Professional Development for Urban Principals in Underperforming Schools

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PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR URBAN PRINCIPALS IN UNDERPERFORMING SCHOOLS

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Principals in America's lowest performing urban schools face many challenges, including public scrutiny as a consequence of being identified as such by state and federal legislation. These special circumstances have implications for the professional development of the leaders of these schools. This article chronicles the work of the Connecticut State Department of Education, local districts, faculty from a private university, and the principals of Connecticut's 28 priority schools as they created coherence from state-mandated and district-mandated programs intended to bring about school improvement. A yearlong Urban Principals' Academy (UPA) was devoted to addressing the instructional leadership, capacity building, and personal renewal needs of these principals. Details regarding the content of the UPA are presented with data gathered from the sessions. The article concludes with lessons learned regarding professional development for urban principals of underperforming schools in context of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001.

Keywords: *urban principals; underperforming schools; professional development*

In the early 1990s, after several attempts to improve America's public schools following the publication of *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), state governments across the country began to implement accountability legislation designed to improve low-performing schools. The central themes of many of these legislative efforts are (a) the use of high-stakes tests as a means to determine the performance levels of students school by school, (b) the expanded use of state and federal funds to help improve those schools at the bottom of statewide rankings, and (c) the implementation of mechanisms for sanctioning schools that failed to meet improvement goals. These state laws and their resulting regulations were the precursor to the passage of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of

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2001 (P.L. 107-110). Connecticut's accountability initiative is an example of this type of legislation. As one of its first priorities, the Connecticut State Department of Education (SDE) placed special emphasis on providing assistance to the principals of the schools that were ranked as the lowest in the state.

CONNECTICUT'S ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEM

Connecticut's accountability legislation, An Act Concerning Education Accountability (1999), which passed in 1999, precipitated a host of policy and programmatic efforts by SDE officials that held local districts and individual schools accountable for improved student achievement. As a result of this legislation, 28 schools were identified as priority schools and targets of these policy and program initiatives. In addition to the state policy and programmatic efforts, the districts in which these schools reside also sought to institute new policies and programs designed to help increase student achievement.

A major focus of the SDE policy was on building capacity for higher levels of student achievement in the 28 identified priority schools that are located in the largest urban areas of the state. The Urban Principals' Academy (UPA) represents one such effort, with particular attention paid to enhancing the leadership skills of the principals of these schools.

The UPA was an initiative implemented by SDE officials, district central office officials, and faculty from a private university's department of educational leadership. It was designed to provide a continuous, yearlong professional development opportunity for the principals of the 28 priority schools. The goal of this work was to bring together these 28 principals to enhance their leadership skills. The principals, however, interpreted participation in the UPA as a mechanism for getting their schools off the list. Understanding the complexities of the urban principalship coupled with the issues associated with being publicly identified as leaders of underperforming schools were critical to the design of this endeavor. In effect, the UPA was designed to help the principals address these complexities and foster school improvement despite being publicly identified as leaders of failing schools.

CHALLENGES TO URBAN PRINCIPALS IN THE CONTEXT OF STANDARDS AND ACCOUNTABILITY

The increasing challenges facing public school principals have been well documented in the literature. Furthermore, special attention has been given to

the issues that face principals in urban settings. Notably, changing families and communities and the resulting stress placed on children, issues outside of school competing with the school for available learning time for students, and the use of instructional practices that do not respond to the increasing knowledge necessary for success in the context of our ever-changing society have been identified as factors that affect the work of urban principals (Grogan & Andrews, 2002; Kimball & Sirotnik, 2000). In addition to the social issues that face principals in urban settings, accountability legislation at federal and state levels has brought with it additional challenges to improve student achievement by meeting annual yearly progress goals for student achievement as defined by NCLB (2001).

