon the four recurring themes—vision for success, focus on teaching and learning, involvement of all stakeholders, demonstration of ethical behavior—appearing among the nearly 200 indicators in the six ISLLC *Standards* (Council for Chief State School Officers, 1996; Hessel & Holloway, 2002). The yearlong program provides a cohesive professional

development experience—a coordinated mix of group and individual learning activities, professional reading and reflection, clinical practice and disciplined inquiry supported by mentor principals—for educational practitioners holding administrator certification. Hence, the program focuses intently on the work required to lead contemporary public schools.

Participants engage in active learning activities away from their schools one day each week throughout an academic year (January to December). One week they work with mentor principals in selected district schools to conduct research about student learning issues. The next week they meet with all cohort peers to engage in learning activities during workshops facilitated by university professors and administrative practitioners. The curriculum and instruction focus on helping current and future principals to become visionary instructional leaders and effective change agents who understand the unique learning needs of students in the Appalachian area. By institutionalizing a new model of instructional leadership, district leaders hope to transform PCSD from "good to great" (Collins, 2001).

Innovative Leadership Development: Project Design

The program is an interconnected series of training workshops, clinical experiences, comprehensive school-based research, and structured reflections. The desired outcome is the creation of a professional community of educational leaders who have the disposition to be change agents, commitment to be lifelong learners, skills to be effective decision makers and reflective practitioners, and desire to remain or become principals in the district.

Program Components: Best Practices in Principal Preparation

PEP incorporates recommendations for redesigned principal preparation and participant selection (Browne-Ferrigno & Shoho, 2004; Coleman, Copeland, & Adams, 2001; Creighton, 2001; Jackson & Kelley, 2002; Murphy, 1992, 1993; Peterson, 2002). The curriculum, framed by the four recurring themes in the ISLLC *Standard*, integrates best practices in adult learning, inquiry-based professional development, and community building (Glasman & Glasman, 1997; Grogan & Andrews, 2002; Hallinger & Bridges, 1996; Hiemstra, 1991; Institute for Educational Leadership, 2000; Muth, 2002; Stein & Gewirtzman, 2003). The focus upon advanced leadership development for administrator-certified practitioners—both practicing and aspiring principals—fills a missing element in the literature about continuing professional growth of school leaders (National Staff Development Council, 2000).

A core component of the project is a concurrent action research project conducted by participants each semester in selected district schools. Clinical practica guided by mentor principals can potentially foster role transformation and

support socialization to a new community of practice (Browne-Ferrigno, 2003a; Capasso & Daresh, 2001; Cordeiro & Smith-Sloan, 1995; Crow & Glascock, 1995). Because clinical practice is greatly enhanced by focused mentoring provided by qualified professionals (Beyu & Holmes, 1992; Browne-Ferrigno & Muth, 2004a; Calabrese & Straut, 1999; Mullen & Lick, 1999), district leaders carefully select high-performing principals to serve as project-trained mentors during the biweekly field-based experiences. The reasons for leadership mentoring are threefold. First, it simulates role socialization for aspiring and novice principals (Crow & Matthews, 1998; Matthews & Crow, 2003). Second, veteran principals serving as mentors have opportunities for their own professional development (Gordon, 2004; Hansen & Matthews, 2002). Finally, leadership mentoring increases the capacity for both new and veteran administrators to meet the demands of school leadership (Lane, 1984; Mullen, Gordon, Greenlee, & Anderson, 2002; Ortiz, 1982; Wenger, 1998).

The "closed cohort" model (Norris & Barnett, 1994) was selected because the potential exists for creating a risk-safe learning environment where participants can be candid about issues and can engage in constructive conflict resolution about problems. A closed cohort remains as a unified group without changes in membership for the duration of a program. A well-functioning cohort supports peer sharing of experiences and concerns, participant reflection, group determination of action, and leadership development (Barnett, Basom, Yerkes, & Norris, 2000; Basom, Yerkes, Norris, & Barnett, 1996; Browne-Ferrigno & Muth, 2003; Browne-Ferrigno & Muth, 2004b). Further, the potential exists within a well-functioning cohort for cultivating a strong and lasting professional community (Basom & Yerkes, 2001; Norris & Barnett, 1994). Through a range of cohort ongoing group-development activities and networking opportunities, participants can develop collegial relationships that support and sustain them after program completion.

