**Maine Department of Education**

**The Transformational Leadership Network, 2021 – 2022**

**Supporting Leadership in Maine Schools**

Maine’s Transformational Leadership Network, as described in a May 2021 recruiting letter, “is committed to the professional learning of principals – professional learning that will directly address the challenges of improving his or her school.” From mid-October 2021 to June 2022, the TLN offered 23 principals from across Maine opportunities to address both immediate and persisting challenges in their work as leaders. The TLN has undergone numerous refinements over its 11-year existence to better meet the needs of its participants.

Meeting by Zoom instead of in person, the Network came together for 13 sessions. Sessions included brief didactic presentations and shared readings, but principals met most frequently in Learning Leader Teams (LLTs) comprised of 5-7 TLN members These LLT sessions were modeled on the concept of periodic “rounds” – examinations of on-going challenges faced by each leader in her or his practice.

This document reports themes in the learning journeys of these 23 principals as they identified significant learnings in their end-of-year reflections. The 2021-22 school year was, as many principals said, “not your normal school year.” Unlike the previous “COVID-19” year, students and staff were now “in person in school”; but this brought a rash of new challenges to principals, challenges largely requiring leaders to address growing emotional, psychological, and social stressors on students, staff, and parents. One TLN leader described it this way:

*We are all exhausted. Administrators are worn down by all that we have been doing to keep our doors open and our students and staff safe, but even more so, by holding the container for EVERYBODY. We are heart weary and compassion fatigued. The worry, pain, fright, frustration, disappointment, grief that is expressed to us by the people we care so deeply about, staff, students, and students’ families, become ours. This is what I mean when I say, “holding the container.”*

To a person, TLN participants found TLN sessions helpful on many levels – in sharing quick and effective strategies, in bringing clarity and understanding to the challenges that were confounding them, and most of all in providing unquestioning support and encouragement for their difficult work. The highly individualized, “challenge-focused” curriculum of TLN, facilitated by a team of five experienced leaders, asked these Maine principals to bring to each session a challenge he/she was currently facing. Each session devoted time and “collegial consultation” to each principal, making each principal’s learning engaging and developmental through the year.

The following excerpts from principals’ written reflections offer a sampling of learning. We identified four aspects of leadership learning in principals’ writing at the conclusion of the experience: gathering practical “how-to” advice and information; delving more deeply into the interpersonal dynamics of leading the variety of adults and children in their schools; understanding themselves more fully and how they could intentionally (and sometimes unintentionally) shape their schools; and, appreciating how the TLN was nourishing them as leaders.

**Coming Away with Strategies I Can Use**

TLN sessions, while focused on very specific situations the principals faced, were rich with “craft knowledge” – “what worked for me in this situation was….” Rather than deliver a preferred set of practices and solutions, the TLN encouraged leader-leader sharing of “what works” – what several principals called “the nuts and bolts of practice.” This year, this sort of practical, immediate advice dealt with:

* Specific instructional intervention models
* Curriculum that worked particularly well with different types of students
* Management of pandemic-related challenges
* Protocols for active listening, problem-solving, dealing with “difficult people” and the like
* Professional development resources
* School climate tools
* Legal, ethical, and procedural clarity in dealing with unprofessional staff or recalcitrant adults
* Methods of collecting feedback on their initiatives and their leadership

**Understanding More Fully the People I Work with and What Will Help Them Perform Well**

By November, principals’ challenges had often morphed from specific instructional and program improvements to focus as well on staff and their states of mind and heart—what was challenging staff in the performance of their work. In addition to resistance to leaders’ efforts to improve, staff were increasingly “stressed out,” “exhausted,” “emotionally on-edge.” For the principals, this meant digging more deeply into their relationships with staff and developing skills that strengthened relationships which could promote teachers’ professional growth. Here are some samples.

