

## Research Roundup Volume 20,2 (Winter 2003)

# Principal Induction

*By Larry Lashway*

The preparation of principals continues to spark debate, but the focus of the discussion has shifted dramatically in the past decade. University training programs still receive attention, but policymakers and school districts increasingly view administrator learning as a lifelong process. The traditional distinction between preparation and development has become blurred.

Nowhere is that shift more evident than in the induction period, the critical first few years of service. Once a quiet and rather lonely stage in which new principals cautiously felt their way through an unfamiliar landscape, induction today is a high-profile process involving mentoring, portfolios, and study groups.

The new focus is a belated recognition that today's school presents a complex, high-pressure environment not easily mastered and unforgiving of beginners' mistakes. That was already the case before No Child Left Behind upped the ante considerably. The need to make adequate yearly progress virtually rules out any chance for a leisurely transition.

The works reviewed here provide innovative perspectives that should help those going through-or guiding others through-the first few years of the principalship.

Judith Aiken analyzes the way principals learn "how things are done here" while still keeping their vision.

Michael S. Knapp and colleagues provide a resource book that helps new principals learn about effective instructional leadership.

WestEd translates the ISLLC standards into concrete professional development.

Bradley Portin and colleagues examine how successful principals diagnose and act on their schools' needs, rather than struggling to be "omnicompetent."

Frederick A. Lindley offers a "portable mentor" that fills the perennial need for tools that can bridge the gap between theory and practice.

**Aiken, Judith. The Socialization of New Principals: Another Perspective on Principal Retention.**

**Educational Leadership Review 3:1 (Winter 2002): 32-40. EJ 659 194. Available online at <http://www.ncpea.net/>**

Most practitioners define induction in highly practical terms, focusing on the need to get new principals up to speed in the dozens of tasks they face each day. This article by Judith Aiken reminds us that the first couple of years of the principalship can be profitably viewed in more theoretical terms as a form of socialization.

In socialization, individuals move from outsider to insider while learning "how things are done here." While every principal enters with hopes of shaping the school in particular ways, schools are not easily molded and the leader must reconcile a vision to certain institutional realities. The outcome of that process can have a long-term effect on the principal's sense of what is possible.

Aiken interviewed a dozen principals who had successfully navigated the induction process and who were now regarded as particularly effective. Reflecting on their induction experiences, these principals identified five key needs that characterize the induction period:

- The need to find one's voice and vision;
- The need to form alliances and networks;
- The need to develop a leadership persona;
- The need to find a balance between custodianship and innovation; and
- The need to make connections with the larger community.

Aiken notes that these themes emphasize the cultural component of socialization, the development of social "maps" that lead to an influential and productive role in the life of the school. The principals she interviewed talked much less about developing management skills than about how they came to understand the school's culture and their place in it.

From the evidence in these interviews, Aiken concludes that formal mentoring programs are most valuable when they demystify the principal's role and offer structured opportunities for collaborative and reflective learning.

**Knapp, Michael S.; Michael E. Copland; Brynne Ford; Anneke Markholt; Milbrey W. McLaughlin; Michael Milliken; and Joan E. Talbert. *Leading for Learning Sourcebook: Concepts and Examples*. Seattle: Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy, University of Washington, 2003. 112 pages. Also available online, with summary, at <http://www.ctpweb.org/>**

In an environment dominated by No Child Left Behind, improving student achievement is the overriding theme in virtually every district. While definitions of instructional leadership vary, there is strong consensus that no school will advance far without a principal who can orchestrate a coordinated instructional improvement effort. The challenge is especially formidable for new principals, who are expected to lead change even before they fully understand the status quo.

This guide is not expressly designed for new principals, but its clear explanation of instructional leadership can be a valuable induction resource. The authors' in-depth review of school leadership literature concludes that the principal has ultimate responsibility for five elements of instructional leadership:

- Establishing a focus on learning;
- Building professional learning communities;
- Engaging the external environment to support learning;
- Acting strategically and sharing leadership; and
- Creating coherence.

Principals do not necessarily have to exercise hands-on control in all these tasks, but they do have the responsibility for seeing that they are accomplished.

The guide provides concrete descriptions of the core tasks and effective leadership behavior, and presents several case studies that illustrate the core principles in action. Finally, it addresses the kind of knotty practical questions likely to confront new leaders. Why do faculty resist change? How should principals confront poor practice? Where do you start?

While the resource book would be helpful to principals even as a stand-alone document, the authors emphasize its value in professional development, where the ideas can be analyzed, critiqued, and extended. Induction programs would be a natural home for such efforts.

**WestEd. Moving Leadership Standards into Everyday Work: Descriptions of Practice. San Francisco: Author, 2003. 57 pages. Available from WestEd, 1-877-493-7833. \$15.00.**

In just seven years, the ISLLC standards have become a powerful influence on initial training programs for principals. Many states have aligned certification programs with the standards or have required new principals to pass the School Leadership Assessment based on the standards. Since many new principals are familiar with ISLLC, and may have already developed portfolios aligned with the standards, it makes sense to use ISLLC as the foundation for induction programs.