Intensive Professional-Development Engagement

Because clinical practice is a core component of the program, participants need time to work in schools other than where they are assigned. Hence, with wholehearted support from the superintendent and school board, all principals and teachers participating in PEP are released from their school responsibilities *one full day every week* throughout the spring and fall semesters to engage in program activities. On an alternating schedule, cohort members spend one full day either (a) working with their mentor principal and inquiry team members conducting action research about student learning or (b) participating in a cohort meeting facilitated by leadership educators and district administrators. The biweekly cohort meetings provide opportunities for participants to share their school-based experiences, discuss assigned readings and education

issues, and reflect upon individual and group learning. During the seminar-workshops, practicing principals often share concerns or celebrations related to their practice, which provides additional practical information about school leadership to aspiring principals. This pattern of alternating clinical practice and cohort meetings stimulates linkage between theory and practice.

During each summer of program implementation, PEP cohort members join all administrators and teacher leaders in the district for an intensive summer leadership institute. The institutes are structured around a major instructional concept. During the first summer, the attendees divided into five teams to explore PreK-12 mathematics and science curriculum alignment. During the second summer institute, the groups focused on differentiation of mathematics instruction and assessment. Each fall semester several PEP cohort members conduct assessments of implementation progress of the summer institute action plans. A leadership consultant hired by PCSD coordinates and facilitates the summer institutes with assistance from two PEP instructors.

Carefully Selected Mentor Principals

Elementary and secondary school principals are selected to serve as mentors for the field-based component of the project. The schools selected as inquiry sites represent very diverse rural communities, student populations, faculty and staff composition, community-based support, educational programs and facilities, and student academic performance. The mentor principals are selected by such criteria as career experiences, instructional-guidance expertise, and leadership styles. The superintendent makes the final assignments of cohort-member groups to mentor principals, and the project director provides training for them about the curricular foci for the semester they provide assistance. Mentor principals receive a personalized PEP notebook, copies of all instructional materials and books distributed to cohort members, all electronic messages send to the cohort, and a $500 stipend.

School-Based Action Research about Learning Issues

With assistance from their mentor principals, small teams of cohort members identify actual problems existing in selected schools. The program-supported action research must be conducted at sites other than where cohort members work in order to give them opportunities to explore different school communities in the district. Working as small inquiry teams, participants design and complete two collaborative action research projects, which require formal proposals, human subjects research approval, and formal written reports. Each cohort has opportunities to work for a semester in an elementary school and then in a secondary school.

Findings from the action research projects are disseminated to various authentic audiences. Each inquiry

team first gives a copy of the study report to its mentor principal and presents findings to the school community where the research was conducted. The teams then formally present their findings to cohort peers and instructors. Additionally, the superintendent invites all administrators in the district to attend a luncheon each semester where the inquiry teams share their research findings through PowerPoint presentations and professionally designed handouts. The teams have also been invited to present their study findings at state education conferences.

Leadership Preparation: Reflections about PEP

Six years ago PCSD hired a leadership consultant, a retired superintendent who led three very diverse education systems in western and central Kentucky. He assignment is to provide personalized training to district and school administrators, often working with them individually in their own work settings. For several years he has also served as a coach and trainer for the Kentucky Leadership Academy, a two-year professional development program for educational leaders coordinated by the Kentucky Association of School Administrators. The consultant assisted the PCSD leadership team in the preliminary design of PEP before UKY professors refined it to align with the federal grant requirements.

The leadership consultant has been involved with project implementation from the outset, first as an observer and advisor during the early months and then as an active member of the instructional team when two professors located to other states. He offered what he calls his "not unbiased" assessments of how PEP uniquely prepares school leaders who promote learning and success for all.

