

Preparing Principals for High-Need Rural Schools: A Central Office Perspective about Collaborative Efforts to Transform School Leadership

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This article presents district administrators' reflections about (a) the contextual challenges they face in leading a high-need rural school system in Central Appalachia and (b) the change initiatives they implemented to transform the principalship from school management to instructional leadership. After several years of reform efforts, the district superintendent sought external support to deliver intensive professional development to further the district's efforts. A land-grant research university and the rural district partnered to develop the Principals Excellence Program (PEP) and, in turn, submitted a proposal for funding to support training for two cohorts of practicing principals and administrator-certified teachers who aspire to become principals. The article presents perspectives by the district administrators and leadership educators involved in the district-initiated activities to change the culture of administrative practice.

Collaborative Efforts to Transform School Leadership

Many regions in the U.S. face difficulty in attracting and retaining well-prepared school leaders (Educational Research Service, National Association of Elementary School Principals, & National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2000). Hard-to-staff schools—those with low accountability test scores, limited resources, high staff turnover, poor school leadership—are located in urban, suburban, and rural areas alike (Gates, Ringel, Santibanez, Ross, & Chung, 2003; Lashway, 2003; Roza, Cello, Harvey, & Wishon, 2003). Transient student populations, ethnic and cultural diversity, and achievement gaps also contribute to creating hard-to-staff schools in both urban and rural settings (Kiefer, 2004).

According to a 2001 estimate by the U.S. Department of Education (USDE), approximately 7.2 million of America's 45.1 million children and youth live in communities with populations of less than 2,500 residents. That means that one of every six school-age child or youth attends a rural school where opportunities to learn are uniquely different from those in urban and suburban schools (Arnold, 2004). Yet research about rural education issues—particularly about ways to recruit and retain adequately prepared principals for

high-need rural schools—is limited (Arnold, 2005; Arnold, Newman, Gaddy, & Dean, 2005). Additionally, finding ways to address principal-candidate shortages in hard-to-staff rural schools requires unique strategies and determined efforts by districts desperately needing new administrative talent (Howley & Pendarvis, 2002; Miller, 2004).

This article presents recollections and reflections by a team of educational leaders who have worked together since 1998 to transform a high-need rural school district in Central Appalachia. Their comments were recorded during a group interview conducted in late May 2004 for the purpose of capturing information about district efforts focused on professional development of school leaders prior to implementation of the Principals Excellence Program (PEP). Comments made by the superintendent during another group interview conducted by WestEd researchers in July 2004 are also included. PEP is the program title for Kentucky's Collaborative Model for Developing School Leaders for Rural High-Need Schools, one of 20 national initiatives awarded grants in October 2002 through the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation that authorized the School Leadership Development Program.

The 3-year award provided funds for the design and delivery of intensive yearlong, postcertification leadership development to two cohorts (15 participants each) of selected practicing principals and assistant principals as well as teachers and other practitioners who completed preservice principal preparation. Because a condition to

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receive funding was evidence of formative and summative evaluation, data collection and analysis has been ongoing since project implementation began. Findings from the May 2004 interview with the district leadership team is only one data source among many in the multiyear, exploratory case study involving 50 individuals.

Innovative Response to Need for Adequately Trained Rural Principals

The overarching goal of PEP is to reframe the principalship from school management to instructional leadership that assures learning for at-risk students in rural high-need schools. A secondary goal is expansion of candidate pools for future open principalships. PEP was designed and delivered through a collaborative effort between the University of Kentucky (UKY) and Pike County School District (PCSD). An instructional team comprising university professors, district administrators, and high-performing veteran principals who served as mentors collaboratively facilitated the cohort learning activities (Browne-Ferrigno, 2004).

PEP is the only rural-based initiative featured in the 2005 USDE publication, *Innovative Pathways to School Leadership*. In the spring of 2004, WestEd conducted an extensive review of nearly 60 leadership initiatives nationally to select programs that offered innovative strategies in school leadership development; PEP was one of six programs that were selected as finalists. WestEd researchers visited each site and conducted multiple interviews with project designers and program participants before including the six case studies in the federal publication (Roberts, 2005). Although all six programs share 10 “common features” (USDE, 2005, p. 29), PEP was selected for three promising practices: (a) unique vision to change the principalship, (b) work to establish support for schools and districts in rural Appalachia, and (c) innovative integration of theory and practice.

High-Need School District: Contextual and Cultural Challenges

Pike County is located in Central Appalachia, at the easternmost tip of Kentucky that borders Virginia and West Virginia, many miles distant from any metropolitan centers. During the early 1700s, the region was settled by Scottish-Irish and German clans who did not welcome newcomers, and even today it retains its early culture as a patriarchy (Clark, 1988; Drake, 2001). Most residents were either born in Pike County or in nearby counties and have lived there most of their lives. The population of Kentucky is over 90% “white persons, not of Hispanic/Latino origin” (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000); in Pike County it is 98%. Nearly two thirds of the population over age 25 are high school graduates, but only 10% within that group have completed a postsecondary degree (despite the local availability of Pikeville College).

Welfare was first introduced to Pike County during the New Deal era, and now multiple generations of county residents rely solely on governmental support (Drake, 2001). In the 1990s, the county population decreased by 5.3% when the coal mining industry declined; the trend of declining population appears to be continuing based on more recent census information. Demographic statistics also indicate that 33% of the households report annual incomes under \$15,000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). Because 3-year unemployment and poverty rates are 1.5 times the national average, the county retains its designation as a “distressed” region in Appalachia (Hilston, 2000).

Pikeville is the county’s largest town (population = 6,304). After the Appalachian Regional Commission designated it as a growth center, the town received millions of dollars to finance infrastructure development (Drake, 2001). Pikeville Independent School District serves the children residing within the town limits; all children residing outside Pikeville city limits attend PCSD schools. According to district educators, many children attending their schools have never traveled outside the county, and some students living in remote hollows have never been to Pikeville. Thus, diversity within the inclusive county population is based upon socioeconomic status, level of education, residence location, work and life experiences—not race or nationality.

