

## **A Tale of Two Districts: Keys to Successful Innovation and Professional Development for School Leaders**

### INTRODUCTION

It is clear that if schools are to improve, then those who lead them must improve as well (Fullan, 1993; Fullan, 1998; Fullan, 1999; Fullan and Stiegelbauer, 1991; Murphy, 2002). A number of development programs have emerged in this continuing effort to improve school leaders such as the Principal Executive Program (Norton, 2001) in which principals meet regularly to share and discuss experiences to aid them in making sense of those experiences and reduce feelings of isolation. In Texas, principals must develop a professional growth plan based on an individual assessment (Bankes, 2002). The Pajaro Valley Unified School District in California has implemented professional standards for administrators that include a goal-setting and assessment system, along with a professional development support model (Casey and Donaldson, 2001). Reflecting on the emerging paradigm in professional development, Sparks and Hirsch (1997) observed that practice is moving away from generic skills presented by experts, isolated training events, fragmented and piecemeal activities and experiences and toward job-embedded learning, individual learning coupled with organizational development, and school focused activities. This approach is in line with that advocated by the National Commission on Excellence in Educational Administration (Young, Peterson, and Short, 2002). With these understandings in mind, a training model was developed in conjunction with two school districts. What follows is an account of that training and the very different results that followed

It was the best of times; it was the worst of times. On the one hand the legislature of this western state had just passed a sweeping school accountability program designed

to assure that all children would be well taught. Training had been provided, a comprehensive set of standards had been adopted, assessments had been designed, and teeth were in place to levy heavy penalties on any district that would be inclined to take the assessments lightly. For the first time in memory, when superintendents gathered, the main topic of conversation was not about “beans, bands, budgets, balls, and buses”, but rather about meeting academic achievement goals by sub-groups of students, school improvement, and consultants who could aid schools in meeting the requirements. On the other hand, there were a number of unfunded mandates, other monies that might have been used for pay raises were drained off to fund implementation of the new requirements, and the training that had been provided was primarily with regard to what the new standards and requirements were, not in direct training on how to meet them, especially with respect to what school leaders might do to increase achievement.

#### PLANNING OF THE TRAINING

It was in this context that two school district superintendents approached a university professor about designing some training for their school leadership teams. Over the next several months goals for the training and drafts of the training exercises and materials were developed and refined with participation of the district superintendents. The final training design consisted of the following components: (1) a five day retreat to a summer campus of the university, (2) a building theme as the focus of the training, (3) Four Cornerstones for emphasis: Building a Culture of Success, Creating Teacher Learning Teams, Refining Leadership Skills, and Utilizing Systems Thinking and (4) four Bedrock Commitments: No Excuses, Persistence, Connecting and Truth Telling. The retreat was led by the professor, assisted by a doctoral student who

was a former superintendent. Five doctoral students were also invited to the retreat to keep personal journals on the retreat itself and to possibly develop rapport with one of the principals that might lead to follow-up research on their implementation efforts. Video documentation of the training was also utilized. District participants were asked to bring copies of their policies, budgets, teacher/student orientation manuals, and other key documents of their respective districts. The initial training was to be followed up by monthly meetings during the school year for the purposes of review, trouble-shooting, and motivation. Publicity for the training was also planned to encourage adherence to the Four Cornerstones and provide psychic rewards for sincere implementation efforts. The training was organized as a graduate course with districts paying for the tuition and the administrators receiving the graduate credit. Doctoral students also signed up for a graduate course as an elective in their doctoral studies. The professor was paid through the university on the basis of regular summer school courses. By university rule, 3 credit hours could not be offered in less than a two week time frame so pre-class and post-class activities were provided to meet this requirement. Materials for the training were provided through university departmental instructional funds. Comfortable residential facilities were provided at the summer campus; however, they were rustic with bunk beds and shared bath facilities. The professor, doctoral students, and administrators of District F stayed at the summer campus facilities; the administrators from District B stayed at a motel in a near-by town.