> First, participants are exposed to the current thinking about organizations. This can be seen in the vision and mission processes [modeled during cohort sessions], readings about change leadership, opportunities to develop capacity within their own organizations, summer institutes, cohort session discussions, reflections, action research, book studies, and networking. Second, participants have an opportunity to work with central office administrators. This interaction decreases the time required to promote collegiality when [aspiring principals] are selected to be administrators. Third, participants are learning [about various] tools and techniques that will shorten their "break in" time when they are selected to be principals. The time needed to ramp up will be shortened dramatically. Fourth, participants have an opportunity to be

mentored by successful administrators. Fifth, all work is job embedded. The learning is geared to the work and flow of the school year; there is no "made up" work in PEP. Application is an important piece of the experience. Sixth, social justice is an important part of PEP activities. This tenet is included in discussions, readings, foci of action research projects, and reflections. Seventh, participants have an opportunity to develop close relationships with university faculty.

His words mirror comments provided in reflections by other project participants—cohort members, mentor principals, district administrators—that suggest this model of professional development is an appropriate, authentic, and powerful ways to enhance knowledge and skill development of aspiring principals and practicing principals alike. The cohort sessions and mentor-supported fieldwork create a seamless bridge between talking about theories and applying them to practice, and then reflecting about both.

Further, a desired outcome from program implementation is becoming evident: the development of collegial relationships. The district leaders hope that these will continue to flourish and eventually transform administrative practice in the district into a professional community of instructional leaders and life-long learners.

Pathways for Improving School Leadership: Program Assessments

The federal grant program supporting PEP requires formative and summative evaluation, and thus, data have been collected regularly throughout project implementation. The case study design was selected because the inquiry is bound by specific time periods and encapsulated in a particular structure (Creswell, 1998; Stake, 1995; Yin, 1994). Further, because the essence of case study research is exploration (Krathwohl, 1998), a qualitative researcher can begin an inquiry with "a target of interest" and then describe "whatever emerges of significance" (p. 26).

The methods of data collection are varied (e.g., surveys, reflections, small-group interviews, observations) and include information from members of all stakeholder groups (i.e., cohort participants, mentor principals, district administrators, program instructors). The study focuses intentionally upon capturing the perceptions of cohort members at various times throughout their learning experiences, rather than only at the beginning and end of their yearlong training. Their responses over time provide ongoing evaluation and opportunities for the instructional team to adapt the program to meet the changing needs of the participants. Mentor principals, district administrators, and project instructors also provide assessments about program

implementation through written reflections and group interviews. Several in-progress reports about the program and findings have been disseminated (Browne-Ferrigno, 2003b, 2004a, 2004b; Browne-Ferrigno & Allen, 2004).

In most instances, the commentaries presented below were lifted from written responses to a reflective questionnaire administered during the tenth month of each cohort's yearlong training (October 2003 or October 2004). Where appropriate, the actual prompt that generated the comments is provided. Cohort members give their insider perspectives, responses and reactions by individuals actually engaged in the intensive professional development activities. Mentor principals, district administrators, and program instructors offer outsider perspectives.

Preparing School Leaders to Promote Success for All Students

The instructional team spent many hours during the opening months of each cohort engaging participants in perception-broadening activities that challenged cohort members to think beyond their school-based experiences and explore issues systemically. The intent was (a) to enhance collaboration and develop trust among individuals who did not know one another and (b) to stimulate thinking about districts as educational systems in which all schools and local communities play important roles in helping students learn. The comments shared below were generated by the prompt, In what ways is PEP preparing school leaders in rural districts to promote learning and success for all children?

A veteran high school teacher, selected to be an elementary school principal just before beginning PEP, reported that participating in the advanced leadership development program "taught [him] to better delegate authority" and provided ways for him "to be a successful instructional leader." A novice assistant principal explained that he thinks the program is "broadening participants' perspectives about education" and "training leaders to be more reflective, make decisions that are research based, and develop leadership skills of teachers and others throughout the schools." Another cohort member suggested that "PEP offers each individual an opportunity to grow professionally so that the participant is better prepared for a leadership role, or if the individual is already in a leadership role, [to be] better qualified."