Kentucky ranks first among the 50 states in a priority ranking based on the “percentage of rural students who qualify for subsidized meals” (Johnson & Strange, 2005, p. 51), with over 76% of all its school-age children and youth eligible for free or reduced lunch. However, based on key indicators of child well being, PCSD faces even greater challenges than those reported by the Rural School and Community Trust. Approximately 29% of the children under the age of 18, who represent 24% of the district’s total county population, live in poverty (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). Among the population of children under the age of 18 in the entire Pike County, 78% live in neighborhoods where 20% or more of the residents live in poverty (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2000). When data for Pikeville are excluded, evidence of poverty becomes more pronounced. The PCSD average rate for student participation in free and reduced price lunch programs is 69%; some isolated schools have participation rates that exceed 90%.

Recognizing fully the challenges that PCSD faces as an isolated rural school system in a distressed Appalachian county, the superintendent and his leadership team nonetheless have committed time and energy to assure that all students have adequate opportunities to learn. Over the past 6 years, they have provided ongoing professional development for principals to help them understand and implement a new model of school leadership that focuses on teaching and learning. In 2002, however, the team determined that it needed external assistance to provide a catalyst to take their efforts to critical mass.

Preparing Principals: University-District Collaboration

Becoming a principal is a somewhat predictable career step for many PreK-12 educational practitioners who seek greater responsibility and organizational mobility in their work (Ortiz, 1982). When districts provide opportunities for teachers to engage in authentic leadership and socialization experiences with school administrators, they demonstrate the value of the principalship and its requirements, as a result, talented educators seek the position (Yerkes & Guaglianone, 1998). Thus, preparing individuals to become principals involves much more than just recruitment, preparation, licensure, and placement. To ensure that schools are led by effective principals, “ongoing evaluation and supervision and coaching” and “continuous career-long professional development” (Kelley & Peterson, 2000, p. 20) must be used.

Joint University-District Efforts in Principal Making

School districts have vested interests in providing long-term professional development of the principals who serve their schools, students, and communities (Institute for Educational Leadership, 2000; National Staff Development Council, 2000). In this era of high-stakes accountability and decreasing numbers of candidates able to meet the challenges of school leadership effectively, the nurturing and supportive maintenance of principals becomes particularly relevant (Capasso & Daresh, 2001; Crow & Matthews, 1998).

The “making of a principal” (Lane, 1984) is an intricate process requiring the concerted collaborative efforts by universities and districts. As joint partners in the principal-making process, leadership educators and administrative practitioners need to work together to (a) identify and select prospective candidates, (b) provide them experiential learning and socialization opportunities, and (c) assist them in assuming role identities oriented toward school leadership (Browne-Ferrigno, 2003; Browne-Ferrigno & Muth, 2004; Milstein, Bobroff, & Restine, 1991). Leadership educators and administrative practitioners also need to collaborate in assisting program graduates through placement as new school leaders and providing support during novice practice years (Aiken, 2002; Daresh, 2002; Milstein, 1992).

Districte-Initiated Principal Development

PEP is an example of an innovative leadership development program that maintains strong connections between a university and district, expands responsibility for the identification and preparation of next generations of school leaders, and integrates formal knowledge and applications to problems of practice (USDE, 2005). The program components are described later in the paper in the chronological order they occurred.

Formative evaluations by cohort participants, mentor principals, district administrators, and program instructors suggest that PEP is generating outcomes toward goal attainment (Browne-Ferrigno, 2004; Browne-Ferrigno & Maynard, 2005). Effective selection and preparation of future administrators who feel confident of their abilities and competent about school leadership practice and who are oriented toward instructional leadership is also apparent in these findings (Browne-Ferrigno, 2005; Browne-Ferrigno & Knoepfel, 2004). Through visionary strategic planning, unwavering commitment to goal accomplishment, hard work by a team of dedicated district leaders, and change agency oriented toward sustainability (Browne-Ferrigno, Jackson, Allen, Maynard, & Stalion, 2005), this school system is now recognized as an exemplar of progressive innovation in Kentucky. This accomplishment, however, has not been easy to achieve.

Continuous Evaluation of Program Impact: Study Design

The federal grant program supporting PEP requires formative and summative evaluation; thus, data have been collected regularly since the beginning of 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, a qualitative researcher can begin an inquiry with “a target of interest” and then describe “whatever emerges of significance” (Krathwohl, 1998, p. 26). The project director served as the primary investigator. A doctoral student was hired as the project coordinator to provide administrative and research assistance throughout program implementation and preliminary data analysis. A professor from a South Carolina research university was hired in early 2005 to assist with program evaluation.

Data Sources: Triangulated Perspectives

Data collection strategies were varied (e.g., surveys, reflections, small-group interviews, observations) and included information from members of all stakeholder groups (i.e., cohort participants, mentor principals, district administrators, program instructors) who voluntarily signed consent forms approved by the University of Kentucky Institutional Review Board. The study focused on capturing the perceptions of cohort members at various times throughout their program experiences, rather than only at the beginning and end of their yearlong training. Their responses over time provided 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 cohort instructors contributed assessments about program implementation through written reflections and group interviews. Their contributions not only guided progress of program implementation but also created a broad-based conceptualization of the contextual issues. Additionally, all interviews conducted by WestEd researchers during their onsite visit to PCSD were audiotaped by the project coordinator and then professionally transcribed, thus providing additional data sources for triangulation.

Data Analysis: Qualitative Strategies

Progressive data analysis was conducted concurrently with data collection to assess the progress of participant learning and project implementation and to identify need for additional data collection. The bulk of analyses were being conducted during program evaluation phase using a qualitative data analysis software program that allows cross-case comparisons among various subgroups. Analyses of questionnaire responses, interview transcriptions, and participant writing include qualitative, grounded theory, and content analysis techniques (Kvale, 1996; LeCompte & Schensul, 1999; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Weber, 1990).

Group authorship and member checking of in-progress reports by cohort instructors, district leaders, and others not directly involved with the initiative ensured authenticity and accuracy. Study participants were asked to conduct member checking of the final report.