#### DESCRIPTION OF THE TRAINING

The first four days of the retreat focused on one of the four Cornerstones (the four Bedrock Commitments were emphasized throughout the training). Participants were

organized into mixed groups consisting of one or more principals from each district (on the same grade level) and a doctoral student. A typical day consisted of an introduction to the Cornerstone followed by a demonstration of that Cornerstone. Participants were then provided with guides to aid them in analyzing their own practices in light of that Cornerstone. They then reported to their small group on the results of their self-analysis. In this self-report, they had to provide an example of good practice of that Cornerstone and an example of one that was less effective. Members of their group provided feedback on each self analysis, pointing out possible misapplications (or misunderstandings) of the Cornerstone. Then, after revisions, the smaller groups reported out to the group as a whole, again with feedback provided by the larger group. At the end of each day, participants completed a form indicating what they had learned and implications for practice at their school. This was also reported out to the group as a whole which again provided additional suggestions or corrections. Although not a part of the training format, the superintendent of District F followed up each day's training with discussions among his principals regarding the implications for their district; the superintendent of District B did not.

The final day was devoted to analyzing their district documents in light of the Four Cornerstones to identify in what respects their documents would need to be amended in order to foster implementation of the Four Cornerstones. These suggested amendments were reported out to the group for suggestions for improvement. Also on the final day, participants were introduced to the 2 x 4 Visitation Program. Principals in each district were paired during the training week and were challenged to visit each other four times during the following year to provide feedback to the inviting principal on their

effort to exemplify one of the Four Cornerstones. For example, if the inviting principal were working on the Culture of Success Cornerstone, the invited principal might be asked to observe a culture-building activity. Forms were provided for feedback to the inviting principal, structured around the key components of that Cornerstone.

#### DESCRIPTION OF THE DISTRICTS

The districts were similar in a number of ways. Each was rural, poor and had a majority of minority students a large percentage of who were on free or reduced lunch. Each district was approximately the same size and had three elementary schools, one middle school and one high school. They each had low performance on the state-mandated achievement tests. The superintendents in each district were new. Each replaced a superintendent who had been in the district for over 10 years. All of the principals were experienced at the grade levels of their building. All of the designated administrators in each of the districts attended the training and remained for the duration of the training.

However, the districts differed in some respects as well. The superintendent of District B took the job about one month before the workshop was scheduled to begin (he had participated in the planning when he was superintendent of another district with the idea of bringing in that district). Even with this change in jobs, he decided to bring the administrators in his new district to the training. He was also a doctoral student at the university and in mid-career. He was relatively young, ambitious, and on the way up. By contrast, the superintendent in district F had been in that district for a number of years as assistant superintendent, had earned only his superintendent's certificate, and was at the end of his career. While considerably older than the superintendent in District B, he was

nonetheless ambitious for his district and the students in his district. The five principals in District B had all been in their schools for at least three years. In District F, three of the principals had been in their schools for at least three years, but the two other principals, though experienced, were new to this district and their schools. While all of the schools in District B were reasonably well respected by the parents, one school in District F was widely perceived as being a school in trouble. In the year prior to this training, 22 of the 24 teachers in this school had signed a petition to have the principal removed and the principal was removed in mid-year. Interviews with parents revealed that they dreaded having their children in this school and their only hope was to get their children through it as fast as possible. The other schools in District F were reasonably well respected, even though in both districts performance on state mandated tests had been low. In sum, each district had areas of stability and areas of instability. The chances for successful change appeared about equal to the doctoral students at the outset of the training.

#### IMPLEMENTATION OF THE FOUR CORNERSTONES AND FOUR BEDROCK COMMITMENTS

The training had been scheduled just before July, the traditional “month off” for those on 12 month contracts. After the training and their holidays, the leaders in both districts returned to the usual flurry of activity that accompanies the start of a new year: filling vacancies that had developed over the summer, finishing up building repair, getting supplies out to the schools, establishing bus routes, etc. At that point there was little time to reflect on the summer training or its implications for practice. However, one interesting development had taken place. Three of the doctoral students had requested

and obtained permission to conduct research on implementation in District F. No doctoral student had requested permission to conduct research in District B. At the time the doctoral students made their selection they did not offer any explanation for their choice other than to say they had just established better rapport with the principals selected in District F. After the school year had settled down, at the request of the professor, each of the superintendents began to devote a part of one of their weekly administrative meetings to a review of one of the Four Cornerstones and the Four Bedrock Commitments.