The research, policy making, and practice communities have recognized the complexities and formidable tasks associated with mandated accountability efforts, particularly in light of the new demands for increased testing, public reporting of results, and opportunities for parents to exercise choice options out of failing schools in the NCLB Act of 2001. Furhman (1999) noted that accountability legislation is clearly focused on student achievement, is targeted toward individual schools rather than whole districts, and attaches consequences for actions taken—whether rewards for meeting target goals or sanctions for lack of progress. This attention to accountability, in full view of the public, places additional stresses on principals and challenges existing models of school leadership.

The administrative configuration in public schooling dating back to the early 20th century casts principals in the role of managers of "the structures and processes around instruction" (Elmore, 2000, p. 6). The instructional practices employed by teachers were considered to be their domain without direct interference from anyone outside the classroom. The standards and accountability movement, begun in the 1990s, has put increased pressure on principals in schools that have been identified by state and federal legislation as underperforming. According to Elmore (2000), this change in policy and open discourse around the technical core of education is "both disconcerting and threatening" (p. 9) to teachers and administrators who are used to working in this loosely coupled system established in education for the past century. This tension is further compounded by a prevailing view that leadership is more closely related to a set of traits in a single person (Gardner, 1990; Wright, 1996). Lashway (2003) observed that practitioners, researchers, and policy makers have reached similar conclusions that "20 years of school reform have stuffed the principal's job to overflowing with new chores and have undermined comfortable old assumptions about the nature of school leadership" (p. 1). He also noted that, "some analysts have concluded that the common ideal of a heroic leader is obsolete" (Lashway, 2003, p. 1). In the

face of the standards and accountability movement, there is a tension created between loosely coupled systems well established in public schools for more than a century and the need for substantive change to meet the needs of educating students in America's most challenging school environments.

Furhman (1999) recognized the connection between these new accountability systems and the need for change. However, they will not achieve their desired results without attention to the need for internal capacity building, with an emphasis on distributed leadership among all stakeholders, at individual school sites:

> New accountability systems that are well-designed . . . are associated with improved student achievement when adequate capacity to improve instruction is present in schools or can be provided by an outside partner. . . . But, in the absence of capacity, the new systems are insufficient approaches to improving student achievement. (Furhman, 1999, p. 10)

In the context of the challenges in a rapidly changing society, particularly in urban settings, coupled with a major focus on standards and accountability, the role of the principal is rapidly changing. The tension created in shifting views of the principalship requires attention to the professional development needs of principals in light of their new roles, especially for those principals whose schools are under public scrutiny for their inability to meet state and federal accountability standards.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR URBAN PRINCIPALS

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) published a report about principals that presented a statistical profile from the Schools and Staffing Survey between 1987/1988 and 1993/1994 (Hammer, Fiore, & Curtin, n.d.). The principals reported two areas of focus for in-service training: 86% participated in training regarding evaluation and supervision, and 75% received training in management practices (Hammer et al., n.d.). These in-service topics are typical in the context of principals working in a loosely coupled system where the principal's role is that of manager of the environment in which instruction takes place.

Grogan and Andrews (2002) stated that most higher education school leader preparation programs are devoted to the management skills required in a loosely coupled system, "such as planning, organizing, financing, super-

vising, budgeting, scheduling, and so on, rather than on the development of relationships and caring environments within schools that promote student learning" (p. 238). They advocated changes in school leader preparation programs that focus on collaborative leadership for instruction and allow for reflection in the context of professional practice.

The National Staff Development Council (NSDC, 2000) report, *Learning to Lead, Leading to Learn*, noted that principals should engage in professional development that, according to the Educational Research Service, "is long-term, planned, and job-embedded; focuses on student achievement; supports reflective practice; and provides opportunities to work, discuss, and solve problems with peers" (p. 6).

