BY DONNA BRAUN AND DONNA VIGNEAU CARLSON

Two key insights guide Rhode Island's work to support principals. First, leaders at all experience levels need support from a network of colleagues. Second, leaders grow when they work with colleagues of diverse

(PRN), an alternative preparation program in Rhode Island to respond to the need for a new breed of school leaders. PRN's mission is to develop a cadre of principals who champion educational reform through leadership of innovative schools focused on student achievement and personal growth. Aspiring principals, selected

SIDE-BY-SIDE

Novice and veteran principals are a powerful mix for learning in Rhode Island

experience levels. That led Rhode Island to create a continuum of support that enables principals to address their learning needs through networks that are immersed in authentic experiences and framed by standards, protocols, and structures that allow leaders to learn from each other's expertise.
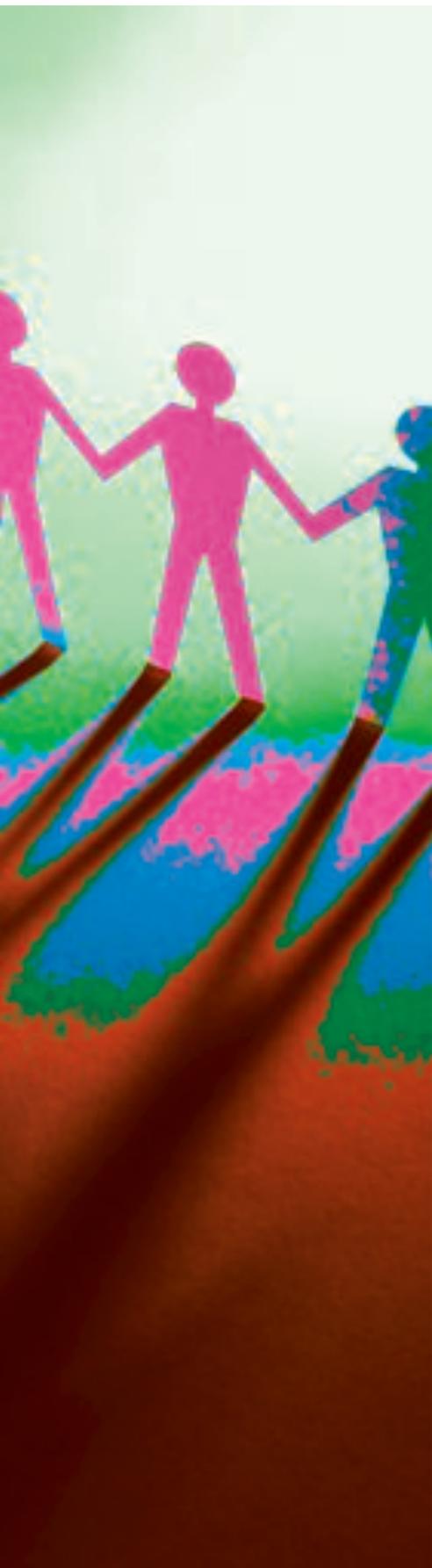
Eight years ago, the Big Picture Company, a nonprofit school reform initiative, and the Education Partnership, a statewide nonprofit education advocacy organization, created the Principal Residency Network

for their leadership capacity and commitment to school change, learn the craft of the principalship through a 12-month, full-time, school-based residency framed by the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) Standards for School Leaders (Council of Chief State School Officers, 1996) and under the guidance of a high-quality mentor principal.

PRN's content and delivery practices are aligned with best practices in the field (Darling-Hammond,

LaPointe, Meyerson, Orr, & Cohen, 2007; USDOE, 2004; Jackson & Kelly, 2002). Each aspiring principal achieves proficiency in all the ISLLC standards through their residency, reflection, problem-based learning with their student cohort, and performance-based assessments. While the experience is highly differentiated in how each student meets the standards, PRN emphasizes improving student achievement through instructional leadership. Aspiring principals receive principal certification upon completing the residency.

