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Training Principals to Ensure Access to Equitable Learning Opportunities in a High-Need Rural School District

Tricia Browne-Ferrigno and
Robert C. Knoepfel

During the mid-1980s in Kentucky, a grassroots advocacy group composed of 66 property-poor school districts, seven local school boards, and 22 public school students formed, calling itself the Council for Better Education, Inc. The group filed a class-action suit in 1985 asserting that “funding in Kentucky was *inequitable* and *inadequate*—inequitable because some school districts had much more money than others to support education and inadequate because of Kentucky’s low level of educational achievement.”¹ Although only seeking changes in school funding, their legal action eventually led to a Kentucky Supreme Court ruling in June 1989 that “the state’s *entire* elementary and secondary school system—not just the school finance system—[was] inefficient and unconstitutional.”² This sweeping decision applied to “the whole gamut of the common school system in Kentucky.”³ The ruling led to enactment of the Kentucky Education Reform Act of 1990 (KERA), the “most comprehensive education legislation in modern American history.”⁴ Kentucky became one of the leaders in comprehensive systemic change in public schooling because KERA significantly changed curriculum, governance, and finance and introduced a demanding statewide system of school accountability.⁵

Despite efforts through legislation to provide equitable learning opportunities for all Kentucky children and youths, many schools districts in eastern Kentucky continue to struggle to ensure that all students learn and achieve required performance levels in the state accountability system. Although PreK-12 educational funding throughout the Commonwealth is more equitable today than it was in the past, influences created by widespread poverty remain. Student underachievement on state accountability measures and school improvement efforts, predominately in poor schools, provides

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evidence that funding is inadequate.⁶ Many eastern Kentucky public schools situated in Central Appalachian counties are classified as “distressed” by the Appalachian Regional Commission because their three-year average poverty and unemployment rates are at least 1.5 times the nation’s average.⁷ Unlike the regions of Northern and Southern Appalachia that experienced economic and population growth over the past 40 years,⁸ most Central Appalachia counties cover mountainous terrain and have decreasing population rates, with 85% of the residents living in isolated rural areas.⁹ The counties lost their major source of revenue when the coal mining industry was cut nearly in half in the late 1900s, leaving many residents without employment opportunities and county governments without tax revenue sources for education.¹⁰ Eastern Kentucky counties were among the hardest hit.

This article shares findings from an exploratory case study about an advanced leadership development program for administrator-certified practitioners in a Central Appalachian school district. The goal of the Principals Excellence Program (PEP), one of 24 projects supported by federal funds through the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) School Leadership Development Program, is to transform the principalship by developing visionary instructional leaders able to increase student learning in high-need rural schools. The program is delivered through a partnership between Pike County Public Schools (PCPS) and the University of Kentucky (UKY). A team of university professors and administrative practitioners facilitates learning experiences in the district for principals, assistant principals, and administrator-certified teachers seeking administrative positions.

The next two sections provide information about the contextual conditions that define the district as high need and an overview of the program and research design. The fourth section presents findings about: (a) preparing school leaders to promote learning success for all students; (b) addressing equity and social justice issues; and (c) providing adequate learning opportunities. Perspectives from representatives of all stakeholder groups are integrated to provide a holistic assessment of the program. The article closes with a discussion about lessons learned thus far about effective leadership preparation.

Context of Leadership Challenges: Pike County Public Schools

Pike County comprises the easternmost tip of Kentucky bordering Virginia and West Virginia, miles distant from any metropolitan area. Pikeville, the county’s largest town, benefited from the influx of millions of dollars to finance infrastructure development when it was designated as a growth center by the Appalachian Regional Center.¹² While Pikeville and its independent school system have benefited from this economic boom, the rest of the county remains economically distressed. Data from the last decade indicate that its population decreased by 5.3%, and 33% of the households report annual incomes under \$15,000.¹²

Although the 90% of the population of the entire Commonwealth of Kentucky is classified as “white persons, not of Hispanic/Latino origin,” it is 98% in Pike County.¹³ Most Pike County residents were born there or in nearby counties and have resided in the region most of their lives. According to school district educators, many children have never traveled outside Pike County, and a few in remote hollows have never visited Pikeville. While 62% of the population over age 25 are high school graduates, only 10% of that group have complet-

ed a post-secondary degree despite the local availability of Pikeville College.¹⁴ Welfare assistance was first introduced during the New Deal era; today the county has multiple generations of residents relying solely on governmental support.¹⁵ Hence, diversity within the county population is based upon socioeconomic status, level of education, residence location, work and life experiences—not ethnicity, race, or nationality.

