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ABSTRACT

This booklet describes the rationale, design, and structure for conferences organized for school principals. Drawing on the experiences of New York City's Community School District 2, it describes standards-based professional development for school leaders. It opens with a description of the District Network for Standards-Based Reform--a project that provided four new superintendents with the example of District 2--and the instruction and support needed to host effective leadership conferences. Examples of effective activities from these districts' leadership conferences are used throughout the paper. It discusses the research-based structure of the effective standards-based leadership conference and focuses on the particular behaviors that the superintendent should be modeling during his or her design and presentation of leadership conferences. Subsections on each of those components address such topics as setting and communicating clear expectations, helping all leaders to be learners, engaging conference participants as active and cooperative learners, going to where the most informing work is being done, focusing on instruction and learning from the experts, engaging in and demanding accountable talk, and saving the administrative items for last. The paper closes with a brief conclusion that emphasizes the importance of clear expectations, communicating these expectations to principals, and focusing on instruction and standards. (Contains 11 endnotes.) (RJM)

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MEETING THE CHALLENGE OF STANDARDS

PLANNING EFFECTIVE STANDARDS-BASED LEADERSHIP CONFERENCES

By

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NEW VISIONS FOR PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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New Visions for Public Schools Policy and Research Series

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NEW VISIONS FOR PUBLIC SCHOOLS was founded in 1989 to help improve public education in New York City. Its programs focus on such critical areas as creating and supporting small public schools, revitalizing school libraries, improving math instruction and literacy and working to spread successful practices to schools throughout the City. New Visions programs have been adopted by the New York City Board of Education and by other school systems around the country.

MEETING THE CHALLENGE OF STANDARDS: PLANNING EFFECTIVE STANDARDS-BASED LEADERSHIP CONFERENCES is one of a series of Occasional Papers based on the work of the District Network for Standards-Based Reform, a project made possible by generous grants from The Charles Hayden Foundation, The Clark Foundation, The Henry Luce Foundation, Inc. and The Robert Sterling Clark Foundation. The District Network for Standards-Based Reform is a collaboration between New Visions for Public Schools and several New York City Community School Districts.

MEETING THE CHALLENGE OF STANDARDS

PLANNING EFFECTIVE STANDARDS-BASED LEADERSHIP CONFERENCES

INTRODUCTION

When a school district first adopts rigorous content and performance standards—an enormous change that requires learning, effort and hard work by personnel at every level, from the superintendent to the principals, teachers, students and parents—it is incumbent upon the district leaders to provide professional development and opportunities to learn for people at each of those levels. The monthly principals conference is one of the few tools available to district leaders to provide effective professional development to all school leaders. Indeed, it provides an excellent opportunity to set an agenda for the district and help principals begin to move themselves and their staffs toward the shared vision of high standards for all children and all schools. To do so, these conferences must be carefully designed and constructed. Based on the work of the District Network for Standards-Based Reform and in particular, the experience of New York City's Community School District 2, this paper describes the rationale, design and structure for effective principals conferences.[1] Conferences such as those described herein constitute standards-based professional development for school leaders and play a key role in moving a district toward the shared goal of rigorous performance standards throughout.

This paper begins with a description of the District Network for Standards-Based Reform, the project which provided four new community superintendents with the example of District 2 and the instruction and support to bring effective leadership conferences to their districts. Examples of particularly effective activities from these districts' leadership conferences are used throughout the paper. Next, the paper describes briefly the research-based structure of the effective standards-based leadership conference. The final and largest section focuses on the particular behaviors the superintendent should be modeling during her design and presentation of leadership conferences. Subsections on each of those components—including setting and communicating clear expectations, helping all leaders to be learners, engaging conference participants as active and cooperative learners, going to where the most informing work is being done, focusing on instruction and learning from the experts, engaging in and demanding accountable talk, and saving the administrative items for last—follow. Finally, there is a brief conclusion.

BACKGROUND:
THE DISTRICT NETWORK FOR STANDARDS-BASED REFORM

For the past year-and-a-half, New Visions for Public Schools has facilitated and documented the District Network for Standards-Based Reform, a privately funded project in which five New York City community school districts have agreed to work together as they each begin to implement the *New Standards Performance Standards* in their combined 160 schools.[2] The District Network originally began as a self-selected group of four new community superintendents who wanted to learn from the nationally-recognized successful experience of Anthony Alvarado, then Superintendent of Community School District 2 in New York City. Since Mr. Alvarado's departure from New York City, the Network has evolved into a group of five community superintendents looking to the experience of District 2, working together and learning from each other. The role of New Visions for Public Schools is to facilitate, document and disseminate the most effective practices learned from the group as the community superintendents work together on implementing standards in their districts.