The NSDC (2000) recommended that states take an active role in the shift to job-embedded, reflective professional development practices for principals including "training in ways to distribute leadership, and efforts to strengthen principals' understanding of how to implement standards, monitor school performance, and strengthen quality professional development for staff" (p. 12). States were also encouraged in the NSDC report to provide networking opportunities for principals to exchange ideas and solve common problems using collaborative approaches between districts and institutions of higher education. These approaches to professional development are critical to increasing the capacity for leaders of urban schools under the pressure of state and federal accountability systems to create the conditions for change that are designed to increase student achievement. It is in the spirit of collaboration in a job-embedded environment that Connecticut's UPA brought together the Connecticut SDE, school district leaders with schools identified as underperforming, and faculty members from a private university's department of educational leadership to provide long-term professional development designed to assist urban principals facing the complexities of their school environments and the resulting attention placed on them to improve student achievement.

THE UPA

The SDE manager of the Office of Priority Schools, the district leaders where these 28 priority schools are located, and university faculty recognized the need to shift the work of these principals from managers in a loosely coupled system to instructional leaders in the context of a state-mandated accountability law. The UPA was designed as a temporary structure to bring

the partners together at a neutral site to provide leadership training in three key areas: (a) instructional leadership, (b) capacity building, and (c) personal renewal. The UPA also provided an opportunity for the principals to find coherence between state and district expectations and provided them with the opportunity to collaborate to articulate and resolve incongruent expectations between state and district officials. An unanticipated outcome of the planning committee's work was that it served as a forum where state and local accountability participants could identify common concerns and explore collaborative ways to address them. The involvement of university faculty facilitated these conversations.

CONNECTICUT'S ACCOUNTABILITY PROCESS

Connecticut's Public Act 99-288 § 2 (An Act Concerning Education Accountability, 1999) established specific actions necessary for priority schools to undertake as part of their efforts to improve student achievement. The impact of this legislation at the school and district levels was a focus on ways in which these schools would become accountable for student performance beyond mandated state testing. The requirements included attention to the development of a school improvement plan in concert with teachers, parents, community members, and students where appropriate and the development of data-driven decision making about student academic performance to monitor the implementation of the plan. These plans were then to be approved by the local board of education. These schools were also mandated to become accredited by a regional agency, the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC). NEASC accreditation is considered a requirement for high schools in New England; however, it is an option for middle schools and elementary schools. Ironically, these lowest performing schools, all of which were middle and elementary schools, were to be held accountable for obtaining NEASC accreditation, a recognition that is only voluntary for higher performing middle and elementary schools in the state.

The law also required an active role for district leaders. The local board of education's role was to monitor progress and, if 2 years after the date of approval of the plan the local board found the school had not made sufficient progress, the board was authorized to take one or more of the following actions: (a) close and reconstitute the school, (b) restructure grades and programs, (c) provide site-based management, and (d) provide interdistrict choice. Furthermore, the statute delineated the following roles for the SDE and the local school districts:

> The Department of Education shall provide technical assistance to the school on the development of the [school improvement] plan. The local or regional board of education shall provide assistance to the school to improve its operation under the plan and to obtain accreditation. The commissioner may require the local or regional board of education to reallocate federal and state categorical assistance provided to the school district to implement the plan. (An Act Concerning Education Accountability, 1999 § 2[c])

In the initial stages of this legislation, much attention was focused on implementing new curriculum initiatives, especially in the area of literacy where test scores in these schools were far below state averages. Professional development was provided to teachers in many urban districts in the area of instructional practice, especially as it related to new reading/language arts curricula. Many other extended day and extended school year programs were also instituted by the districts to assist children attain reading proficiency.

School districts focused on assisting the schools with the development of their school improvement plans and establishing monitoring systems for school progress in the form of visits by district-level administrative teams on a quarterly basis to review data the schools prepared to show their progress. The SDE and local district leaders also worked together with the schools to provide assistance in the development of the self-assessment documents required as part of the NEASC accreditation process.

