Q & A Dialogue

with
Troy Mooney, Chief Academic Officer
and
Herbert O'Neil, Chief Talent Officer

The ever-changing demands placed on school principals has necessitated the development of formal programs for improving the capacity of both existing school principals and those in the pipeline (i.e., assistant principals, vice-principals, and other aspiring school leaders). While there are several well known development programs such as LEAD at Denver Public Schools and Broward County Public Schools in Florida, other school districts and educational institutions in other locales throughout the country have programs that have began to emerge. In Dallas, Texas, Troy Mooney, Chief Academic Officer of Life Schools and Herbert O'Neil, Chief Talent Officer of Life Schools have developed a preparation guide and development program to meet the demanding needs of 21st century school leaders.

Both Troy Mooney and Herbert O'Neil have worked in education in numerous capacities for a number of years. Troy Mooney has served in education for 23 years. He has been a teacher, site administrator, and assistant superintendent in public education. Herbert O'Neil has been in education for 13 years and has served as a principal at the elementary, junior high, and high school levels and currently serves as a district administrator.

The following conversation with Troy Mooney and Herbert O'Neil chronicles the genesis of *Primer* and how it contributes to the development of school leaders and aspiring school leaders within their organization.

Q1: What support and development does your district offer school administrators to prepare for the principalship?

HO: We have created a two-tiered leadership preparation program that we have branded *Primer Lead*. The introductory level of the program is the *Life Leaders*

Academy (monthly meetings) and the second year program is called *Leadership Fellows* (quarterly meetings). The content for both programs is derived from our competency list displayed in Table 1. We have dedicated instructors who plan the *Life Leaders* and *Leadership Fellows* content lesson plan prior to each meeting. We also integrate developmental content from the *Primer* competencies from these programs in our assistant principal and principal meetings as well. The assistant principal and principal meetings contain a mix of operational and development content so that we continue to prepare our current and next generation of leaders.

The *Life Leaders* program meets monthly and includes developing presentation, collaboration, and leading meeting skills of participants. This program is designed not just to prepare participants for the principalship but rather to be leaders in their current jobs as well. Many of our *Life Leaders* participants have gone on to Assistant Principal and Principal roles, but others have shifted into curriculum or other central office positions.

The *Leadership Fellows* program includes coaching and mentoring for participants from current principals and other district leaders. The meetings are once a quarter and the attendees work on actual real-world projects (not simulations) for the organization. They plan and execute events, address problematic areas, and produce procedure documents. They role-play interviewing and other leadership activities. Our ongoing support beyond these two different cohort groups include the following:

- An annual kickoff meeting for all participants and existing district leadership.

- Videos, podcasts, and other documents to support participant development.

Table 1

Primer LEAD Competencies, Skills, and Insights Version 1.1

Leading & Managing Others	Aligning Vision & Goals	Communicating Effectively	Influencing & Empowering	Developing People	Creating a Sustainable Learning Culture
Defining Leadership	Clarifying Values	Essential Exchanges	Explaining Why	Building Capacity	Establishing, Monitoring and Supporting High Expectations
Transformational Leadership	Developing Shared Vision	Contending, Yielding, and Problem-Solving	Involving Others in Decisions that Impact Them	Recruiting	Accepting Responsibility for Each Student's Academic Success and Well Being
Servant Leadership	Goal, Objectives and Strategies	Triangular Conversations	Championing Collaboration	Valuing Diversity	Equity and Reducing Achievement Gaps
Ethical Leadership	Leading and Managing Change	Expectations Reality Gap	Influencers and Decision Makers	Interviewing	Creating and Sustaining Professional Learning Communities
Sources and Uses of Power	Continuous Improvement	Giving Feedback	Empowering and Motivating Others	Onboarding and Induction	Maximizing Instructional Time
Managing and Leading Projects and Systems	Disruptive/Sustaining Innovation	Engaging Stakeholders	Delegation	Mentoring	Designing, Monitoring and Evaluating C, A, & I
Managing Operations, Technology, and Resources	Concerns Based Adoption Model	Stakeholder Communication	Discovery Thinking/ Learning	Assessing Employee Capacity	Analyzing Standards
Leading Meetings	Diffusion of Innovation Adopter Categories	Corporate, Community, Family Partnerships	Piloting Projects and Programs	Performance Measurement and Appraisal	Pedagogical Leadership and Instructional Coaching
Perspective		Using Email	Hugs, Handshakes, and High Fives	Employee Work-Life Balance	Digital Leadership and Blended Learning
Flexibility		Using Social Media	Importance of Recognition and Celebration	Dismissing Employees	Competency Based Progression
Situational Awareness			RAVE	Commitment to Personal Growth and Soliciting Feedback	Common Formative and Summative Assessments
Solutions Orientation				Creating a Multi-Year Professional Development Vision	Analyzing Data, Data Chats and Using Data Systems
Financial Management					Differentiated Instruction
Listening					Prescriptive Intervention
Comprehensive Safe School Environment					Student Learning Profiles
Student Centered Political Advocacy					
Implementing Policy and Policy Compliance					
Political Awareness					

- A *Facebook* group and social media groups to continue ongoing leadership discussions and development.