Three of the principals in District F implemented small but noticeable improvements in the buildings and grounds of their schools. For example, a rotting bulletin board was removed from one of the campus grounds and dead and overgrown shrubs were trimmed. A Coke machine that had greeted visitors at the front entrance of the school lobby was removed to the cafeteria and was replaced with a bulletin board proclaiming this school as a “Learning Academy”. Attractive banners were added challenging students to work hard and apply themselves. By contrast, dead shrubs and unkempt grounds remained in District B. A particularly unsettling photograph of an American flag being burned remained prominently displayed in the reception area of the principal’s office (there was a logical explanation – when a flag is worn out, one does not just wad it up and throw it away; it is burned with proper military recognition); however, no explanation for the burning of the flag was offered unless requested. Bulletin boards in another principal’s reception area remained covered with outdated notices, carelessly displayed.

The first of the monthly meetings revealed differences in efforts to implement the Four Cornerstones as well. The program for the meeting was for each school to discuss its progress so far. Each of the schools in District F addressed the Four Cornerstones and discussed specific efforts to follow-up on the commitments they had made at the training. In particular, one principal in District F reported holding a Four Cornerstones “mini-camp” for his teachers and the teachers, in turn, holding a mini-camp for the students in their homerooms. By contrast, the principals in District B reported in general terms about start of school activities. The monthly sessions continued reflecting a similar pattern – District F school leaders reporting much more conscious attention to the Four Cornerstones than the school leaders in District B. However, both superintendents reported stressing the Four Cornerstones to their school leaders and the superintendent in District B even requested that the professor hold a refresher session for his principals. Of note about that session was that a sample Vision statement the professor provided for illustrative purposes (“Every child, Every chance, Every day”) to contrast a compelling Vision statement with a mediocre one was adopted by the district. They ordered pins, had it adopted officially by the board, printed it on their stationary, and had banners proclaiming it.

In neither district, however, was the 2 x 4 Visitation Program well implemented. At one point the professor offered two tickets to a traveling Broadway show to each of the two districts in a drawing for just engaging in one visitation, hoping to “prime the pump”. While all parties did the one visitation for purposes of becoming eligible for the drawing, subsequent visitations did not occur. While all principals reported that this was a good idea, they just did not feel they had the time to engage in it. It was true that the

increased expectations on principals that grew from state mandates had imposed additional responsibilities which had not been part of their traditional roles so this explanation was understandable.

As the monthly meetings progressed, there was little new to report and the principals in District B particularly appeared to tire of just exchanging ideas. Thus, the professor began to provide programs with visiting speakers who provided motivation or ideas for implementation of the Four Cornerstones.

### TEST RESULTS

The last meeting of the year was planned as a celebration of the test scores reported by the state. District F schools achieved marked improvement, scoring an average of 89 across all subjects and demographic groups (a score of 90 would have placed them in the “Recognized” category – two categories above where they had scored the previous year). District B schools also improved their scores with an average of 82 across all subjects and demographic groups. At the celebration, the superintendent of District F praised his principals on the results. The professor who was presiding at the meeting reported the scores of District B, stressing the improvement that had been achieved. Still, the District B superintendent pointed out that they had not met their goal of 90 and placed a negative cast on what was to have been a celebration and a launch for increased effort the following year.

### REFLECTION ON PLANNING

As similar as the two districts were in circumstance as well as demographically, they approached planning in somewhat different ways, and according to the doctoral students, it was this difference in approach that contributed to the different outcomes.

