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An Evaluation of the EPIC Professional Learning Model

Investigating the Impact of EPIC Professional Development on Perspectives Charter School Principals

Evaluation Brief – September 2010

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 - Perspectives Charter Schools (Chicago, IL)

Background

In 2009–10, New Leaders for New Schools partnered with the Perspectives Charter School Network in Chicago to pilot an innovative leadership development program for principals. The program is part of the Effective Practice Incentive Community (EPIC) initiative, which was created by New Leaders in 2006 to identify, reward, and share effective practices leading to dramatic achievement gains in high-need urban schools. To date, New Leaders for New Schools has awarded nearly \$13 million to EPIC-awarded schools. In exchange, school leaders and their leadership teams engage in rigorous investigation of practice to document the decisions, strategies, and tools driving student gains and, with New Leaders, author a case study for the Knowledge System (<http://epic.nlins.org>), EPIC's online professional development platform. This rich repository of over 150 video case studies and related artifacts allows educators in the EPIC consortium—including the five schools in the Perspectives network and over 500 district and charter schools nationwide—to share effective practices and learn from others' success.

The partnership with Perspectives allowed New Leaders to meet two of its goals: (1) to build the capacity of its partners to leverage the Knowledge System resources and (2) to test and evolve the professional learning model built around EPIC resources. The EPIC model, which guides principals in their own self-study of leadership practice, gives partners the opportunity to tailor the professional learning experience to local and individual principal needs. For Perspectives, that meant selecting videos and crafting sessions aligned with ongoing efforts to create strong professional learning communities in each school and build the leadership capacity among its teachers.

The goals of the EPIC-Perspectives leadership development pilot were to:

- *Enhance principals' abilities to create school-wide structures that strengthen teacher capacity through job-embedded professional development*

- *Build principals' personal leadership skills, specifically their ability to develop teachers' capacity to lead meaningful conversations rooted in student data and student work*
- *Support principals in building effective structures around the way that data is gathered, analyzed, and used to improve instruction and student achievement*

This research brief reports on what Perspectives principals and New Leaders learned from the pilot implementation of the EPIC professional learning model and the impact of the program on principals' knowledge, skills, and application of effective practices in their schools.

Pilot Program Model

Six principals from the five charter schools in the Perspectives network took part in four 2–3-hour leadership development sessions, held between November 2009 and April 2010. The implementation followed the steps of the EPIC leadership development model, beginning with the selection and training of a facilitator—in this case a Chicago principal outside the Perspectives network—and pre-session planning. During planning, Perspectives network leaders shared school and leadership profiles for each participating principal, described ongoing leadership development activities and instructional interventions being implemented, discussed the structures for professional learning communities already in place, and, with the EPIC team, reviewed proposed topics, video clips, and plans for each session.

The EPIC model takes principals through scripted lessons based on video cases and related artifacts from the Knowledge System. Using a Socratic, inquiry-oriented approach, the facilitator encourages principals to use the examples of others to analyze and reflect on their own leadership practices and approaches and look for ways where they might change a behavior or adapt a strategy to improve their own leadership. Following reflections and discussions of comparable needs and existing structures, principals engaged in action-planning and identifying ways to apply new knowledge.

Evaluation Methods

To explore the impact of the pilot implementation, New Leaders contracted with Rockman Associates (www.rockman.com), an independent research firm that has conducted numerous studies of professional development. The timing of the Perspectives sessions precluded an in-depth impact study, but evaluators talked with principals about short-term effects, strategies applied and resources utilized thus far, and the potential for long-term impacts. During the course of the program, the Rockman team:

- Attended facilitated sessions, observing interactions among principals and talking afterward with principals and the facilitator

- Conducted telephone interviews with principals following the first two sessions, using structured protocols
- Reviewed principals' responses to a survey following the final session
- Conducted a second round of telephone interviews after the final session with principals, the facilitator, instructional leaders, and Perspectives leadership personnel.

Data analysis consisted of successive reviews of all data to identify prominent or recurrent themes or activities and discussions with New Leaders and Perspectives partners to confirm and triangulate findings.

Findings

Overall, principals reported that the sessions helped them further develop their leadership practices. They agreed that the Knowledge System videos provided valuable examples of effective practice and that structured conversations with colleagues were a rare, welcome opportunity. The pre-session planning and collaboration between New Leaders, Perspectives, and the facilitator resulted in a program that clearly reflected local goals—borne out in survey results showing that all six participants said the sessions were relevant to their needs and that most (83 percent) rated them “extremely relevant.” All of the principals gained insight into how they could build capacity in others and left with tools and strategies to help them share leadership responsibilities and bring focus to data conversations and the work of professional learning communities.