The community superintendents in the District Network[3] recognized that successful implementation of the *New Standards* in their districts' schools cannot occur if the principals of the schools are not sufficiently versed in and supportive of the *New Standards*. The experience of District 2 has shown that getting principals to that point requires not only an enormous amount of information, practice and dedication, but also peer support. Regular, quality principals conferences provide both—expert assistance as well as the opportunity for school leaders to meet, discuss and assist each other with important challenges inherent to the job and to the implementation of standards. Because the knowledge and leadership of principals is so important to the effort to implement standards, the Network Superintendents decided to spend a significant amount of time studying and working to improve their principals conferences.

The District Network took as its model the principals conferences designed by Anthony Alvarado and District 2's then-Deputy, now Superintendent, Elaine Fink. These monthly meetings, which are planned by a committee consisting of the Superintendent and Deputy Superintendent, Director of Professional Development, Director of Standards, and several principals and staff developers, are viewed as a primary means of establishing a common agenda for the district. More importantly, however, they are professional development for school leaders. It is through these meetings that the district is able to pursue an agenda of change and help bring its principals the information and experience they need to carry this agenda to the schools. Thus, the main feature of these conferences is that they are <u>not</u> about administration or administrative details—no matter how vexing and important they may be. Rather, they are about <u>instruction</u>.

The design of the principals conference recognizes that schools and classrooms will not become "standards-based" on their own; they must be led there. And, like the Network Superintendents, principals cannot lead what they do not know. Therefore, it is the district's responsibility—and one that is at least partially borne through the principals conferences—to help the principals become instructional leaders—by teaching them what it means for a school to be "standards-based," what good standards-based teaching practice looks like and how teachers can be taught to change their classroom teaching practices in order for children to have a fair chance to meet the *New Standards*.

THE RESEARCH-BASED STRUCTURE OF EFFECTIVE STANDARDS-BASED LEADERSHIP CONFERENCES

The effective principals conference is not only designed to "teach" standards, it is itself a standards-based learning experience. The structure of effective standards-based leadership conferences is based on scholarly research as well as anecdotal descriptions about how adults learn when they are faced with important new challenges. The structure is also reflective of the *Principles of Learning* developed by Lauren Resnick, of the Institute for Learning at the Learning Research and Development Center at the University of Pittsburgh.[4]

According to both anecdotal descriptions and scholarly research on how adults learn, learning is particularly successful when it is self-directed, or when learners are involved in the identification of their own learning needs and the development of opportunities to meet them.[5] To begin with, adult learners may seek out relevant and expert literature about the subject. Once they have learned a bit about the subject, they will try to meet and converse with others engaged in the same quest or experience.[6] This often leads to their seeking out experts on the subject—an effort which may require changing budget priorities so that they are able to expend greater time and effort on meeting the challenge. Such time and financial commitments may even include traveling to where the best work is being done to see and better understand the challenge and possible successful solutions. Many adults learn best when they participate in discussions, reflections and shared work in small groups rather than in a lecture-type atmosphere.[7] Finally, successful adult learning means taking risks and, when faced with less successful outcomes, trying again.[8] As a well-planned adult learning experience, the effective principals conference builds upon and supports these behaviors.

The *Principles of Learning* describe eight characteristics of successful learning environments. Based on Lauren Resnick's research and descriptive of schools and classrooms in which children have a real opportunity to reach the rigorous requirements of the *New*

Standards, some of the *Principles of Learning* are also apt characteristics of the effective standards-based principals conference. While this paper focuses on the behaviors the superintendent models for her principals in order to create a successful learning environment, it describes how several of those behaviors are also reflective of some of the *Principles of Learning*. Specifically, the paper describes how the superintendent should model a learning environment that includes Clear Expectations, Learning as Apprenticeship and Accountable Talk. In addition, though not described herein, the underlying assumptions of an effective standards-based conference design also include Organizing for Effort and Academic Rigor in a Thinking Curriculum.[9]

THE CONFERENCE LEADER MODELS THE BEHAVIOR SHE WANTS HER SCHOOL LEADERS TO ADOPT

As the designer and leader of an effective principals conference, the superintendent should be conscious of her own behavior, and create an environment that would be an effective learning experience if replicated by principals with their staffs. Indeed, it is often helpful if the conference design can feature activities that can, at least in part, be taken directly to the schools and used in staff conferences. In addition to repeating specific activities, the specific behaviors the superintendent should model for the school leaders include setting and communicating clear expectations for the conference and its participants; demonstrating that the superintendent is an active learner in the school improvement process and is herself learning about implementing standards; ensuring that participants engage in active and cooperative learning; holding the conferences in locations where the best or particularly informing work can be seen; learning from experts; and keeping the focus on instruction.