* *This year I have grown in my confidence to have hard conversations. This is a hard thing to do but so important because it impacts students. It is my job to coach and mentor and advise teachers to do their best for students – make sure they are safe, engaged, and happy… I have learned this year that I can’t worry about what other people’s opinions of me are when I call them out, in a professional way, for mistreating students.*
* *When met with resistance to new ideas, I don’t push through, I let it be and simmer and come back to it when they show they are ready, or I can push a little more. I jump on it and always come back to things, never one and done.*
* *I felt as if I were a social worker this year. My focus and my reflections dealt with the soft skills of leading—the interpersonal aspects—not the nuts and bolts of leading. I have been in my role for six years, so I feel pretty good about the nuts and bolts.  But the social interactions of running a school are now a more important focus.  My strength is connecting with others and being emotionally aware. It is a strength, but it requires constant work.*
* *When I read over my in-the-moment reflections, I am struck by how many of the struggles were in the soft skills of leadership, not the logistics. I’m curious about this. I wonder if it’s because after six years I have figured out most of the nuts and bolts of running a school, but interpersonal relationships are ever evolving. I also wonder if it’s because the past two years have been so emotionally draining on all of us that it exacerbated difficulties in this area. I wonder if it’s because those are so important to me as a person. I am certain these are skills I’m still gaining.*
* *I need to plan as best I can for a specific conversation. I need to think through how not to be defensive, how to pause and listen (really listen), and how to make the points I need to make in a kind and supportive way. I also need to let go of the fact that the teacher will feel bad after the conversation (because she knows she’s not doing her best) and that she will spin a narrative to tell other staff.*
* *Although the majority of my staff is great, I have a few that really sank low the last couple of years and a few who were already low. Having some tough conversations was necessary—not easy, but definitely necessary. Teaching is hard work and our goal and mission need to be strong and supported. I need to provide that strength and guidance toward the goal and mission.*
* *I have worked on increasing and improving my communication skills with all staff and stakeholders. In part, this has become a focus for me because I am not seeing or hearing it from the leadership above. When you live it, you see it.*

**Understanding Myself More Fully, and What Makes Me More (and less) Effective as a Leader**

For most principals, the TLN proved to be a safe and confidential environment to address what some called their “vulnerabilities”—their worries and doubts about their ability to lead. As the year wore on and more principals brought to the TLN issues that “keep me up at night,” the small LLTs became environments for self-examination and for colleagues to provide observations and encouragement. Here are a few examples of the intrapersonal learning from these sessions.

* *I have found that I am finding a stance of leadership, suppressing my natural urge to get excited and pontificate (on whatever subject is presented) to one of quiet listening. This has allowed me to diffuse situations and maintain relationships with a variety of personality types and stakeholders.*
* *I saw how frustrated my faculty and I were by the intrusion of the pandemic that made our work so much more fraught and complicated. I have come to see that accepting that there are things that I can focus on to effect change and letting things go that wear us down as educators and that I cannot change in the broader community and society.  In many ways, this movement forward has been a perspective shift and maturation. I actually listened to the advice that I have shared with colleagues: I stress not sweating the small things and focusing on small gains that give us a broader feeling of efficacy.  Then by maintaining a regular focus on those small actions we see that our work has a larger and sustained impact for our learners.  We can actually see sustained and worthy improvement.*
* *I feel that as we get to know ourselves better as leaders, we are more able to support those we work with and learn from. Over the last two years [in TLN] I have learned more about myself, that the fatigue and frustration required me to do so and also required me to shed, and be ok with doing so, things that pulled at my time but made little difference to my school community Doing so makes me a more effective leader.*
* *I had to really take a look at my ability to lead not only academically but emotionally.  I had to find extra empathy and understanding to help teachers struggling with their students.  I had to emphasize Social-Emotional Learning and the need to put that first in classrooms. Students need to have a certain level of feeling safe before any real learning can take place.*
* *While being the support for my staff that they truly needed, I know that my own mental health suffered. I try to take on the weight of the world for others and worry about myself later. That sometimes then puts me in a slump.*
* *I already knew that I seek feedback and am reflective. The absence of meaningful, evidence-based feedback this year made it especially challenging to stay the course. The feedback I received [in my district] felt reactive and was not aligned with my strategic plan. Under the circumstances, I know I need to take the lead on my own growth and development. This is, in and of itself, a challenge because I seem to lack guidance and mentorship within my district. Without these, I risk stunting my own growth.*

**HOW HAS THE TLN NOURISHED MY LEARNING?**

The TLN structure and process offered these principals a safe and confidential learning environment – a “learning place” that asked them to identify what *they felt* would make them more effective leaders in their various schools and communities. Thus, their learning began with them. The TLN sought to make each principal’s motivation to improve her or his practice the driving force in our network sessions. Here, several participants reflect on how the experience nourished them as leaders.

* *For me [the TLN’s value] was providing a scheduled time to stop and reflect. It was also very helpful to hear about issues occurring in other schools around the state, a sense of not being alone in this position. It was helpful to talk about issues and gain perspective from colleagues who are experiencing similar issues. It was helpful when framing issues and working through them. I really enjoyed the connections.*
* *I think that the TLN group is great to push us as administrators to take the time to reflect on how we are doing and what we can improve on…. Meeting every two weeks helps me take the time that is needed to help me continue to grow as a leader.*
* *This was the most challenging year I have ever experienced in my career.  The TLN was the greatest support professionally and emotionally. It always was a safe and stable environment.  I received positive feedback. I became a better problem solver. It allows me to see the big picture and identify areas still needing improvement....  It’s a safe, nurturing, and confidential environment that helps me grow.  Feedback is critical.*
* *I have so appreciated the TLN. It made me take the moments to pause and reflect, and it always came at times when I needed that most! I am generally reflective, but the power of a group and of actually saying some things out loud is immeasurable! I appreciated having cheerleader colleagues who could view issues with impartial eyes and help me see problems from a different perspective. Every time, they helped me uncover solutions that were there all along.*
* *This year really helped me to see the need for, and give myself permission to, do some self-care, which has made a significant positive impact. I enjoyed the moments of meditation. I know those are helpful, but I do not often take the time to do them. Having “{mindfulness moments”, in a way, forced me to do that, which was a good thing.*
* *The TLN group often just listened and validated the difficulties a situation presented. Just knowing that this situation was unique to leaders with much more experience than I, encouraged me to realize that I am doing an exceptional job under less than ideal circumstances. The support this group provided shaped my leadership for the better. In addition, I have made professional relationships with these individuals. That allows me to have a sounding board that is an email or phone call away. Creating a professional network is vital to any leadership position, and I am grateful that the TLN helped to facilitate ours.*