Not wanting to behave as the dictator of accountability mandates, the SDE staff began to work collaboratively with the district-level leaders, principals, and staff of these 28 schools in their collective quest to improve student outcomes and implement sustainable change. However, the immediate need was to be removed from the list of identified schools and, most importantly, to remain off the list. Well-intentioned state and district officials attempted to work together in partnership to address improving student achievement. However, all participants recognized that the state was indeed a senior partner in these joint activities. The partnership was later expanded to include university faculty for the express purpose of exploring what professional development activities would be most helpful to principals with urgent mandates to improve student achievement in their schools.

UPA DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Facilitated by faculty from a private university, the UPA was designed and implemented using a systematic shared planning process with representatives from the SDE and administrators from each district's central office. A

planning committee was established. Committee members helped to ensure that the content of the professional development was responsive to their respective organizational needs. To meet these differentiated needs, sessions were designed to address common issues with the whole group. When necessary, district-based groups were used to address specific needs within the districts relative to the goals of the UPA. The university faculty, using a participatory action research approach, worked to design and structure the UPA sessions based on data from the planning committee's concerns as well as data from the participants' dialogue gathered during the sessions and from session evaluation forms.

Whyte, Greenwood, and Lazes (1991) defined participatory action research as a process where "some of the people in the organization or community under study participate actively with the professional researcher throughout the research process from the initial design to the final presentation of results and discussion of their action implications" (p. 20). In the case of the UPA, the use of a university's educational leadership program faculty in the process was to provide expertise with regard to the work and world of the principal as well as expertise in the area of organizational development and change. The goal of the planning committee was to bring the varying perspectives of the partners to the table. The SDE staff provided input regarding state-mandated initiatives that were expected to be implemented by these schools. The district leaders outlined the various district-level initiatives they had implemented and their impact on the work of the principals. The university facilitators brought theoretical and practical knowledge of systemic change to the conversation. An overall consideration for the committee was the input from the principals themselves as the yearlong activities progressed.

The university faculty members also examined documents from the districts and schools that were critical to the understanding of the work that had been done and was needed. These documents included individual school improvement plans, newly created district teacher evaluation and professional development plans, and NEASC accreditation guidelines. The faculty members also spent time in some of the schools observing the NEASC self-assessment process to learn how schools were using this process to learn about their strengths and weaknesses and to think about ways to make necessary improvements to increase student achievement. The data gathered from the documents and site visits were infused into the UPA sessions.

Following each UPA session, the planning committee met to review state and district mandates in the context of feedback recorded from the sessions themselves and from the participants' evaluation forms. Although data from the state and district levels were important considerations, the voices of the

principals were given the highest priority in the work to formulate both the structure and content of subsequent sessions. Whyte et al. (1991) and Reason (1994) stressed the need for giving voice to all the participants in the action research process. Reason noted that an objective of participatory action research "is to empower people at a second and deeper level through the process of constructing and using their own knowledge" (p. 328). The university facilitators worked through the process of reflection on the session just completed, the feedback received from the planning committee, and the formal evaluations by participants with the goal of helping the principals reflect on their own practice to find ways to shift from managerial leadership to instructional/distributed leadership. It was in this spirit that the UPA sought to provide connected, job-embedded professional development specific to the needs of urban principals under the public scrutiny of the state's accountability legislation.

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

The UPA provided opportunities to address three areas: (a) instructional leadership, (b) capacity building, and (c) personal renewal. Instructional leadership activities addressed effective supervision of classroom instruction and facilitation of teachers' professional growth. Capacity building activities were intended to help the principals better bring coherence to the many tasks they had been asked to implement by focusing staff and engaging parents and community members in the school improvement process. The university facilitators also recognized the fact that these principals work in highly stressful environments where they have final responsibility for the success of their students and staff. The personal renewal activities provided opportunities for reflection and interactions with peers and trusted colleagues.

