# Creating a New Approach to Principal Leadership

**Robert C. Hughes**

## The National Institute of School Leadership has borrowed from the leadership practices of other professions to build an innovative program for principals.

*"This is the first time in twenty-seven years as a public school teacher and administrator that I have felt like a true professional."*

When a principal in one of the National Institute for School Leadership (NISL) districts said this to his colleagues several months ago, we knew that the two years spent in developing and 18 months in piloting the NISL program were more than worth the time

**IN BRIEF**

The author describes a principal training program resulting from a study that found disconnects between education leadership programs and what principals need to know and be able to do to guide improved instruction. The National Institute for School Leadership program focuses on practicing principals but also has applications for aspiring principals and other school leaders.

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and talents we had expended.

### Learning About Leadership

NISL, an innovative new program for training school principals to be highly effective instructional leaders, is the product of a study launched in the late 1990s by the National Center on Education and the Economy (NCEE). The study examined the role of school leadership in improving school performance, which was lagging despite a decade of comprehensive school reform and the introduction of accountability systems in many states. At the heart of the study was an important question: What could the world of education learn about leadership from other professions like medicine, law, the military, and business?

The answer, the study found, is a lot. The professions of law, medicine, and engineering, along with the worlds of business and the military, focused on excellence in professional practices and strategic leadership to a much higher degree and much more systematically than did education. For example, in law and medicine it is expected that best practices will be identified, studied, and disseminated to those in the professional community, who then apply them to improve results. Because their common experience is that those who fall behind stay behind, these and other professions require rigorous advanced training, periodic recertifications, refresher courses, and extended training over a career. These professions do not assume their members will always know what they need to know.

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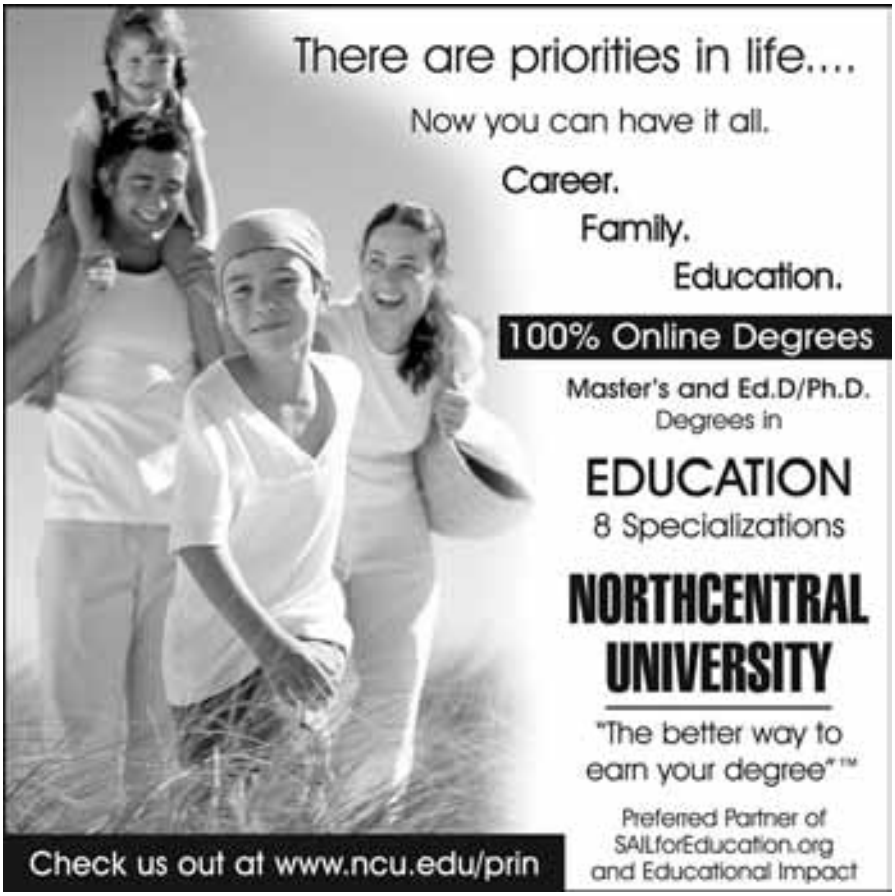



### Why Programs Fail

The study also revealed that connections between strategic ends and operational excellence are much looser in education than in other professions. There are so many programs, reforms, instructional approaches, and mandates in education—each with its own justification—that the means easily overcome the end. The NISL research found many entrenched projects and

programs whose strategic purpose was often nowhere to be found.

