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DEVELOPING PRINCIPALS AS INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERS:
A Critical Step in the Reform Process

Thank you for the opportunity to speak on a topic which I believe is central to the current changes occurring in our state and in our country to reform our educational systems: the necessity of developing our principals to be true instructional leaders. There is no question that nothing has or will have more of an impact on student learning and achievement than the quality and effectiveness of our teachers and school leaders.

A year ago, I retired after thirty five years as a teacher and school administrator. My path had been a little different. Despite the urging of my supervisors I had put off my own entry into administration until my own children were grown. I was well aware of the realities of the time commitment and challenges of administrative roles and wanted to be able to commit fully to those responsibilities. The decision proved to be a good one, because when I did become a school leader, I had the benefit of having had my feet planted firmly in the classroom for the many years that helped define my own philosophies and priorities as I became a dean, an assistant principal and a principal. In those roles, I continued to identify as a teacher above all, one whose primary role and focus was to support and help develop excellent teachers and highly effective practices. When I made the transition from teacher to building leader, I had lots to learn about things like budgeting, scheduling, floor waxing schedules and fire drills, but I knew classrooms, I knew teachers and I knew instruction. One of my superintendents liked to say that the role of principal had evolved from the role of 'principal teacher' in the one room school houses, and that suited me fine. Coaching and developing new teachers, leading the creation of Professional Learning Communities to support collaboration and promoting practices and initiatives such as support systems for struggling students and differentiated instruction to meet the needs of all learners became my priorities as a leader.

Over the past year, in my new role as a BOCES Network Trainer, I have had the opportunity to receive the most current training offered by NYSED and then bring that learning to schools in the form of professional development for teachers and administrators on the components of Race to the Top: APPR and teacher evaluation models, Common Core implementation, Data Driven Instruction and the development of Student Learning Objectives are all topics that I bring to teams of teachers and administrators in numerous schools across three counties in New York State. In addition, as a member of the Educator Leader Cadre of New York State, I have the opportunity to keep up with the emerging development of national assessments and curricular models which will have a tremendous impact in the years ahead. Whenever I go to schools and meet with principals I see and hear the frustration and just plain worry about not

being able to keep up with emerging new demands within already overwhelming schedules and calendars that often result in fourteen hour days and weekends consumed by paperwork.

The term "Instructional Leader" is nothing new. The expectation that principals be instructional leaders is nothing new either. However, it is fair to say that the term "instructional leader" like many buzz words in education, has been tossed around for a long time with varying levels of understanding, definition and support to bring the words to life and ensure that our school leaders, both those just starting out and those more seasoned, have what they need to truly become that instructional leader in more than name.

Now, we are living in a different time. The magnitude and speed with which change and reform is redefining our schools is unprecedented. The sea change that comes with accountability, new evaluation systems for teachers and principals, implementation of the Common Core Standards and a strong focus on data and assessment has given principals primary responsibility and a huge set of new expectations that, at its worst, and without support, can result in a crushing workload, demoralization and ultimate frustration at the inability to do it all. At its best, these changes and new expectations can be the opportunity to redefine the role, put the focus where it should have been all along, and prioritize the learning and authority that principals need to empower them as leaders capable of guiding the implementation of real change that impacts student learning and achievement.

Anyone who has been a principal knows that that lofty sounding role as instructional leader often goes by the wayside despite the best of intentions. Instead, building problem solver, putting out little fires and managing the administrivia and minutia which consumes a school day, can instead be the reality. Traditionally, principals who were expert managers, schedulers, budget masters and cheerleaders for their staff and students could be well on their way to success. This is no longer the case. So what are the skill sets and abilities principals need to not just survive, but thrive as leaders in today's rapidly changing educational world? Here are a few:

- 1) **THE ABILITY TO ASK THE RIGHT QUESTIONS:** Richard DuFour, well known in educational circles for his work on professional learning communities, boils these questions down: What are students learning? How will we know if they are learning it? What will we do differently if they are struggling or need even more challenge? And most importantly, how will I, as principal, support teachers to improve learning? For principals, making these the top priority questions the ones that guide decision making and drive the vision for a school is crucial.
- 2) **THE ABILITY TO BE TRUE INSTRUCTIONAL COACHES AS WELL AS KNOWLEDGEABLE EVALUATORS OF TEACHER PERFORMANCE:** As master teachers, principals need to work on establishing the trust and credibility honed by years in the classroom and currency with the most updated information and professional learning to be seen as true instructional partners with teachers. Prioritizing time out of the office and in classrooms, for frequent and informal short visits gives principals the opportunity to build reference points with teachers and gain a true understanding of where instruction

is in the building. The principal's ability to informally provide meaningful, supportive and focused coaching feedback that teachers respect and appreciate comes only with that credibility as one who understands the challenges of the classrooms that teachers face every day.

