





Learning to Fly:

SAANYS' *New Principals Institute Takes Flight*

by Amy E. Tucker

Like most successful innovations, The New Principals Institute: Investing in Success (NPI) evolved out of a need that wasn't being met. There was a statewide premise that a gap existed between preservice education and training (including graduate-level course work and the corresponding internship) and on-the-job training and support once individuals received their first administration assignment.

"Education is much like other professions," explained SAANYS Director of Professional Development Jim Collins. "Four years of medical school doesn't prepare you to become a doctor. So, there's an internship and a residency. We felt that people leaving graduate school with just an internship under their belts weren't really ready to do their best work. The learning needed to continue and the Mentoring Committee recognized that gap."

In 2008, SAANYS developed a Mentoring Committee comprised of principals statewide to develop a mentoring program for new administrators (see cover story). The committee developed Five Pillars for reform (see page 16) and the New Principals Institute evolved from Pillar #4. A subcommittee then visited the Ontario Principals Council in Canada and the Maine Principals Academy and returned with a number of ideas for topics to be addressed through the Institute.

In February 2010, SAANYS approached Dr. Michael Johnson, retired Averill Park superintendent with three decades of administrative experience of all types, and Deborah (Debbye) Price,

SUNY Oswego, spent 23 years teaching math at the Oswego High School and became principal at the Charles E. Riley elementary school on July 1, 2010. She saw the NPI as a new teacher institute for principals.

"I'm a huge believer in lifelong learning and professional development to improve one's art," said Fierro. "Teaching and education is my art. Obtaining my degree in education, completing an internship and being a teacher on assignment were all great experiences. But, this is a new experience for me and I would never take on a new job without training."

In his fifth year as assistant principal at Shaker High School, a large suburban

Potsdam. The entire district is housed in one building and Reid oversees 285 students in grades pre-K through six. Reid enrolled in the Institute with her high school principal due to recent administrative changes in their district.

"When I arrived, the elementary principal had just retired after 20 years," explained Reid. "So, it was a very well-run building to step into. But, there are always new initiatives and mandates coming down from State Ed that you need to stay on top of, so it was nice to have this program and support."

In addition, the high school principal had just moved into the superintendent's position, leaving two huge vacancies in the tiny district.

"We thought it would be great to both attend and create our style together to some extent," explained Reid. "We have some time to reflect during our drive, to discuss and interpret what we heard. It was nice for us as a new team to have some new tools to bring back to the district and to work together to determine which tools would work well in our building."

Broadalbin-Perth Intermediate School Principal Dan Casey signed up for the Institute because he recognized Facilitator Dr. Johnson, a former professor from his master's program at SUNY Plattsburgh. He spent a year as assistant principal at the secondary level and jumped at the intermediate principal position overseeing grades three through five.

He began his second year in the fall and said of the position, "I like the idea of working with the bigger picture. I have a say in where the building and district goes and being a bigger part of the community."

For Ruth Lincoln, K-12 principal at Morristown Central Schools, a 410-student, one-building district on

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retired elementary school principal from Shenendehowa's large suburban district with 20 years of administrative experience, to pull together the curriculum from the Mentoring Committee's ideas and facilitate the first Institute.

"The Mentoring Committee spent a few years flushing out the curriculum and came to us with a general scope of things they wanted to accomplish," said Johnson. "Deborah and I brought the thing together, laid out the organizational plan, and created the materials and resources for the Institute."

We Built It: They Came

Mary Beth Fierro spent her entire life in Oswego County. She grew up there, obtained her master's and CAS from

campus in the North Colonie School District, Brian Spofford was recruited into administration. Spofford taught biology at Schenectady High School and spent two years as a teacher on special assignment at one of the middle schools. He found he both liked it and was good at it and enrolled in the NPI as a precursor to applying for a principal position.

"As you transition from being an assistant principal to a principal, there isn't a college course that prepares you for those things," Spofford explained. "For me, [NPI] was about getting a lot of experience and time with people who have already done this and can give me great advice to be able to move up."

Brooke Reid is the principal at the Parishville-Hopkinton Elementary School, a small, rural district outside of

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the Canadian border; becoming an administrator was purely semantic.

“I’m the mother of five kids and was a stay-at-home mom for the early part of their lives,” Lincoln explained. “When they were all in school, I decided I needed a career. I taught middle school in California, and when I moved back East I was a substitute initially, then taught pre-K for 10 years.”

Lincoln spent her first three years as a shared administrator for BOCES special education where she received training from the bottom up. She enrolled in the NPI because she felt her internship wasn’t enough.

“There’s no real-life training for principals,” Lincoln stated. “I obtained my college degree and spent a year in my internship when only a half-year was required. I split my time between the high school and the elementary school, but it was hardly the equivalent of student teaching.”

The Crucial First Year

Johnson and Price flushed out four day-long sessions for the NPI to be held at SAANYS’ headquarters in Latham on August 6 and November 12, 2010, and February 4 and April 29, 2011. Each session chronologically matches a sequence of topics that those principals would be undertaking at that point in the calendar year.

