



BLENDED LEARNING FOR SCHOOL LEADERS



Combining online instruction with residency offers critical hands-on experience

BY RACHEL SCOTT

School leaders' responsibilities are enormous, and their day-to-day decisions have profound effects on children's lives. Unfortunately, too many do not have access to the kinds of professional learning that prepare them for the complexities of their role or help them continue to improve practice. Intensive leadership training models typically require significant investments of time, money, and travel. But blended learning—an approach that combines online tools and face-to-face learning experiences—can offer a cost-effective way to support both aspiring and sitting principals scattered across geographic distances.

Consider the newly created “blended residency” portion of the NYC Leadership Academy’s Aspiring Principals Program (APP). APP is the NYC Leadership Academy’s (NYCLA) flagship leadership development program. The residency experience immerses aspiring leaders in school sites where they assume significant leadership responsibilities under the guidance of mentor principals. Resident principals meet regularly as a cohort—both online and in person—to pursue a curriculum aligned with their leadership work in schools. The experience begins with a multiweek “summer intensive,” in which participants assume leadership of a simulated school. The following school year, these aspiring leaders are placed in “residency schools” under the guidance of mentor principals.

AMERICAN EXPRESS AND NASSP'S PRINCIPALS PATH TO LEADERSHIP PROGRAM

In an effort to support and enrich current principal leadership programs, American Express has partnered with NASSP on a new program that seeks to identify tomorrow's school leaders and support them on the path to principal leadership. Last October, the American Express Principals Path to Leadership program awarded multiyear grants to school districts or nonprofit organizations engaged in principal leadership programs with a goal to increase the program's capacity and impact over the next three years with an eye toward long-term sustainability.

In order to apply, submissions were required to be supporting existing programs and were evaluated in

accordance with several criteria. After extensive review, five effective principal and aspiring principal programs, including the NYC Leadership Academy, were selected to receive the grant. Each program has a blended element and includes clinical job-embedded components to facilitate interaction and learning.

This important program fulfills one of NASSP's goals to assist aspiring leaders in preparation for school leadership. As part of the Principals Path to Leadership grant, NASSP will conduct case studies on several of the programs and share these findings along with their impact on NASSP's goal. Visit www.nassp.org/principalspath for more information.

On-the-job learning constitutes the heart of the residency experience. Online curriculum supports residents while they're in the thick of their school responsibilities and is designed to keep their focus on student learning. Participants receive on-site coaching four times a year and are expected to spend about three hours per week on online activities, which include real-time, video-based virtual meetings via Adobe Connect and contributions to threaded discussions.

Five Essential Characteristics of Online Learning

To build a successful online or blended school leadership program, consider the following five characteristics that have emerged from this program.

1. Use varied learning strategies. Not only do repetitive activities become dull, but adults also practice different kinds of cognitive, interpersonal, and communication skills when they participate in interactions made possible by face-to-face, asynchronous, and synchronous online experiences. Face-to-face meetings present excellent opportunities for participants to practice role plays and presentations. They also bolster the cohort's sense of fellowship as participants move through the program together.

In-person communication is often less deliberate than text-based communication, however. Asynchronous written communication offers online learners an opportunity to articulate their ideas clearly and critique others' thinking.

Participants keep ongoing personal blogs to reflect on their experience and use discussion forums to explore complex topics such as handling competing values at their school sites and managing resources in an equitable manner.

2. Provide active guidance, modeling, and feedback from a facilitator.

Not all school leaders are instantly comfortable with the online forum; many must get accustomed to managing their time, staying motivated, and expressing themselves in new ways. Research indicates that adults require active guidance and feedback to learn how to maneuver through virtual terrain and contribute to written dialogue.



Given the absence of social cues in the online environment, facilitators must be more explicit than usual about participant expectations. They send out frequent reminders about assignments and sometimes need to be particularly directive as they manage threaded discussions. Without guidance, participants can slip into sharing personal opinions and experiences rather than participating in critical discourse.

3. Tap into the enormous range of online resources to guide and shape learning.

Adult learners may rely on their own experiences to adjust practice rather than seeking out and applying new knowledge from their fields. School leaders now have 24-hour access to an unprecedented stream of articles, studies, reports, frameworks, tools, Twitter chats, blogs, and other resources relevant to their real-life problems and experiences.

Blended residency participants are challenged to seek out the answers to their own questions using the tools available to them. They identify particular topics they need to study or explore. In small groups, they conduct online research and lead virtual cohort meetings that address these subjects. They also contribute to a group page on Diigo—a social bookmarking site—where they can share and tag resources relevant to their work, building a collective educational leadership library as they go.

4. Create a robust online community.

Learners' sense of community has a significant impact on their perception

of learning—even on the quality of their discussions and work products. For real learning to occur online, school leaders must be able to communicate in their own styles and voice real opinions, questions, experiences, and challenges.

As part of this online community, blended residency participants create their own “netiquette” guidelines by defining together how they will interact and communicate online. Facilitators encourage them to write in a conversational tone, as they might on social media, and to communicate clearly. They build in time for casual chats at the beginnings of virtual meetings, and encourage participants to keep up text-based sidebar conversations (and use humor) during these 90-minute sessions. Facilitators are also careful to build “catch-up” time into face-to-face meetings so they can continue to develop their relationships in person.

5. Focus on real work. All online activities in the blended residency program are explicitly connected with participants' daily leadership responsibilities. Participants may otherwise perceive online work as less relevant than the work they do at their school sites.

In blended residency, participants analyze data about their schools, identify school challenges, develop theories of action and strategic plans, implement their plans, and assess results to identify lessons learned. They share videos of themselves leading meetings and giving teachers feedback, and submit drafts of plans, analyses,


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and agendas for peer and facilitator feedback.

Sharing real-world work enables participants to pool and apply good ideas. When they enter their schools at the beginning of the year, participants create and share “listening plans” detailing whom they will talk to and the questions they will ask to become acquainted with school culture. In doing so, they exchange questions and improve their plans.

Assessing the Value

Survey data and daily observations will help NYCLA evaluate and refine the design and delivery of the blended residency program. A new national NYCLA APP program, supported by NASSP and American Express (see sidebar), will begin in July 2016.

Becoming part of an online cohort can reduce isolation for busy principals and provide a forum in which to exchange ideas and feedback with peers, which fosters deliberate thinking and reflection that are crucial to effective leadership. The five essential characteristics of online learning can help ensure that online and blended programs offer principals new ways to continue improving their leadership throughout their careers. 

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