- 3) **THE ABILITY TO BUILD SCHOOL CULTURES THAT FOCUS ON STUDENT LEARNING AND PROFESSIONAL GROWTH:** It would be naïve to think that principals can do it all. Instead, building a culture where teacher leaders can thrive, where a level of professional trust exists that chips away at the isolation of teaching and instead promotes true collaboration that pays off in improved practice is vital. Setting expectations and systems within the building that promote teacher to teacher classroom visits, peer coaching, sharing and examination of student work and development of common assessments builds the cultural infrastructure that will make the difference in student achievement.
- 4) **THE ABILITY TO USE DATA TO INFORM INSTRUCTION AND GUIDE DECISION MAKING:** To paraphrase Paul Bambrick-Santoyo in his book Leveraging Leadership, standards are meaningless unless we know how to assess them. Today's principal and instructional leader must be well versed in assessment, performance data and curricular goals and alignment. He or she must be nimble at interpreting data and providing leadership to teachers as they build their own emerging skills with data. His or her ability to lead analysis of data which results in strategies for improvement is essential. No more can the principal pass these responsibilities off to central office. What used to be someone else's job has now landed smack in the lap of our overwhelmed and shell shocked building principals.

To say there is a tremendous learning curve here would be an understatement. None of these skills were among those emphasized in the traditional college and leadership training programs which can be a scattershot mix of philosophical courses on organizational management and educational philosophy devoid of the real learning about skills which are so necessary to today's principal. None of the learning which is required of principals now will happen by accident or capriciously. Conscious and concrete steps to support principals and ensure that they have the opportunity to learn the skills they need to lead their schools is a process that deserves our full attention and support. Here are some steps that will make a difference in ensuring that our principals are the instructional leaders they are called upon to be:

1. **HIGH QUALITY, ONGOING AND EMBEDDED PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT:** Again, anyone who has been a principal knows that being away from the building for the occasional professional development workshop or conference, while a pleasant diversion, often results in a bulging inbox, race to catch up on missed situations and ultimately little real impact on learning. Instead, fostering and promoting regular sessions and onsite mentoring for principals within their buildings and within time frames that align with his or her building schedules is what will make a difference. Working with BOCES and other professional development providers across our state to redefine the nature of pd for principals is an idea whose time has come.

2. **UNDERSTANDING AND COMMUNICATING THE IMPORTANCE OF SUPPORTIVE ADMINISTRATIVE ROLES WITHIN DISTRICTS:** Very often, those unfamiliar with the ways schools work or the behind the scenes demands and workloads of school administrators are quick to suggest cutting administrative positions as a prudent way to save money and maintain the academic program. What people do not get is that every time an assistant principal or dean position is eliminated, the traditional responsibilities that go with those roles (disciplinary issues, planning the seating in the next school assembly) go right to the principal, who will now have even less time to leave the office, get into classrooms, run that data meeting, or organize professional learning to grow the capacity of faculty and staff. Everytime a district position, whether it be curricular, human resource or other, is eliminated, those responsibilities fall to principals, who again, become more and more caught on a treadmill of divergent roles and responsibilities that make real instructional leadership a distant dream. Maintaining the positions that support principals, not eliminating them, is essential to instructional leadership.
3. **EMPOWERING PRINCIPALS TO MAKE DECISIONS ABOUT HIRING, TEACHING ASSIGNMENTS AND TRANSFERS:** Provisions at the state or district level and within teaching contracts often tie the hands of the principal and severely restrict his or her power to make decisions which directly impact student learning. Sound human resource strategies which always keep the focus on student needs rather than adult wants are critical in empowering principals.
4. **REDEFINING PRINCIPALS' ROLE AND RESPONSIBILITIES WITHIN DISTRICTS:** Quite simply, superintendents and districts need to see the principal's primary role as the instructional leader in the building and work to reduce the superfluous and crushing meeting schedules and expectations that take away from that priority. Expectations that principals keep up a non-stop schedule of attendance at school and sporting events, late night BOE meetings and other commitments is no longer realistic.
5. **REVAMPING COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY PREPARATION PROGRAMS FOR PRINCIPALS:** Changes in the focus and nature of coursework, implementation of more concrete practice in the skills that have an impact and strong mentoring programs for new and struggling principals will make a difference. What is a data analysis meeting and how do I run one? How can I support teacher leaders in my school? How can I make faculty and team meetings true professional learning opportunities for teachers rather than squander that precious time on mundane and trivial issues? What can I do to build teacher confidence with technology? Where do we start to ensure our school's curriculum is aligning with the Common Core? These are all questions that our principals wish had been the focus of some of their own learning and professional preparation.

Principals, regardless of their personal style, time in the field or specific subject area background, all face a tremendous learning curve right now. Regardless of those differences, all principals can be supported and developed to be true instructional leaders if there is awareness of the critical and challenging role they have in making

change happen. Empowering principals and ensuring that they are getting the level of professional development and support that is vital to developing them as instructional leaders is central to the vision and goals of educational reform in our great state of New York.