The district B superintendent expected the training and the professor to “do the hard work of improvement” for the district. One of the best examples was the request for a refresher session by the superintendent. Rather than do the hard work of developing their own Vision statement, they just took the easy way and adopted the example presented by the professor. While they attended all of the monthly sessions, they seldom came prepared – there was no evidence of planning for the sessions and, again, seemed to expect to be “fed.” At the two District B central office meetings that the professor dropped in on, no mention was made of the Four Cornerstones and they did not appear on the formal agenda; there did not seem to be any plan for on-going attention to the Four Cornerstones. As noted earlier, three doctoral students chose to conduct research in District F and none chose District B. One of the students later reported that he chose District F because he wanted to be “sure to have something to do research on.” His implication was that he did not sense that District B had a plan for following up on the training.

Another point in regard to pre- training planning is noteworthy. The District F superintendent had the professor come to the district twice to meet with the principals and present the outline of the training and answer questions. After those sessions, the superintendent permitted the principals to vote on whether they should proceed with the training (this even though the superintendent had participated in the development of the training). The District B superintendent did not give his principals a choice and two of them reported not even knowing what the training was about. They only met the professor when he visited each of them at his own suggestion just before the training was to begin.

Regarding planning, this report makes several important points: (1) planning before training is very important – participants must know the purpose of the training and have agreed that it is right for them as District F provided for; (2) planning must provide for follow-up in the district as was the case in District F; the monthly meetings did not prove to be sufficient to support implementation in themselves, (3) planning must include work at the district level to foster adaptation of the training; doctoral students in District F reported unique school-level approaches to implementation - each developed a plan, (4) planning needs to provide for mini-celebrations of successes as implementation proceeds, which occurred in District F at their weekly administrative meetings, but was not in evidence at the two unannounced visits to District B administrative meetings by the professor.

#### EPILOGUE

Three superintendents came out of District F. Of these only one had aspired to the superintendency prior to the training. One of the other two had reported that he was ready to retire and make a job change. The third was a “local boy” and was happy as a middle school principal. Yet, as they realized that they could make a difference in school achievement through planned change, their career ambitions increased. The superintendent in District F retired after another two years and by that time, the three principals had moved on to superintendencies. Yet, the school achievement reached so quickly that year continued. At last report, none of the principals in District B had made a career move, even though one had expressed an interest in moving into a superintendency. At last report, the superintendent of District B was still there as were all of his principals. School achievement improved somewhat, but never reached the

levels attained by District F. While for the children of District F, it continued to be the best of times; for the children of District B, if it was not the worst of times, it was not as good as it could have been under a different approach to planning for change.

## ANALYSIS

The following analysis was developed as doctoral students discussed their journals, reviewed the video tapes of the summer training, and analyzed the documents they had collected from the two districts. The workshop, itself, followed well understood guides for successful transfer: participation in design of the training, engagement of the participants as a feature of the training, reflection on their own practice, enacting alternative and preferred responses with feedback from respected peers, follow-up meetings once a month after the initial training, and provision for feedback on their attempts to exhibit the Four Cornerstones through the 2 x 4 Visitation Plan (Peterson, 2002). Observed differences in implementation and outcomes cannot be attributed to the workshop as both districts experienced the same training at the same time under the same conditions.

System thinking however, may offer a partial explanation of the different outcomes by the two districts. System thinking, Senge (1990) writes, is a discipline for seeing wholes. He writes further that it is a framework for seeing interrelationships rather than a series of isolated factors. Kaufman, Herman, and Watters (2002) argue that we must rediscover system thinking in our efforts to improve schools. They hold that schools have drifted away from approaching education from a system perspective and this has led to many of the current problems well documented in the literature such as fragmentation of the curriculum (Ubben, Hughes, and Norris, 2004), and piecemeal

approaches to educational improvement (Reinhartz and Beach, 2004). Even though system thinking was one of the Four Cornerstones, its practice was not well reflected in District B. For example, as reported above, District B did not come to the monthly meetings well prepared, did not reference the Four Cornerstones in their administrative meetings, and did not use the workshop terminology in their meetings with teachers and students. They appeared to view the workshop as something “out there” not related to their daily practice. By contrast, District F utilized the terminology of the Four Cornerstones, referenced them at their administrative meetings, and came well prepared to the monthly meetings to report on their efforts to integrate the Four Cornerstones into their daily practice.