“We looked at the time of the year and for the first program we chose the entry plan and first faculty meeting,” said Johnson. “As we moved through the year we looked at when would be

the best time to talk about budgeting, creating a master schedule, observations, and other responsibilities.”

Syracuse had some federal funds and they contracted with SAANYS to run a second Syracuse-City-administrator-specific Institute at the former Teacher Center building.

The NPI also attracted two attendees from the Kahnawake District in Quebec. “Many of the topics are the same no matter where your school is located,” said Johnson. “Whether you’re a large or small, urban or rural district, an entry plan is still an entry plan.”

“Observations, dealing with harassment, dealing with difficult people are all universal no matter what country you’re from,” agreed Price.

“A Successful Beginning: Starting the School Year Out Right”

In addition to developing entry plans, session one focused on organization, time management strategies, promoting effective communication with key stakeholder groups, and developing and leading efficient faculty and department meetings. A panel of principals helped lead the afternoon breakout sessions by building level.

Everyone touted the benefits of being able to network and share ideas with individuals who had been former principals and also those veterans still in the field. Lincoln found the charts in session one to be most helpful to her on an organizational level.

Session one was right before school started and I wanted more organizational strategies to work more efficiently,” said Lincoln. “I really zeroed in on the charts. When you start as a principal, you’re learning to fly the plane while you’re in the air. I’ve developed a million organizational things to help me, but I always want more so I can spend more time with teachers and kids.”

“One concern of mine was that I didn’t want our faculty meetings to be just reading from a list of bulleted items,” said Fierro. “I wanted it to be more of a learning experience and professional development time where people shared. I came out with some great ideas from the first session for faculty meetings.”

Casey found getting insight from those working in urban settings was particularly helpful because he grew up in and works in a rural school district. The fact that the sessions mimicked the calendar year was key.

“There is so much that goes into these jobs and much of it depends on the time of year,” said Casey. “I was literally sitting in the conference discussing the very things that are sitting on my desk. That’s reassuring and motivating in a lot of ways and really fuels the fire to get back and tackle the stack.”

“It was great to get these administrators to really stop and think about what they’re going to do when they open up their schools,” said Price. “We had them really prepared to be proactive rather than reactive.”

“If I had something that I wasn’t sure how to handle,” added Casey, “I had the opportunity to pick some brains about it and get back to the office and bang it out.”

As a primary teacher, Reid finds dealing with confrontation to be uncomfortable for her and welcomed the strategies for

dealing with different personality types and situations.

"They taught us simple tools and catch phrases that you could always go to and have ready to say," explained Reid. "These statements allow you to quickly de-escalate the situation and buy you time to gather your thoughts. Then they also gave you some plans to help you navigate those situations."

"Setting the Tone: The Steps a Leader Takes"

The second session focused on teacher observations and handling difficult employee situations. Participants discussed sexual harassment,

"Every one of our workshops is focused on really giving the administrators some key things that they can take away."

operational issues, discipline issues, and curricular issues in schools. A comprehensive review of *The Administrator's Handbook* was also discussed in detail by one of the co-authors, Mike Hargraves.

Reid raved about the second session and particularly liked *The Administrator's Handbook* desk reference. "It's a very convenient resource," Reid noted. "The language is simple and the way it's organized allows you to read it quickly or reference it even if you're on the phone with someone. You can check how something is indexed and provide information seamlessly without people even realizing you've had to look something up."

Reid found it interesting to get feedback on some other ideas such as note-taking techniques and using technology to support observations.

"We talked about professional practice components and the process that you go through and framework you follow when you're trying to impact instruction with teachers," said Reid. "It was nice to hear that reinforced."

"Session two emphasized that you need to really know your local contract," said Johnson.

"They did a nice job of covering the legality of the position," Reid agreed. "There are so many regulations and mandates that you need to be aware of and as a new administrator, you might not have even heard of many of the laws that you now need to implement and oversee within your building. They were very thorough and pulled together great resources!"

"Building Momentum and Maintaining Balance"

Session three, which took place in early February, covered response to intervention, professional learning communities, analyzing student achievement data, and identifying barriers to student achievement. Superintendent Sue Swartz, a former director of special education, joined the session to discuss the administrator's role with respect to special education.

"Whether we're discussing how to have an effective meeting, organizational processes like making the best use of your time, or how to introduce changes and improvements in the building," Johnson continued, "every one of our workshops is focused on really giving the administrators some key things that they can take away."

"Closing Out the School Year – Finishing Strong"

Session four wraps up the inaugural NPI with discussions of the administrator's role in the master schedule, the principal's and superintendent's collaboration, involvement in completing difficult employee evaluations, and drafting the second-year start-up plan. And critically, a panel of practicing administrators discusses the challenges of balancing a career and family.

"One of the perspectives that I offer in session four is being female and having raised a family while an administrator," said Price. "The time management piece is huge for any administrator. So, knowing how to manage this, raise a family, and have a personal life is paramount."

Fierro has three children of her own and has been caring for a sick mother since Labor Day. But she was particularly drawn to the title of the fourth session, "Finishing Strong."