A sobering picture of the county's high-need characteristics, based upon key indicators of child wellbeing, emerged from the *Kentucky Kids Count* report by the Annie E. Casey Foundation.¹⁶ Between 25% and 33% of children under the age of five have been neglected or physically, sexually, or emotionally abused. Children under the age of 18 comprise 26% of the total county population, and 30% of them live in poverty.¹⁷ Approximately 69% of the students in Pike County schools qualify to participate in free or reduced-price lunch programs; schools located in remote areas of the district report free or reduced-price lunch rates above 90%.

KERA reconstructed the Commonwealth's entire system of PreK-12 public schooling and launched demanding school accountability to ensure that all children learn at high levels.¹⁸ Although the vision for reformed public education embraces high student achievement for all students, rural schools in eastern Kentucky face formidable challenges. Nonetheless, the Pike County School Board maintains a sustained commitment to the belief that all children can learn and shares its expectations through its slogan, "Success For All," adopted four years ago. However, two stumbling blocks to achieving success for all became apparent. First, a 2001 survey of the then-current principals revealed that many viewed themselves as competent managers, but not as strong instructional leaders. Transforming the district leaders' vision into reality requires principals who have appropriate dispositions and necessary skills for leading instructional programs. Second, the district faced projected vacancies in administrative positions in half of its schools.

Although many educational practitioners in the district are qualified to hold administrative positions, few aspire to become principals. These potential leadership candidates, while self-nominated for the certification process, candidly admit their motivation to complete graduate degrees was mainly to increase their salaries. The district leaders realized that they needed to institute a reconceptualization of school leadership and build sustainable leadership capacity within the district. They sought external help to accomplish their goal from Kentucky's land-grant research university located 150 miles away in Lexington.

Addressing Leadership Development: Principals Excellence Program (PEP)

Working as collaborative partners, UKY leadership educators and PCPS leadership practitioners developed the framework for advanced principal preparation and then sought external funds to implement it. The proposal was selected in September 2002 by the U.S. Department of Education as one of 24 projects to be supported through the NCLB School Leadership Development Program. The three project objectives are the recruitment, development, and retention of high-quality educational leaders. The program curriculum is based upon the four recurring themes—a vision for success, a focus on teaching and learning, an involvement of all stakeholders, a demonstration of ethical behavior—appearing among the nearly 200 indicators in the six ISLLC *Standards for School Leaders*.¹⁹ The yearlong program provides

cohesive and coherent professional development experiences focused intently on the work and effort required to lead contemporary public schools; selected curricular elements address specific challenges faced by high-need rural districts.

The project design for the advanced leadership development program is an interconnected series of seminar-workshops, clinical experiences guided by trained mentors, comprehensive school-based research, and structured reflections. The envisioned outcome is the creation of a professional community of visionary educational leaders who have the disposition to be change agents; commitment to be lifelong learners; skill to be effective decision-makers and reflective practitioners; and desire to remain or become principals in the district.

Integration of Best Practices in Principal Preparation

PEP incorporates recommendations for redesigned principal preparation and participant selection.²⁰ The curriculum integrates best practices in adult learning, inquiry-based professional training, and community building.²¹ This advanced leadership development for administrator-certified practitioners—practicing and aspiring principals—fills a missing element in the literature about continuing professional growth of school leaders.²²

A core component of the project is the concurrent action research conducted by participants each semester in selected district schools. Clinical practice guided by mentor principals can potentially foster role transformation and support socialization to a new community of practice.²³ Because clinical practice is greatly enhanced through support provided by qualified professionals, district leaders carefully select high-performing principals to serve as project-trained mentors during the biweekly field-based experiences.²⁴ The reasons for integrating mentoring are threefold. First, it simulates role socialization for aspiring and novice principals.²⁵ Second, principals serving as mentors have opportunities for their own professional development.²⁶ Finally, mentoring increases the capacity for both new and veteran administrators to meet the demands of school leadership.²⁷

