

New Minnesota Principal Academy

(April 2006 -- St. Paul, MN) During the 2005 legislative session, funds were appropriated to start a Principals' Academy with a grant from the Minnesota Department of Education to the University of Minnesota. During the past six months, Commissioner Seagren has brought a group of us together to develop the concept of this new professional development opportunity for our K-12 principals.

Many of us reflected on our past experiences in the Bush Principals' Leadership Program and agreed that it was among the most high quality professional development in which we participated. In my 27 years as principal, the Bush program provided me invaluable insights and skills around four frames:

- structural- a pattern of well thought out roles and relationships;
- human resource- how characteristics of organization and people shape what they do for one another;
- political- the process of making decisions and allocating resources in a context of scarcity and divergent interests;
- symbolic- how humans make sense of the world through their meaning and beliefs.

These four frames provided the fundamental structure of the Bush program and propelled us in our development of a new school improvement project.

In searching for a framework for our new principal academy we've been impressed with the work of the National Institute for School Leadership (NISL). NISL provides leadership training to school principals and other school and district leaders. The NISL program is based on six years of research and design related to the most effective executive leadership programs worldwide in business, the military and other enterprises, and on an exhaustive search of the literature on instructional leadership in education. NISL uses the corporate, university and executive development model of leadership training. NISL is designed to train the principals and other school leaders in an entire district or state in cohorts, infusing that training with the particular strategy and approaches that the state or district is using to raise student performance.

In the model, NISL facilitators train a leadership team from the district or state and then provide technical assistance to that leadership team as it subsequently trains cohorts of principals. The

curriculum, developed and field-tested over a period of three and a half years, is partly Web-based. Costing \$8.5 million to date to develop, the program incorporates the kind of highly interactive techniques shown to be most effective in adult professional development, including: computer-assisted exercises and games, simulations, written cases, and video case studies. Over 50 national and international experts on a wide variety of subjects appear on video in the curriculum. Each of the two major program phases concludes with a computer-assisted simulation that draws together and helps integrate the major themes of NISL. The program is roughly 65 percent face-to-face facilitation, 15 to 20 percent online experience, and the rest individual preparation and reading.

Vince Ferrandino, our NAESP executive director, served on the NISL Advisory Board and has high regard for this comprehensive research-based executive development program.

In March, I contacted my Massachusetts counterpart Nadya Higgins, where NISL is being used to train 60 principals, and her words were, “the research base and content is irrefutable.”

The goal of our Minnesota Principals’ Academy is to develop a premiere, research-based, executive development program for school principals that will build leadership capacity. This capacity will lead to sustained increases in student performance in low performing schools and move schools to become great. The details of the intensive development experience are in process. The first cohort will be a “train the trainer model” where NISL certified principals would become part of training team.

Tom Peters said, “Management is about arranging and telling. Leadership is about nurturing and enhancing.” As I reflect back on the Bush Program being my most capacity building development experience, my hope is that principals in our new academy will experience the same growth and that the experience will nurture them and make a profound difference in enhancing their capacity as school leaders. For more information about NISL, go to www.ncee.org.

by P. Fred Storti, MESPA Executive Director