Other respondents indicated that the program instructors stimulate reflection about innovation because they "encourage cohort members to think outside the box." A high school assistant principal appreciated the way the instructors first provoked cohort members to reflect upon assumptions about student learning and then challenged them to analyze how their beliefs influence their actions.

> PEP [instructors] provided many provoking questions and situations that

made us think about what we really believe and compare that to what is true social justice. We have an obligation to serve every child; therefore, we are being groomed to think how leadership influences our reaction to that obligation.

According to an elementary teacher, "PEP has made us understand that we are working for a district, and not just one school." This systemic perspective has helped her and others understand the importance of collaboration and cooperation among schools, especially to improve instructional programs.

Although a veteran teacher has participated in "numerous professional development opportunities over the past several years" before joining the first cohort, she asserted that PEP by far "impacted [her] professional growth" the greatest. She indicated that she believes the intensive leadership development program is also changing the district.

> The [professional development] experience helps to create better learning environments in Pike County. The impact that the program has had on the leaders of the schools will create more opportunities for student success. It is simple: If leadership improves, learning improves.

A mentor principal holds a similar viewpoint. She volunteered to assist with a second clinical practicum because she considered the experiential learning component—with its attention to student learning issues in rural schools—to be the key to the project's success.

> The culture in eastern Kentucky is unique. Therefore, it is important for aspiring administrators to be involved in the schools. . . .When PEP participants are placed in the schools, they are given opportunities to observe how school leaders are addressing equity issues. . . . PEP is preparing school leaders in rural districts to promote learning and success for all children by the useful information provided through action research.

A cohort member agrees that PEP fills a void in the preparation of rural school leaders. She works as a media specialist and conducted a literature review for her colleagues to use in their action research report. She discovered that there is "not a lot of literature for school leaders in rural districts." Being able to participate in a program like this "gives leaders an opportunity to collaborate with each other [about issues] in rural settings."

Supervisors of instruction are certified district-level administrators who assist teachers in developing curriculum and principals in supervising the instructional program. Although only an observer of the program, he offered this assessment of the project's effectiveness because he has already observed changes in professional practice.

> PEP is providing aspiring leaders with an opportunity to gain valuable insight into certain aspects of an administrator's role before actually assuming an administrative position. In instances where participants are already principals, PEP is greatly accelerating their learning curve and developing their knowledge base.

The director of curriculum and instruction, who is responsible for the evaluation of all school administrators in the district, offered a slightly different assessment of the program's impact. She views the intensive professional development program as a means to build leadership capacity, a critically important strategy in isolated districts where few new residents arrive.

> PEP is preparing school leaders with a broader scope of understanding about how leadership directly impacts student learning. Rural districts are not able to recruit administrators into their schools so it becomes absolutely imperative that districts focus on developing those already there.

Unlike traditional pre-service preparation programs and other professional development activities, PEP focuses on rural-school leadership issues. The curricular topics, sometimes provocative instructional strategies, and clinical experiences in district schools promote the development of instructional leadership skills and systemic thinking about schooling. Participants and observers alike perceive that the leadership development activities are changing administrative practice in the district.

Engaging in Authentic Practice with Mentor Principals

The collaboration required to complete the assigned action research projects provides opportunities for developing professional relationships and collegiality rarely found in preparation programs, and possibly not in many P-12 schools. The job-embedded field experiences stimulate theory-to-practice linkage and development of inquiry skills, not only for cohort members but also mentor principals. The requirement to conduct action research was purposefully connected to the clinical-practice component of PEP for two reasons. First, action research is a valuable tool for making informed decisions about practice. Rather than having

cohort members simply read about and discuss action research as a school improvement strategy, the project designers wanted them to experience first hand its power as a tool for implementing needed change. Second, the projects require cohort members to work closely with principals in different schools to identify student-learning concerns and then design strategies to gather and analyze information. Cohort members are required to use multiple sources and strategies for gathering data; then they use research literature and their study findings to determine appropriate strategies to address the real problems of practice. Their efforts benefit the schools where they conduct action research, making the inquiry project valuable for everyone.