We report out findings by addressing the main components of the EPIC model, examining how participants responded to the Knowledge System videos, what topics and strategies sparked discussion, what insights and plans emerged from subsequent reflection on their own schools and practices, and what real changes resulted.

Exposure and Examination

The Knowledge System videos and the ways in which they brought “common challenges into focus” won praise from Perspectives principals. All agreed that it was valuable to see “practice in action.” Principals pointed out that while viewing videos is common in faculty meetings or professional development sessions, they more often show

teachers, not principals, and hold up instructional practice, not instructional leadership, for analysis. The facilitator also observed that the videos “had the principals talking about their practices in a way that they do not typically do.”

Feedback from principals indicated that the most applicable videos were those focused on data conversations. These videos served as particularly good springboards for discussion and reflection because they addressed a topic fresh in the minds of Perspectives principals—closest, according to the facilitator, to “things going on in their work lives.” They also showed real teachers and principals talking about data, which gave participants clear examples of “how to talk about data with teachers” and figure out “what that data is telling [them].”

According to principals, videos on data conversations, along with those focused on “looking at student achievement” and “improving the culture of [their] classrooms” provided guidance on how to distribute instructional leadership—how to help instructional leaders engage in conversations with departmental colleagues and how to help teachers “take ownership of findings” and “use them in their own planning.” As one principal explained, “...as the instructional leader, you’re not just doing the work of looking at data, but [looking at] how you develop teacher leadership within your team and coach teachers on how to read the data for themselves, and then really be able to utilize it and make an action plan from it.”

When asked what might make sessions more valuable, principals noted that selective viewing of videos did not give them a sense of the Knowledge System’s full scope. A general guided tour during the last session provided a

more comprehensive view of the protocols, tools, and other artifacts available, leading one principal to observe that they had “only tapped the surface.” The fuller tour left others excited about opportunities for using the Knowledge System “outside of the session.” These comments, along with survey responses indicating that principals were more likely to think about their leadership practices during the sessions than afterward, underscore the importance of introducing the Knowledge System as a personal resource to extend the value of the sessions. As one principal describing her post-session exploration of the Knowledge System observed:

I think it's very personal, and I know now that I have resources I can go back and utilize now that I understand the structure of the [EPIC Knowledge System] website. I was looking for something, and then I saw our session! It was great to go back and look at that and reflect. A lot of times you have PD, you leave, and unless you take great notes, it's hard to revisit. And it is the continuation that is so important.

Critical Reflection

One of the most important aspects of the EPIC model is the shift that takes place when principals turn their focus from the examples of others to their own leadership practice. Feedback from Perspectives principals indicates that this shift indeed took place: When asked on the survey whether the professional development experience made them think about what was and was not working in their schools “in a new way,” three of the six principals said the sessions achieved this “to a great extent,” one said “moderately,” and two said, “somewhat.” Ratings were a little lower for the extent to which exposure to others’ practice led principals to change their own practice: three principals said “moderately,” two said, “somewhat,” and one said, “slightly.”

More moderate ratings of actual changes to practice likely reflect the timing: The school year was drawing to a close, and principals had limited time to fully implement changes. What also seemed to temper ratings was how far along principals were in creating professional learning communities or structures for data conversations. EPIC sessions intentionally include videos of principals at different stages of implementing such changes. Seeing principals at different points along that continuum led some Perspectives principals to evaluate, and change, personal approaches. One principal saw clips of two approaches to examining data from benchmark exams as a way to reassess her own practice:

One [principal] was very impartial and one was very collaborative, and I found that being able to take a little bit from each of those has allowed me to change my style...and re-evaluate my practice.

Other Perspectives principals also held a mirror up to their

practices but concluded that theirs held up fairly well under scrutiny. For them, the process “reaffirmed some of the beliefs and structures and expectations that we have at the school” and confirmed that they were “working at getting better in making data-driven instruction a reality, and really working on authentic assessments and using assessments to drive instruction.” Principals who felt they were “already there” suggested some videos might be more useful to someone at the “start-up stage.” What they were looking for were more examples of “logical next steps” undertaken by leaders featured in the videos, as well as more context. That principals wanted to look more closely at the texture of a decision or practice may indicate a need for a more thorough introduction to the Knowledge System so participants know where to look on their own for more differentiation.