Principals who tend to themselves as persons recognize that their professional authenticity is inextricably linked to their personal efficacy. The design of the UPA provided a sanctuary and forum for the free exchange of ideas between the principals of the priority schools, the university faculty members, state department personnel, and local district level leaders. All of the parties were at the table engaged in the discussion of the various initiatives that the principals were being asked to implement and were able to address issues as the group attempted to move from incongruence to coherence. The evaluations of the sessions indicated that the emphasis on personal renewal and exchange of ideas were the most appreciated. Comments included opportunities to share ideas with colleagues in the same situation and strategies for managing time and tasks to focus on instructional leadership.

Instructional leadership. Prior to the UPA, professional development activities for the priority school principals were focused on providing them with information regarding some of the many program initiatives they were being asked to implement. In the SDE's initial attempts to increase the principals' capacity for instructional leadership, these sessions were devoted to providing them with information regarding new curricula focused on improving literacy. Although these information sessions increased their content knowledge regarding the curriculum, they did not address instructional leadership in the context of classroom instruction and working with teachers to improve their practice.

Shortly after the accountability legislation passed, the SDE also mandated that all districts in the state revise/formalize their teacher evaluation plans and integrate them with a district professional development plan, regardless of whether they were considered to be priority districts. These plans were designed to recognize various phases of teachers' professional growth and to differentiate the supervision, professional development, and evaluation practices of teachers based on these phases. Principals are required to use a clinical supervision process of a preconference, classroom observation, and postconference several times a year prior to a year-end evaluation with all beginning and nontenured teachers. Tenured teachers whose evaluations indicated that they were meeting the state standards for teachers, known as the Connecticut Common Core of Teaching, move into a professional growth phase where, in addition to periodic clinical supervision, they are allowed to develop a personal professional growth plan with goals tied to student achievement (Connecticut State Board of Education, 1999). In this phase, teachers select from a menu of options to improve their instructional practice. Demonstrations of professional growth include samples of student work, reflection journals, videotapes of lessons, peer observation reports, student assessment data, and other artifacts that can be assembled into a professional portfolio. The timing of the implementation of the new evaluation/professional development plans provided an opportunity for the SDE staff and district leadership to emphasize and improve instruction in these low-performing schools and became the catalyst for the launching of the UPA.

The UPA began with a 2-day summer retreat designed to look at instructional leadership in the context of the new teacher evaluation/professional development plans. These sessions were focused on working with principals to sharpen their skills as observers of instructional practice by gathering specific data from a lesson in a variety of formats using Charlotte Danielson's (1996) framework for teaching as a lens. The framework for teaching is the foundation on which the Connecticut Common Core of Teaching is based. The framework also provided the principals with indicators of perfor-

mance from unsatisfactory to distinguished (Danielson, 1996; Danielson & McGreal, 2000). Through the use of videotapes of lessons, the principals practiced data-gathering techniques that would provide them with sufficient detail regarding the observations to be able to distinguish between levels of performance and to work effectively with teachers during the clinical supervision process. The summer retreat was followed by monthly daylong sessions designed, in part, to work with the principals on other instructional leadership issues, such as working with teachers who were placed in the professional growth phase of their district's teacher evaluation/professional development plans.

The new state-mandated teacher evaluation/professional development plans allow for teachers who demonstrate success in classroom instruction to be placed on a professional growth phase cycle where the use of effective professional development practices and their documented effect on improved student achievement are to be used for the purposes of summative evaluation. The evaluation plans reviewed from the districts indicated that these teachers would be required to develop a professional portfolio. Working with professional growth phase teachers in these ways was new to the principals, so the focus of these sessions was to equip them with the tools necessary to assist teachers in the development of professional growth goals and support their work in implementing and documenting their progress on their goals. Issues that came to the forefront of the discussion were related to helping teachers find time for doing this work and how the principals and their districts might develop criteria for assessing the portfolios. Small group sessions by district allowed for these issues to be addressed in the context of the individual teacher evaluation/professional development plans.