Perspectives by District Leadership Team

What follows is a chronology of principal professional development efforts prior to implementation of PEP as recalled by those who began working together as a leadership team in 1998. Anecdotal data were used to frame the questions posed during the May 2004 group interview conducted by the project director, with assistance from the project coordinator. The interviewees included three members of the PCSD leadership team (superintendent, assistant superintendent, director of curriculum and instruction) and two retired Kentucky superintendents who have long-established ties with the district that will be explained momentarily. The fourth leadership team member (director of personnel) was out of town when the interview was conducted; he reviewed the professionally transcribed interview commentary and added his reflections to the transcription where he believed he would have contributed to the conversation had he been present. A copy of the semistructured interview protocol is attached as an appendix.

Wherever possible, we include the actual words of interview participants as direct quotes. To both improve readability and create a chronological order of the events, the

text of the paper is an interpretive perspective by the primary author based on comments made by the interviewees rather than a verbatim recounting of the interview. The second author is one of the retired Kentucky superintendents who has worked with PCSD continuously since 1998. The director of curriculum and instruction completed a member check. Reflections collected from PEP participants through a variety of questionnaires and group interviews are integrated into this article to support summary statements about the program impact. Citations to study reports and *Innovative Pathways to School Leadership* are used to support claims, allowing interested readers to further investigate the assertions.

Changing Administrative Culture: New Vision and Expectations

PCSD was once an educational system in default, hindered by a \$1.5 million budgetary deficit due to long-term mismanagement and complacent attitudes about student learning among many district and school educators. After several years of contentious existence between the superintendent and the Kentucky Department of Education (KDE) Office of Educational Accountability, the superintendent chose to retire. In 1998 the Pike County Board of Education appointed the current superintendent, a lifelong resident of the county and highly respected principal. The new superintendent had to focus first on budgetary and personnel issues, which required him to decrease employment in all levels of the system—resulting in staff reductions by over 350 employees. In an Appalachian county where the coal industry had recently suffered a 50% decline in production that forced unemployment rates to rise, this was a tough job for the new superintendent and his leadership team (assistant superintendent, director of personnel, director of curriculum and instruction). KDE assigned monitors to assist with the elimination of the deficit and support a smooth transition. Two members of that transition team established close ties with the superintendent and assisted with leadership development activities in PCSD.

After first dealing with the most critical areas of needed change, the new superintendent asked his associates to work with him toward transforming the district into an exemplar of progressive growth. This district-initiated reform agenda included, among many changes in district administrative practice, the creation and delivery of continuous professional development activities for principals that emphasizes visionary instructional leadership to assure “success for all students” without exception. The seeds for a reconceptualized principalship were thus sown.

During the May 2004 interview, the superintendent, who has worked in PCSD throughout his entire 48-year career in education, recalled the challenges they faced during those 1st years of his tenure: “For many years in this district, 95% of the responsibility of the school principal was to manage

and do those activities associated with it. And very little was done in the way of instruction.” The director of curriculum and instruction recalled that the team realized it was going to ask their principals to assume “a role that they were not prepared to take.” Because they “did not understand teaching and learning,” she believes they “really were not able to be instructional leaders in their schools.” It quickly became apparent that the leadership team’s first task was to envision what an ideal principal in their district would know and be able to do.

Development of Envisioned Ideal

The district administrators brainstormed together and generated a list of characteristics they believed were essential for a contemporary principal: the necessary knowledge, dispositions, and skills for PCSD principals to be effective instructional leaders. These characteristics guided them in planning the initial professional development activities and later became the criteria for recommending teachers to the preservice preparation program provided by a regional university and selecting “the best possible leadership candidates” (USDE, 2005, p. 53) for the professional development program delivered by UKY.

An ideal principal of a PCSD school—and PEP cohort member—must (a) understand Kentucky’s core content and learning goals, (b) believe that all children can learn at high levels, (c) have a thorough knowledge of curriculum and assessment, (d) demonstrate instructional leadership within his or her school community, (e) show evidence of being a master teacher, (f) work well as a team member, (g) show evidence of being a lifelong learner, and (h) understand the teaching and learning process. Using this shared vision of an ideal principal, the leadership team then embarked on efforts to change the culture of administrative practice.

Exemplified Leadership Expectations

Their first action was to change the name of the monthly principals’ meeting. Because they intended to “talk about leadership in this district,” the superintendent suggested that they establish a “Pike County Leadership Academy.” Thus, they compiled a notebook of material to distribute to principals for future reference and restructured the monthly meetings. According to the assistant superintendent, about 10% of the time at those early academy meetings was used to cover “kitchen chores” (e.g., state or district regulations, deadlines for reports) and the remaining “90% of the time was spent [doing] educational activities.” The professional development included “engaging [principals] in activities that would further develop their leadership skills.” The superintendent believes that focusing on leadership development during meetings helped to create “an atmosphere

or a feeling that would build on [a changed] culture” in the district.

Focus on Student Learning and School Improvement

During the 2nd year, the leadership team decided it was time for principals to develop skills in public relations. They introduced press conferences that fall after the state-accountability testing results were distributed. Principals were required to stand in front of their peers and talk about their test scores, “whether good or bad.” They shared “the things that they had done in their building along with their staff to make sure that they had good test results.” They were also required to talk “about the things they were going to put in place to make changes to improve test scores.” The assistant superintendent reflected further about those early press conferences:

I can remember the 1st year vividly and how some principals were so uncomfortable talking about educational issues. Some of those folks aren’t with us now and, to be quite honest with you, it wasn’t anything that we did in terms of being mean to them in any way. I really feel that we had some principals with us 5 years ago [who] would probably still be with us today had not [the superintendent] placed the kind of emphasis that he did on [their] being instructional leaders. When I recall those first press conferences that 1st year, I [see] the growth and maturity of our building-level principals during press conferences today.

The leadership team believes that recent principal presentations about accountability results were the best, not because the scores were necessarily high but because the principals are able to talk about teaching and learning as professionals.