"That caught my attention," Fierro explained, "because I've read articles about how some people feel the school year ends in May or earlier when there's still six weeks of school left on

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the academic calendar! My philosophy is that school's not over until it's over and that opportunities exist through the very last day to make a difference in kids' lives."

The Next Step – Mentoring

"Administrator positions today are high-risk positions that you don't enter into lightly," said Johnson. "In addition to the extra education required by the state, 40 percent of your administrator performance is now based on student achievement. It changes the landscape entirely. Everyone is coming at you and you really have to have your act together."

Fierro knows she's fortunate to have four other elementary principals in her district to draw upon as resources. Still, the Oswego City School District doesn't have a formal mentoring program, so she has taken the next step post NPI and has notified her assistant superintendent that she wants to participate in the new SAANYS Mentoring Service (see cover story).

"As one of the mentoring team teachers in the district," Fierro explained, "I know the importance of having a person with experience in the position whom you can turn to."

"The idea of mentoring is a tough one in this position because you know how busy your job is," she explained. "So, you hesitate to pick up the phone and bother another principal knowing what you're asking them to give: time from their already hectic day."

Reid still feels guilty even when she does pick up the phone and found it nice to have the Institute conference to network collectively.

Lincoln also feels that the collective brain is more productive and is never threatened by people who can provide guidance and mentoring. "When I was in special education," Lincoln continued, "Morristown was identified as being a School in Need of Improvement (SINI). We had state and regional representatives coming here to work with us to ensure that we were meeting all of the state regulations. I see that as a benefit, not a threat. It's a learning tool

and a way to learn more about the business and make it better."

Learned Leadership

Institute participants came to the table with varied experiences, but found a commonality in both what they faced and their self-doubts with handling certain challenges.

In her role for nearly three years now, Lincoln still finds the hardest part involves dealing with all of the dynamics of the day.

"When I was involved in elementary and special education, I didn't have to deal as much with the discipline and negative conflicts," she explained. "Kids feel entitled to things and don't have the work ethic we had. Parents are both working and still struggle with the permissive parenting issue. The family unit has been compromised so many parents leave a lot of discipline up to the schools to handle."

Spofford found the pace to be the most challenging aspect of his new role.

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"It's impossible to prepare yourself for how much can happen in one day," he continued, "how many faces you have to wear; and how many places you have to be in at once."

Casey sees his biggest challenge as resulting from his jump from the elementary level, where all his experience and training primarily were, to the secondary level. He describes it as a work in progress.

"Working with people and educators is a constant," Casey stated. "But learning the new curriculum and mandates that are so different is an ongoing challenge. Understanding schedules for teachers and that these teachers teach all subjects and understanding the different expectations and the age-appropriateness of the students in the secondary level has without a doubt been challenging."

Reid believes inherently that all leadership is learned. "One of the things I realized as soon as I stepped into this job," Reid explained, "was that you can be a born leader but there's really many aspects of leadership that you still need to learn." "Without this Institute, you would have to learn them through trial and error on a day-by-day basis."

For more information on the New Principals Institute, contact SAANYS Director of Professional Development Jim Collins at (518) 782-0600 or JCollins@saanys.org 🏠

Editor's Note: Amy E. Tucker is a freelance writer from Clifton Park, New York, covering education and sports for the past decade.

Pillars of SAANYS Leadership Mentoring Model

The preparation and continual development of highly successful educational leaders is vitally important to the success of education across this country. All educational leaders must constantly meet the everyday challenges of educational leadership with new skills, new knowledge, and new perspectives.

SAANYS believes that educational leaders should be mentored both in the beginning of and throughout their careers. They should essentially be "mentored" forever. We believe that this ongoing professional support or mentoring is based on five pillars. They are:

Assessment of Practice – Using established criteria that identifies successful leadership practices and skills, all educational leaders should engage in a self-assessment. This self-assessment will help each leader identify and sustain their strengths as well as identify areas in which they need support. The self-assessment will help create the basis of direct or indirect mentoring, needed professional development, and networking possibilities.

Mentoring – Direct intervention or coaching is a way for all administrators, particularly new leaders, to engage in conversation and reflection of practice. Mentoring/Coaching can take the form of one-to-one mentoring, group or cohort mentoring, internal or external mentoring, or single-year or extended mentoring. This mentoring pillar will provide all leaders the ability to gain knowledge and insight from other accomplished school leaders.

Professional Development – Continuous learning is critical for educational leaders to meet current challenges and responsibilities and to prepare themselves for the demands of an ever-changing world. By engaging in a variety of professional development activities, educational leaders actually mentor themselves. Professional development should become an integral part of our personal development.

Academies – Establishing opportunities for extended learning using a cohort model not only helps address professional needs but creates the foundation for future dialogue. Annual academies, which may last from three to seven days, can be based on a variety of needs for both beginning and experienced administrators. Through these academies, participants will have the chance to engage in ongoing professional development.

Development of Networks – Sharing information and thoughts and seeking immediate advice have always contributed to the development of educational leaders. Supporting the development of networks such as physical opportunities to meet, using electronic communication (e-mail list serves), or the use of blogs can greatly enhance the exchange of information and ideas helping administrators learn from others and make wiser decisions.