This focus on instructional leadership represented a departure from the principals' perceptions of their duties as being, first and foremost, managers. Several of the principals expressed concerns regarding the time that would be necessary to observe teachers, give them feedback, and work with teachers in the professional growth phase. These issues caused the university facilitators to focus the bulk of the remaining monthly sessions on the areas of capacity building and personal renewal.

Capacity building. The principals were quick to point out their overarching concerns regarding their ability to be effective instructional leaders. In essence, they had been asked to implement a multitude of projects and programs by both the SDE and districts. As the discussion unfolded, a list of 62 different initiatives from the SDE and/or the districts, which they were required to implement, was generated. The 62 initiatives clustered around the following areas: (a) administrative/organizational, (b) assessment, (c) curriculum,

(d) literacy initiatives, (e) teaming instructional issues, (f) summer/extended day and/or week, (g) behavioral/attendance/students, and (h) community/family. Table 1 shows examples of the activities identified by the principals in each of these areas.

These data suggest that the principals were on "innovation overload" (Fullan, 2001, p. 21). However, what was more important to the design and implementation of the UPA during this point in time was the principals' willingness to take a risk by identifying the fact that they were feeling overwhelmed in the presence of their peers as well as district-level administrators, SDE personnel from the Office of Priority Schools, and the university facilitators. It was through this and subsequent discussions regarding these initiatives, the implementation of school improvement plans, and the preparation for the NEASC accreditation that it became clear that the principals were seeing all of these projects, programs, and accountability mandates as discreet activities.

These discussions confirmed the need to help the principals make their work more coherent: To seek connections between the many projects and programs by making capacity building became the second major focus of the UPA. Fullan (2001) cited Bryk and associates in noting that capacity building is increasing the ability of educators to work together to bring coherence to their work and to find ways to involve parents and community members in these endeavors. One way that some of the principals found to do this was through the accreditation process they were mandated to undertake.

One session of the UPA was devoted to a panel of those principals who had either been through an NEASC site visit or prepared their NEASC self-study in anticipation of that visit. During that session, several tasks were identified by the panel as important to the process. Addressing the NEASC standards in the context of the learning areas (curriculum areas) was identified as critical to a successful visit. This session was extremely well received by the participants, as they were able to learn from the experiences of their peers about what was most important to the process. Even though most of them had received some technical assistance from NEASC staff members at their school sites, the evaluations from this session indicated that the participants learned more from their peers about the overall process and its impact on building a professional learning community in a school. The session evaluations indicated that the principals increased their understanding of several critical components of preparing for the accreditation visit: ensuring that the school's NEASC steering committee understood that they were the backbone of the process, implementing procedures at school sites necessary for a successful visit, understanding what district-level support is needed, preparing

TABLE 1
Programs/Projects Implemented by Priority School Principals

Category	*Examples of Programs/Projects*
Administrative/organizational	School-based health clinics
	Accreditation
	School improvement plans
Assessment	Data-driven portfolios
	Comprehensive assessments for all students
Curriculum	New content area programs
	Service learning
	Dual language program
Literacy initiatives	Early literacy training
	Literacy enrichment programs
	Family literacy
Teaming/instructional issues	New teacher evaluation program
	Direct instruction
	Professional development
	Coteaching and teaming
Summer/extended day and/or week	After-school programs
	Test preparation programs
	Vacation/summer school
	Saturday academy/enrichment
Behavioral/attendance/students	New discipline code
	Retention policy
	Social development programs
Community/family	Library partnerships
	Family workshops in math and science
	Professional development with higher education partners
	Family resource centers

to respond to the site visit report, and generating specific ideas on how to make the NEASC process more effective for overall school improvement.

The NEASC process involves the establishment of several subcommittees as well as an overall steering committee. The principals saw this opportunity as a means to foster teacher leadership and build capacity within their own organizations to accomplish the many demands of the accountability mandates. What was also learned as a result of the discussion at the session was that the principals were looking for guidance as to how to continue this new way of working in their schools. As a result, time was devoted to helping the principals recast the tasks to be done, such as student achievement data collection, as the overall tasks that would then feed into the appropriate

initiative/project, rather than using the various projects to define the tasks that needed to be done to create coherence from perceived chaos. Using a process where common tasks among initiatives were identified, they began to more fully understand how they might be able to better manage the demands placed on them by distributing the work among their staff members so they might be better able to lessen the burden they were trying to carry alone.