To date, 42 aspiring principals have received certification. All but two are now serving as administrators, and only four have left the state to practice elsewhere. More than half the districts in the state have supported the training of aspiring principals through PRN, and these graduates now serve in leadership roles in 21 of the state's 36 districts. Twenty-one are elementary principals, seven serve as leaders at the middle level, and 10 are high school leaders. PRN is proud of the placement and retention rate of the program graduates, especially in light of the number of individuals nationally who hold an administrative certificate, but are not practicing as school leaders (Roza, Celio, Harvey, & Wishon, 2003). A 2005 program evaluation survey of PRN graduates revealed participants' satisfaction and high degree of preparedness. As Rogers High School (Newport, R.I.) principal Patti DiCenso stated, "The program allowed me to grow and stretch ... and become reflective. I've always held deep beliefs about what's best for students. …The PRN allowed me to live that passion." The high degree of preparedness felt by PRN graduates concurs with the perspectives of leaders in other alternative preparation programs (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007). We are also tracking student achievement and school learning environment data col-

Standards for mentor principals

The standards for mentor principals assume that all good principals are not effective mentors; however, effective mentors must be successful principals. Toward that end, we have endorsed the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) Standards for School Leaders as the primary measure of effective mentor principals. Since aspiring and new principals are assessed based on the ISLLC standards, the mentors should be held to the same expectations, in addition to the mentor standards. Development of the standards was guided by the work of Daresh (2001), Capasso and Daresh (2001), and Zachary (2000).

A mentor principal is …

1. An effective leader who engages in reflective practices and provides thoughtful, candid, and constructive feedback in a manner that supports individual mentee learning. The mentor must be organized and have the ability to assess the mentee's strengths and needs in thoughtful ways and target opportunities for growth.

2. An educational leader who builds and maintains a learning relationship with an individual mentee that involves respect, trust, support, and effective communication.

3. An educational leader who allows the mentee to assume a real leadership role, that is, make independent decisions, and own the responsibility for the results.

4. An educational leader who has passion for learning and believes that mentoring is a professional development opportunity in which both partners benefit.

5. An educational leader who displays emotional maturity as evidenced by personal and professional interactions both with mentees and the school community.

lected by the state of Rhode Island annually for each school in which PRN graduates lead. However, because of movement of principals to schools within and across districts, we have not yet accumulated enough longitudinal data to positively correlate student and school outcomes with the leadership of PRN graduates that have practiced at the same school for at least three years.

CAREER-LONG GROWTH OPPORTUNITIES

Initially, we celebrated and wished our PRN graduates well, with the promise of a check-in sometime during the following year. However, we soon realized that these new administrators needed more support. PRN graduates had grown accustomed to a collaborative learning model, where reflection and feedback were key components of continued learning. Since there is no formal statewide mentor support program, we saw a need to create a network of support for new PRN graduates and other novice school leaders in their first few years of practice. We developed the Novice Principal Network (NPN) to respond to this need. So far, 60 beginning school administrators have participated in professional learning offered through NPN.

As part of this work, three all-day retreats are scheduled throughout the year and a bimonthly Critical Friends

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Rhode Island

The statistics below are for the entire state. They tell a very different story when disaggregated by urban core, urban ring, and suburban cities.

Enrollment: 153,417
Number of schools: 319 (202 elementary, 60 middle, 57 high)
Teachers: 11,963 (5,274 elementary, 2,906 middle, 3,783 high)
Racial/ethnic mix:

White:	70.4%
Black:	8.6%
Hispanic:	17.35
Asian/Pacific Islander:	3.1%
Native American:	< 1%
Other:	0%

Limited English proficient: 5%
Free/reduced lunch: 33%
Special education: 18%
Contact: Peter McWalters, commissioner, Rhode Island Department of Elementary and Secondary Education
Phone: 401-222-4600
Web site: www.ridoe.net