The closed-cohort model in which an identified group remains together without changes in membership was selected because the potential exists for creating a risk-safe learning environment where participants can candidly discuss issues and engage in constructive conflict resolution about problems.²⁸ A well-functioning cohort supports peer sharing of experiences, group determination of action, participant reflection, and leadership development.²⁹ Further, the potential exists within a well-functioning cohort for cultivating a strong and lasting professional community.³⁰ Through ongoing group-development activities and networking, cohort members can develop collegial relationships that support and sustain them after program completion.

Intensive Engagement in Leadership Development

Because clinical practice is a core component of the program, participants need time to work in schools other than where they are assigned. Hence, with wholehearted support by the superintendent and school board, all principals and teachers participating as cohort members are released from their responsibilities one day every week throughout the spring and fall semesters to engage in program-sponsored activities. On an alternating schedule, cohort members either work at a school site with their mentor principals and inquiry team members conducting action research about student learning or

participate in a seminar-workshop facilitated by university professors and district administrators. The full day, biweekly cohort meetings allow time for participants to talk about fieldwork experiences, assigned readings, and educational issues and to reflect upon individual and group learning. During cohort sessions, practicing principals often share concerns or celebrations related to their practice which provide additional practical information about school leadership to aspiring and novice principals. This pattern of alternating full-day clinical practica and cohort meetings stimulates linkage between theory and practice.

Fieldwork Guided by Carefully Selected Mentor Principals

Elementary and secondary school principals are selected by district leaders to serve as mentors to support the field-based component of the project. The host schools where cohort members meet for a full semester represent different rural communities, student populations, faculty and staff, educational programs, and facilities. Most mentor principals are selected according to their effectiveness as instructional leaders and their career experiences, leadership styles, and willingness to open their schools to scrutiny; however, a few were asked to serve as mentors in order to bring high-performing inquiry teams on site to stimulate improvement efforts. The superintendent makes the final assignments of cohort members to mentor principals, and the project director provides training about the curricular foci for the semester they serve as mentors.

School-Based Action Research About Learning Issues

The program-supported action research must be conducted at sites other than where cohort members work in order to give them opportunities to visit different school communities in the district and work with different school leaders. With assistance from their mentor principals, small teams of cohort members identify authentic problems to investigate at the host schools. Each inquiry team must design and complete two collaborative action research projects that require formal proposals, human subjects research approval, and formal written reports. During the yearlong program, cohort members have opportunities to work in an elementary school and then in a secondary school. Findings from the action research projects are disseminated to different authentic audiences within the district.

Continuous Evaluation of Program Impact: Study Design

The federal grant program supporting PEP requires formative and summative evaluation, and, thus, data have been collected regularly since the beginning of project implementation. The case study design was selected because the inquiry is bound by specific time periods and encapsulated in a particular structure.³¹ Further, because the essence of case study research is exploration, a qualitative researcher can begin an inquiry with “a target of interest” and then describe “whatever emerges of significance.”³²

Data collection strategies are varied (e.g., surveys, reflections, small-group interviews, observations) and include information from members of all stakeholder groups: cohort participants; mentor principals; district administrators; and program instructors. The study focuses intentionally upon capturing the perceptions of cohort members at various times throughout their learning experiences rather than only at the beginning and end of their yearlong training. Their responses over time provide ongoing evaluation and opportunities for the instructional team to adapt the program to meet the changing

needs of the participants. Mentor principals, district administrators, and project instructors provide assessments about program implementation through written reflections and group interviews. The project director serves as the primary investigator. In-progress reports about the program and articles integrating selected findings have been disseminated.³³

Advanced Leadership Development: Participant Assessments

The findings presented in this section were taken from written responses to a reflective questionnaire administered during the tenth month of each cohort’s yearlong training, i.e., October 2003, October 2004. Where appropriate, the prompts that generated the comments are provided. Cohort members presented insider perspectives through their reactions as individuals actively participating in the intensive professional development. Outsider perspectives were provided by mentor principals, district administrators, and program instructors who in various ways supported learning experiences of cohort members.

