

# The Principals' Leadership Network

## Focusing on the Image of the Principal

Cheryl Riggins Newby and Hal Hayden

*"At no time in the history of our nation's education has the public's perception of schools been so critically important. School leaders catch it from all sides, contending with the sometimes competing interests of teachers, parents, central-office administrators, school boards, and community members. By and large, what parents and the broader community believe to be true about how well principals do their jobs is strongly influenced by the media—a media that is not always in tune with the positive things that happen every day in good schools. The most effective principals are able to get the right message out to the public and to engage the public in the life of the school in such meaningful ways that reality and perception become one and the same."*

Vincent L. Ferrandino, Ed.D.

Executive Director, National Association of Elementary School Principals

A recent study by The National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP), *Principals in the Public: Engaging Community Support* (2000) found that communication, marketing, public affairs and public relations and engagement activities are now given more time and importance than ever before. According to the study, public support builds great schools. With a focus on communicating the principal's complex role to the community, The National Association of Elementary School Principals, in conjunction with The Education Alliance at Brown University engaged principals from the Buffalo (NY) School District and Regional District #17 in Connecticut, in the development of an agenda for enhancing the public's image of schools and of principals as effective leaders. This brief details those action strategies designed to impact public perceptions regarding the role of principals and their schools.

The project in urban Buffalo parallels that of the rural/suburban Killingworth-Regional School District 17. A summary of the strategies best suited for improving the image of schools and principals within diverse settings is provided.

## THE IMAGE OF PRINCIPALS

Despite the complex, and often demanding nature of the principalship, there exists an undying commitment on the part of principals to stay the course in making a difference in the lives of children. Surveys of the perceptions of principals regarding the impact of public image on their roles conducted by the Alliance and NAESP staff revealed that principals generally acknowledge that their image varies with student test scores and the public's perception of what school is all about. According to information garnered during focus interviews, principals perceive that "The press can be the principal's worst enemy."

A number of principals appeared disheartened by some of the publicity and publication of test scores that compare schools that are not similarly situated. Lee (2000) notes that principals now must heed the cries growing even louder-for standards and accountability. The standards movement calls for schools to align their curricula with district, state, and in some cases national frameworks. He adds, "When test scores come back, newspapers trumpet stories on Page One about which

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schools are meeting standards and which ones are falling short." Principals expressed exasperation over the fact that the media generally chose to cover negative events,

while virtually ignoring those positive things that should make the news about schools.

Additionally, principals expressed concern that negative publicity is shaping the image of the principal and said that they want the general public to know they are working hard under "extreme" conditions to help students. Glanz (1997) noted that images and perceptions of principals, both personal and those

resulting from public opinion, are largely influenced by culturally shared models. He suggested that three distinct images of principals, as depicted on television and in film, have contributed to unfavorable public views. In both media modes, principals are, more often than not, depicted as the authoritarian principal, the principal-as-bureaucrat, or the principal-as-numbskull. Such images must be countered, as principals actively communicate to the school community that the autocrat, bureaucrat, and numbskull depictions are not real-world descriptors.

Sergiovanni (2003) contends that much of the difficulty faced by principals, superintendents, and teachers is the result of a loss of community in schools, and in society in general. "Community building," he notes, "must be the heart of any school improvement effort. Improving the image of schools is a major component of the school improvement effort".

Principals agree that public image can be shaped and that programs are in place to do this in their districts. Others report that image begins with the attitudes of the principals themselves. In a study of the perceptions of principals regarding their role, Lyons (1999) indicated that new reform mandates during the 1980's left principals feeling more accountable and less empowered. An awareness that "top-down" reform did not produce the expected levels of school improvement led to a more "bottom-up" approach that supported a need for principals to focus on instructional leadership, shared decision making, and participatory management.

A recent survey analysis of public opinion, conducted by Public Agenda (2003), found that the quality of local schools, the quality of local leadership, local politics, local funding, and local press coverage all effect people's news. As such, the results of such studies create a useful guide for leadership in looking at the role public opinion plays in shaping the image of the principal, and especially the image of specific schools.

Further results of the NAESP study (2002) revealed that there was agreement that image and knowledge of principals' daily work were closely linked. Principals indicated frequently that when the public "saw" what they were doing and the conditions under which they work, there was more appreciation for their role. There was "hope" that someone would create and develop a program that could be used by "even small systems" to enhance the public image of principals.