The team also began requiring the site-based governance committees at each school, called School-Based Decision Making (SBDM) Councils, to present a formal report each year to the Pike County School Board about student learning and school improvement. SBDM Councils were legislated through passage of the 1990 Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA) and comprise elected representatives from teacher and parent groups and the principal who is the only continuous member. State policy mandates that each council include three teachers, two parents, and the principal, or a greater number of members that remain in the same 3-2-1 ratio of representation. An important goal of this policy was to give schools local control in decision making related to curriculum, instruction, professional development, finances, and principal selection (Foster, 1999). The leadership team determined that requiring SBDM Councils to report to the

school board was “another opportunity for principals to be in the spotlight in terms of showing their abilities as instructional leaders.”

The assistant superintendent asserted that professional growth is quite evident through the confidence displayed and language used by principals when they make their school-board presentations. He believes the change occurred because principals “understand all the [school reform] now” compared to “5 years ago when that [expertise] did not exist.” He believes that anytime the district leaders “can put principals in positions where they can show their abilities and their growth as a school leaders, [the leadership team] needs to do that.” He recalled that their innovative professional development activity was shared to a packed audience at an annual conference of the Kentucky Association of School Administrators about 5 years ago and has since been adopted by other school districts.

Standards-Based Leadership Practice

One long-term initiative in the district has been intensive work with the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) Standards for School Leaders (Council of Chief State School Officers, 1996), adopted by Kentucky in 1998 as the framework for the preparation and practice of principals (Browne-Ferrigno & Fusarelli, 2005). The superintendent hired a member of the KDE transition team, one of the retired superintendents who participated in the May 2004 interview, to serve as a leadership coach in Pike County. He continues to facilitate many professional development activities during the leadership academy meetings and provide on-site coaching support to principals and assistant principals. He also served as a member of the PEP design and instructional team. During the group interview, he reflected on the changed expectations for PCSD principals following the selection of a new superintendent:

[In the past,] if you were a good manager as a building principal and things went along well and there wasn't a lot of upheaval, then you were a great principal. But with the change in [district] administration, the expectations changed. [Principals] were expected to be good managers, but now they are also expected to be instructional leaders . . . responsible for student achievement results. . . . It was a focus away from the management position to instructional leader, which was a tremendous shift for this district.

To help educational leaders understand better the reconceptualized principalship, the leadership consultant distributed the principals and central office staff into small work groups to develop examples of school leadership performance based on the Standards and their corresponding indicators. This

activity provided a “tremendous opportunity to talk about instruction.”

Engaging interactively with peers and central office staff in discussions about leadership was a new experience for the principals. He recalled that the small working groups became “totally focused on instruction and the Standards” and asked if they could go “back to their schools and work with their staff to build better definitions about what [exceptional leadership] performance would look like.” Ultimately, this professional development activity

ended up being a really great opportunity for principals and teachers and central office staff to talk about what the system expected, what good practice would look like and how that would be implemented. And it did serve as a wonderful base . . . to extend discussions about the instructional program and instructional expectations.

The collaborative interaction with the Standards also provided the framework for a district-developed administrator evaluation process that exceeds state requirements (Browne-Ferrigno & Fusarelli, 2005). Additionally, according to the district leadership team and leadership consultant, the widespread collaboration in defining and identifying school leadership performance helped everyone understand that the reconceptualized principalship emphasizes leadership for learning, not school management.

Enhancing School Leadership: Collaborative Enterprise

A new vision of educational leadership modeled by the district administrative team through changes in professional meetings, new expectations for school principals, and intensive work with the Standards by stakeholder groups served as initial catalysts for innovation. Although the leadership team was pleased with these initial efforts, it believed that intensive professional development was required to move this paradigm shift to critical mass. Moreover, a 2001 survey of PCSD principals indicated that the district potentially faced open principalships in half of its 24 schools within 5 years due to anticipated retirements. The team realized that unless they took immediate action, a principal-candidate shortage appeared imminent.

Recruitment and Placement Challenges

Although recognizing the multiple challenges the school system faces, district leaders maintain a sustained commitment to the belief that all children can learn. In 2001, the superintendent and school board adopted the slogan “Success For All” and then acted on it by requiring educators to reframe solutions associated with children at risk of not

learning. Hence, the district seeks principals who will both make a difference with students and make a commitment to stay in Pike County. However, according to the director of personnel, recruiting and retaining principals and teachers for the district is quite challenging:

Both administrator and teacher recruitment present unique challenges because of the geography of the district. Schools far removed from the business center of the county, Pikeville, are difficult to staff . . . It is extremely difficult to attract individuals from outside [isolated communities] to either relocate there or to drive in from [elsewhere]. It is well over an hour in driving time from Pikeville to [outlying schools] and that inaccessibility is not a great recruiting tool. The best recruitment tool for teachers and administrators in those settings is to “grow your own.”

The mountainous terrain of the region and cultural norms make it difficult to convince a teacher or principal to travel to a school in another community across narrow two-lane roads that may be closed during snow or rain storms.

The retired superintendent who led the KDE transition team during the 1st years of the current superintendent’s tenure believes that although “geography makes a big difference in staffing” for school districts in eastern Kentucky, population stability creates another challenge. While working for KDE elsewhere in the state, he observed that teachers and principals were willing to move from one district to another or to travel long distances between work and home because the terrain and highway system make it possible.

The leadership consultant, who was born in a county adjacent to Pike County and has been a superintendent in three Kentucky districts, offered another perspective about the challenges PCSD faces in recruiting and retaining principals and teachers. He asserted that people in eastern Kentucky “are born and raised and intend to live” close to their nuclear and extended family members. Even if young adults leave to attend college outside the region, they usually return to their hometowns. Hence, relocating to other places to improve one’s career opportunities is not commonly done. When relocation is an option or necessary, however, young adults typically leave eastern Kentucky, which provides one reason for the declining population.

The superintendent has learned through working with his peers from large urban and suburban districts that they too have trouble staffing schools with quality educators where large percentages of student populations come from poverty. He remarked that he knows about “schools in some urban districts within the state” that have “changed the principal every year for the last 3 years.” However, he believes that rural school districts in eastern Kentucky must

overcome deeply embedded cultural influences, as well as isolation, limited mobility, and high poverty:

We are dealing with a different culture [here] . . . that is made up of workers who do not put a high value on education. 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. . . . We have very little [support for schooling] in rural Pike County and eastern Kentucky.