In the accompanying boxes are actual agendas, taken from principals conferences in the Network, that illustrate plans for effective standards-based principals conferences. Though some of the key ingredients of the standards-based conference are reflected in the agenda, others—such as the quality of the discussion, active and engaged learning, risk taking, and meeting all learners on their own levels—cannot be captured in the written description of a conference. These intangibles must be modeled and integrated by the superintendent and presenters who lead the conference sessions. In addition, in both of these instances all of the conference participants were provided with various standards publications as well as a wealth of professional reading and administrative materials.

A. SET AND COMMUNICATE CLEAR EXPECTATIONS FOR EACH CONFERENCE

Setting and communicating clear expectations is at the heart of standards-based education. It is just as valuable in a learning experience for adults as it is for children in the learning environment of the classroom. The need for clear expectations begins even

before a superintendent starts to change her conference from one that focuses on school and district administration to a standards-based leadership conference, and continues through each individual conference, extending to the structure of the day and the skills or understanding the principals are expected to gain as a result of the conference.

Planning and participating in effective standards-based leadership conferences is hard work for principals and superintendents. It is thus important for superintendents to begin the process by communicating their intentions regarding the new style of leadership conferences even before they start to hold such conferences. Principals should be told how the conferences will be changing, that the superintendent understands it will not always be easy, but that they will all be involved in the changes, and that the district's leaders are confident that these changes will help move the district's agenda toward improved standards-based teaching and learning.

When planning the actual leadership conference, the superintendent's (or planning committee's) expectations should focus on the structure and contents of the day, the work the principals will engage in during the day and the specific knowledge or activity the principals will take back to their schools as a result of the conference day. Superintendents should be up-front about their expectations—both in terms of what they expect of the principals and what they expect the principals to do with the day's learning. Communicating expectations about the structure and activities of the day can be as simple as providing each participant with an agenda and discussing specific expectations

PRINCIPALS LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE
COMMUNITY SCHOOL DISTRICT 2

8:30	Networking
9:15	Update on District Standards Work. ElaineFink, Acting Superintendent
9:20	Group Work: Jigsaw Article: *"Learnin Organizations for Sustainable School Reform."* Using this article, how does it support and extend the standard professional development in your school? Denise Levine, District Director of Standards.
10:30	Break
10:45	Group Work:
	Picture Sort: Using the *Principles of Learning*, please come to a consensus on how [the photographs of your schools] relate to the *Principles of Learning*.
	Gallery Walk: Choose one or two pictures from your table that best represent a particular *Principle of Learning* and place it on the appropriate chart around the room. Please use a post-it to explain your choice.
11:45	Synthesis
12:00	Lunch
1:15	Middle Schools/High Schools - Conversation regarding high school mathematics curriculum and eighth grade mathematics curriculum. Lucy Mahon, Director of Mathematics
	Elementary Schools - Standards and Portfolios and Word Study Update. Maria Utevskey, Director, Reading Interventions.
2:00	Middle Schools/High Schools - Conversation regarding Standards/Portfolio. Denise Levine, District Director of Standards, JoAnne Eresh, Coordinator, Secondary School Staff Development, and Principals.
	Elementary Schools - Identifying Good Mathematics Instruction and Mathematics Update. Lucy Mahon, District Director of Mathematics.
3:00	Administrative Items. Testing; Leadership Teams; Special Education. Elaine Fink, Acting Superintendent.

HEADS OF SCHOOL LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE
COMMUNITY SCHOOL DISTRICT 15

8:00	Breakfast
8:30	Superintendent's Welcome. Frank DeStefano, Superintendent.
9:00	Introduction to the Core Assignment. Susan Radley, Brenda Wallace, National Center on Education and the Economy.
9:15	Assignment One - Overview of Days 1 - 5. Susan Radley, Brenda Wallace.
9:45	Writers as Mentors/The Craft of Writing (Individual and group work). Susan Radley, Brenda Wallace.
10:30	Looking at a piece of work that Meets the Standard, *In Maine as a Child*, pp. 24, 25 and a piece that Does Not Yet Meet the Standard, *Snow Mountain Thunder*, pp. 42, 43.
11:30	Creating a Rubric for *One Summer* (Student Memoir Picture Book).
12:15	Lunch
1:30	What is the Principal's/Leader's Role? How can the Principal/Leader Support Instruction, i.e., the implementation of the Core Assignment?

during introductory remarks to the conference. For example, in the District 15 Leadership Conference agenda to the left, it is made clear to participants that, in addition to learning about the Core Assignment and determining what student work meets the standard, they will also be expected to participate in designing a rubric to assess a particular class assignment. Likewise, communicating the expectation that principals engage in school-based follow-up can be as simple as giving the principals assignments or asking them to replicate an activity performed at the conference. At the principals conference prior to the District 2 conference described in the agenda above, principals were provided with cameras and instructed to take pictures in their schools of classroom scenes that demonstrate the *Principles of Learning* and bring the photographs to the subsequent conference. Then, after the principals completed the Picture Sort and Gallery Walk activities at the conference, they were told that they should purchase cameras and repeat the Picture Sort and Gallery Walk activities with their faculties. The conference plan and the expectations for current and subsequent behaviors must not remain secret: like students, principals will rise to the level of the expectations to which they are held.