Similarly, many of the college and university education leadership programs examined for the study were not tightly connected to the craft of teaching and learning. Too often, such programs offered a series of discrete courses that were not tied to improved instruction. And most graduate programs did not focus on the deep leadership knowledge and kinds of skills (*e.g.,* data-driven analyses, continuous improvement strategies, and distributed leadership accountability) that other professions have prioritized over the last decade.

Finally, the study found that many principals did not feel prepared to lead their schools to higher student achievement. In fact, background interviews, focus groups, and our own informal surveys showed that principals were spending only 15 to 30 percent of their time on improving instruction in their schools. The rest of their time was focused on such things as schedules, buses, food services, facilities, sports programs, and matters related to discipline and safety in their schools.

## What Principals Need to Do

These findings, discussed at length in *The Principal Challenge* (Tucker & Codding 2002), together with research conducted into what school principals needed to know about improved instruction, guided our development of NISL. The work was supported in part by grants from the Broad Foundation, the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the NewSchools Venture Fund, and the Stupski Foundation.

The program encourages participating principals to think and act strategically about vision and results. It trains them to:

- Formulate a clear vision that inspires others;
- Think strategically;
- Lead the implementation of fully aligned, standards-based instructional systems;
- Build effective math, reading, and writing programs;
- Design and implement professional development programs;
- Manage for results that produce steady improvements in student achievement;
- Coach faculty teams to get the job done; and
- Foster ethical and moral behavior in a just, fair, and caring culture.

NISL is a train-the-trainer model, in which facilitators train principals to head leadership teams. Those teams in turn train cohorts of school leaders in the skills needed to meet the requirements of increased accountability. The rigorous leadership team training requires a serious commitment of about 33 days over a period ranging from 18 months to two years. The program focuses on changing entire teaching and learning cultures


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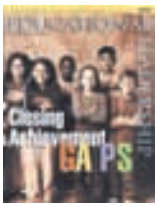

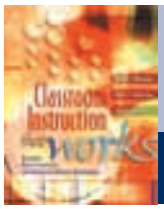

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within schools through high expectations for all, a commitment to improve instruction, and a dedication to a single strategic goal—high student achievement for all.

### Designing a Hybrid Program

In designing training units to show principals how to strengthen their roles as strategic thinkers, creators of ethical culture, instructional leaders, and drivers for results, NISL borrowed from adult learning approaches used in exemplary leadership programs worldwide. In doing so, we created a hybrid program with computer-based training accounting for about 15 percent of the experience, face-to-face instruction about 70 percent, and personal reading and preparation the remaining 15 percent.

NISL's 40 hours of interactive training include analyses of nearly a score of authentic case studies, a large number of scenarios for group activities, extensive use of video interviews with the "best and the brightest" in the profession, and filmed instructional practice in preparation for open-ended and creative activities—such as simulations and action projects—that foster deeper understanding.

**"…many of the college and university education leadership programs… were not tightly connected to teaching and learning."**

From March 2003 through mid-January 2005, we successfully piloted the entire program with the Duval County Public Schools in Florida and the Santa Monica-Malibu Unified School District in California. Based on that experience, we have revised the units and the online experience to make NISL even more interactive and to give principals additional applications and tools to use in their schools.

NISL has recently entered discussions with one state to launch a large number of leadership teams and follow-on principals' programs, while offering parallel training to school teams in areas such as coaching and instructional leadership. We have also begun discussions with a university about the possibility of incorporating NISL into a doctoral program in which NISL participants would receive a substantial number of graduate credits toward a Ph.D.

The Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE), which recently received a grant to launch a five-year, randomized, longitudinal study of the effects of leadership training on improved administrative practices—and ultimately on increased student achievement—has selected NISL to be at the core of this study. The results may have wide-ranging influence on the quality and direction of leadership programs.

Michael Fullan captures the essence of the leadership approaches that are at the heart of the NISL program:

*Adaptive challenges such as sustainability, moral purpose for all, deep learning, fine-tuning intelligent accountability, productive lateral capacity building, and getting results never before attained can be tremendously enticing once you start to get good at doing them. People find meaning by connecting to others; and they find well-being by making progress on problems important to their peers and of benefit beyond themselves* (Fullan 2005).

Fullan closes his analysis by inviting his readers to "Go for it."

NISL is doing just that! ■

### References


Fullan, Michael. *Leadership and Sustainability: Systems Thinkers in Action.* Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Corwin Press, 2005.

Tucker, Mark S. and Codding, Judy B. (eds.) *The Principal Challenge: Leading and Managing Schools in an Era of Accountability.* New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2002.



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### WEB RESOURCES

The National Center on Education and the Economy Web site has a special section on the National Institute for School Leadership.
**www.ncee.org**

e-lead, a partnership of the Laboratory for Student Success at Temple University and the Institute for Educational Leadership, compares and contrasts the scope of more than 30 regional and national leadership programs.
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The Clearinghouse on Educational Policy and Management provides an informative section on administrator training.
**http://cepm.uoregon.edu/trends_issues/training/index.html**

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# Perspectives on the Principalship

Recently, students in a graduate school class of aspiring principals that I teach asked me to explain the evolution of knowledge and skills necessary to be a successful principal. The question made me realize that the answer is as complex as the demands of the job itself. It prompted me to reflect on my own learning and experiences as a principal. What I discovered was that there are no easy answers, but that success in the principalship involves examining the position from five key perspectives.

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***The Personal Perspective.*** Principals must strive to learn as much about themselves as they can in terms of their attitudes, dispositions, and communication style, all of which significantly affect their overall effectiveness. How we ask questions, explain matters, or hear others' comments is in large part a matter of personality and temperament. As we come to understand and appreciate how others' personal styles can work in harmony with our own, we find it easier to solve problems and make decisions.

***The Organizational Perspective.*** Principals must be well-versed in the knowledge of leadership theory, group dynamics, the change process, and conflict management and resolution if they are to function in an effective and cohesive way within the school organization.

***The Instructional Leadership Perspective.*** At the heart of school leadership is the role of the principal as instructional leader. More than ever, principals must be conversant about different learning theories, teaching methods, standards-based instruction, and performance-based assessment. However, perhaps the most significant aspect of the instructional leadership role is building a professional learning community in which teachers perceive the principal as trustworthy, competent, supportive, and serious about sharing leadership.

***The Community Perspective.*** Many institutions have changed to accommodate the socioeconomic, cultural, and ethnic diversity of modern-day society. Schools are part of that reality. Successful principals must embrace the changing fabric of their community and work in meaningful partnership with community members to mirror their values and beliefs. At the same time, they must raise the awareness of their faculties and staffs to diversify learning in ways that accommodate differences. Principals should strive to transform their campuses into community schools, in which school personnel and community members create a democratic partnership that values purposeful involvement, a sense of equality, inclusiveness, and a commitment to social justice for all.

***The Educational Statistics Perspective.*** In order to meet the requirements for student achievement and accountability imposed by the federal government's No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation, principals must change the way they think about teaching and learning. They must increasingly rely on the use of data to make sound instructional decisions.

Mandated testing programs have become a way of life in today's schools, and principals must be able to interpret test data and explain their meaning to staff, parents, and the community. They also must use the results to drive professional development, realign curriculum, and allocate appropriate resources for purposeful instruction.

The work of a principal can never be reduced to a list of perspectives. However, they can serve as pathways to a broader and deeper understanding of what successful principals can and must do to create schools that are joyful, caring, and successful.

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