

PRINCIPAL RESIDENCY NETWORK PROCESS FOR DEVELOPING LEARNING PLAN

The learning plan is an individualized curriculum plan written for each aspiring principal. Every aspiring principal needs a unique learning plan, one that recognizes experiences, knowledge and skills already acquired, and that charts a course for gaining leadership skills in the year ahead. There are also common experiences, activities and texts that all aspiring principals will be expected to participate in as part of the PRN curriculum. The aspiring principal takes the lead in its construction, and the mentor principal and project director also have a significant hand in its creation. In the end, the learning plan must meet the leadership learning needs of the aspiring principal and benefit the school.

Planning, doing, and reflecting: these are the three core processes of the Principal Residency Network. The learning plan articulates the planned learning. Writing a learning plan is a way to express hoped-for learning on the front end of experience. (Learning in the Residency can come unexpectedly, unbidden and unplanned, so as you'll see later, we also put a heavy emphasis on reflection of actual experience and on on-going revision of the plan.)

In the first step, the aspiring principal will identify the opportunities, skills and knowledge that she needs. The mentor principal should review the learning needs carefully, making suggestions based on knowledge of the aspiring principal's strengths and weaknesses. Then the mentor principal can describe some of the needs of the school, and the two can add those to the learning plan. Make sure that the major projects and action research are of major consequence to the school.

The goal is to fully describe the learning needs of the aspiring principal and elegantly match up many of those needs with an action research project. This project should be authentic, that is, it should fit the real and current needs of the school so that the aspiring principals' work is both authentic and helpful.

There will undoubtedly be some learning needs that do not fit readily into the school project. That's fine! These needs can be met in at least five ways: (1) by picking up some responsibilities at the school; (2) through cohort sessions of the Principal Residency Network; (3) through independent study; (4) through visits to other school sites; and (5) through formal coursework if the aspiring principals wants to focus in a particular area.

The first version of the learning plan is the most arduous to produce. At a very minimum, it requires considerable introspection; writing and documentation by the aspiring principal, an analysis of the AP's needs and the school's needs by the mentor principal, and an honest appraisal of the school's current needs. Once the learning plan has been drafted, the project director will analyze the learning plan's potential to give the aspiring principal what he/she needs to meet the Residency's leadership competencies (and any additional state requirements).

Note: The initial construction of the learning plan may require the participation of other individual and groups. For example, the school staff may need to get involved in

prioritizing school needs, or the superintendent and school committee may need to be notified of the scope of the aspiring principals' work. It is wise for the principal to discuss the nature and scope of the aspiring principal's leadership training with teachers' union representatives and with the superintendent. The school's parent-teacher organization may also appreciate being informed.

LEARNING PLAN TIMELINE

The aspiring principal takes initiative on the learning plan development from the time he is accepted into the program until the project director's first site visit to the school in late September or early October, when he presents it for discussion and review. Taking initiative means completing the Learning Plan form and working out a process and timeline with the mentor principal for the mentor's contribution. If other groups should be involved, the aspiring principal should propose to the mentor principal a timeline and process for their involvement.

Because both individuals needs and school needs are so dynamic, aspiring principals may need or want to revise their plans often. Put formal drafts of learning plans into the final portfolio with brief reflection about how and why the plans changed during the course of the year.

Notice that the first draft of the learning plan will not be formalized until after the first few weeks of school. This is deliberate. During the summer and first weeks of school, the aspiring principal should be joined at the hip of the mentor principal, shadowing him/her, thinking about school leadership, and asking questions- and yes, helping out as needed. The aspiring principal should be working diligently on developing ideas for the learning plan without letting them get carved in stone until early October at the earliest.

Creating Leadership Learning Plans: Suggestions for Aspiring Principals

Many roads lead to terrific learning plans. We hope the following suggestions give you some productive starting points. Some aspiring principals like to start crafting their learning plans by describing past experiences. Some like to start by looking at the specific required competencies. There is no single way to chart your path. Our recommendation is that you incorporate all of the following six processes in the development of your plan, regardless of the order.

1. Step back and think about leadership, about your vision of leadership for yourself.
2. Step back and look at your past experiences as a school leader. Describe and document the significant ones.