Program participants were asked to describe the value of the field-based practicum each semester in preparing effective school leaders and in providing meaningful field-based experiences with mentor principals. A new principal perceived that the "value of the professional development received during the field-based practice cannot be measured" because "each participant takes something different away that is unique" Her perspective is supported by many others involved with the project. For example, according to another new principal, the purpose for the clinical practicum is rather simple: "It allows us to look at real-life issues facing schools." A cohort peer appreciated that program participants were placed "in different educational environments" where they "work to solve real-life problems occurring in a school." He asserted that the authenticity of the issues "give the projects meaning."

Other program participants evaluated the practicum each semester a bit differently. An elementary principal wrote, "I believe the field-based experiences are valuable to school leaders because they provide a tool for detecting problem areas in a school. Once the problems have been identified, plans for improvement can then be developed." A Title I coordinator perceived significant value in disciplined inquiry because educators must explore root causes of issues before taking action.

> Conducting action research is the only true way of determining causes of existing problems and determining ways to improve academic performance levels of students. As educators, we often jump to conclusions regarding problems and try a "quick fix." However, action research allows school leaders to identify problems and seek solutions to those problems based on the research. This experience has provided me with the knowledge and tools to conduct action research effectively and improve the academic performance levels of ALL students.

Her observation that "quick fix" strategies are all too common responses by educators was shared by a district administrator.

> For too long, educators have had a knee-jerk reaction to issues within their schools. This type of response has created a culture of skepticism in teachers, parents, and students and a belief that new initiatives will not change issues in schools because all too often they have not. Administrators who understand and use the process of action research truly focus their staff efforts toward identifying underlying causes of problems and then addressing them by using research-based strategies.

Learning to take time to study an issue before taking action is an important skill for instructional leaders. An experienced high school principal admitted that he gained "confidence in decision making based on research—and not assumption" while assisting an inquiry team with their research. According to another mentor principal,

> Nothing can replace the face-to-face, on-the-spot practicum. Even though all schools have many similarities, rural eastern Kentucky schools retain a unique culture. PEP allows future leaders to experience the pulse of the [host] school by what they see and hear. Personally surveying and questioning the students and teachers gives the school leaders an intimate understanding that develops insight for future reference.

She also indicated that sponsoring an inquiry team benefits the mentor and the host school in important ways: "The practicum encourages the mentor principal to reflect on the learning climate, culture and instructional practices of the school. The research data and recommendations are used to make changes and improve student learning."

The requirement that cohort members must conduct research in schools other than where they work proved particularly valuable to a new assistant principal. She had worked at only one school is an isolated community throughout her 16-year teaching career. While conducting action research with her cohort peers, she was able to observe different instructional programs and leadership styles that helped her grow professionally.

> The field-based experience benefited me because I have spent my entire professional career at one school. They have helped me gain new insights into the different ways that schools operate and the

various struggles that all schools experience. I have also benefited from looking at the strengths of the instructional program of each [school] that I have visited. I feel that these experiences will equip me with more strategies for meeting the leadership needs of the schools in eastern Kentucky... both mentors principals [that I have worked with] have unique strengths, and I strongly feel that my associations with them have broadened my awareness of different, yet effective, leadership styles.

The opportunity to visit with principals and teachers in other schools was also important to other program participants. A veteran principal noted that "most schools in eastern Kentucky have similar problems." Thus, he believes "it is valuable [for teachers and principals] to get into other schools" and learn from others who are "dealing with problems and situations that are similar." Another cohort member gained new insights about rural education because "just visiting other schools and seeing what is going on in them is [a form of] professional development." She wants "to visit more schools and see what is working effectively" at other sites.

