

The Principal's Residency

By Burt Rosenberg, MCNC; and Principals Daphne Beasley (DB), Hollis F. Price ECHS, Memphis, TN; Michelle Brantley (MB), Middle College High School, Memphis TN; Greg Brown (GB), The Charles School, Columbus, OH; Eric Markinson (EM), Middle College High School, Dallas TX; and Michael Sinclair (MS), Brashier Middle College Charter High School, Greenville, SC

This was a journey that enlightened my perspective of school administration and leadership. As a result, I will take back and apply what I have experienced, and make all efforts to provide leadership that will create an environment and culture of learning and support that will not fail our children as they begin their journey to a much better tomorrow. (DB)

PRINCIPAL AS LEARNER



Professional development lies at the heart of the Middle College National Consortium (MCNC). For it is through our own on-going learning that we may better inspire and engage our staff and students. Our students are those who have been historically underserved and underrepresented among college graduates. They are poor or minority or English language learners or simply unchallenged and unmotivated, who, if ignored, slip through the cracks. Our teachers hold our students, even those who come to us under-prepared, to the academic and emotional demands of college. Our schools operate within the nexus of two disparate and historically separate cultures, high school and college. Navigating this cultural divide and engaging the faculty to do this work requires a principal who is willing to embrace a new vision of leadership.

The Consortium provides numerous opportunities for the growth and development of our entire community of students, principals, teachers, counselors, and college partners. MCNC fosters professional development in each of our schools, sponsors Summer Institutes, regional Technical Assistance conferences, Critical Friends Reviews, on-site and school-based coaching and an annual Students' Conference. In addition to these, the Consortium has specifically designed the annual Winter Leadership Institute and the Principal's Residency for our principals.

Richard Elmore, in his article, [Building a New Structure for School Leadership](#) discusses the principles that form the basis of Distributed Leadership. These principles are the driving force of our Principal's Residencies:

- The most important function of school leadership must be the improvement of instructional practice and performance. All other leadership skills are secondary.

- Improvement of instruction cannot take place without continuous learning. It is the job of leadership to create the climate and the structures that allow teachers to learn from each other and “to have their shared conceptions of practice subjected to the scrutiny of individuals” (Elmore, p. 20)
- Leaders should be able to model the learning and practices they expect from others.
- Leaders need to recognize that true learning is based on expertise, not formal roles. In our schools, everyone has something important to contribute.

THE RESIDENCY: WHAT?

The Residency experience, one piece of the Consortium’s Professional Development program, aims to positively transform our schools and the lives of the students we serve. The application is school based, practical, and tied directly to the needs of the individual principals. All sessions are led and debriefed by school-based practitioners – administrators, teachers, and counselors-- with an eye towards applying the practice to the visiting principals’ own schools. The visiting principal spends time in as many as three different schools each with a unique mission and each serving a different population of students.

The visiting principal has the opportunity to observe a school as it is. No school is perfect. We are all in the process of “becoming”. What we hope the visitor will take away, however, is to experience the strategies each school uses to take on these challenges. To see that a long established host school could also have its own struggles and challenges can be comforting. The intention is not for the visiting principal merely to copy a structure from a host school. Rather, we hope that the visiting principal applies what they see to the context of their own setting and develops structures that make sense for them. It is distinctive in that it provides visiting principals with images of what is possible. The Residency provides a block of time for self-reflection and examination. It deliberately provides the luxury of time, a block of a few days to give principals time for self-reflection, conversation with peers and exposure to new ideas.

Residency includes a variety of experiences. Participants observe various academic classes, an early college seminar, an inquiry based lesson, House/Advisory, and developmental group. They could serve as a member of a student’s graduation portfolio panel, participate in a staff meeting or a professional development workshop, and sit in on a teacher’s peer evaluation review panel. They can meet with a group of teachers to learn how they plan classroom activities, assess students or participate in school governance and meet with a group of students to ask them questions about the school. As the concept and the reality come together, participants may voice: “So, that’s what students can do in House” or “Oh, that’s how a classroom can be organized” or “I never thought of scheduling the school day like that.”

Finally, the visiting principal is asked to write a self-reflection. This allows the visiting principals to think more deeply about their experiences and to explore ways to apply what was learned during the Residency to their own schools. It models and promotes the importance of reflective writing as an essential part of instruction and professional development at the school level. It reinforces the notion that everyone, including those of us at the Consortium, needs to be open to a public process of self-improvement.

THE RESIDENCY AS AN EXTENSION OF THE DESIGN PRINCIPLES

The Residency experience grows out of and is embedded within the MCNC Design Principles. They

state our beliefs on how to create schools that best serve students. More than three decades of working with students and teachers have enabled us to develop and refine these principles. Data driven research has helped us test the validity of our assumptions. With over thirty schools in the consortium, these principles are now serving schools in every region of the country and in communities that span the rural, suburban, and urban spectrum. Transcending local contexts and cultures, these Design Principles include: the Power of the Site, Teaching and Learning, Student Assessment, Student Support, Democratic School Governance, and Professional Development.

In their self-reflections Principals commented on all elements of the Design Principles. Part one of this article focuses on three of those principles. In the next issue we will complete the remaining Principles, describe the evaluation of the program, and reveal some next steps for the Principal's Residency.

REFLECTIONS ON THE DESIGN PRINCIPLES

Teaching and Learning: Schools engage students in rigorous, in-depth academic work, using active intellectual inquiry and sustained writing and revision in all classes. Learning is meaningful, engaging, and celebrated.