3. Study the required competencies carefully. Know them inside and out and address them in your written leadership plan.
4. Dream BIG. What kinds of opportunities do you hope for this year? Ask, and you may receive.
5. Incorporate real school needs into your learning plan. Consult the school improvement plan and talk with your mentor principal.
6. Talk to friends and colleagues about leadership, about your leadership. Seek out suggestions for expanding your repertoire of leadership skills and knowledge.

Portrait of Yourself as a School Leader

Talk with colleagues who know you well and use your journal to help you explore your vision of yourself as a school leader. Explore a variety of modes to create a picture of yourself as a leader. Try stories, words, metaphors, and pictures or collages. The prompts below may help you clarify your picture of yourself as a school leader. This is not the definitive portrait of yourself as a leader: it is your current picture of who you are as a leader and who you want to become. Revisit the self-portrait several times during the year.

Consider reading Warren Bennis' terrific book (1994), *On Becoming a Leader*. Early on, he writes, "What do you believe are the qualities of leadership? What experiences were vital to your development? What were the turning points in your life? What role has failure played in you life? How did you learn? Are the people in your life, or in general, whom you particularly admire? What can organizations do to encourage or stifle leaders? (p.7). Once you have explored your conception of yourself as a leader, distill it into a few sentences or phrases for the first version of the learning plan. Ask your mentor for feedback.

Leadership Accomplishments

You are already a school leader with demonstrated leadership abilities. What leadership skills have you already practiced with good success? Think about the formal responsibilities you have shouldered, as well as informal opportunities for exercising leadership. Size up your accomplishments and describe them. At the very least, familiarize yourself with the six leadership domains and competencies of the Principal Residency Network and with the standards your own stet requires for principal certification. The six leadership domains in the Principal Residency Network are:

1. Moving the Vision
2. Instructional Leadership
3. Moral Courage
4. Management through Flexibility and Efficiency
5. Relationships and Communication
6. Public Support

We give you "credit" for past work. State your accomplishments proudly!

Portfolio

Begin to create your leadership portfolio. For any area where you have considerable leadership experience (and typical, aspiring principals have several areas), collect the documentation that will give you evidence of your learning and competence. For example, if you have worked long and hard at establishing peer mediation teams and other methods of conflict resolution in your school, share documentation of that work with your mentor principal. We recommend that you present documentation of substantial prior learning along with the draft of the learning plan by mid- September, so the mentor principal and project director can weigh in on whether you can “Portfolio” that area of competence. Don’t worry too much at this point about the format and organization of the portfolio. In our experience, the portfolio change shape as the year progresses. For now, just collect the evidence and stash it in a crate or binder for easy retrieval. Keep everything. You can sort out and distill later.

Dream Big

What kinds of leadership opportunities are you craving? The Principal Residency Network urges you to dream big, to take advantage of this year to explore worlds you’ve been curious about. As you draft your ideas for gaining knowledge and skill on the learning plan, keep thinking big about opportunities this year could give you. You may never get an opportunity like this again. Go for it!

Examples: Want to talk to the governor about your vision of schooling? Eager to change your proficiency from technophobe to techie? Curious about how videotape can give you insight into effectiveness as a public speaker? Determined to juggle many tasks simultaneously and with apparent ease? Fired up about providing professional development that staff want and appreciate? Always wanted to read those enticing books? Interested in learning ways that leaders can bolster student’s learning? Want to see a school doing something of interest firsthand? Have a yen to write about and present your experience and perspective?

Doing the Real Work

The Principal Residency Network posits that doing the real work of a school leader is the best training for aspiring principals. (Crazy idea, isn’t it?) Every part of your learning plan, every assignment in the Principal Residency Network, every reflection and reading, should be relevant and necessary to your growth as a school leader. If the work that you are doing starts to feel disconnected from the learning plan, if it starts to feel too artificial or like jumping thorough academic hoops, talk to your mentor and project director.

This is Your Year

Make it count. Yes, your work must benefit the school. But we’ve found some danger in aspiring principals becoming so invested in the school that they fail to take time for their own learning. Work hard with the mentor principal to find a balance between working on your school projects and gaining the competencies you need. As you’ll see over and over again in the Residency, **learning from experience is not inevitable**. Many school

leaders fall into the trap of being so busy *doing* that they miss the other part of leadership: of reflecting on action, of figuring out which actions are more valuable than others, of thinking through why they're doing what they're doing!