Preparing School Leaders to Promote Learning Success for All

The instructional team spent many hours during the opening months of each cohort engaging participants in perception-broadening activities that challenged cohort members to think beyond their school-based experiences and to explore issues systemically. The intent was to enhance collaboration and develop trust among individuals who did not know one another and to stimulate thinking about districts as educational systems in which all schools and local communities play important roles in student learning. Participants provided their assessments of the program through their written responses to the prompt: “In what ways is PEP preparing school leaders in rural districts to promote learning and success for all children?”

A novice high school assistant principal wrote that the program was “broadening participants’ perspectives about education” and “training leaders to be more reflective, make decisions that are research-based, and develop leadership skills of teachers and others throughout the schools.” Another cohort member asserted, “PEP offers each individual an opportunity to grow professionally so that the participant is better prepared for a leadership role, or if the individual is already in a leadership role, [to be] better qualified.”

Another respondent believed that the program has been effective in stimulating innovation and reflection because instructors “encourage cohort members to think outside the box.” A high school assistant principal appreciated the way instructors prodded cohort members to reflect upon their assumptions about student learning and then challenged them to analyze how their beliefs influence their actions: “PEP [instructors] provided many provoking questions and situations that made us think about what we really believe and compare that to what is true social justice. We have an obligation to serve every child; therefore, we are being groomed to think how leadership influences our reaction to that obligation.” According to an elementary teacher, “PEP has made us understand that we are working for the district, and not just one school.” This systemic perspective helped her to understand the importance of collaboration and cooperation among schools, especially to improve instructional programs.

Although a veteran teacher had participated in “numerous professional development opportunities over the past several years” before joining the first cohort, she asserted that PEP by far “impacted [her]

professional growth” the greatest. She perceived that the intensive leadership development program was also changing the district: “The [professional development] experience helps to create better learning environments in Pike County. The impact that the program has had on the leaders of the schools will create more opportunities for student success. It is simple: If leadership improves, learning improves.” A mentor principal held a similar viewpoint. She volunteered to assist with a second clinical practicum because she believed that the experiential learning component, with its specific emphasis on student learning in rural schools, was a key to the project’s success. She stated:

The culture in eastern Kentucky is unique. Therefore, it is important for aspiring administrators to be involved in the schools... When PEP participants are placed in the schools, they are given opportunities to observe how school leaders are addressing equity issues... PEP is preparing school leaders in rural districts to promote learning and success for all children by the useful information provided through action research.

A cohort member agreed that the program filled a void in the preparation of rural school leaders. She works as a media specialist and conducted a literature review for her peers to use in their action research reports. She discovered that there is “not a lot of literature for school leaders in rural districts.” Being able to participate in a program like this “gives leaders an opportunity to collaborate with each other [about issues] in rural settings.”

Supervisors of instruction are certified district-level administrators who assist teachers in developing curriculum and principals in supervising instructional programs. A veteran supervisor offered his assessment of the project’s effectiveness based upon observed changes in participants’ professional practice: “PEP is providing aspiring leaders with an opportunity to gain valuable insight into certain aspects of an administrator’s role before actually assuming an administrative position. In instances where participants are already principals, PEP is greatly accelerating their learning curve and developing their knowledge base.”

The director of curriculum and instruction, who is responsible for the evaluation of all school administrators in the district, offered a slightly different assessment of the program’s impact. She viewed the intensive professional development program as a means to build leadership capacity, a critically important strategy in isolated districts where few new residents relocate: “PEP is preparing school leaders with a broader scope of understanding about how leadership directly impacts student learning. Rural districts are not able to recruit administrators into their schools; so it becomes absolutely imperative that districts focus on developing those already there.”

Unlike traditional preservice preparation programs and other professional development activities, PEP focused attention on rural school issues. The curricular topics, sometimes provocative instructional strategies, and clinical experiences in local schools promoted the development of instructional leadership skills. Project participants and observers alike perceived that the program was changing administrative practice in the district.