All principals praised the opportunities for peer learning and collective inquiry. According to the facilitator, principals gained comfort with successive sessions. One principal captured the thoughts of others: “What my colleagues and I treasured the most was just the time to sit back and reflect on our practices and then to apply everything we learned from each other or the sessions to a real context.” Perspectives’ Chief Academic Officer personnel noted that principals continued these reflective discussions beyond the EPIC sessions. Conversations about data were still going on at the network instructional leadership retreat in May, where principals were talking about “teacher morale, motivation,” and everyone “really started to home in on culture: they talked about new teachers, classroom management,” and “how to give new teachers adequate support in looking at data.”

Planning for Change

In viewing the videos, most principals saw opportunities to build capacity in others and adapt specific strategies and tools for their own schools. As one principal noted, “My takeaways were more about structures and procedures to put in place.”

Their plans generally fell into three categories:

- 1. Creating common structures to help teachers look at student work.** In comments about session strategies they had used or planned to adapt, principals often referenced ongoing efforts, which they hoped to “improve on” as they became “more reflective practitioners.” Principals described plans to analyze student work in a more “deliberate” and uniform way. In reference to data conversations, one principal said she wanted her teachers to have “a common way of doing that so first of all we can talk about the results...and have a different way of recording the data and evaluating what it means.” Some principals planned to use specific tools or artifacts. As one said, she planned to “beg, borrow and steal ideas from the Knowledge System to fine-tune” her structures.

2. Asking the right questions. As they listened to data conversations recorded on the videos, participants paid close attention to what principals were actually saying and again saw ways to improve on existing practices. Some concluded that although they had a process in place for looking at data, they might not have been precise enough in their questions about how data reflects the effectiveness of instructional practice. Again, some principals planned to take their “moves” and language from the Knowledge System videos or use specific protocols from accompanying artifacts. As one principal said:

I had created a protocol for teachers to examine student work in their horizontal or grade-level team meetings, but I don't think I was asking the right questions, or asking teachers to pull the right kinds of data to facilitate those conversations.

3. Mobilizing staff around priorities. By improving structures, changing the facilitation of data meetings, and sharpening data conversations, principals hoped to get “more buy-in on where they should be focusing” and ensure that everyone was clear about goals. Perspectives leadership noted that as a network they had narrowed goals and priorities and felt those efforts, in tandem with strategies from the sessions, would help principals mobilize their staff.

Applying New Knowledge

Survey and interview data indicated that principals had begun to implement strategies from the sessions and that those efforts led to tangible results. Survey responses showed that four of the six principals had implemented specific strategies discussed in the sessions. When asked, during interviews, to provide examples, principals noted specific changes in how they worked with instructional leaders to improve data conversations as a result of the sessions. One principal stated, “...it's definitely strengthened me in terms of instructional leadership, with a focus on how to have great data conversations, not only with individual teachers but also with the team.”

According to principals, efforts to put more deliberate structures in place and mobilize staff around priorities also had broad impacts on school culture and added definition to their professional learning communities, the purpose of which had sometimes been unclear and overwhelming.

Areas of practice where principals saw specific and broader impacts included:

Strategic decisions and teacher morale. One principal noted that using a protocol to examine student work in teams and making the decision to look “at three kids only, like a high, a mid, and a low,” a strategy directly borrowed from a video (“I kind of stole her structure and implemented that at the school”), “had an immediate impact on teacher morale.” Describing the way the protocol helped her frame the work of their professional learning community, (PLC), the principals commented:

Teachers were feeling overwhelmed by the initial idea of having this PLC and were unclear on really where to begin. Okay, let's look at student work. I have 180 students. How can we be a little more practical about this? So I'm saying we're going to choose two students from each of the levels, and we're going to focus on their work for a semester and track their progress...It became easier for teachers to be able to do that.

Distributed leadership and ownership. Citing modifications stemming from a session focused on empowerment of instructional leaders—e.g., asking them to conduct data conversations using language modeled in the Knowledge System cases—principals saw changes take hold, including improvements they did not anticipate. One noted that the changes had meant not just buy-in but also ownership from teachers. One principal noted how the changes cascaded from her to the instructional facilitator to individual teachers.

The best example is the data conversation. We were able to come back and really have strong, reflective data conversations where teachers were able to make changes to their re-teaching plans...It started with the AP and myself, [that] started conversations with the instructional leaders and [the] teachers...What changed is the message, where the AP and I were the drivers of the conversation, now the ILS and teachers are able to have these conversations amongst themselves and it's not just us driving them...so I do think EPIC helped me a lot.