Personal renewal. Time was spent in later sessions focusing on personal renewal. The principals were asked to describe "a day in the life . . . " and "other tasks besides the dailies . . . " in which they engaged. The most frequent activities listed included tasks such as bus duty, cafeteria duty, dealing with student issues of behavior and attendance that required working with parents, attending special education meetings on individual students, responding to multiple demands from district-level curriculum specialists, and attending district administrator meetings. Further discussion of these tasks resulted in an analysis of the group and of the tasks by high versus low priority and most versus least amount of time. The tension between their perceptions of administration as their highest priority and a move to becoming instructional leaders became very apparent during this discussion. The guiding question through this process was, "How can we reprioritize our tasks to ensure the high priority items receive the most attention?" Comments, such as "Doing cafeteria duty is the only way I can be sure I have contact with the kids every day," indicated the tension between what they perceived as duties from which they could not release themselves and the demands being placed on them to focus on curriculum and instruction and improving student performance in their schools. A look at some time management techniques that could help in this shift also led to a discussion of the need for these principals to take care of themselves and to find time for personal growth and renewal. Admittedly, they realized that their work and family responsibilities left little time for themselves. They also were able to express the understanding that to be effective leaders, time for personal renewal was crucial.

The university faculty facilitators infused some humor into the sessions as well to help lighten the atmosphere and give the principals an opportunity to build camaraderie and community together. The two university faculty facilitators put on a skit during the summer retreat to dramatize a poorly run postobservation conference between a hypothetical principal and a marginal teacher. The skit was well received with lots of laughter and applause at the end and with some commenting that they had "been there" with the kind of interaction that took place. The discussion following the skit allowed the principals to reflect upon the importance of being able to confront poor instructional practice in the context of a postobservation conference.

Another humorous moment was the result of working through the issues of an overabundance of well-intentioned, but fragmented initiatives and programs that had been thrust upon these principals from both the SDE and their local districts. Fullan (2001) cited Bryk and associates in describing this phenomenon as the "'Christmas tree' problem" (p. 21). Using the metaphor of having a Christmas tree so loaded with presents that a child can be easily overwhelmed, the principals could easily identify with this dilemma. This led to a rewrite of "The Twelve Days of Christmas" by one of the university facilitators. This song outlined many of the initiatives the principals had been asked to implement. Copies were printed and a rousing chorus by all was the highlight of the session prior to the winter break. These humorous moments allowed the principals to feel a sense of joy in the midst of what they viewed was a dark and serious situation for them and their schools. The evaluation forms clearly indicated that opportunities such as these for the principals to be able to laugh at themselves and their situations were helpful. One comment in particular noted that the university facilitators "provide a safe, relaxing environment with a positive format." Their candor during the sessions also indicated that they felt a sense of safety and security within the group, which allowed them to speak freely regarding their concerns.

LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE UPA

What began as a deliberate leadership training series evolved into a new understanding about doing things differently. Although that new understanding was not fully realized during the UPA, several important lessons regarding leadership development for our nation's neediest schools were learned through this endeavor. What the SDE and district-level leaders learned through this process is that too much help, in the form of school improvement programs and projects, is as harmful as not enough help. As for the principals, the lessons about building capacity for change were important enough to take back to the school level and to at least begin the process of working smarter instead of working harder.