Although learning to do action research in settings other than her own school helped a novice principal become confident in using this school improvement strategy, she particularly appreciated having opportunities to develop professional relationships with her two mentor principals.

> Observing and at times assisting the mentor principals is a valuable experience. Our mentor principals have . . . wisdom and guidance that they have gained with their years of service. I have very much benefited from developing a collegial relationship with them as well; when difficulties arise, I am comfortable asking [them] for advice or assistance.

A mentor principal supported the assessment the having participants work with experienced principals in schools helped to develop collegiality within the district.

> Being involved through field-based experience with mentoring principals provided the participants with opportunities to problem solve and apply critical thinking skills to actual situations that would impact student achievement the most. Establishing collegiality among the PEP participants and mentoring principals paved the way for positive professional experiences.

Likewise, an assistant principal believes that "an important by-product of conducting the action research" with cohort peers in various school settings "are the relationships built among members of each group and the subsequent collaboration among PEP members on issues faced by all."

The action research projects that are the core component of the program provide an authentic, focused purpose for cohort members and mentor principals to work together. Inquiry teams struggle through learning how to conduct comprehensive action research and how to work together as effectively performing teams in settings outside of cohort training sessions or their own schools. They discovered the critical importance of exploring the root causes of problems before taking action and the value of exploring professional literature to find research-based solutions to help them improve student learning. The development of collegial relationships among cohort members and mentor principals is a value-added outcome.

Addressing High-Stakes Accountability Issues

Despite the multiple challenges of educating children and youth whose personal backgrounds and experiences suggest they potentially are at-risk of not learning at high levels, principals must institutionalize the district's vision of "success for all" in their schools. Hence, the PEP curriculum and learning activities intentionally focus on instructional leadership and ways to increase student learning in high-need rural schools. Commentary presented here emerged from responses by program participants and observers to the question, How are social justice issues (i.e., equal learning opportunities for all students) addressed in PEP to prepare participants for the high-stakes accountability context in public schools today?

According to a district administrator, "PEP participants have gained added insights into the crucial role of principals in ensuring that all of their students have maximum opportunities to learn." Further, she believes the program gives "aspiring and new principals exposure to current thinking regarding a principal's responsibility to ensure the education of all children." A member of the instructional team asserts that emphasis on "social justice is included in book studies, discussions, and application of learnings." Attention to this concept is "especially important in a high-needs district [where] 'Success For All' is the district's vision, a constant reminder about meeting the needs of all students." This focus is apparent to a program participant: "All cohort members and their ideas are equally important in PEP. A large portion of the initial training is dedicated to building a belief that all stakeholders come to the table equal and that belief is protected throughout the experience." In other words, social justice is not only discussed, but also modeled in cohort meetings.

An experienced principal, who participated in the first cohort and served as a mentor for the second one, posited that conducting school-based inquiry projects forced all participants to concentrate on instructional leadership. Additionally, the experiences helped him discover that some of his own assumptions may have created barriers to understanding accountability issues at his own school.

> It has helped all participants narrow our focus to strategies that impact student achievement in each of our schools. It has placed greater focus on being instructional leaders in our buildings... The action research activities have taught us how to withdraw personal assumptions [when] looking at data, strategies, etc. It has taught me that raw data can help determine true weaknesses and help find solutions.

A middle school principal reported that he developed a new perspective about "high-stakes accountability" since participating in the program. In his response to the prompt, he wrote further, "PEP has shown us that by being positive with our teachers, we can positively influence each individual student in our building."

Because participants work in both elementary and secondary schools during their clinical practices, they "see how different grade-level schools function" and "view various forms of instruction." Like many secondary-level educators, a high school administrator had not spent any time in an elementary school "since [he] was a student." The experience forced him to consider P-12 schooling as a continuum and consider possibilities for improving all levels.