## THE PROCESS

As principals and school based teams came together to develop a plan to elicit positive images, a recorded process guided the discussion of strategies, such as the following:

1. Engaging site leaders and gaining support to investigate and implement processes for the improvement of school/principal image.
2. Identification of those who were interested in change and capable of contributing to positive change.
3. Recruiting representative samples of individuals from constituent groups to ensure equal understanding and participation.
4. Conducting initial and on-going meetings to frame the questions, identify issues, secure equal understanding, and develop processes and procedures for making positive changes.
5. Surveying the situation, including appropriate surveys/focus groups and or semi-structured interviews with staff, students, parents, and community members.
6. Identifying reasons for the poor image. Interviews with principals led to identifying the following general reasons for poor public image:
  - Different communities have different perceptions about their schools, principals, and/or programs and there is no system in place

to quantify, account for and address these differences.

- The public doesn't trust the school staff and/or the principal even when they "know the school."
  - There has been a pervasive poor image of the school an/or principal that has not been addressed.
  - The public does not know the school.
  - The school staff and/ or the principal have little knowledge about the community groups they serve.
  - The school/principal has accepted the precept that there is a "we/they" dichotomy and public has bought into the same concept.
  - Negative reports from the press, parents, students and/or community members have contributed to the development of a poor image.
7. Using staff, parents, students, and community to identify a specific list of issues that are negatively impacting the school's image.
  8. Using focus groups, surveys, reviews of outside publications, reviews of internal publications as resources.
  9. Constructing a plan to address the image issue:
    - Select one or two issues to address
    - Determine the internal staff with an interest in the issue(s)
    - Determine those external individual(s) that may have an interest in the issue(s)
    - Create a small "Image Building Team" to work on enhancing the image
    - Advise the "Image Building Team" to do the following:
      - Select a team leader
      - Select a recorder for the meetings
      - Develop an agenda for all meetings
      - Keep minutes of all meetings and activities
      - Keep all meetings short—no more than 90 minutes
      - Establish a vision statement and make it public

- Establish objectives that, when met, would move the team towards reaching the vision.
- Develop a strategy or strategies to reach each objective.
- Identify the resources (e.g. time, money) necessary to implement the strategies.
- Identify specifically the people who will be involved in the activity—both internally and externally.
- Establish reasonable timelines. (Note: Many projects fail because timelines are too short or too long.)
- Have the recorder track progress on a regular basis.
- Report the results to staff, parents, and community.

- Introductions
- A review of the research
- Directed discussion
- Setting the stage
- Identification of the issues
- Strategizing for change
- Next steps

Principals in Buffalo are faced with impending budget cuts, thereby creating a lack of resources needed to accomplish the goals set before them. The number of Schools Under Registration Review (SURR) seems to grow, as student achievement, while steady, is slow in reaching acceptable performance levels. The district has a disproportionate number of special education students, and there is the perception of financial mismanagement within the schools. In addition, many parents feel that the schools in Buffalo are unsafe, as some areas of the city have been labeled undesirable. Like many urban districts across the county, a high transience level and the number of children in the juvenile justice system also contribute to the poor image often associated with Buffalo.

The Buffalo Public School District appears to undervalue professional development, in that very little is spent to improve the skills and knowledge of district teachers and staff and attendance is voluntary at many of the professional development opportunities that are available. Clearly the lack of appropriate training will impact negatively on the performance of children. It appears that teachers are not held to the same level of accountability as administrators.

Principals sensed a lack of central office support and often felt restricted in the level of autonomy and authority afforded to them. Additionally, with the little input in the development of agendas for principal's meetings, there appeared to be little chance for open dialogue or peer interaction. Principals indicated a need for greater access to accurate data, if they are expected to

## THE BUFFALO DIALOGUE

The Buffalo Public Schools stand at a crossroads and are facing a critical choice. It is essential that steps be taken to substantially improve student achievement. Of equal importance is the need for the school system to play a central role in the city's economic revitalization. The greatest issue is the need to increase public confidence in its schools. While parents and community members still generally support public schools, this support is tenuous. Principals recognize a need to enhance the image of the principals in the district, citing that without improvement in the public school system, and especially in the achievement of the children in the district, public confidence is likely to dissipate.