B. ENCOURAGE ALL LEADERS TO BE LEARNERS

The effective standards-based principals conference is designed so that the principals and the superintendent learn together. As with all the other aspects of the conference, there must be a plan for learning together. So, for example, the superintendent may talk about a book or article she has recently read, or a conference she recently attended, and suggest that the principals as a group also read the book, article or conference proceedings.[10] It is not so important that the superintendent communicate the information she has learned—principals are capable of learning the information themselves—but it is important that she communicate her involvement in and commitment to learning more about how to improve the schools and the teaching and learning they provide. In this way, the superintendent creates an environment where professionals are learning, and expected to continue learning.

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One particularly successful example of sharing the learning in the Network was a District 3 conference which the superintendent opened by talking about the several different meetings and conferences she had attended since the last leadership conference. For this presentation, superintendent Patricia Romandetto skillfully blended anecdotes and information to make clear to the school leaders that she is deeply committed to continuing to learn about standards, that there is a tremendous amount of work yet to be done and that schools in the district are on the forefront of standards-based practices. Another example of sharing in the learning naturally arises after principals and superintendents in the Network return from the conferences or institutes devoted to the study or implementation of standards and are asked to speak about their experiences to their colleagues. Indeed, when teachers are among those that attend conferences, the Network Superintendents often invite them to come speak to the principals as well. It is especially powerful when representatives of all three levels make presentations—teachers, principals and the superintendent.

One way to encourage principals to learn continually is to regularly provide conference participants with books, articles and other assigned readings, and to use those readings during the conference time. So, for example, District 15 provided each principal with a copy of Ellin Keene's *Mosaic of Thought*, and, a few months later, brought Ms. Keene to the district to lead a principals conference. She was able to engage the leaders in discussion and activities that presupposed and then deepened the theory of connecting to text that she explains in her book. Alternatively, a superintendent might provide each participant with several articles at a conference, and tell the principals that at least one of them will be the basis for a discussion at next month's conference. (Of course, the superintendent must follow through and include the discussion or activity based on the reading at the next conference.) Still another possibility is to provide articles with focus questions, which may or may not be discussed in a subsequent conference, but clearly suggest the purpose for which the articles are being assigned.

All Leaders are Learners

Superintendents regularly provide new and noteworthy journal articles—including publications from the Education Development Center, National Center on Education and the Economy, *Education Week*, the Institute for Learning at the University of Pittsburgh, and *Educational Leadership*—as well as copies of the New York City Customized Performance Standards, books by noted authors including Gay Su Pinnell, Roland Barth, Mark Tucker, Ellin Keene, Douglas Harris and Judy Carr.

Superintendents in the Network have used all these methods to make sure the group members are constantly reading, learning together and working to deepen their understanding of key concepts.

Some readings have been specifically assigned, others have been discussed during conference presentations and some have been read in advance of the authors making presentations to the group. Still other articles are provided for information, though they are not formally assigned or used by the principals.

C. ENGAGE CONFERENCE PARTICIPANTS AS ACTIVE AND COOPERATIVE LEARNERS

A standards-based principals conference cannot be a day-long presentation of or by anyone. Rather than simply being talked to, conference participants must actively engage in the work and create meaning by themselves and with their colleagues. The superintendents in the District Network look closely at the group work performed at the principals conferences. While the work is, and should always be, around instruction, the Network Superintendents often find that the small group work tends to be the weakest part of the conference. In examining the reasons for the weakness, it became clear that group work should take place early in the day—ideally, it should continue throughout the day—and not be left for the late afternoon. It is also clear that the projects, or work assignments, must be well thought out and planned with the understanding that they must engage participants quickly and help them overcome any reticence to participate.

One often-successful method of engaging interest and activity is to design the cooperative group learning projects around student work. Whether in combination with classroom visits, or independent of the visits, very few principals—almost all of whom are former teachers—are likely to be without strong opinions about student work and the teacher assignments that provoked the work. Designing principals' work around student work also has the added benefit of focusing principals on student learning—a critical area of understanding in order to bring standards-based learning and teaching to their schools. Without examining student work, it is nearly impossible to understand the needs that rigorous performance standards are meant to address and the changes that will be necessary to enable children to reach them.