> Being in schools allows PEP participants to see what is going on in high schools [and] in elementary schools. Seeing the difference may actually help bridge the gap between the [differences in] instruction. . . . High schools may benefit by more hands-on activities, enthusiasm, and well-organized classroom instruction with centers or stations to break up otherwise monotonous lessons. On the flip side, [visiting] high school settings may trigger thoughts [for elementary educators] about how to better prepare students for their high school careers.

PEP is expanding understanding of instructional leadership because participants learn by observing teaching in different settings and by helping colleagues toward a common goal of improving all schools in the district. Further, according to an elementary principal, the program

provides "a curriculum tailored to the need of [rural school districts in eastern Kentucky]."

A Title I coordinator believes that the program provides multiple opportunities for participants to discover ways to ensure equal learning opportunities for all students.

> Closing education gaps and overcoming barriers have been important topics to the cohort. All members of PEP are aware that these inequities exist and [that] they must be eradicated as much as possible. PEP has provided literature, videos, guest speakers, and dialogue to help address issues of social justice. I feel the participants have gained more insight into the problems, and we have been provided strategies to making learning equal for all students.

According to an assistant principal who participated in the program both as a cohort member and as a mentor, PEP emphasizes that educational leaders must address high-stakes accountability: "The message sent is that we must reach all kids—no matter their age, race, or socioeconomic background. The bottom line is that it is our responsibility to reach all students." The program allows participants to "see theory actually in practice" and unites "people with a common cause [that] brings about successful results."

Rather than simply reading about and discussing social justice and accountability issues, cohort members worked in different grade-level settings where they were able to observe and interact with principals as they handled equity issues. The inquiry projects focused on authentic student learning concerns and required participants to review professional literature, collect and analyze data from multiple sources, and report study findings related to assuring equitable learning opportunities for all. The fact that schools used the findings to plan and implement action for school improvement is an added benefit.

Delivering Effective Leadership Preparation: Lessons Learned

The overarching goal of PEP is the reframing of the principalship from school management to instructional leadership that assures learning for at-risk students in rural school districts in eastern Kentucky. Assessments of learning experiences and outcomes provided by cohort members, mentor principals, district administrators, and program instructors indicate that linkage of theory to practice—stimulated by alternating fieldwork and seminar-workshops that involve both practicing principals and aspiring principals—is perhaps the greatest benefit of the program.

Action-Oriented Professional Development

Peppered throughout data collected thus far are references to the powerful professional development that occurs when teachers and principals work together to conduct disciplined inquiry about student learning issues. According to the director of curriculum and instruction, the field-based experiences are critically important because PEP participants "better understand the role of the principal." She believes that working in schools—in a variety of settings with different principals—and then meeting together to talk about those experiences provide critically important learning opportunities.

> I think this is a component [of principal preparation that] if we don't duplicate, then we are going to continue turning out the same kind of administrators that we've had all along... I think a lot of people go into the certification process thinking that [the principalship] is one job when it's really another job... They go through the classes [that are really] disjointed pieces, and they don't see the big picture. And I think that's been one of the things that has been most powerful for some of the people in PEP: They finally saw the big picture.

A veteran high school assistant principal shares a similar perspective drawn from her experiences as a cohort member and mentor.

> PEP is more effective than the traditional "sit and git" professional development. It allows practicing administrators and aspiring administrators to get a more practical view of the role of principals. It also allows them to share and come up with new ideas to address real problems in schools.

Likewise, a teacher who was selected to be an assistant principal while participating in the first cohort contrasted the active-learning strategies used in the program with her previous professional development experiences.

Traditional models of professional development often present theory but do not link the theory to practice. Oftentimes participants leave a professional development session with an abundance of resources, yet with no opportunity to practice what has been taught... PEP is definitely a "hands-on" professional development program. Cohort members actively participate in action research and share their results with others. They work closely with mentor principals, read about and discuss current

educational issues, and benefit from the experience and expertise of instructors and guest speakers... The PEP model of professional development integrates both theory and practice through actual experiences within schools and with other administrators.