Peter McNally, a PLN Advisory Board member, and Anthony Palano, a principal in Buffalo, served as co-facilitators in convening a representative group of principals from Buffalo. NAESP Associate Executive Director Cheryl Riggins Newby and Hal Hayden, a specialist at the LAB, joined the group in directing the process. Participants from the Buffalo school district included principals Gilbert Hargrave, Tom Vitale and Francis Wilson. Items for discussion in the initial session included:

achieve improvement in student performance. Overall, principals in Buffalo agreed that in order to alleviate some of the challenges of their jobs, the public perception of principals must change.

Members of the group decided to begin work on a plan that would result in positive interactions and relationships with the press—a “courting-the-newspaper” campaign. Additionally, they would identify resources that would be useful in developing a workable, affordable initiative. Subsequent sessions covered a wide range of topics designed to “get the message out.” The level of commitment of the group greatly contributed to the development of an action plan that would not only provide peer support but also showcase the positives in the principalships of Buffalo.

### THE KILLINGWORTH CONVERSATION

The Killingworth Regional School District Number 17 is located only a few miles from Long Island Sound on Connecticut’s south shore. It has nearly 600 students and scores that are slightly above the average for students in the state. Dr. Maureen Fitzpatrick has been principal of the elementary school, a K-5 “suburban/rural” school, for 10 years. She indicated that getting people to recognize when strategies are not working is the starting point of their search for what will work. She notes “This is especially true in schools where traditional patterns of practice all too often drive the strategies employed in efforts to help students learn to use their minds. Getting anyone to take an objective, emotion-free look at what they are doing and to abandon what doesn’t work is an important job of a leader. Because, of course, without abandoning what isn’t working, there will be no room for what will work.”

#### *Process for Determining Need*

The Killingworth team used a collaborative investigation process to determine issues that might be of concern for administrators, teachers, students, and the population,

in general. The process involved a relatively large representative group of involved community members. The team included principals, a union representative, teachers, community members, parents, the superintendent, and the chairman of the board of education. As the result of four intensive meetings, the team made the following identification of possible issues:

- Superintendent’s image
- Rate at which students are leaving the district
- Rate at which teachers are leaving the district
- Communications (generically)
- Projection of a negative image by staff
- The word district and deleting the words high school from items A and B. [What does this mean? It will not make sense to a reader outside of this district. Explain more clearly or take it out]
- Possible groups that may have power issues.

LAB specialist Hal Hayden introduced a process for helping the group select important issues. Each team member was asked to select, in order of preference, those issues he/she felt should be the concern of this team. Each selection was then given a weight as follows: a first choice was weighted 3; a second choice was weighted 2, and a third choice was weighted 1.

R E S U L T S :		
Item	Points	Issue
U	7	Communication (generic)
C	6	People not wanting to hear the message sent
M	6	General issue of morale
B	5	No formal assessment of the image of the district
V	5	Projection of a negative image (by staff, et al.)
K	4	Power issues between/among groups
R	3	Image of the superintendent
P	3	Assessment of the attitude of the students
H	2	Assessment of the attitude of the parents
O	1	Having students involved (at this table or other)
Q	1	Assessment of teachers’ beliefs

After discussion, the team agreed that item U (Communications - generic) and item C (People not wanting to hear the message) were very closely aligned and thus “chunked” them under one category termed “Communications.” The team acknowledged that this term was both wide and deep and the team would have to look at many facets of communications before they could target interventions.

The team also suggested that the overarching goal of this initiative would be to create an infrastructure that would enhance communications and relations between the school district and the community. Hal Hayden suggested that the LAB at Brown University develop a series of statements that might be used as items in surveys of staff, parents, community members, and students.

The team indicated that they felt the timing of the surveys was critical, that the survey items had to reflect the issues of concern, and that the team should examine and approve them before distributing the instrument. The team agreed to devote at least a part of the next meeting to review and approval of the initial list of items for inclusion in the surveys.

The next step for the Killingworth district team was to design a series of survey instruments that, when distributed, would provide information about the extent of the concerns for each group: the staff, students, parents, and the community. The team discussed at length the content of the survey, its length, and its wording. All agreed that the surveys for each group would contain similar concepts so that comparisons between and within groups could be made.