Another lens that may offer insight into the differential outcomes of the two districts is that of Argyris’ distinction between single and double loop learning ((1982). He distinguishes between the two as follows: in single loop learning, one simply follows conventional practice, making sure that it is enforced; in double loop learning, one follows conventional practice, but with a questioning attitude, ready to alter practice if conventional practice does not appear to be producing desired results. Reflecting on the approaches by Districts B and F to the workshop, it appears that the superintendent of District F created the conditions to foster double loop learning prior to the workshop by having the professor present to the principals twice and then having them vote on whether to attend. During the workshop, he held his own follow-up sessions after the formal workshop was over each day, which again served to foster double loop learning as they considered their practices in light of the Cornerstone considered for that day.

Subsequently, his follow up after their return to the district continued to create conditions for reflection on the Four Cornerstones and their implications for practice in the district.

By contrast, the superintendent in District B who moved from another district one month before the start of the workshop told the principals they would attend the workshop. He further reinforced the tendency to settle for single loop learning by housing his district team at a motel separate from the summer campus where District F and the professor and doctoral students were staying. Thus, as his principals came to the sessions, they were more likely to view the training provided in terms of single loop learning (thus, closing out much of the nuance of the training offered) and seeing little difference between their conventional practice and that offered by the training. The fact that the Four Cornerstones were seldom referenced in the weekly administrative meetings in District B further suggests that single loop learning was all that was expected of the principals. Additionally, their lack of preparation for the monthly follow-up meetings suggests that little reflection on their practices was occurring.

A more recent study published in the book, The Knowing-Doing Gap (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2000) provides additional insights into the differing outcomes produced by the two districts. As their research question, Pfeffer and Sutton explored why so much time and expense is incurred by businesses, primarily in management training, and so little of that training is actually translated into practice in the companies. While they found many contributors to that failure, several seem pertinent to the outcomes reported in this article. The first, knowing what to do is not enough, is exemplified by District B. Never did they question the soundness of the training or its real world application. They participated in all exercises in the workshop and attended all follow-up sessions. As noted above, they

seemed to wish to be “fed” at those follow-up sessions as they came unprepared to engage in dialogue and exchange at these follow-up sessions. A second finding of the Pheffer and Sutton study was that making decisions is not enough. Through their superintendent, District B had made a decision to participate in the training and follow-up sessions. Pheffer and Sutton stress that there must be follow-up to the decisions. A third finding was that organizations seem to have preference for complex solutions. Leaders may leave such training claiming to have learned a lot. Yet, they rarely actually place these complex solutions into practice in their organizations. The Four Cornerstones were straightforward leadership guides, commonly known in the literature. District B may have felt that they were not sufficiently complex to produce substantive results. A fourth finding was that organizational philosophy and values count. Pheffer and Sutton go even further to suggest that when members of one organization visit another to learn about an effective program, they may simply focus on the program specifics and totally miss that what makes it work is the underlying/supporting philosophy of the organization. As noted earlier in this report, District B merely adopted the sample mission/vision statement provided by the professor. Adopting a canned statement does not/cannot represent the beliefs/values/commitments of a district. Pheffer and Sutton summarize their findings by noting that, “...one of our main recommendations is to engage more frequently in thoughtful action,” (p. 6). This “knowing-in-practice” may be the most enduring finding from the experiences of District B and District F.

## SUMMARY

Schools and student outcomes can improve and can improve very quickly as evidenced in this report. Training that follows well understood conventions for influence

on practice can be an important contributor to that improvement. However, attention must also be given to system thinking, fostering double loop learning, and making a commitment to knowing-in-practice at the district level if training is to truly influence the organization. If not, the results can be very different, even for similar districts which receive identical training.