Addressing Equity and Social Justice Issues

Despite the multiple challenges of educating children and youth potentially at risk of not learning, principals must institutionalize

the district’s vision of “success for all” in their schools. Thus, the program curriculum and learning activities intentionally concentrated on instructional leadership and ways to increase student learning in high-need rural schools. Commentary presented here emerged from responses to the question: “How is social justice (i.e., equitable learning opportunities for all students) addressed through PEP to prepare educational leaders for the high-stakes accountability context in public schools today?”

According to a district administrator, “PEP participants have gained added insights into the crucial role of principals in ensuring that all of their students have maximum opportunities to learn.” Further, she believed that the program gave “aspiring and new principals exposure to current thinking regarding a principal’s responsibility to ensure the education of all children.” A member of the instructional team asserted that emphasis on “social justice is included in book studies, discussions, and application of learnings.” Attention to this concept is “especially important in a high-needs district [where] ‘Success For All’ is the district’s vision, a constant reminder about meeting the needs of all students.” This focus was also apparent to a program participant who wrote: “All cohort members and their ideas are equally important in PEP. A large portion of the initial training is dedicated to building a belief that all stakeholders come to the table as equals, and that belief is protected throughout the experience.” In other words, social justice was not only discussed, but also modeled.

A veteran principal who participated in the first cohort and served as a mentor for the second cohort posited that conducting school-based inquiry projects forced all participants to concentrate on instructional leadership. Additionally, the experiences helped him discover that some of his assumptions may have created barriers to understanding accountability issues at his own school:

[The program] has helped all participants narrow our focus to strategies that will impact student achievement in each of our schools. It has placed greater focus on being instructional leaders in our buildings... The action research activities have taught us how to withdraw personal assumptions [when] looking at data, strategies, etc. It has taught me that raw data can help determine true weaknesses and help find solutions.

A middle school principal developed a new perspective about “high-stakes accountability” since participating in the program. He explained further that “PEP has shown us that by being positive with our teachers, we can positively influence each individual student in our building.”

Because participants worked in both elementary and secondary schools during their clinical practices, they “see how different grade-level schools function” and “view various forms of instruction.” Like many secondary school educators, a high school administrator had not spent any time working in an elementary school. The program helped him to view PreK-12 schooling as a continuum and to consider possibilities for improving all levels:

Being in schools allows PEP participants to see what is going on in high schools [and] in elementary schools. Seeing the difference may actually help bridge the gap between the [differences in] instruction... High schools may benefit by more hands-on activities, enthusiasm, and well-organized classroom instruction with centers or

stations to break up otherwise monotonous lessons. On the flip side, [visiting] high school settings may trigger thoughts [for elementary educators] about how to better prepare students for their high school careers.

The program expanded understanding of instructional leadership because participants learned by observing teaching in different settings and by helping colleagues toward a common goal of improving all schools in the district. Further, according to an elementary principal, the program provided “a curriculum tailored to the need of [rural school districts in eastern Kentucky].”

A Title I coordinator posited that the program provided multiple opportunities for participants to discover ways to ensure equal learning opportunities for all students:

Closing education gaps and overcoming barriers have been important topics to the cohort. All members of PEP are aware that these inequities exist and [that] they must be eradicated as much as possible. PEP has provided literature, videos, guest speakers, and dialogue to help address the issues of social justice. I feel the participants have gained more insight into the problems, and we have been provided strategies to making learning equal for all students.

According to an assistant high school principal who participated as both a cohort member and a mentor, PEP emphasized that educational leaders must address high-stakes accountability: “The message sent is that we must reach all kids—no matter their age, race, or socioeconomic background. The bottom line is that it is our responsibility to teach all students.” The program allowed participants to “see theory actually in practice” and united “people with a common cause [that] brings about successful results.”

Rather than simply reading about and discussing social justice issues, cohort members worked in different grade-level settings where they were able to observe and interact with principals as they handled equity issues. The inquiry projects explored authentic student learning concerns and required participants to review literature, collect and analyze data from multiple sources, and report study findings related to assuring equitable learning opportunities for all. The fact that schools used the findings to plan action for school improvement was an added benefit.

