

Computer Simulations Hone Leadership Skills

By Lynn Olson
Lowell, Mass.

An \$11 million executive-training course for principals, modeled after best practices used in the corporate, medical, engineering, and military worlds, is starting to gain traction among states.

Developed by the National Institute for School Leadership, or NISL, a for-profit company based in Washington, the program is now used widely in Massachusetts, Minnesota, Mississippi, and Pennsylvania, as well as in individual school districts in five other states.

Computerized simulations designed to help prepare principals who are instructional leaders lie at the heart of the 14-unit curriculum.

“War games, exercises, simulations are at the core of any culminating experience,” explained Robert C. Hughes, the president of NISL, “because it requires the application of knowledge to a new scenario.”

Mr. Hughes should know, having spent 26 years in the U.S. military, most recently as the dean of the National War College at Fort Lesley J. McNair in Washington, and then in the business world running an executive-leadership program.

NISL grew out of a 1999 study conducted by the National Center on Education and the Economy, a nonprofit policy, research, and technical-assistance organization in Washington, that looked at how education prepares leaders compared with such fields as law, business, engineering, and medicine. The study, underwritten by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, resulted in a book called *The Principal Challenge* that formed the basis for a 2½-year design effort to create a national program for school leadership that would draw on the lessons from other fields.

Since December 2000, NISL has spent some \$11 million developing, piloting, revising, and implementing the executive-training program—a small fortune in the world of school leadership training—with support from the Los Angeles-based Broad Foundation, the Mill Valley, Calif.-based Stupski Foundation, the San Francisco-based New Schools Venture Fund, and the NCEE.

“This program is as high a quality program as there is,” said David P. Driscoll, who was Massachusetts’ commissioner of education until his retirement this past August. “It was extremely well researched, with millions of dollars be-

hind it. And it really talks about a complete paradigm shift for leaders, from running a building to being an instructional leader.”

‘Right and Right’

Massachusetts first pilot-tested the program in its nine largest urban districts. By this December, it will have paid to train some 600 principals statewide through a model in which NISL trains regional and district leadership teams, which in turn train their own principals and other school leaders.

NISL maintains quality control through a core group of 35 national faculty members, who are all former principals or superintendents.

The curriculum includes such topics as the principal as strategic thinker, leadership for excellence in literacy and mathematics, the principal as team builder, and the principal as ethical leader. It’s designed to develop school leaders with a sharp focus on improving instruction and raising student achievement through a combination of case studies from business, education, and the military; face-to-face instruction; professional readings; video commentaries by leading experts; computer-assisted instruction; and “action research” projects.

But the highlight of the program, arguably, is the two simulations: “Johnson Elementary School,” which occurs midway through the 29-day training program, and “Greenwood Middle School,” at the end.

The first tells participants: Imagine that you have just been named the principal at Johnson Elementary, a K-5 school whose former principal retired this year after 25 years in the school system, 15 of them at Johnson. The school’s scores on state-mandated tests have been low and declining in the past four years. And the superintendent, on the job just more than a year, has told you that your evaluation will be based on increasing the percentage of students who meet the state standard in reading and mathematics by 10 percent this school year.

What do you do first to get you closest to that goal?

One day earlier this fall, a group of 30 principals and central-office administrators here in the 14,000-student Lowell, Mass., district work their way, for 90 minutes, through a series of forced options on their computer screens based on the Johnson case study. The detailed, 12-page simulation is designed

to help them think strategically about their role as instructional leaders.

As the participants answer a rapid-fire series of questions, designed to mirror the real-life situations in which they often find themselves, their answers are captured anonymously and tabulated in real time so that their instructors, who are also principals in the school district, can quickly identify questions on which the group is split and that will become the basis for a group discussion.

Each participant also receives immediate feedback on his or her responses, in the form of other things to think about, before proceeding to the next question.

“What it does is reveal what they’ve learned and how they think, and it exposes what other people think, since they’ve all done the same units,” said Marge Sable, a NISL faculty member and its state coordinator for Massachusetts. “It also reveals to the presenters exactly what they’ve processed and where they are as a group.”

Participants are supposed to read the case study before the simulation starts. But, as in real life, they may not have all the information they’d like. And, as in real life, they will be provided with additional data as the simulation unfolds.

Each question has three answers to choose from. The answers were contributed by a group of about 25 veteran principals and other school administrators from across the country based on

what they thought was reasonable. While there is a “preferred” answer, said Mr. Hughes, “often what we’re doing is creating situations where you have to choose between right and right.”

The hope is that, over time, participants will more likely pick the strategic answer that will get them furthest toward their goal. The Johnson Elementary School simulation is fairly linear—regardless of where the participants start, they eventually work their way through the entire scenario.

The Greenwood Middle School simulation is much more complex, with literally thousands of pathways for a participant to follow, some of which lead to dead ends. The Greenwood simulation also includes video clips from experts who discuss their own thinking about the case at the end of each section.

