# Lessons Learned in Preparing Principals to Become Instructional Leaders

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*Instructional Leadership faculty at the University of South Alabama redesigned their program's curricula between 2004 and 2006 to include new standards for instructional leaders. Seven of eleven public school superintendents in the University's service area signed a Memorandum of Agreement with the College of Education to plan, implement, and evaluate the program. The redesigned program's capstone experience is a full-semester in local schools to give residents opportunities to observe and lead teachers in improving student achievement. Data obtained from surveys and the Leadership Practices Inventory© reflect residents' and mentor principals' satisfaction with the program. Forty nine residents in eight cohorts indicated on their end-of-program survey that they wanted more time and interaction with mentor principals. Principals responded to a similar survey statement that they gave residents adequate guidance and ample feedback about job performance. These divergent perceptions will be a focal point for improving the program in the future.*

## INTRODUCTION

Recent research on school leadership (Drake & Roe, 2003; Rooney, 2000; Hoy & Hoy, 2009) asserts that principals are the focus of tremendous expectations in schools. Countless accrediting agencies, consortiums, and educational boards have concluded that *effective* principals are oriented less toward managing *things* and more interested in leading learning communities to facilitate change. Gray and Lewis (2011, p.3), however, noted that "organizational practices to recruit and hire principals in the past have been fraught with irony. Job advertisements. . .rarely emphasized the managerial side of school leadership. Instead, they often used vague and effusive phrases, such as 'a catalyst for program improvement, an outstanding instructional leader and team builder' to attract applicants."

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The search for instructional leaders gained intensity with congressional passage of the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001. Its requirement for Adequate Yearly Progress (Adequate Yearly Progress) by all children meant that principals who had been trained as managers would need instructional leadership skills to improve student achievement.

Making the transition from *building manager* to *instructional leader* was challenging. Usher (2001) reported that after a decade of collective effort, more than 91,000 K-12 schools, or approximately 38% of the public schools in the United States, failed to reach their AYP benchmarks by 2010" (p. 9). Threatened sanctions, including federal take-over of schools missing AYP targets for three consecutive years, put more pressure on schools to succeed with curriculums that have become outcome-based.

**Preparing Instructional Leaders in Alabama**

The number of schools in Alabama that failed to make AYP increased between 2001 and 2003. In 2004, the governor, engaged in a broad initiative to recruit business and industry to the state, recognized that public schools were not producing high school graduates with adequate skills to support his plan for economic growth. He charged the State Board of Education (SBE) with revamping principal training programs to prepare *instructional leaders*, not *building managers*.

The SBE worked closely with the State Department of Education (SDE) to replace outdated standards in educational administration programs with more relevant *knowledge to* and *ability to* requirements. Typically, educational administration students graduated with the appropriate credential after completing campus-based courses. They demonstrated a working knowledge of organizational theory, school law and finance, but lacked understanding of instructional leadership's meaning in operational terms.

**Collaborating with Local School Districts**

A Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) that identified college and school district responsibilities for planning, implementing, and evaluating the new program was signed by seven of eleven district superintendents and the college's dean. A key element in the document was the provision for a semester-long residency as a capstone experience for leadership students under the supervision of a highly-effective principal. A majority of the superintendents agreed to pay a substitute teacher for residents during their internship.

Joint selection of program applicants by local school district representatives and college faculty brought the organizations together. Since the inception of revised selection procedures in 2006, 82% of the applicants have been admitted to the University's instructional leadership program. The remaining 28% either fared poorly during their interview or did not have adequate professional experience to understand the principal's role in instructional leadership.

**Evaluating the Program's Effectiveness**

The MOA included a provision for evaluating the new program and each student's performance during a residency. Locally-developed surveys were distributed to mentor

principals during the semester in which they supervised residents. These assessments were augmented by regular visits from college program faculty.

**The Leadership Practices Inventory**

The Leadership Practices Inventory© (LPI) was administered twice during the residency for each leadership student. The instrument is an on-line survey designed to provide feedback from a self-assessment, mentor ratings, and a performance evaluation from as many as six observers. Jim Kouzes and Barry Posner created the LPI in 2003 to "dispel two popular myths about leadership: First, that leadership is an innate quality people are born with, and second, that only a select few can lead successfully" (p. 3).

**Data Results for LPI**

Paired-samples t-tests were conducted to evaluate the impact of the program on students' scores on the LPI. There was a statistically significant increase in LPI scores from pretest to posttest on all five leadership practices. See Table 1. Differences are reported with a 95% confidence interval. Cohen's D reflects the differences in the effect size between mean scores for each resident's results.

Table 1
*Leadership Practices Inventory Results for Selected Residents in USA's Redesigned Instructional Leadership Program*

| Leadership Practice | Pretest Mean | Posttest Mean | *t* (57) | *P* | Cohen's D |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Model the Way | 47.20 | 50.65 | 3.29 | .003 | .79 |
| Inspire the Vision | 42.17 | 47.83 | 3.14 | .005 | .88 |
| Challenge the Process | 43.17 | 47.35 | 2.55 | .018 | .66 |
| Enable Others to Act | 49.22 | 51.74 | 2.26 | .033 | .68 |
| Encourage the Heart | 46.39 | 49.87 | 2.49 | .021 | .67 |
| LPI Summative | 45.63 | 49.49 | 2.95 | .007 | .81 |

This program was evaluated using a multifaceted approach. Feedback from the principals self-reports from program participants, and as reported, the scores on the LPI before and after the participation in the program all contributed determining the impact of the program. Significant results on the LPI directly correspond to the increase in leadership competencies during the intervention period.

**Lessons Learned in the First Five Years**

Gray and Lewis (2011) reported that LPI assessments were based on the skills associated with the Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership©, including "Model the Way, Inspire a Shared Vision, Challenge the Process, Enable Others to Act, and Encourage the Heart" (p. 3-4). Residents' six-week rotations between elementary, middle, and high schools negated the LPI's reliability with regard to mentor and observer feedback, but the self-assessment was reliable, valid, and statistically significant in each of the Five Exemplary Practices where $p \leq .05$. The mean increase in composite scores for each cohort of students in each of the Five Practices was greater than 30 percent, which led program faculty to conclude that residents were moving through the *survival* stage of becoming leaders and gaining confidence in their decision-making and interpersonal relationship skills.

Mentor principals also were asked to complete a survey on internship's efficacy. Seventy two mentors rated the capstone experience at 3.83 on a four-point scale. Program faculty, however, noted a discrepancy between the residents' and principals' summative scores regarding mentor feedback. Residents rated their formative interactions with mentors lowest (3.30) among their survey items while principals ranked this item as highest at 3.96. The difference may be attributed to the rapid work pace of school principals and the lack of adequate time for impromptu meetings.

Mentor principal feedback is the most important element in the redesigned leadership program. Other design elements, including joint interviews, MOAs, and multiple assessments are necessary, but less important than on-site formative dialogues between an aspiring administrator and an effective principal. Asking residents to engage in leadership tasks without frequent and substantive critiques is a disservice. They need more than a visceral understanding about *why* decisions in schools were made.

The redesigned program has been in place for five years. Tomorrow's instructional leaders are receiving better opportunities to develop their leadership skills than they did prior to 2007. Continued emphasis on selecting applicants with leadership potential and increasing the amount of time they spend with mentor principals will empower them to develop the skills to improve teacher and student performance.

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