The university facilitators also realized that there was a delicate balance in each of the sessions between providing the principals with hands-on help and preserving their fragile egos. The principals had all been named publicly as the leaders of their underperforming schools with an implied threat that their jobs were on the line. It was critical, through the use of large and small group sessions with opportunities for open discussion and humor, to be sure that the UPA provided a safe space for the principals to say "I don't know" or "help"

in response to the issues raised during the sessions. The use of the university as a neutral site for the sessions provided the principals with an opportunity to think, reflect, and strategize ways to improve their schools, even though their district supervisors and SDE staff were in attendance at the sessions. Starting with a 2-day retreat during which relationships could be built followed by monthly gatherings, a climate where honesty and openness were valued and appreciated was provided. Establishing this kind of climate in a professional development environment is critical for supporting principals of low-performing schools.

What the planning committee, particularly the university facilitators, learned is that *job-embedded professional development* is a term that can be reduced to rhetoric unless the voices of the participants are heard and validated as data used in a reflective process shaping the overall format and content of long-term professional development. This is especially true for urban principals of low-performing schools facing complex issues and who may be the recipients of too much help designed to help deal with those issues. However, the notion of job-embedded professional development can often limit the possibilities for change. This was the greatest challenge that the university facilitators faced when trying to present new models for school leadership. The contextual issues at both the district and building level, coupled with a strong view of the principal as a manager, were very powerful during the UPA sessions, and the university facilitators' desire to be responsive to the needs of the constituents somewhat limited their ability to enable the principals to think outside the box.

The UPA is over. Bray, Lee, Smith, and Yorks (2000) noted that the ultimate goal of participatory action research is to "not only solv[e] problems, but enabl[e] the client system to continue to learn after the researcher leaves the system" (p. 35). As the sessions progressed, it became apparent to the planning committee that the district needs were superceding the needs of the group as a whole. However, the foundation laid in the joint sessions was sufficient to enable the local districts to take the lead in furthering the work begun during the UPA.

In addition to providing professional development for the principals, there were other unanticipated outcomes of the UPA that were realized as well. Local district participants perceived that the UPA served as an opportunity that could be used as leverage in promoting more extensive and continuous change in their districts. The UPA provided SDE staff with a forum to work with the identified school districts in a hands-on fashion. The UPA also provided the university faculty with a practitioner's voice by enabling them to help create bridges between theory and practice for practitioners in an in-service context as well as for matriculated students in their programs. The

need for university participants to facilitate UPA initiatives has diminished, particularly because they are being replicated in the participating school districts, but the work to establish a systemwide approach to continuous improvement is far from over.

Creation of a formal partnership between the SDE, local school districts, and the higher education community is the next step for Connecticut as it pursues its work in improving student achievement while enhancing the capacity of the SDE and local districts to foster broad systems change on behalf of our children. The issues are so complex that they require the involvement of all segments of the educational community. Formal partnership arrangements help to ensure that all parties have an equal voice and that resulting efforts at professional development that builds the capacity for urban principals under scrutiny to meet the accountability standards of the NCLB legislation through models of distributed leadership. NCLB's emphasis on increased testing and annual yearly progress goals for all students, most especially for identified subgroups of students (racial and ethnic minorities, English-language learners, special-needs students, low-income students), has increased the number of schools being placed on statewide lists of underperforming schools across the nation. Threatened sanctions against these schools and their principals, coupled with choice and tutoring options for parents, have added even more pressure to these principals. The need for partnerships and job-embedded professional development for principals of our neediest schools using models similar to Connecticut's UPA is critical to help them build the capacity for strong, focused leadership designed to bring about necessary improvement and change.

The tension that is created by mental models of leaders as managers in a loosely coupled system as they move into models of instructional/distributed leadership will need continued attention and opportunities for examination at the district level and at neutral locations, such as university-sponsored sessions, for urban principals in underperforming schools to explore and understand the kind of leadership necessary to improve achievement for all students. Long-term professional development focused on providing a risk-free environment for principals to not only make sense of their current context but to move them to think outside of those parameters to new possibilities is critical to making that shift. Only at that point can we begin to take steps to achieve sustainable change in the educational system.

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