**Program Structure**

In order to help stimulate “the learning place” alluded to earlier the TLN facilitators created a structure for our Zoom sessions meant to be both developmental in terms of principals’ learning and leadership growth and also responsive to their ever-changing needs. That structure generally consisted of the following for one session per month (2 hours):

* Overview of the session
* A “mindfulness moment” reflective prompt meant to help principals focus on the work ahead and the importance of self-care.
* A short presentation with resources addressing a relevant topic or theme, followed by the opportunity for discussion. Pre-work for the session included readings that helped set the stage for this didactic aspect of the session.
* Time in our small group Leader Learning Teams to either: (1) examine the content of the presentation in greater depth and its applicability to their own learning; (2) use protocols to review and provide feedback to individuals about their school improvement goals and/or personal leadership development plans or: (3) address current challenges in their schools that principals raised in order to help with problem identification and solving, sharing resources and/or being supportive listeners.
* A closing activity meant to bring the LLTs together within the larger community of TLN learners.

The second session each month (1.5 hours) was similar to what has been described:

* Overview of the session
* A “mindfulness moment” reflective prompt meant to help principals focus on the work ahead and the importance of self-care.
* The rest of the time was spent in LLTs. Here the facilitator and the principals were able to shape the time to meet their own groups’ needs. The focus was similar to what was described previously but allowed for much more individualization within the small group structure of 5-7 members. Facilitators’ notes on both these and the previously described LLT sessions were used to help develop the direction of the subsequent session. In this way, the facilitators were able to offer a “curriculum” responsive to the needs of the TLN members.

**A Note on Facilitation**

The whole point of the program, and thus the facilitator roles, was flexibility and adaptability. Primarily the principals were the drivers for each other—questioning, probing, validating. As facilitators, we stepped back. We offered the structure, and the principals responded as they could or needed to. Sometimes listening and thinking about implications for themselves; other times, offering questions or, occasionally, advice in the form of “this is what helped me in a similar situation.” Since principals said this was the hardest year, we took their lead and didn’t push too hard on school improvement goals they might have been hoping to work on. The Department of Education recognized the stress schools and principals were under and encouraged us—and others—to lighten the burden, not requiring too much documentation or detailed plans. Nevertheless, by the second semester, many principals seemed able to implement some plans that had been allowed to rest for a while. Most principals, by the end of the year, were planning for next year, building on the work that had been started in areas such as SEL, literacy, and math.

To conclude this report, we offer an entire final reflection of one of the participants. We had introduced the notion of “a pebble in your shoe” to describe an immediate challenge the principals faced as they came together for the first session. This principal elaborates on the pebble in her shoe metaphor to characterize her leadership growth.

*First of all, I have to slow down and actually consider the pebble in my shoe. Not just live with it there. So, pay attention. Take time to notice and process.*

*And is it really my pebble? Perhaps it belongs to someone else and isn't my pebble? In which case why did I let it in my shoe?? How did it get here? I need sturdier shoes! And better boundaries.*

*Now that the pebble is here—regardless of ownership—what is the nature of it? Is it really a pebble or was a parent overly critical or anxious and, although it looks and feels like there might be a pebble, in truth there isn't a pebble at all. And worse still, this phantom pebble is taking resources away from the real pebbles in my shoe. So, I better get shoes that are comfortable for me. (I need to know to recognize the real problems and issues that are worth my time and energy because I can change them for the better.)*

*Also, I can't turn a little sand into a pebble. If there's some irritation and I can shake it out quickly and effectively, do it already!! Keep the inside of that shoe tidy and comfy for walking the walk. Don't be letting it get all stinky and messy.*

*Finally, remember it's just a pebble. I's not a boulder. I don't have an open infected sore from it. This isn't an emergency or a life-threatening situation. It's a pebble. Deal with it and don't get overly emotional. Time will go on. This will pass. There will always be pebbles. And thank goodness because it makes sitting down and resting that much sweeter.*

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