Group of 10 to 12 like-minded professionals meets and uses protocols to pose questions and receive feedback about dilemmas they are experiencing as school leaders. Participant needs drive the focus of NPN sessions. Topics have included developing a professional learning community, developing teacher leaders, planning job-embedded professional learning, and strategic planning. At the same time, the learning experiences engage participants with colleagues who value different perspectives and build shared knowledge and strategies, thereby modeling ways to facilitate such learning experiences in participants' schools. Chris Haskins, an NPN participant and principal of Springbrook Elementary School in Westerly, R.I., notes, "With the exception of test scores, most principals actually receive very little feedback on their work. This network helps me to reflect on my work, consider dilemmas from a greater perspective, improve action planning, and recharge my moral courage to help my school continually improve. Without the NPN, I would

be half the leader I am today."

We discovered another need during PRN's formative years: improvement in the quality of mentor principals. Thus, a statewide committee of educational leaders developed standards for mentor principals (see p. 35). These standards were used to guide the content of a graduate course entitled the Kennedy Mentor Principal Fellowship (KPF), named for Rep. Patrick Kennedy (D-R.I.), who sponsored a federal appropriation to support this work. More than 75 experienced school leaders have participated in this rigorous training, and a growing number are serving as formal and informal mentors in their districts. Merry Caswell, principal of Slater Middle School in Pawtucket, R.I., and NASSP's finalist for National Middle Level School Principal of the Year, described the power of the training. "I knew the institute would provide some wonderful networking opportunities. But along the way, I became a better listener, a more effective mentor, a more focused facilitator, a more skilled examiner of data, and a true, dedicated reflector of my craft. In short, I became a better principal for my teachers, parents, and especially my students."

All three principal learning projects maintain a constant focus on school reform and on developing skills to be agents of change. Thus, the experiences are guided by either ISLLC standards (Council of Chief State School Officers, 1996) or research on best practice, such as the balanced leadership model from Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003) and the work of Richard Elmore, Mike Schmoker, Douglas Reeves, Rebecca DuFour, Richard DuFour, and Robert Eaker. NSDC's Standards for Staff Development have guided how we work together.

THE FUTURE

Though we initially envisioned that the support school leaders needed was best attended to in career stages, we now recognize the power of combining leaders of all career stages into heterogenous groups, much like what we advocate for effective student grouping in schools. As membership of the separate groups began to overlap, the lines between groups blurred, and participant feedback told us that the experience was the richer for this mix. Novice principals learned from listening to experts articulate their thinking on leadership dilemmas and issues. Likewise, veteran principals benefited from the fresh perspectives and probing questions of aspiring and novice principals. These new leaders were usually closer to the classroom, less tied to more traditional ways of thinking, and busy honing their leadership skills amid a school reform context that places emphasis on accountability and equity. This realization has led to a radical shift in our conceptualization of what this statewide learning community of school leaders will look like in the coming years.

We have now combined the work of NPN and KPF into an all-inclusive network of school leaders called the Learning Leader Network and continue to invite aspiring principals from PRN to participate. This network meets as a large group at the beginning and end of the school year to kick off the year and reflect on the year's work. Between those meetings, smaller groups of 10 to 12 participants meet bimonthly and use the format of National School Reform Faculty's Critical Friends Groups. Further, we encourage the formation of ad hoc groups to discuss texts and specific issues suggested by participants. One Critical Friends Group will pilot a format similar to that of Richard Elmore's work with superintendents in Connecticut, using the medical rounds model (Rallis, Tedder, Lachman, & Elmore, 2006). This work will strive to create a heterogenous statewide network of school leaders.

While past participants have reported a high degree of satisfaction with both KPF's traditional coursestyle and NPN's network-style learning, we aspire to improve our design toward a statewide network that lives up to Elmore's definition of professional networks. That is, "not simply voluntary associations where practitioners meet to share their experiences and contribute to each others' learning, as useful as these associations are. Professional networks have a commitment to a common practice — a set of norms, protocols, procedures, and structured interactions that provide the basis for building individual and group knowledge and expertise in practice" (Elmore, 2006, p.3).

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