A central office supervisor of instruction, who works regularly in district schools to assist with curriculum implementation, has observed program participants in their day-to-day practice. He offered his perceptive about benefits emerging from the project.

> PEP impacts principal development by providing on-the-job training and allows participants to gain knowledge far beyond what they would normally gain by other means. For existing principals, PEP accelerates the rate of professional growth; for aspiring principals, PEP provides opportunities that allow participants to be better prepared to assume leadership roles.

These comments made by various educational leaders within PCSD district suggest that effective principal preparation and professional development requires a blend of guided active-learning experiences in authentic settings and reflection about those experiences both privately and publicly. Another finding from this study is that including both practicing and aspiring principals in cohort memberships provides positive learning outcomes for everyone.

Joint Learning by Principals and Teachers

In addition to the program design that integrates job-embedded field experiences and interactive seminar-workshops, a key reason for the success of the project is the inclusion of both practicing and aspiring principals in the cohorts. During a focus group interview, a six-year veteran principal who participated the first year of program implementation shared why he believes PEP is an effective model of school leadership preparation.

> I think one of the biggest reasons is [that the program] is probably as close to an actual position of being a principal as you can get just because of the resources and experiences when a group of principals come together... It's probably as good as any preparation program that I've been involved in.

In response to a reflective writing prompt after the close of his training, he wrote, "PEP gives more realistic opportunities for participants to apply many of the strategies that research shows to be best practices."

Like his cohort peer, another veteran principal and former high school assistant principal perceived that participation in the cohort by both principals and teachers helped him and others in several important ways.

> I think it really is an eye opener for aspiring principals to see things that are involved [in being a principal]... I know before I became a principal, I would have loved to have had this experience, to have learned and listened. And I think it is important to keep practicing principals in the cohort... I have learned things from people who aren't principals that I use as an administrator... I think PEP would be beneficial to principals who have been acting administrators for some time [because] I think they aren't as comfortable sharing and learning from others... and realizing that the principalship doesn't have to be isolated, lonely work.

Cohort members who have not yet assumed positions as school leaders support the principals' assessments. They have reported considerable professional growth and changed professional practice by working and learning side-by-side with practicing principals. One aspiring principal believes that continued peer support after program completion is another important benefit.

> I think it is a great experience for aspiring principals, people like me who are not currently holding an administrative position. Even in my dean-of-students role, [which] is much like an assistant principal, a lot of people think that I am an assistant principal at the school... I think the program prepares you for all the different leadership roles that you have to accept... whether you are wanting them or anticipating them... I know [that] if I was a principal and had a problem I needed to discuss, I would not hesitate calling a member of our cohort and say, "Hey, help me break this problem down. Help me diffuse this."

Perhaps the most poignant comments about the program's impact, however, were provided by a member of the first cohort who assumed a principalship just before beginning the program. After the close of his training, he wrote the following response about the value of the program for him personally: "Without PEP, I would have probably

requested or applied for a teaching position after [my first year as a principal]. Days away from my school gave me time to reflect on some of the monumental mistakes I made as a first-year administrator." Although his first year as a principal was quite difficult, particularly because he accepted a position at a low-performing school, he gained confidence and developed competence to make needed changes to the school's culture and instructional program that are yielding positive results.

Program Impact on High-Need Rural District

PEP was launched in January 2003 when the first cohort of 15 participants began their yearlong professional development activities. They completed their training in December 2003 and then welcomed the second cohort of 15 additional participants, including 3 administrators from Johnson County School District, when they formed in January 2004. The second and final grant-supported cohort will complete their program in December 2004.

At this point of project implementation, 18 of the 25 schools in Pike County and 5 of the 9 schools in Johnson County have PEP cohort members or mentor principals working on site. According to administrators from both districts, the federally funded project is serving as a positive catalyst in changing administrative practice. Principals and teachers are demonstrating greater confidence, competence, and comfort in their roles as instructional leaders, and student academic performance is improving. Although it is too early to make direct connections between the project and student achievement, efforts toward transforming the principalship are definitely making a difference.

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