Hiring practices. Not all practices described in the Knowledge System cases are instructional, and at least one principal took her cues that affect instruction in a different way—for instance, the kinds of questions a principal asks during interviews and the skill sets they might look for in new hires. One principal commented on how they used an interview protocol and accompanying artifact from a video case to question prospective teachers.

Conclusions & Recommendations

The evaluation's results suggest that the EPIC leadership development model and the Knowledge System video cases acted as a catalyst that gave principals a new lens through which to view leadership. Although there is undoubtedly variation between the principals, there is sufficient evidence to show that the program had a broad and significant effect. For instance, principals are showing dramatic shifts in how they create and structure their PLCs, set protocols for targeted, meaningful discussions around data, and mobilize teacher support for these changes. At the same time, there are real questions to consider about how deep or sustained the impact of exposure to EPIC's leadership development model will be on principal and their schools over time—Perspectives leadership needs to continue to work with its principals to provide additional scaffolding to stimulate and extend their preparation to sustain the short-term impacts.

The following recommendations combine those made by Perspectives principals and leadership and the evaluation team:

- **To deepen and leverage the value of the Knowledge System by introducing it to principals early in the sessions and suggesting how they might use it as a personal resource and with others.** An early introduction to the Knowledge System would ensure that participants understand its scope and what it has to offer. Principals could then explore on their own, which will increase the likelihood that they put strategies to work in their schools and share the resource with faculty.
- **Frame the overall professional development experience for participants so they “think of all the sessions as one professional development effort” and understand that the program is part of the strategic direction of the CMO or district.** The ways principals think about video cases, apply strategies, and consider changes in personal leadership styles may be enhanced if they see how sessions connected—and see professional learning as an ongoing process, linked to their growth as leaders.
- **As part of the collaboration between New Leaders, CMO or district leadership, and the facilitator, differentiate**

the professional learning to not only meet principals where they are , but also help them take the next steps in their development. Ask principals to engage in a self-assessment before the content is set. This self-assessment may prompt principals to be more analytical and honest about their current practice, what they want or need to focus on, and allow facilitators to differentiate the content accordingly.

- **Look at co-facilitation as a way to differentiate instruction.** Having local leadership as a co-facilitator can help balance local needs and the needs of individual principals with the goals of the EPIC program.
- **Take advantage of time between sessions with collaborative assignments, on-site follow-ups, and technology-enabled sharing.** There are a number of ways to bridge the time between sessions. Collaborative tasks could extend conversations among principals. A face-to-face visit or follow-up from the facilitator or leadership personnel could provide help in implementing a strategy. An online discussion forum could support an extended conversation between principals trying similar strategies for similar goals, a whole-group discussion, or an individual update.
- **Build technology tools that allow principals to upload their own videos.** Including opportunities for participants to upload their own videos and artifacts within the Knowledge System would allow principals to capture their ongoing progress and benchmark their practices against other principals. This may also allow principal supervisors greater opportunity to provide critical feedback and insights for the development of schools leaders.
- **Consider including instructional leaders or coaches in the sessions.** Principals and other school leaders often attend different professional development sessions. Because of the emphasis on distributed leadership and empowering faculty, allowing teams of leaders to come together could add new perspective to the reflections and allow participants to model the collaborative activities described in the Knowledge System cases, thus ensuring that strategies and new ideas transfer from session to school.

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MetLife Foundation supports education, health, civic and cultural organizations. It seeks to increase opportunities for young people to succeed, encourage leadership development for teachers and principals, and connect schools, families and communities. Its funding for education is informed by findings from the annual MetLife Survey of the American Teacher. For more information visit www.metlife.org.



New Leaders for New Schools ensures high academic achievement for every student by attracting and preparing outstanding leaders and supporting the performance of the urban public schools they lead at scale. New Leaders was founded in 2000 and operates today in ten cities: Bay Area (CA), Baltimore, Charlotte, Chicago, Memphis, Milwaukee, Greater New Orleans, New York City, Prince Georges County (MD), and Washington, DC. More than a principal training program, New Leaders for New Schools is a national movement of leaders with an unwavering commitment to ensure that every student achieves academic excellence. For more information visit www.nlns.org.

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The Effective Practice Incentive Community drives student performance by rewarding educators in schools making student achievement gains for sharing effective practices with colleagues in their own district and with educators across the country. The EPIC program was founded in 2006 by New Leaders for New Schools and operates in partnership with the Denver Public Schools, District of Columbia Public Schools, Memphis City Schools, and a consortium of more than 140 charter schools across the nation. As of June 2009, more than 65 case studies and profiles of EPIC awarded schools are available on the EPIC Knowledge System. For more information visit www.nlns.org/epic.jsp.

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