His commitment to transforming the district through ongoing professional development for principals is best explained by his powerful justification, “We have to have educational leaders that are the very, very best.”

The isolation caused by mountain ranges and limited access to small rural communities resulted in different belief systems in different parts of the county, making it difficult for principals, and even teachers, to transfer to different schools within PCSD. The director of curriculum and instruction has observed that community expectations about who a principal is and what a principal does means that a SBDM Council “will protect itself” and not select an outsider—or even a woman—as its new principal.

During the interview, the group talked for a few minutes about the findings from their 2001 survey of current principals. They realized that their efforts would not be enough to achieve their dual goals of transformed administrative practice and increased student-learning achievement. They determined that their next step had to focus on the high-need circumstances and new leadership expectations within the district, yet also provide broad-based perspectives about the contemporary principalship from a national viewpoint. They realized they needed help in creating a model of advanced leadership development that would build sustainable capacity. Thus, the superintendent sought assistance from the Commonwealth’s only land-grant research university located 150 miles away in the Bluegrass region of Kentucky.

Innovative Action for Principal Development

Working collaboratively, UKY leadership educators and PCSD leadership administrators designed an advanced leadership development program and sought external funding to implement it. The proposal was selected as 1 of 20 initiatives in the nation to be supported financially through the first authorization of 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 program is based upon the four recurring themes within the Standards: “a vision for success, a focus on teaching and learning, an involvement

of all stakeholders, a demonstration of ethical behavior” (Hessel & Holloway, 2002, p. 21).

The yearlong program provides coherent professional development—a coordinated mix of group and individual learning activities of selected participants formed into closed cohorts, continuous professional reading and reflection, field-based experiential learning, disciplined inquiry supported by mentor principals—for educational practitioners holding Kentucky administrator certification (Browne-Ferrigno, 2004; Browne-Ferrigno & Maynard, 2005; USDE, 2005). Hence, the program focuses intently on the work required to lead contemporary public schools.

The curriculum and instruction focused on helping principals, both current and future, to become visionary instructional leaders and effective change agents who understand the unique learning needs of students in high-poverty, rural Appalachia. The superintendent and school board excused the cohort members from their professional duties 1 day each week throughout an academic year (January to December) to participate in PEP-sponsored learning activities. They began each semester by meeting as a cohort for a full-day seminar/workshop. Then the next week they worked as small inquiry teams assigned to mentor principals in selected schools (the first semester at the elementary level, the next at the secondary level) to conduct research about student learning issues. The two training events, cohort meetings and field-based practice, alternated weekly throughout the academic year.

At the close of each semester, the inquiry teams formally presented their action-research findings at their site schools and then at a superintendent-sponsored luncheon to which all PCSD administrators and school board members were invited. The cohort members joined all principals and central office staff in the summer for an inquiry-based leadership institute.

Findings from data collected during the 2-year program implementation suggest that this model of district-sponsored, university-supported professional development is a powerful solution to addressing principal shortages in locations where few candidates are available (Browne-Ferrigno & Maynard, 2005; Browne-Ferrigno & Muth, 2004). Moreover, the universality of the curriculum and the integration of theory and practice make the program adaptable for other locations. Districts in North Carolina and South Carolina hope to implement a modified version of PEP to address their needs for developing school administrators at the secondary level (Fusarelli, Ricciardi, Browne-Ferrigno, & Lindle, 2005).

Assessment of District Efforts Toward Principal Making

To date, 18 of the 24 PCSD schools have PEP participants (cohort members or mentor principals) working on

site. According to PCSD administrators and the leadership consultant, PEP has served as a positive catalyst in changing administrative practice and increasing the principal candidate pool. Although it is impossible to make direct connections between the program and student achievement because PEP influences cannot be isolated from other district initiatives, schools have improved recently as measured by accountability performance indicators initiated with passage of KERA (Browne-Ferrigno & Fusarelli, 2005).

The director of curriculum and instruction, who has primary responsibility for the evaluation of principals, believes that the initial efforts made by the district in developing school administrators was a critical first step before moving to another level of expectations:

I think that PEP was Pike County’s next step. We had to grow before [implementing the grant-supported project], and all of the things that happened with SBDM Council reports and with press conferences [brought us to] a level where we could go for big, big change. . . . We’re not going to have to do [intensive professional development] after the project participants are in principal positions . . . they’ll be ready because they are instructional leaders now.

The superintendent agreed and asserted that “the program’s ability to have people work together in teams as they strive to increase their leadership skills and their instructional skills” is one aspect of the professional development program that “has really been gratifying.”

District-Supported Release Time for Professional Development

The district made a major commitment to professional development by releasing principals and teachers 1 day every week throughout an academic year to participate in the program. While this may seem extraordinary to outsiders, the leadership team determined several years ago that their efforts to improve instruction in the district required investment in human capital. The director of personnel explained why this decision was made:

I think the commitment to bring about change in the focus of school-level administrators cannot be limited to after-work or evening activities. The release time indicates how important the activities are viewed to be and sends a strong message to participants that the district has a committed belief in the program. I know participants realize how important their daily responsibilities are, and they also realize that the district leadership recognizes

that importance. Being released from those responsibilities gives credibility and value to the activities in which the participants are involved.

Further, data collected from cohort members indicate that few, if any, would have agreed to participate in the leadership development program without district-supported release time (Browne-Ferrigno, 2004). Their comments often mirror the words of the director of personnel about commitment, importance, and value of the program to the district and their participation in it.

The director of curriculum and instruction, with assistance from the instructional supervisors in her department, is responsible for professional development of certified personnel. She talked about how the leadership team tried over the years to instill a belief among PCSD educators that professional growth is important:

We've worked really hard to send the message that if we are bringing teachers into [a district-sponsored] training and releasing them from [their work responsibilities], then the class is very, very important. . . . [They understand now] that when we bring them in for a day of professional development, they know that the preliminary work they must do in preparation for leaving their classrooms is extremely important.