At all three schools, two elements stood out the most. One was the blending of grade levels. The second was the blending of content areas such as the math and science and humanities. Due to the tight restrictions in my state, the flexibility apparent in NY may not be possible, but the concept is. I will be arranging the subject areas to mix sciences and humanities of similar grades. Planning periods will also be arranged to allow subject areas to plan together. (MS)

The New York articulations of excellent instruction for a particular type of student population, as well as the good supports necessary for these students to thrive, are exemplars, from which to take much good wisdom. In particular, the time in New York reinforces that depth of understanding ought to trump breadth of knowledge 99 times out of 100; and that the supports we offer students in order to be successful need to be systematic—structured, but easily redesigned as each student's needs change. (EM)

I observed a teacher provide a different approach to the study of vocabulary. He produced various sounds while students had their eyes closed and they were to write the sound they heard. This was great for listening and mentally visualizing words, and just the association between the two. (DB)



What the school is as a community of teachers and learners is evident in the work on display throughout the entire school. The aesthetic quality of the school is characterized by student work. The kids' art, writing, research, etc. (which were are tangible representations of their thinking) fill the school. I remember thinking that I could “see” the students' minds as I moved from classroom to classroom because there were carefully crafted protocols in place that allowed students to engage in true intellectual discourse and produce quality work. I think that pushing pedagogical structures to be

more inquiry-based is a need at our school; an example is training in strategies like Socratic circles that challenge students to converse with each other in ways that build their critical thinking skills. (MB)

Student Assessment: Schools design assessments that provide multiple opportunities for students to show what they know and can do; the assessments grow out of classroom activities; and provide on-going feedback to the school community, the teacher, the student, and the parent on a student's progress toward achieving academic proficiency.

The structures of *Student Assessment*—portfolio requirements, rubrics, and energies invested in waiving superfluous testing—certainly enhanced achievement. More than that, however, was the consistency among classrooms of assessment *talk* among students and teachers. Someone taught these students to want to know what they know. That interest seemed to lead to infinite variety of ways in which students could demonstrate their learning. Students are exceptionally present to their summative exhibition, their intermediate demonstration of knowledge and skill, and to filling their portfolios. Teacher guidance helps to keep these requirements in mind. (EM)

Oral Defense is a critical piece to the instructional program at this school. This is a culminating experience for students completing their high school requirements. This process involves students defending their learning before a panel comprised of faculty and administration. In the student's defense literacy and multi-communication skills were embedded throughout. She had to prepare with research papers, PowerPoint (technology), visuals, listening skills, grammatical skills. She had the support of staff (teachers) in the role of mentors who guided her throughout this preparation process up until the actual presentation. (DB)

Student Support: Small schools and small classes help create a learning community for students and teachers and provide for flexible and innovative structures to support students academically and emotionally. All students are well known by the adults because the school values and makes time to foster strong student-teacher relationships.

I learned a great deal at both Middle College High School and International High School on the area of student support. The **advisory** sessions were instructive to hear about and witness school counselors hosting/teaching thematic sessions. I like that way of approaching advisory. Although I would say we currently provide intensive student support, advisory has always been a conundrum. Making this time meaningful for students is our aim, of course, and so we look forward to addressing this subject with colleagues at the summer institute and next year in contact with sister/brother schools. (GB)

I observed **Seminar** in action while visiting Middle College. In this support session, students entered and immediately began working on their college work, using the computer in the lab, studying, or whatever they felt was imperative. House: The principal has a House group also. His particular students have probably more serious issues and he has chosen to interact with them to assure them that they can succeed and that there is definitely a supportive environment at this site. (DB)

Visiting **seminar** was very helpful to my understanding the importance of this time for students in the college classes. It gave them a chance to study with a Middle College teacher and to ask questions, update the teacher on work, and commiserate with other students. Seminar also can serve as a vehicle for high school staff and college faculty to interact and know better the dynamics of each setting, and the expectations of each, in order to help serve the students better.

Later, when reflecting on this with Director Cunningham, she stressed the importance of teachers being active participants in this process in terms of connecting with the college faculty member of each student's class, getting routine updates, and always being available for contact. (GB)

I participated in seminar, which is the student support piece in place for Early College students. The seminar leaders had established a blog where students discussed scenarios that related directly to issues they may face as high school students in college classes. There was a true productive buzz amid the room as students worked in small groups on college assignments, completed their blog activities, and worked with the seminar leader on college assignments. Since returning from my visit, this is one piece that I have shared with our academic support team, and we are currently reviewing our school's master schedule to see how we can organize this type of structure in the schedule. (MB)

The time set aside for groups of freshmen and sophomores to meet with the guidance counselors was impressive. These students were open and supportive of one another during the session I visited. In a school such as ours, building community is important. Our district is very large, and our students represent each area of the district. I cannot remember which counselor told me that the best part of guidance at MC was the ability to work with the students and not paper. (MS)

CONCLUSIONS

The sharp relief in which I see this life-changing work with and for students challenges and inspires me to hold up to the light my school, my leadership, and my thinking. Of course, this seriousness is sustained by grand humor and celebration. MCNC Director Cece Cunningham reminded us that good adult learning demands space, connections, and respect for the experience and investment that adults have brought to this learning opportunity. Coupled with the breezes, cool and warm, gentle and sharp, that come from student interactions, this most important work energizes and fulfills like no other. (EM)



I am honored and inspired by the cadre of schools that make up the consortium. We are all continuously moving forward in doing the dogged work that it takes to make high school right for students. (MB) So as a result of this journey, I will take back and apply what I have experienced, and make all efforts to provide leadership that will create an environment and culture of learning and support that will not fail our children as they begin their journey to a much better tomorrow. (DB)