The standards themselves, however, are simply a rather broad statement of "best practices," not a developmental program. For that reason, many districts will find this guide from WestEd helpful. Although nominally based on the California Professional Standards for Educational Leaders, the book's advice is easily applied to the ISLLC standards from which they were derived.

WestEd's guide solves two problems often encountered in putting the standards to work. First, it provides concrete descriptions of leadership actions that exemplify each standard, making it easier for both new principals and their mentors to visualize the target behavior.

Second, it recognizes that achieving a standard is more a series of attempts that progressively move closer to the desired level of practice. At one end of the scale, administrators exhibit "practice that is directed toward the standards," showing some awareness of the expectations, but not demonstrating deep understanding or consistent behavior. At the other end of the continuum, leaders demonstrate "practice that exemplifies the standard," consciously integrating the standard into their practice and using it strategically. In between these mileposts, principals may demonstrate practice that "approaches the standard" or "meets the standard."

WestEd's guide subdivides the six core standards into more specific statements, each of which is accompanied by descriptions of characteristic behaviors at the four levels of development. The descriptions are not explicit, because each leader operates in a different context, and the authors note that terms like "appropriate" or "effective" are a matter for local discussion. Similarly, the descriptions are not prescriptions that could be used for evaluation. However, they provide a very serviceable tool that can guide the induction process.

**Portin, Bradley; with Paul Schneider; Michael DeArmond; and Lauren Gundlach. Making Sense of Leading Schools: A Study of the School Principalship. Seattle: Center on Reinventing Public Education, University of Washington, 2003. 59 pages. Available online at <http://www.crpe.org/>**

If the first few years of the principalship are a steep learning curve, what should principals be learning? Some believe they should be concentrating on purely practical needs; others advocate a "best practices" strategy based on ISLLC standards. Based on interviews with principals in 21 public and private schools, the authors suggest a third approach.

They assert that the core skill needed for a successful principalship is the ability to diagnose and act on a school's needs. Only the principal, they found, is in a position to do this.

While the interviews also supported the importance of seven domains of leadership (instructional, cultural, managerial, human resources, strategic, external development, and micropolitical), they did not suggest that principals must exercise direct leadership in each area. Some school leaders were "one-man bands"; others operated more like "jazz band leaders," laying down a theme but stepping back to let other players solo. Still others were "orchestra conductors," playing no instrument themselves but making sure that players' individual efforts were harmonized.

Asked about their preparation for this complex balancing act, principals tended to be dismissive of their university programs, recalling little that was helpful. They pointed to experience as the best teacher. More recent graduates, however, tended to be better satisfied with their training, suggesting that either programs are improving or that they are more relevant to the needs of new principals.

While the report does not articulate an explicit agenda for the induction period, its findings do suggest the importance of addressing the principal's broad leadership strategy. New principals are often driven by a perceived need to "do it all," but the desire to be "omnicompetent" may be counterproductive.

Instead, induction programs should ask principals to reflect on their school's needs, culture, and human resources; consider their own strengths and weaknesses; and then begin to cultivate leadership wherever the soil looks most fertile. Distributing leadership is a task that challenges even highly experienced leaders, but it also holds an important place in the induction agenda.

**Lindley, Frederick A. *The Portable Mentor: A Resource Guide for Entry-Year Principals and Mentors*. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Corwin Press, 2003. 184 pages. Available from Corwin Press, 800-818-7243. \$74.95 hardcover, \$34.95 paperback.**

The title of Frederick Lindley's book sums it up well: This is not a book about mentoring but a guide for mentors and beginning principals. As such, it fills the perennial need for tools that can bridge the gap between theory and practice. This is an especially strong need for induction programs that are heavy on well-intended rhetoric but leave participants to work out the details.

Lindley's guide begins with a succinct summary of the ISLLC standards. The following chapters present a monthly to-do list in which each necessary task is connected to a standard. For example, before the beginning of the school year, principals should familiarize themselves with the school's academic performance record, a task related to ISLLC Standard 2. New principals can thus connect the abstract standards learned in preparation programs to the multitude of mundane tasks that fill the principal's day.

While Lindley suggests that the book can be used in the absence of a mentor, its greatest potential value is as a source for dialog between new principals and their experienced colleagues. For that reason, he devotes a section to advice for mentors, emphasizing three points:

Make your expectations clear. Is there a specific agenda to be followed? How long will the mentoring relationship last? Will the role involve formal evaluation? What does the new principal hope to gain from the relationship?

Build the relationship first. Whatever professional knowledge the mentor has to offer will take root only in the context of a human relationship characterized by a sense of comfort and trust. Such relationships take time to develop, but the mentor can take the initiative by exchanging contact information, meeting and communicating frequently, and clearly conveying a sense of confidentiality.

Recognize the continuum of professional development. At times the new principal will be concerned about sheer survival. For these moments, Lindley includes a helpful list of possible mentor responses. Gradually, however, the novice will be ready to refine existing skills and develop new ones. The book includes a number of hypothetical leadership scenarios that can be used as the basis for discussion