Providing Adequate Learning Opportunities

The PEP curriculum is based upon school improvement and leadership for change, which requires exploration of policy assumptions and issues and discussion about accountability. Significant differences between student testing based on state guidelines in KERA and federal requirements in NCLB often resulted in lively debates during cohort meetings. While not a concept specifically included in the curriculum, availability of adequate resources often emerged as a topic because both practicing and aspiring principals realized that their performance as school leaders and classroom teachers was influenced by availability of resources. The following discussion is based upon participants’ responses to two questions about adequate funding posed on a closing questionnaire.

The first prompt was: “Are adequate resources available to support student achievement? Please explain your answer.” A surprising result was that well over half the respondents indicated that adequate

resources were available for regular programs; those responding “yes” tended to be working in administrative positions. Despite answering in the affirmative, several principals raised frustrations about not having sufficient funds to provide experiential learning, which raised questions about the respondents’ understanding of adequacy.

Not surprising were the predominately “yes” responses to the second prompt: “If your school received more funding, would your students achieve at a higher level? Please explain your answer.” According to the varied comments, increased funding would be used for “improving instruction” by hiring “more instructional assistants to work individually with students to keep them from being ‘left behind,’” and to “reduce class size” to help “close gaps” in learning achievement. Respondents also asserted that “more funding would allow students to experience more off-campus educational activities, more hands-on learning, more first-hand experiences” and allow schools “to purchase additional resources” and “provide more authentic professional development experiences” for staff. With additional funds, an assistant superintendent would hire “music teachers [to] spend extra time with primary students” and “more primary teachers [to] focus on reading and math skills.”

While the district leaders have worked diligently over the past five years to acquire additional funding through grants and other resources to enhance instructional programs and professional development, the financial realities in eastern Kentucky simply cannot be ignored. With widespread welfare dependency and social challenges created by unemployment and poverty, Pike County in many ways faces issues similar to those in inner cities. However, a significant difference between impoverished inner city schools and those in eastern Kentucky is that a district like Pike County must solve its problems through internal efforts because the Appalachian Mountains isolate it from metropolitan areas where external support services might be more readily available. The district-initiated effort to improve school leadership is not changing the problems, but rather, changing perceptions about the problems for those charged with finding solutions. Based upon in-progress assessments by stakeholder groups and recent student performances on state accountability testing, this advanced leadership preparation program is a success.

Ensuring Equitable Opportunities for Learning: Lessons Learned

Action by the United States Supreme Court and high courts in many states has established that all children are to be afforded equal opportunities to learn in public schools. Toward this end, the Kentucky General Assembly enacted KERA and established a formula that created greater equity with regard to the funding available to educate all students in public school across the Commonwealth. However, neither legislative nor judicial action can change the demographic and social conditions inherent in specific regions. Districts that serve communities where poverty and unemployment are pervasive must find their own unique solutions to insure that all students learn at appropriately high levels.

PEP is an example of a university-district partnership created to train school leaders in instructional leadership, action research, and collaborative problem solving in order to successfully impact student achievement. The program is structured upon best practices related to principal preparation and implemented through efforts by a team of dedicated educators. It provides a unique opportunity for continuing leadership development for veteran, novice, and prospective

principals in a rural high-need school district. Participants work together in risk-safe learning environments of closed cohorts, regularly apply their new learnings in authentic school settings, and then reflect upon their experiences when they come back together during biweekly workshops. Mentors—both in the field and in the classroom—help them unravel the complexities of the contemporary principalship and guide them in exploring ways to practice instructional leadership.

To be truly successful, systemic education reform must change the values, beliefs, and behaviors of education professionals.³⁴ With its emphasis on a vision of success for all students, best practices in school leadership, and comprehensive action research, PEP challenges participants to assess critically their dispositions and practices and then modify them in order to maximize student achievement. The program curriculum creates links across leadership practices and accountability expectations that are at the heart of KERA and NCLB. Through implementation of PEP, a foundation for a changed culture throughout PCPS is being built. Its sustained success will be measured by the achievement of the students over subsequent years. Future research will explore program influence on measures of student performance, the outputs of the educational system, and the

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¹⁴ *Ibid.*

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