- Coaching development training for the actual coaches who will be working with our Leadership Fellows participants. This has given us an avenue to develop and refine the leadership coaching skills of our existing principals and central office leadership.

Q2: How did the idea for *Primer* come about?

TM: The original idea for *Primer* came about when I was an Assistant Superintendent in Waller ISD in 2010 and was talking with our high school principal, Brian Merrell, about the fact that there should be a practical guide for new principals. I began writing the *Primer Entry Guide* as a passion project in 2012 and I completed it, with help from Herbert O'Neil, in April of 2016. During the same time as I was creating the entry guide we were developing our leadership preparation program and we ultimately decided to brand everything we were doing to support and develop leaders under the *Primer* brand.

The critical piece of the *Primer* program was our research and development of the competencies for the program. We reviewed existing standards at the state and national level, met with leaders of existing programs, reviewed national research and borrowed from our own experiences. These competencies are the framework for all of our books, articles, podcasts, *YouTube* videos and other *Primer* items.

Q3: What do you believe are the most important takeaways from *Primer* that a new principal could benefit from?

HO: The most important takeaway is to begin intentionally developing leaders at your district or at least your campus. A new principal should consider the *Primer Entry Guide for New Principals* as an affordable (.99 cents) and essential resource. The basic theme of the guide is about first building relationships before beginning any "tearing down of fences." There is much more useful information in the guide but I have found that many new principals fail when they begin with trying to implement their own ideas (even if they are good) without first making the necessary connections with their staff.

As far as the existing list of *Primer* competencies some of them mean more to me personally but they are almost all derived from existing National standards or research.

Q4: The role of the principal has greatly evolved over the last several decades. How do you think the role will continue to change and what development and support will be needed to meet those changes to the role of the principal?

TM: The role has changed but many districts still do not meet what I think are basic requirements for principal support including:

- Regular principal meetings.

- Supervisors only responsible for approximately 10 principals.

- Expectation that supervisors respond quickly to principal questions/inquiries/concerns.

- Inclusion of development items instead of only operational items at principal meetings.

While much of the principal experience is universal, each district has some specific behaviors that they require of principals. Have those been articulated? Has there been any thought and planning on how to prepare current and future principals for those district specific responsibilities and competencies? Principals need training on how to collaborate effectively. This begins with "involving people in decisions that impact them." Principals also need to train their own leadership teams on how to collaborate effectively. Additionally, principals need to strengthen their instructional leadership capabilities but their first priority is to ensure their campus is operationally functioning at a high level. If the principal is the most knowledgeable person about curriculum and instruction at their campus then they may have hired poorly.

Q5: What advice would you give a new superintendent who wanted to ensure those school administrators coming up through the ranks are prepared for the principalship?

TM & HO:

- Commit to developing leaders at all levels throughout the organization. Develop a leadership preparation program that is focusing on developing leaders rather than only just preparing principals. Good organizations need leaders all throughout the system and a campus full developed teacher leaders will be of great benefit to any principal. The district leadership preparation program cannot be an afterthought. Planning is required for the selection of participants, competencies, content, and measurement of outcomes of a leadership program.

- Leadership program participants need to be as-

signed into cohorts, have authentic job embedded experiences, complete meaningful work, and be exposed to mentoring and coaching throughout the process.

- Existing principals should be involved in the program both for content development and for mentoring/coaching and to ensure the program is relevant.

Conclusion

The preparation of school site administrators is paramount for school leaders to meet the rigorous demands of leading their school sites. Today's educational leaders have unprecedented challenges in ensuring teachers are delivering high-quality common core teaching to prepare students for the 21st century and beyond. School leaders such as Troy Mooney and Herbert O'Neil are building capacity in their school leaders through *Primer Lead*, a comprehensive leadership program centered on developing core competencies. As the principalship continues to evolve in complexity, programs such as *Primer Lead* may serve as an exemplary program to develop school leaders in these demanding and evolving times.

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If you would like to know more about *Primer* it can be purchased for *Kindle* at www.Amazon.com https://www.amazon.com/Primer-Entry-Plan-New-Principals-ebook/dp/B01EYY8XQK/ref=sr_1_fkmr0_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1480957767&sr=8-1-fkmr0&keywords=Principal+entry+guide+primer

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