She explained further that releasing principals from their responsibilities a day every week to participate in PEP—in addition to attending other required administrative meetings and activities away from their schools—shows how the district uses principal absences for a secondary purpose:

We've had some principals who felt that they could not possibly leave their buildings 1 day a week. [However, their absence] forced the issue of building leadership capacity within their schools. And that's been a good thing because I think that is part of the learning experience that principals have to go through. They can't do this job alone. . . . They have to identify leaders within their buildings, and I think that's been a very positive piece to come out of PEP.

Principals who participated in the cohorts indicated that they learned the value of asking teachers to assume responsibilities during their absences. They discovered that building leadership capacity in their schools has been an unanticipated, but very welcomed, outcome of their participation in the program (Browne-Ferrigno & Muth, 2004). Several recruited and nominated their teacher leaders to participate in the second PEP cohort, thus further expanding leadership capacity in their schools and the district.

Evidence of Changed Administrator Behaviors

Change agents sometimes are fortunate to observe a defining moment during an innovation effort. Fortunately, the district leadership team and program director were present when that happened in June 2003 during a PEP-initiated summer professional development institute, involving all principals, assistant principals, supervisors of instruction, teacher leaders, and cohort members. The purpose for implementing a summer institute was to focus on PreK-12 curricular and instructional topics and to help create a professional learning community for educational leaders in the district. The leadership consultant assumed major responsibility for facilitating the institute.

The large gathering of approximately 100 individuals was divided into five smaller groups determined by participants' work assignments at the five district high schools or their feeder middle and elementary schools. PEP cohort members were assigned as small-group facilitators. The goal for the first institute was review and alignment of the entire PreK-12 mathematics and science curricula to ensure that topics were not duplicated and that others were not omitted. The school teams were asked to look carefully at transition points (i.e., from preschool to kindergarten, from primary to intermediate grade levels, from elementary to middle school, from middle school to high school) to be certain that curricular topics had been covered to assure opportunity for student learning success.

Rather than present the topics through formal presentations, the leadership consultant modeled inquiry learning strategies, which was the theory of action for the professional development experience. To diminish interaction barriers, he interjected group development activities similar to those used during PEP cohort meetings. The culminating project for each of the five groups was demonstration of their learning by teaching a mathematics or science lesson using inquiry-based learning. According to participants' written critiques, the institute was definitely "not a 'sit-and-git' session," but rather a risk-safe opportunity for principals and other educational leaders to experience inquiry learning where they had to "figure out on their own" and "come to a common understanding for the district."

During the group interview, the superintendent reflected about what he observed happening during the first institute, which was conducted 6 months after the launch of PEP:

[I saw] people participating and operating at a level that I only dreamed about prior to this activity. And we're talking about people who were not administrators but a part of PEP. We're talking about people who had been administrators for 1 year, 2 years, . . . [and even] 20 years, all of them working at a level that was paying dividends to everyone involved in the process. . . . For the first time in this school

district, a high percentage of people truly believed they not only could be a manager of school, [but also] a successful instructional leader.

The assistant superintendent observed the same summer institute activities and recalled that he too “was truly amazed at the interaction that was taking.” He saw “involvement from some folks who [he] would have never dreamed” possible. For him, that moment in June 2003 was “the coming together of all the different initiatives” they had initiated over the previous several years. He asserted that the collaboration among principals and teachers toward improving teaching and learning that he saw is the “kind of a culture that we all strive” to achieve.

Ongoing professional development for administrators—for the purpose of steadily improving role performance—engages veteran, novice, and aspiring principals in shared learning experiences, which ultimately expands leadership capacity (Browne-Ferrigno & Muth, 2004). Capacity building is a critical element of innovation sustainability (Fullan, 2004). Successful sustainability of innovation requires “cyclical energizing” (Fullan, 2005, p. 17) that includes two nonlinear related components: (a) energy expended toward change, and (b) periodic plateaus before the next breakthrough movement occurs. The first institute provided evidence of a breakthrough moment for PCSD toward the potential for sustained efforts (Browne-Ferrigno et al., 2005).

Collaborative Principal Making: Assessments of Innovation Efforts

Transforming the principalship from school management to instructional leadership is certainly not unique to PCSD. What makes it noteworthy are the contextual challenges faced by this high-need rural district in eastern Kentucky: (a) the school system’s geographic isolation in Central Appalachia, (b) economic limitations caused by unemployment and poverty, and (c) a culture that does not readily accept outsiders or value education. Their efforts required demanding work over several years, with only incremental improvement at first as evidence of goal achievement. Yet, as a team of committed change agents, they did not waver from their vision of developing principals who focus primarily on teaching and learning and assure that all children achieve at high levels.

The grant through the NCLB School Leadership Development Program provided necessary funding to transform their idea for intensive principal development into a reality. Without external support, including a collaborative partnership with a university located 150 miles from the district, implementation of the postcertification leadership development for practicing and aspiring principals would not have

been possible. The superintendent explained the importance of external support to the WestEd researchers during a July 2004 interview: “We could not have done this if we hadn’t received the funding. We would have had to do the best we could have done, which would have been far short of what we’ve achieved since we’ve had this grant.”

National Recognition of PCSD Leadership Development

Although PEP was designed to address school leadership needs in a high-need rural district, it incorporated recommended best practices in principal preparation, professional development and adult learning, thus capturing the attention of WestEd. Although the six leadership initiatives featured in *Innovative Pathways to School Leadership* (USDE, 2005) have uniquely different contextual challenges and program goals, they share 10 common features.