Principals can be actively engaged in examining student work regardless of the location of the conference. In the District 15 principals conference described in the sample agenda above, principals were actively involved in looking at student and teacher work. They looked at two pieces of student work—one that meets the standards and one that does not—then discussed the strong and weak points of each, as well as the assignment in response to which the work was prepared. Then, to really hone in on the connection between standards and student work, all of the principals worked on designing rubrics to assess the work produced in response to a particular assignment.

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cussion often includes reaction to and questions regarding the particular classroom experiences (often led by an expert in the area), as well as close review of specific examples of student work. For instance, in a District 19 conference focusing on literary practices—specifically, quality conversation—after hearing from the school's principal about the literacy work in the school, conference participants were provided with specific guidance for their classroom visits. They were provided with focus questions as well as a description of the student's role in quality conversation. Then, after the classroom visits, Dorothy Sauer, an expert consultant from Johns Hopkins University, spoke to and engaged the principals in activities around recognizing and supporting quality conversation, or accountable talk. In a District 2 conference focusing on addressing the needs of English language learners, conference participants were provided with specific guidance for their classroom observations in the form of two focus questions. They were told to focus on what strategies were being used that benefit second language learners and how the principles of learning were reflected. Following their visits, the participants met in groups with the two teachers whose classes they had observed to discuss their observations and have an opportunity to ask questions. Then, when all the leaders returned to the large group, they were invited to bring feedback from the classroom visits and teacher discussions to the principal of the school. After a break, the conference then continued with a presentation on supporting literacy development by an expert in the field, Dr. Catherine Snow.

PRINCIPALS' CONFERENCE: DISTRICT 19

Classroom Tours—Focus Questions

1. What strategies does the teacher use to facilitate and model discussion?

2. Please see the attached description of the students' role as facilitators of discussion. What kind of student/team behaviors did you observe? How did the teams facilitate discussion?

Role of the Student

As facilitators of discussion:

... they invite their peers to speak

... they help steer the course of conversation

... they acknowledge insightful thinking

... they ask about important information in the text

... they ask for a summary of the text

... they ask for clarification of the text

... they ask for predictions about upcoming events or specific content in the text

... they ask authentic questions

... they offer alternative views

... they identify and address misconceptions

... they learn how to interact socially

... they develop communicative competence

... they learn to take responsibility for their own learning

The active parts of the effective principals conference can even be designed around the reading done by the group. One successful method of making reading active and cooperative is to "jigsaw" an article, chapter or other assigned reading. To "jigsaw" the reading, conference participants are divided into several small groups, each of which is responsible for reading, discussing and collectively answering descriptive questions about a particular section of the article. Participants may then return to their original

> **"Jigsawing" An Article**
>
> In the District 2 principals conference described in the agenda above, Denise Levine, the district's Director of Standards, had the group "jigsaw" Lauren Resnick's and Megan Williams Hall's "Learning Organizations for Sustainable Education Reform." As a result of engaging in this activity, the principals succeeded in gaining a solid understanding of knowledge-based constructivism, effort-based learning, socializing intelligence, and nested learning communities. In addition, the group came away from the discussion with a plethora of good ideas for how principals can help to establish all of those learning conditions in their schools.

tables and members of each subgroup teach the other table members about the particular section of the article they worked on, providing the answers to the general questions about the portion discussed in the small group. Alternatively, each table may be responsible for discussing a particular portion of the article, and then sharing their responses to descriptive or informational questions with the whole group.

When designing active, cooperative work for principals conferences, it is important to think about the formation of the working groups. While working with colleagues who independently choose to sit together may make for comfortable conversation, it is unlikely to create groups with a wide range of interests or experience. And, unless the principals are completely comfortable engaging in thoughtful professional discussions whenever they meet together, when friends sit together it can be more difficult to remain on task. In addition, the particular mix of participants might be important. For some projects, such as when elementary, middle and high school leaders are doing very different work in their schools, they may be unaware of the human and intellectual resources they could provide each other, and it might be appropriate to create groups with a mix of elementary, middle and high school leaders. Similarly, it is much more likely that a district will be able to create benchmarks for meeting a particular graduation standard if the working groups include representatives of elementary, middle and high schools. In other conferences, such as a District 15 conference when participants were asked to begin to design new professional development activities supporting the impending introduction of the mathematics standards throughout the district's schools, it may be more important to put all representatives of the same or similar schools together. Only in those instances where the particular mix of people is not important should the conference design not include the preselection of working groups.

