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School leadership experts initiate training program

Consultants are in Pueblo this week to initiate the specialized training.

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CHIEFTAIN PHOTO/ JOHN JAQUES -- Dr. David Driscoll, former commissioner for education in Massachusetts, talks to Pueblo City Schools principals about effective leadership during a meeting Wednesday at Corwin Magnet School.

Another class of principals, administrators and teachers in Pueblo City Schools is beginning to receive specialized training aimed at raising test scores by teaching them to be better leaders.

Some of the top consultants from the National Institute for School Leadership are in Pueblo this week to get the program started.

In its second year, one group already has undergone training and some of those have gone on to become mentors and coaches, a key part of the program, according to John Fryer, an instructional coach with NISL.

Fryer is a retired Air Force major general who following a stint in private industry became superintendent of the Jacksonville, Fla., school system, an unusual choice since he didn't come up through the ranks of education.

Fryer said Wednesday that sustainability is a big part of the Pueblo City Schools five-year contract with NISL, funded by a U.S. Department of Education grant.

The institute's trainers will develop a corps of coaches in the district who will continue to instruct administrators after the grant runs out, he said.

The program will not be limited just to principals or teachers who show promise to move into the principal's office, said John Covington, superintendent of the Pueblo district.

Part of the grant will provide training for other people in the community who, like Fryer, might want to leave government or industry jobs to take on the running of a public school.

Covington said that the NISL coaches would be working not only with another group of trainees over the next year but also with last year's group, whom he said appeared to learn what was taught but had a "huge disconnect" when it came to applying it in their schools. This year those people are getting more training in how to make their new skills work.

"There is no magic wand," he said. "NISL isn't going to come in here and spread magic dust on our principals."

NISL is a nonprofit organization formed a decade ago with funding from the Carnegie Corporation and other foundations to take leadership training ideas from the military, business, medicine and other fields and apply them to education, where Fryer said there was no systematic method to train leaders.

Fryer said that the program analyzes how principals use their time and shows them how to spend more time improving instruction. Dealing with parents and staff will always be a political process but "sometimes you just have to be tough," he said.

That doesn't mean shutting people out but it will mean reaching out to educate parents, too, about what the schools need to do to improve achievement.

David Driscoll, former commissioner for education in Massachusetts, is another NISL coach in Pueblo this week. He became a believer in the program when he brought it into Massachusetts. Strapped for money, like all school systems, he said, he compared his job to playing roulette with the option of spreading his bets around. "I decided to put all my chips on one number and that was leadership," Driscoll said. "You really can't find an effective school that doesn't have an effective principal."

More than 1,000 principals were trained in his state and one of the results was that when all children were given the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study test, they scored second only to Singapore. Pueblo City Schools will be using the TIMSS test soon to determine how the district ranks internationally.

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