1. An initial base of support that includes partnerships with key stakeholders and funders to finance “start-up” costs of planning, development, and early implementation;
2. A commitment on the part of program developers to do the extremely hard work of developing, establishing, and implementing the program over a minimum of three to five years;
3. A research-based vision of what an effective principal does to lead instructional improvement and student achievement gains;
4. A focused theory of action about program development and instructional design based on the vision;
5. School leadership performance standards and outcome assessments aligned with the vision and theory of action;
6. Candidate selection criteria and screening process that reflects the vision and the capability of the program;
7. Structuring participant groups into continuing cohorts that frequently meet to discuss what they are experiencing and learning about the principal’s job;
8. Authentic learning experiences that incorporate on-the-job, practical realities of the principal’s work;

9. Frequent structured opportunities for participants to do personal reflection and performance assessment; and
10. Structured program monitoring and assessment through feedback, participants' performance in the program, and participants' success on the job after the program. (p. 29)

The purpose for the WestEd research was to identify program components that potentially "improve the quality and equity of education opportunities" (p. 1) and thus diminish persistent achievement gaps in student learning. A provocative question arises: In what ways is PEP different from the other programs, especially for those interested in rural education?

Rural Uniqueness of PCSD Leadership Development

The other leadership development programs included in the WestEd study are located in or near major metropolitan areas where social service and charitable agencies, public transportation, large businesses and major corporations, and trained volunteers are readily available as potential support resources. PCSD does not have those types of external supports. Its isolation created by geography and distance from metropolitan areas means that the district cannot rely on others to provide social services; instead, the district and its schools are the providers of social services in many communities. Further, discretionary resources are extremely limited due to unemployment and poverty among the families that the district serves, which means that field trips are not often possible and fundraising activities only marginally profitable.

The differences between urban and rural schools were discussed during WestEd interviews and the interview reported in this article, and often during cohort meetings. Passage of KERA instituted a school-funding formula that provides equity among all districts regardless of local tax base, yet differences continue to exist. The leadership consultant offered the following reflection about why implementation of PEP has been important for Pike County:

There is a current legal action [in Kentucky] to determine if resources are adequate. Until the courts make this determination, we have what we have. It may be more beneficial to determine if the resources we have are being effectively and efficiently utilized. One opportunity PEP gives participants is the ability to study student performance and determine if there is a data-based solution to problems. If there is a better way to deliver services, PEPers have been equipped to look at options and reallocate resources if needed. It may be that we

never have "adequate resources" available. The ability to make informed decisions about the use of what is available is more important than the amount available.

Several years ago, the PCSD superintendent and his leadership team determined that well-prepared principals serving as instructional leaders and change agents are necessary resources for assuring that all students learn at high levels. Their message has been heard, based on a comment written by a PEP cohort member: "The most valuable resources for student achievement are quality instructional leaders."

Human capital is a critical element of the construct "adequate resources." Thus, another important difference between PEP and the other programs recognized by WestEd is the pool of potential candidates for transformation into "quality instructional leaders." According to the PCSD director of curriculum and instruction, "Rural districts are not able to recruit administrators into their schools so it becomes absolutely imperative that districts focus on developing those already there." But she believes that developing school leaders requires three critical elements:

If professional development is to make an impact on practice, it must be delivered over time, job embedded, and allow for reflection. PEP is built on those three premises. The real-life connection to the principalship is perhaps the strongest component of the program.

Another question must be answered: What evidence suggests that the district efforts to transform the principalship are making a difference? The following section presents comments by program participants about the program and its impact.

Participant Assessments of PCSD Leadership Development

Cohort members, mentor principals, and others provided rich commentary through multiple data collection strategies (Browne-Ferrigno, 2003, 2004; Browne-Ferrigno & Knoepfel, 2004; Browne-Ferrigno & Maynard, 2005; Browne-Ferrigno & Muth, 2004).

Program effectiveness. Near the close of each cohort, participants were asked on a questionnaire to respond to the prompt, In what ways is PEP an effective professional development program for school leaders? A veteran secondary mathematics teacher, who was selected to participate as a cohort member during his 1st year as a new high school assistant principal, had this to say:

PEP is significantly better than other professional development programs in many ways. Study is

more intense and focused on application and practice. The issues studied are relevant to each day's work and therefore immediately valuable and beneficial to the participants. PEP truly changes the participants' view of themselves from that of being isolated individuals working with a limited number of people to that of being cooperative members of a broader group working toward higher goals involving many more people.

Supervisors of instruction are certified district-level administrators who assist teachers in developing curriculum and principals in supervising instructional programs. A veteran supervisor offered his assessment of the project's effectiveness based upon observed changes in participants' 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.

During a focus-group interview near the close of the first cohort, participants were asked if they would recommend the program to others. A veteran middle school principal, who has since become a high school principal, stated that he would encourage others to participate because he believes

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.

When the announcement was made in the fall of 2003 that nominations were being accepted for candidates to be considered for the second cohort, this principal vigorously recruited and recommended two teachers from his school as candidates. Both were selected as members of the second cohort. One filled his mentor's position as the principal of the middle school; the other is actively seeking a principalship.

Student learning emphasis. Another prompt on the questionnaire administered each November asked cohort members and mentor principals, How is social justice (i.e., equitable learning opportunities for all students) addressed through PEP to prepare educational leaders for the high-stakes accountability context in public schools today? A Title I coordinator in an elementary school, who is actively seeking a principalship, offered this perspective:

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 provided literature, videos, guest speakers, and dialogue to help address the 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.

She continued, "In order to promote learning and success for all children, instructional leadership must involve all stakeholders. Administrators must be focused on instructional leadership and building capacity rather than simply the management of schools."

Rural education emphasis. All participants were also asked to write a reflection to the questionnaire prompt, In what ways is PEP preparing school leaders in rural districts to promote learning and success for all students? An elementary school principal, who served as a mentor principal for both cohorts, believes that the experiential learning component of the program provided context for topics discussed during cohort meetings:

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.

Cohort members, however, offered slightly different perspectives. A high school assistant principal appreciated the way instructors prodded cohort members to reflect upon their 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 the district, and not just one school." In her lengthy response she explained how this new systemic perspective helped her to understand the

importance of collaboration and cooperation among schools, especially to improve instructional programs.

Reconceptualized principalship. At the midpoint of each yearlong program, cohort members were asked, In what ways has participating in PEP changed your understanding about the principalship? An aspiring principal provided a lengthy description about her changed perceptions of the principalship, a portion of which is included here:

No matter how successful a school is, it must continuously seek new ideas and change practices or its spirit will wither and die. I now know that a successful school shows that principal leadership is necessary for improvement and without the principal providing support for risk-taking and encouraging teacher leadership, [he or she] cannot succeed.