D. GO TO WHERE THE MOST INFORMING WORK IS BEING DONE

The expectations for the work principals must do are best demonstrated in successful, standards-based classrooms and schools. The expectations are made clear for the principals when they are brought to top quality work—that is, the best schools and classrooms—and that work is examined and analyzed. This means that as often as possible, principals conferences should be held in schools; the principals should visit classrooms, look at teaching and at student work; and the student and teacher work should be discussed. Classroom and school visits should be around specific topics—as, for example,

cussion often includes reaction to and questions regarding the particular classroom experiences (often led by an expert in the area), as well as close review of specific examples of student work. For instance, in a District 19 conference focusing on literary practices—specifically, quality conversation—after hearing from the school's principal about the literacy work in the school, conference participants were provided with specific guidance for their classroom visits. They were provided with focus questions as well as a description of the student's role in quality conversation. Then, after the classroom visits, Dorothy Sauer, an expert consultant from Johns Hopkins University, spoke to and engaged the principals in activities around recognizing and supporting quality conversation, or accountable talk. In a District 2 conference focusing on addressing the needs of English language learners, conference participants were provided with specific guidance for their classroom observations in the form of two focus questions. They were told to focus on what strategies were being used that benefit second language learners and how the principles of learning were reflected. Following their visits, the participants met in groups with the two teachers whose classes they had observed to discuss their observations and have an opportunity to ask questions. Then, when all the leaders returned to the large group, they were invited to bring feedback from the classroom visits and teacher discussions to the principal of the school. After a break, the conference then continued with a presentation on supporting literacy development by an expert in the field, Dr. Catherine Snow.

PRINCIPALS' CONFERENCE: DISTRICT 19

Classroom Tours—Focus Questions

1. What strategies does the teacher use to facilitate and model discussion?

2. Please see the attached description of the students' role as facilitators of discussion. What kind of student/team behaviors did you observe? How did the teams facilitate discussion?

Role of the Student

As facilitators of discussion:

... they invite their peers to speak

... they help steer the course of conversation

... they acknowledge insightful thinking

... they ask about important information in the text

... they ask for a summary of the text

... they ask for clarification of the text

... they ask for predictions about upcoming events or specific content in the text

... they ask authentic questions

... they offer alternative views

... they identify and address misconceptions

... they learn how to interact socially

... they develop communicative competence

... they learn to take responsibility for their own learning

The active parts of the effective principals conference can even be designed around the reading done by the group. One successful method of making reading active and cooperative is to "jigsaw" an article, chapter or other assigned reading. To "jigsaw" the reading, conference participants are divided into several small groups, each of which is responsible for reading, discussing and collectively answering descriptive questions about a particular section of the article. Participants may then return to their original

> **"Jigsawing" An Article**
>
> In the District 2 principals conference described in the agenda above, Denise Levine, the district's Director of Standards, had the group "jigsaw" Lauren Resnick's and Megan Williams Hall's "Learning Organizations for Sustainable Education Reform." As a result of engaging in this activity, the principals succeeded in gaining a solid understanding of knowledge-based constructivism, effort-based learning, socializing intelligence, and nested learning communities. In addition, the group came away from the discussion with a plethora of good ideas for how principals can help to establish all of those learning conditions in their schools.

tables and members of each subgroup teach the other table members about the particular section of the article they worked on, providing the answers to the general questions about the portion discussed in the small group. Alternatively, each table may be responsible for discussing a particular portion of the article, and then sharing their responses to descriptive or informational questions with the whole group.

When designing active, cooperative work for principals conferences, it is important to think about the formation of the working groups. While working with colleagues who independently choose to sit together may make for comfortable conversation, it is unlikely to create groups with a wide range of interests or experience. And, unless the principals are completely comfortable engaging in thoughtful professional discussions whenever they meet together, when friends sit together it can be more difficult to remain on task. In addition, the particular mix of participants might be important. For some projects, such as when elementary, middle and high school leaders are doing very different work in their schools, they may be unaware of the human and intellectual resources they could provide each other, and it might be appropriate to create groups with a mix of elementary, middle and high school leaders. Similarly, it is much more likely that a district will be able to create benchmarks for meeting a particular graduation standard if the working groups include representatives of elementary, middle and high schools. In other conferences, such as a District 15 conference when participants were asked to begin to design new professional development activities supporting the impending introduction of the mathematics standards throughout the district's schools, it may be more important to put all representatives of the same or similar schools together. Only in those instances where the particular mix of people is not important should the conference design not include the preselection of working groups.

D. GO TO WHERE THE MOST INFORMING WORK IS BEING DONE

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it was around second language learners in the District 2 conference discussed above. It is particularly effective if the topic is one the group has been reading about and discussing in previous sessions. The District 2 conference took place in the course of a year during which the district was concentrating on how to best address the needs of English language learners. A committee made up of school and district leaders was meeting regularly to devise a plan for meeting the needs of English language learners and several principals conferences were focused, at least in part, on the subject. A similar technique around a different topic—Guided Reading—might take another form. There, after reading about Guided Reading and hearing about it from an expert, a conference might bring principals to a school where they can attend several different Guided Reading lessons. After the visits, the principals will have the common knowledge and experience to engage in a meaningful conversation that might focus not only on what they saw but also on providing effective professional development in Guided Reading to the teachers in their own schools. They might also see a benefit in arranging for teachers from their own schools to visit and observe some of the teachers they observed during the principals' observations.