Thinking Strategically

The discussion among participants is probably what principals appreciate most, however.

In a question in the analysis and planning section of the Johnson simulation, participants are asked: “In order to start

developing a plan for the success of the school, what data are you going to analyze first?”

Roughly half the group chooses to look at 3rd and 5th grade scores over the past four years, while the other half chooses to look at the total school data profile and how it fluctuates from year to year.

Jason McCrevan, the principal of Moody Elementary School in Lowell, chose option one because raising scores in those grades was the superintendent’s priority for the year. Linda Lee, the principal of Shaughnessy Elementary School, also chose that option because it was a more targeted look at data and less likely to overwhelm teachers at the school who, according to the case study, have little experience with data-driven analysis.

But Paul Schlichtman, the coordinator of research, testing, and assessment for the district, chose to look at data for the school as a whole because the problems may not reside specifically in those grades.

“I fought with this a little bit,” sighed Timothy McGillicuddy, the principal at E.N. Rogers Middle School, who wanted to pursue both avenues.

Exercise in Leadership

In a simulation of running a fictitious school, principals and other administrators work their way through a series of questions to come up with the “preferred” answer.

SCHOOL LEADERSHIP SCENARIO:

How will you put together a professional-development system that results in raising student achievement?

- Develop a way to hold teachers accountable for implementing the professional development they have received.
- Look at teachers’ performance and focus professional development on areas in which teachers are weak.
- Look at student test-score data and focus professional development on areas in which students are weak.

SPECIAL CONSIDERATION:

Do all the teachers need the same professional development? What do you do with your very skilled teachers?

SOURCE: National Institute for School Leadership

In between the discussion, Ms. Sable coaches the two facilitators in the hallway about what they might have done to probe deeper during the discussion and to challenge some of the participants’ assumptions.

Alison Corner, the principal of Pawtucketville Memorial Elementary School here, said she particularly liked the Johnson simulation. “It’s really fascinating to think about your answer and how the group answered and why,” she said. “It really did work for me.”

But Matthew Stahl, a first-year principal at Washington Elementary School, said that, as a new principal, he also found the experience frustrating.

“For me, it was difficult to get into the Johnson school. Every question, Washington would pop into my head.” He wondered what steps he’d actually take back in his own building based on the simulation: “What are we going to do to move those 14 teachers [in the scenario] who do the same lesson plan every single year?”

Stephen Gross, a first-year principal at Katherine Stoklosa Middle School, where the training took place, said that for

him, the Johnson simulation resonated because of the constant press to make decisions in the heat of the moment and the need to step back and reflect on those decisions.

Karla Brooks Baehr, the superintendent of the Lowell district, plans to roll out the NISL training across all her schools, as well as the central administration, over several years, starting with a carefully assembled five-person leadership team that includes two elementary principals, two middle school principals, and the deputy superintendent for curriculum and instruction. Her goal, she said, is not only to improve the skills of school principals but also to transform the central office's relationship to the schools.

"It's been a very powerful professional-development experience for the team," said Ms. Baehr, who also took part in the simulation. "I think each one of them could point to things that they're doing differently today."

"It really forces you to think about how you approach decisionmaking," agreed Richard Rogers, the principal of Charlotte M. Murkland Elementary School, one of the original team members and a 19-year veteran who now trains other principals. "Helping you to think more strategically is a major emphasis."

State Support

Massachusetts and Pennsylvania probably have embraced NISL more than any other states so far. In addition to paying for the NISL training at the district level, the state of Massachusetts supports some 25 "principal coaches" statewide, and it is developing a facilitation guide for trainers. Lesley University, in Cambridge, Mass., also has agreed to provide 24 credits toward a doctoral degree for principals who have finished the NISL training.

"What we're trying to do is build support and sustainability," said Bobbie D'Alessandro, the administrator of school performance evaluation and leadership development for the state education department. She said some districts are also choosing to spend their own money to offer the training to both assistant and aspiring principals, although it was originally designed for principals in their first three to five years on the job.

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DAVID P. DRISCOLL

Former State Chief, Massachusetts

Pennsylvania lawmakers last summer enacted legislation, which requires new principals to complete an induction and development program, based on nine school leadership standards, in order to retain their certificates. The legislature provided money for the state to pay for such training, which is largely being delivered through NISL-prepared facilitators.

NISL charges \$15,000 per person to train a leadership team that it certifies to train other principals. Participants are provided with a kit of professional books, other readings, instructor guides, and other materials. They also have access to the online component of the NISL curriculum. Fees for the materials for the principals' program range from \$5,000 a person for the first 75 principals to \$2,000 each for 1,000 school leaders or more.

"The leadership training is probably one of the most powerful levers we can pull down," Pennsylvania Secretary of Education Gerald Zahorchak said in explaining why he supports the program. "We know that there's no good school, no great school, without a great leader."

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