Included in her response was a description about how participation in the program changed her practices as a teacher leader in her school. The “readings, research, and group interaction” with practicing principals and other aspiring principals in her cohort provoked her “to become more involved in looking for ways to make change happen at [her] school.”

Changed behaviors. Cohort members participated in focus-group interviews twice during their yearlong program. In the fall semester they were asked, In what ways has your performance as an educational leader changed since participating in PEP? A former high-school assistant principal and current elementary principal described how his leadership has become more visionary and collaborative:

Prior to my participation in PEP, I really had no understanding of the powerful role the mission and vision statements can play in the success of a school. I have concluded that to call them statements is a bit of a misnomer—they aren’t just statements, they are the driving life force of any organization.

He explained further that he has “actively sought out greater involvement from parents and community members in the daily life of our school.” While his school has received the highest overall scores on the state accountability tests for several years, recently his school has made a significant gain.

Leadership capacity building. During a fall focus-group interview with cohort members, a 3rd-year high school assistant principal shared how she perceives the program is indirectly building leadership capacity within schools:

PEP has taught us to grow and develop leaders within our schools; that to be effective leaders our-

selves, we have to grow and develop others and be able to delegate . . . whether it be menial or major tasks. . . . We have to learn to give up control and not do everything ourselves.

Continuing with the notion about the importance of principals distributing responsibilities and building leadership capacity in their schools, a 2nd-year elementary principal shared his new insights:

Being in PEP has forced me to delegate duties. It has made me look at my staff [to determine] who can take care of the lunchroom when I’m gone, who can help with bus duty, or who get the purchase orders out. I am creating an inner group of people with responsibilities.

Another veteran elementary principal said that he believed recruiting future principals is part of an administrator’s job and that “a really good administrator will develop the capacity of leaders.”

Aspiring principals in the PEP cohorts responded slightly differently. A veteran elementary teacher believes being recruited to participate in the program means the district administrators “have faith” in her as a prospective principal. She also shared how she benefited from participating:

The experience of being with a group of administrators and future administrators gives me confidence that I can do the job [of being a principal]. Now, I don’t hesitate to include my [cohort] colleagues whenever I need help or want to share something with them. I feel a part of something great in this district.

Another teacher indicated that she had “gained valuable information from [participating in the] program that helped [her] feel more confident about becoming a school principal.”

Effective Principal Making in a High-Need Rural School District

The superintendent began his tenure with a vision of what the district could accomplish if principals focused on teaching and learning. That vision has been the driving force in the district for 6 years. Near the close of the district administrators’ interview with WestEd researchers in July 2004, the superintendent reflected about what has been accomplished in developing leadership capacity in PCSD. He remarked that he had recently heard the word “passion” being used to describe commitment to making positive changes in education. Without passionate commitment by many individuals, the envisioned transformation of the district would probably not have happened.

Multiple sources of information about leadership development efforts in this high-need rural district suggest that preparing principals is not a single event, but rather a continuous process. PEP provided a unique opportunity for veteran, novice, and prospective school leaders to work together in risk-safe learning environments of closed cohorts, regularly apply their learnings in authentic school settings, and then reflect about their experiences when they came back together during biweekly workshops. Mentors, both in the field and in the classroom, helped them unravel the complexities of the contemporary principalship and guided them in exploring alternative ways to practice school leadership.

The program was made possible through a truly collaborative university-district partnership and external funding. Many individuals provided implementation support and evaluative assessment. The PCSD leadership team, however, were the true catalysts of change toward preparing principals for the high-need schools in their rural Appalachian district.

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Appendix

Proposed Interview Protocol for District Leadership Team Interview
May 19, 2004

Background Information about the Principals Excellence Program (PEP)

1. In the grant proposal and various conference papers that we have written over the past two years, we have shared this “story” about the development of PEP. [Researcher reads excerpt from April 2004 paper.] How did PEP really emerge? Is what is written in this conference paper authentic?
2. Is PEP achieving the envisioned outcomes? Preparing the idealized principals?
3. What have PEP participants—both cohort members and mentor principals—told you about their experiences?
4. PEP was developed as a strategy to improve school leadership and student learning. What challenges does Pike County School District still face in achieving its goal of “Success For All”?

District-University Partnerships: Preparation and Continuing Development of School Leaders

5. What role do districts play in preparing future principals?
6. Based on your own preparation for administrative leadership and our work in PEP, what recommendations would you make to the field about principal preparation?
7. Many PEP participants cited networking and building trusting relationships with colleagues as a valuable part of the PEP program. How do you see these outcomes as advantageous for your district?
8. Developing effective school leaders requires support and development beyond initial year of practice. Has PEP served as an effective induction program for novice principals?

Rural Appalachia Issues

9. What are some of the unique challenges that principals face in rural areas? Has PEP addressed those unique challenges? If not, then what more needs to be done?
10. The geography and terrain of Pike County appear to be challenges for the district. Is that true? Please explain your answer.
11. According to the literature, many rural districts find it difficult to find well-qualified school leaders willing to commit to long-term tenures. One response to that problem is the “grow your own leaders” model where training is provided by districts—often without any involvement or support from universities. What are your thoughts of using the “grow your own leader” model here in Pike County?

Equity and Diversity

12. This year is the 50th anniversary of Brown vs. Board of Education and thus there appears to be an increased attention on the importance of equity. What issues related to equity in the Pike County system has PEP addressed thus far? What more needs to be addressed?
13. According to the U.S. Census Report for 2000, racial diversity is negligible in Pike County. Yet, those same statistics suggest that there exists cultural and economic diversity within the county. What is the role of PEP in addressing issues of equity and social justice in schools where diversity is based upon socioeconomic status, level of education in the family structure, residence location, work and life experiences—rather than race or nationality?
14. How has PEP played a role in developing school leaders—beyond their preservice training—to promote learning and success for all children?