E. FOCUS ON INSTRUCTION AND LEARN FROM THE EXPERTS

The purpose of effective standards-based principals conferences is to provide the professional development and support necessary to enable principals to create and lead schools with improved teaching and learning. Principals must become skilled instructional leaders, yet they cannot lead what they do not know. Therefore, the superintendent's focus on instructional leadership should never waver. This single focus should manifest itself in principals conference presentations by experts on any number of specific areas of instruction and on being an instructional leader.

What is remarkable and important about the sessions focusing specifically on instruction is not the particular topic, but that the presenters speak to the principals as though they were teachers, not leaders. Indeed, most of the presenters are likely to be accustomed to speaking with teachers, and will often refer to the audience as teachers, forgetting that in these particular conferences they are addressing principals. Because there are so many aspects of instruction that are important for principals to know, it should not be hard to find experts to present to the principals. As always, whenever possible these presentations should engage

Presentations on specific areas of instruction in the Network districts have included numerous subject area experts from within the districts, as well as:

* Gay Su Pinnell, on guided reading
* Diane Snowball, on word study
* Lauren Resnick and other representatives of the Learning Research & Development Center, on the *Principles of Learning*
* Judith Ramsey, on the writing process
* Catherine Fosnot, on mathematics standards and constructivist mathematics
* Aida Walqui, on English language learners
* Elaine Thompson, on a balanced literacy program
* Ellin Keene, on literacy learning

the participants in active and cooperative learning.

Those conferences that also address being an instructional leader should provide inspirational guidance to help principals understand the importance of their leadership role as well as specific instructional strategies for participants to use in their schools. In District 17, for example, when J. Jerome Harris, a former New York City Community Superintendent and past president of the National Association of Black Educators, addressed the conference participants, he presented specific objectives, which included (1) challenging the principals' belief systems, (2) encouraging each of them to look at their theory in action, and (3) suggesting some possible changes in their paradigm. He spoke to the principal's role as a school leader—and the importance of her presence and knowledge throughout the school—as well as her role as an instructional leader, where he provided specific guidance on observing classrooms and hallmarks of effective instruction. In District 3, conference participants were addressed on the subject of leadership by Fabian Brooks, of the National Center on Education and the Economy. Ms. Brooks spoke about leadership strategies that can be used to break stalemates and to move a leader's agenda. Then, in small groups, the principals applied the strategies to tackle the issue of how to improve student performance.

F. ENGAGE IN AND DEMAND ACCOUNTABLE TALK

The talk at an effective standards-based principals conference must be capable of moving the district's agenda. If it is not consistently serious, thoughtful, fact- or information-based, engaging and relevant it is far less likely that the principals will improve their understanding of the topic under discussion. The effective talk must be not only that directed to principals, but also that of the principals—they must as a group engage in Accountable Talk. For classroom talk or talk among colleagues to promote learning, it must have the following characteristics: it seriously responds to and further develops what others in the group have said; it puts forth and demands knowledge that is accurate and relevant to the issue; it uses evidence in ways appropriate to the discipline and it follows established norms of good reasoning.[11] If superintendents model and require such listening and speaking in their interactions with principals in the principals conferences, then principals will likely become more comfortable using the skills and customs of such Accountable Talk in their professional conversations with teachers—in grade level conferences, faculty meetings and other staff development; and the teachers, in turn, are more likely to become comfortable using, listening to and encouraging similar behavior among their students. This modeling done by the superintendent is thus an important part of helping to move the district's agenda for high level teaching and learning.

Within the principals conference, there is ample opportunity for such Accountable Talk, and each of those opportunities should be taken. Whether discussing literature the

group has read, reviewing student work against the standards, discussing a classroom visit, or responding to an expert presenting to the conference participants, the superintendent must and principals should be expected to respond thoughtfully to and further develop what others in the group have said. They should be contributing accurate and relevant knowledge to the conversation, appropriately using evidence to make, question or contradict others' statements and following established norms of good reasoning. Accountable talk should become the norm and expected conversational style for professional interactions in learning environments throughout the district.