Samples of two student survey items and the format for the survey itself are presented below.

This school is safe, secure, and drug free

Strongly Disagree	Strongly Agree
1      2      3      4      5	

There is good discipline here with clear expectations for my conduct

Strongly Disagree	Strongly Agree
1      2      3      4      5	

Samples of two staff survey items and the format are presented below.

I feel valued as part of the school’s community

Strongly Disagree	Strongly Agree
1      2      3      4      5	

I am treated with respect at this school

Strongly Disagree	Strongly Agree
1      2      3      4      5	

Samples of two parent survey items and the format are presented below.

I receive phone calls or other communications early when problems occur

Strongly Disagree	Strongly Agree
1      2      3      4      5	

Parent needs are assessed annually

Strongly Disagree	Strongly Agree
1      2      3      4      5	

It was the contention of the Killingworth group that their team would continue to convene interdisciplinary team meetings to include members of the community in an effort to keep the lines of communication open. After some discussion, the team determined that, when authorized to do so by the new administration, they would conduct the surveys, analyze the results, and make recommendations designed to improve school-community relationships.

An interesting element of the study was the team's concern that the entire community be made aware of "what was going on in this study" in order to reduce the speculation and community anxiety that might result from a series of surveys being sent to the population without prior notification. Further discussion led the team to the decision that it was time to issue a press release to explain to the community the make-up and goals of the team. The team suggested that the article include the following points:

- A description of the team members (not names)
- A statement about the focus (communications)
- Partnership with NAESP and the LAB at Brown University
- Working with different constituencies
- A study of important related issues - image/relationships
- Data gathering from the district and community
- The fact that there is no cost to the district for this initiative
- The fact that findings from the initiative would be made public

It was the contention of the team members that they continue to convene interdisciplinary team meetings to include members of the community in an effort to keep the lines of communication open. Next steps would then be to look at the process as described previously and begin to develop a plan to address those issues determined by the survey results to be of greatest significance.

### **THE BUFFALO PRINCIPALS ACTION PLAN**

Principals in the Buffalo group proposed the following strategies for focusing on a positive image of the principal:

1. Develop a Principals' Network in Buffalo to enhance internal communication and professional development

2. Develop a Business and Community Partners Initiative
  - Identify topics for professional development
  - Identify speakers and consultants
3. Develop a Media Matters Plan
  - Include a mentoring component
4. Utilize public access television
  - Determine contact on the editorial board of The Buffalo News
  - Develop a positive press opportunity for principals
  - Select principals for positive press profiles
5. Utilize the Leadership Buffalo Effort - The Business Partners Community
6. Explore the Greater Buffalo Leadership Center for funding through grants
7. Engage greater parent involvement
  - Back-to-school events
  - The First Week Campaign
  - Monthly parent activities

The principals agreed that once the initial plan is completed, the first step toward implementing it would be to formalize the principals' network, thereby increasing the voice of the principal in Buffalo. Members of the planning group have acquired the approval of the superintendent in the district and are ready to move to the next level of organizational change.

### **NEXT STEPS**

Both groups acknowledged that the most direct way to engage support from the community and the public in

general was to develop an overall plan, based on agreed-upon goals, which were developed from a determination of issues most in need of addressing. Additionally, all agreed that one of the best ways to begin to change the image of principal was to develop a positive relationship with the media. NAESP (2000) makes the following recommendations to principals as they move toward enlisting greater community support in reshaping the image of the principal:

- Don't try to do too many things at once.
- You are the best judge of your needs, your resources, and your community.
- If you're the only one who knows something, it's a secret.
- Knowing where you stand is not the same as standing out.
- Before you can sell the customers, you have to sell the sales force.
- If you want to be remembered, put it in writing.
- Get to know the reporters in your community.
- Building a better school is a team effort. If you're the only one on the field, don't expect to win.
- Not every teacher is a parent, but every parent is a teacher.
- If you don't know where you are, how can you know where you're going?
- Use brainstorming with groups to determine better ways to improve your school.
- Narrow the list to three or four public engagement activities that may be effective for your school in the next two years. Develop a lead group to do this.
- Develop interpersonal relationships. "People beat paper just about every time."

