

Advancing Principals

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A Common Thread: Coaching Across Eight Schools in Kentucky with the NISL Framework

Focus on Coaching: Tim Hanner

Tim Hanner was a middle school teacher for 11 years in an eastern Kentucky school district, the same district where he also served as a curriculum coordinator, principal and superintendent. While he may have retired over six years ago, his work on behalf of Kentucky students is far from over. Tim is in his second year serving as a NISL National School Leadership Coach for eight school principals as part of NISL's Advanced Credentialing System for School Principals.

Despite his deep experience, Tim Hanner is not one to provide all the answers. Instead, he supports his coachees in thinking more strategically.

“We are learners in the process with them,” said Tim referring to his coachees, “you’re not coming in to be the expert, you’re coming in to be the thought partner as they work on action research in their own buildings.”

This role as a thought partner, along with the opportunity to work directly with the principals he was coaching, were two of the factors that drew Tim to coach with NISL. He was also eager to see NISL's Executive Development Program (EDP), which he himself had completed just prior to becoming a coach, be put to even greater use throughout his home state of Kentucky.

For Tim, the fact that he had recently completed the EDP helped shape his relationships with his coachees. His own experiences as a principal earned their trust and respect and he made it clear to his coachees that, having all just completed the program, they would be taking up the process of school improvement coming from a similar foundation. He told each coachee that he was working with seven others and he intended to use what he learned from each to address the challenges of the others.

The eight schools overseen by Tim's coachees vary widely. They range from elementary schools to high schools, low performing to high performing, big to small, and urban to rural. “Every school is different,” he explained. “That’s why I like it, that’s why I enjoy it.”

One of the principals Tim has been coaching leads a high-performing high school in a large county. For Tim, what was fascinating about this school was that even though it was deemed distinguished, the principal admitted to Tim that he could not say for certain that the majority of his students were leaving high school prepared for college or their future careers.

“This was really a powerful breakthrough for him,” Tim said. “He was the first to really focus on this challenge and run with it. And the work that he’s done in coaching his staff to think differently and the Action Learning Project he developed has been powerful.”

As part of the EDP, all participants complete an Action Learning Project (ALP) as a way to implement the program’s principles and concepts in the participants’ school or district. This principal’s ALP focused on student engagement to empower students to participate in school in a way that goes beyond mere attendance. In planning this ALP, Tim said they acknowledged that there were students at the principal’s school who were able to get by on the bare minimum, who were just showing up and doing enough to pass. This prompted the two to ask: “Are they learning on the level that they need to be for life beyond high school?”

The principal pulled together a group of students to serve as both a working and focus group while he asked his teachers to identify strategies they needed to either develop or improve to make learning more student focused and driven. And the principal is seeing results, according to Tim.

“They know they’re a good school. And they really, for their kids, want to be a great school,” Tim said. “Compared to last year, it’s a completely different feel. The conversations are different. Even while walking through the building with the principal and engaging with teachers during their planning period, we could see that they were challenging each other on what they were doing and making plans to come and observe each other. That, to me, is pretty powerful.”

In stark contrast to this distinguished high school, Tim is also coaching a principal in one of the lowest performing middle schools in the state. Tim reflected on this time last year: the school’s reputation was bad and getting worse, student discipline was almost nonexistent, and district leadership challenges were being felt at the school level.

The principal of this school quickly realized he wanted to get everyone in his school community moving in the same direction, speaking the same language with respect to the mission and vision of where they were going to take the school. He leveraged his ALP’s focus on strengthening the school’s professional learning communities as a means to turn around the culture and performance of the school.

Tim described what he saw afterward as the staff rallying behind the principal and the principal, in turn, rallying behind the teachers. It was the birth of “a community in that school that they probably never experienced.” While still very early, the school is seeing positive growth in academic metrics

including interim assessments in key subjects for its students and the culture of the school has been transformed.

Although there is a great diversity of challenges in Tim's work with his eight schools, he observed that the NISL EDP framework is a common thread.

"I think what might surprise people is that I coach leaders from one of the highest performing high schools, the lowest performing middle schools, and one of the lowest performing elementary schools and the work is still very much the same because the common themes I see run through all of the schools and those themes are taught in NISL's EDP."

"In this work, you need to have a framework to reference that you believe in, as a principal and as a coach, because it pulls everything together," he said. "The beauty of coaching with the EDP framework is that it is not a one-size-fits all approach, it works in every kind of school and setting."