G. SAVE THE ADMINISTRATIVE ITEMS FOR LAST

An effective standards-based principals conference is not about administrative items. Though the daily administrative matters often threaten to overtake the mail, fax and phone calls at the District Office, they cannot overtake the agenda of a principals instructional conference. The principals conference is about instruction and about modeling; its purposes are to educate the principals and to help them become instructional leaders. If principals experience group meetings as existing for the purpose of reviewing administrative details, they are likely to use their grade conferences and faculty meetings for the same purpose. The conferences will not be capable of moving the district's instructional agenda. If superintendents spend a great deal of time at the principals conferences on administration, they will not be taken seriously when they tell the principals they care most deeply about instruction. They will not create a learning environment. By keeping the focus on instruction and saving a quick review of the really important administrative items for the last 30 minutes of the conference, the superintendent demonstrates that she believes and acts upon her belief that the purpose of being a principal is to be an instructional leader and improve the education of every child in the school.

CONCLUSION

There is no magic to planning and holding an effective standards-based principals conference. It takes a great deal of thought, preparation, deliberate action and effort. A successful standards-based principals conference is structured in much the same way as a successful children's learning environment. By starting with clear expectations, communicating them to the principals, focusing on instruction and connecting that instruction to the standards, engaging the principals in active and cooperative work, looking at student work and learning from the experts, superintendents can begin to fashion conferences that can help to teach and move principals toward improving their schools. There may be instances when, despite all the above efforts, the conference is not successful. Just as a standards-based education suggests that there should be ongoing assessment and that the assessment drive instruction, a standards-based principals conference suggests

that the conferences be assessed and that the assessment drive the design of the next conference. The effort must be purposeful and ongoing.

The need to improve the teaching and learning in most school districts is immense, and the most hopeful way of gaining such improvement is through the utilization of rigorous content and performance standards. This is a relatively new process, and one that demands significant change from most schools, classrooms and teachers. Superintendents must be prepared to meet head-on the challenge of bringing their principals and school leaders to the point of familiarity, comfort and leadership around standards. The effective standards-based principals conference builds upon a solid foundation of research to help reach, support and develop the necessary knowledge and leadership of principals. Of course, conferences such as those described in this paper will not provide all the professional development necessary. But in addition to providing useful information on instruction, they create a model that can be used in every school to create consistent, on-going learning and reflection among educators and students alike.

ENDNOTES

[1] Because the development of leadership and a culture of improvement in schools are so important, most effective standards-based principals conferences include assistant principals and, in many cases, staff developers. Although this paper refers to "principals" conferences, it is recommended that all school leaders be included in the conferences.

[2] The New York City Board of Education recently adopted the *New Standards* for city-wide use in all public schools. Beginning under the leadership of Anthony Alvarado and continuing under Elaine Fink, Community School District 2 adopted and began to implement the *New Standards* in 1996.

[3] The Community Superintendents whose districts participate in the District Network for Standards-Based Reform are Elaine Fink, Community School District 2; Patricia Romandetto, Community School District 3; Francis DeStefano, Community School District 15; Evelyn Castro, Community School District 17; and Robert Riccobono, Community School District 19.

[4] See, e.g., *Instruction and Learning Profile* (Version 2.1) (University of Pittsburgh 1997).

[5] Anne C. Lewis, *A New Consensus Emerges on the Characteristics of Good Professional Development*, in The Harvard Education Letter. May/June 1997. See also Stephen Brookfield, *Adult Learning: An Overview*, in A. Tuinjman (ed.) (1995). International Encyclopedia of Education. Oxford, Pergamon Press (http://nlu.nl.edu/act/Resources/Documents/AdultLearning.html).

[6] See, e.g., *30 Things We Know For Sure About Adult Learning*, Innovation Abstracts Vol. VI, No. 8, March 9, 1984; *Situated Learning in Adult Education*. ERIC Digest No. 195.

[7] *Situated Learning in Adult Education*. ERIC Digest No. 195; *Adult vs. Child Learners* (http: www.ceap.wcu.edu/kirk/Course_ Resou...learn_theories/adult_vs_child_learners.htm).

[8] *Situated Learning in Adult Education*. ERIC Digest No. 195.

[9]For a complete description of the *Principles of Learning*, see Institute for Learning Instruction and Learning Profile v2.1 (1997 University of Pittsburgh) and Robert Rothman, *Organizing So All Children Can Learn: Applying the Principles of Learning* (National Center on Education and the Economy 1996). In the context of the effective standards-based principals conference, Organizing for Effort means that the effective standards-based leadership conference is designed for all principals—no matter how new they are to standards, how expert they are concerning the specific instructional focus of the conference, or how well or poorly their students are performing. *Academic Rigor in a Thinking Curriculum* implies that principals must be given a basic framework of knowledge—in this case, knowledge about what the standards are and about best practices for improving teaching and student performance—and then use the knowledge to construct their own meaning and understanding.

[10] Even if conference proceedings are not available, it is useful for the superintendent to tell the principals about an interesting conference she has attended, what its most salient points were, and how she intends to follow up in the district on the information gleaned from the conference.

[11] Institute for Learning Instruction and Learning Profile v2.1 (1997 University of Pittsburgh).

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