## IN CONCLUSION

Although the teams at these two sites still have much work to do, they have already accomplished a great deal. They have formed groups, identified specific issues/problems associated with image, and made plans

for further action. We anticipate that once specific implementation takes place, it will be based firmly on open discussion, intelligent design, and positive commitment. All participants have recognized the absolute need to ensure that the schools, staffs, parents, and communities have processes in place that will create, encourage, and support students' capacity to reach their highest academic and social goals.

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Cheryl Riggins Newby, Ed.D. is Associate Executive Director for the Leadership Academy and Urban Alliances at the National Association of Elementary School Principals. Dr. Riggins Newby has recently launched Urban Connections, an NAESP resource that serves as the foundation for a network for Urban Principals. She assumes lead responsibility for the development and implementation of regional Principals' Leadership Networks in collaboration with the Education Alliance at Brown University. A former principal, she earned her doctorate from the George Washington University.

Harold A. (Hal) Hayden, Ph.D. is a LAB Liaison with Brown University's Regional Educational Laboratory. His roles include facilitating the Principals' Leadership Network, designing and implementing educational research protocols and working with teams of colleagues to enhance educational delivery systems. Hal was instrumental in designing and implementing special educational evaluation systems for the states of Maryland and Delaware. A former principal, Hal earned his Ph.D. in Curriculum and Instruction with an emphasis in Organizational Development from the University of Maryland.

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## **THE PRINCIPALS' LEADERSHIP NETWORK**

### ***Addressing the leadership challenges faced by principals***

The Principals' Leadership Network (PLN) is a regional program of The Education Alliance at Brown University in partnership with the National Association of Elementary School Principals. Members are drawn from New England, New York, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands. The strength of the network allows K-12 principals to explore solutions to the leadership challenges they face during this time of educational change, and bring their voices to the reform table. The PLN is an organization by, for, and of principals. Its advisory council members are drawn from K-12 principals in our region.

### ***The PLN's beginnings***

In July 2000, the United States Department of Education sponsored a Principals' Leadership Summit in Washington, D.C., to inform the Department's understanding of the role of today's principal. The Summit shaped the Department's planning and research agenda, and charged the participants with addressing the complex difficulties in leading the nation's schools.

In October 2000, the partnership of the Northeast and Islands Regional Educational Laboratory at Brown University (LAB) and the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) hosted its first regional summit to focus on the emerging role of the principal. This regional group has grown into the current Principals' Leadership Network.

### ***Networking around specific issues***

PLN principals are working together to investigate three major aspects of becoming an instructional leader, which are:

- How do you become an instructional leader?
- What constitutes an effective and successful mentoring program for sitting and aspiring principals?
- How can we communicate the complexity of the principalship to the community?

Working together, the partnership is collecting data, developing action research projects in the field, and disseminating results around issues of regional and national significance.

Each year, the PLN conducts a summit of principals in the region to discuss progress on these issues and to promote networking among outstanding principals in the region.

### ***Additional partners***

Critical to the success of the PLN are the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP), the American Federation of School Administrators (AFSA), and the state principals' associations across our region.



## **Northeast and Islands Regional Educational Laboratory**

A program of The Education Alliance at Brown University

The LAB, a program of The Education Alliance at Brown University, is one of ten educational laboratories funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Educational Sciences. Our goals are to improve teaching and learning, advance school improvement, build capacity for reform, and develop strategic alliances with key members of the region's education and policymaking community.

The LAB develops educational products and services for school administrators, policymakers, teachers, and parents in New England, New York, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands. Central to our efforts is a commitment to equity and excellence.

Information about LAB programs and services is available by contacting:

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## **National Association of Elementary School Principals**

Serving all elementary and middle level school principals

The 28,500 members of the National Association of Elementary School Principals provide administrative and instructional leadership for public and private elementary and middle schools throughout the United States, Canada, and overseas. Founded in 1921, NAESP is today a vigorously independent professional association with its own headquarters in Alexandria, Virginia, just across the Potomac River from the nation's capital. From this special vantage point, NAESP conveys the unique perspective of the elementary and middle school principal to the highest policy councils of our national government. Through national and regional meetings, award-winning publications, and joint efforts with its 50 state affiliates, NAESP is a strong advocate both for its members and for the 33 million American children enrolled in preschool, kindergarten, and grades 1 through 8.

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