

Advancing Principals

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School Pride, High-Fives & Blue Ribbons

Thanks to NISL Distinguished Principal Training

Distinguished Principal Spotlight: Sarah Herbert

Late in the 2015-2016 school year, my supervisor shared information about the NISL SEED Advanced Credentialing System project and asked that I submit an application for the first round of Distinguished Principal credentialing. At that time, I had no clear idea of what the project entailed or what I could expect from the application process or being selected to receive the credential. However, I appreciated that he had the confidence in me to potentially be a part of this project. I soon learned that there was to be a very intentional and rigorous selection process that included an array of preparatory assignments related to my work as a school leader and an intensive observation process while attending a three-day NISL session. I left this experience unsure of my potential to be selected as a Distinguished Principal who would be responsible for coaching other principals during the pilot phase of the project. In August of 2016, I received a phone call from our NISL State Coordinator indicating that I, along with only 38 other educators across the three participating states, was selected as a Distinguished Principal.

For the next year, I, along with my fellow Distinguished Principals, participated in a series of Distinguished Principal Institutes intended to prepare us to better support newer principals throughout the state of Pennsylvania. Through these trainings and my interactions with my coachee, I began to take a different look at my own leadership practices. I began to slow down my decision making to include time for research and reflection. I also started asking questions to continue moving instruction in my schools to include increased opportunity for higher student thinking. Having the opportunity to present struggles and questions to my peer group allowed for a safe environment to receive feedback. Additionally, working with my National Shoulder-to-Shoulder coach provided another avenue to receive support and feedback.

Throughout the past year and for the remainder of this school year, I have been paired, as a coach, with a fellow elementary principal who, like me, covers two buildings. He and I are able to relate well due to similar circumstances and experiences. Being able to relate to and collaborate with him not

only helps him, but it has also challenged me to reflect upon my leadership. It has offered me opportunities to brainstorm and discover new or innovative ways of approaching a need that both he and I share. For example, he and I both have limited resources with which to support our students. My coachee and I spent time researching best practices and strategies that might be integrated into the regular education setting allowing for even greater support of individual student needs. As part of his focus, my coachee and his staff are incorporating small group learning in a math setting. I have been able to share what he and I discovered with my teachers as well and have begun to see small group instruction occurring in math lessons throughout my two schools.

In late January 2017, I received an email indicating that my elementary school was selected to apply to become a National Blue Ribbon School. Being recognized as a nominee was a great honor. My teaching team and I worked to formally submit our application in late March, and in the spring, we received word that all applications had been received and reviewed, but the committee was awaiting state test data from that academic year. The scores would eventually arrive and show that we had continued to make real progress. The data showed that we had reduced the proportion of students scoring at below basic across nearly every grade level and subject.

In August, I received an email indicating that an announcement would be made in September for those schools who earned this distinction. When the date came, I joined my third-grade students to watch a live stream of the announcement by U.S. Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos. When my students saw our school name appear among those schools selected for National Blue Ribbon Recognition, they were exultant! There were many hugs, high fives, and a contagious excitement flooded the school.

Upon reflection, my original NISL training in the Executive Development Program was a real difference maker in my work, particularly around some key decisions. Establishing a clear vision, reviewing current data to make decisions for better support of students, and involving staff, students and parents in making big decisions, helped to propel our school into a student-focused, data-driven environment striving for excellence. By becoming a NISL Distinguished Principal, I was able to revisit many of these key ideas and can now clearly see the connection of the success of my school and my experience in this project.