



How Many Principals Does It Take to Make a Paper Plane?

No longer a classroom annoyance, paper planes are team building tools for principals who want their schools to fly high.

"Principals are a lot like corporate vice presidents. They manage divisions of highly scrutinized organizations for which they're held accountable, even though they can't control policy or implementation. It's a tough place for a professional to thrive in."

-Larry Coble Ed.D., Director of The Collegium for the Advancement of Schools, Schooling and Education, The University of North Carolina at Greensboro

Accountability Takes Off

For better or worse, school accountability has become a top priority for teachers, administrators and politicians across the country. One result of this trend is that twenty-nine states now allow parents to shop among public schools across a state or within districts, according to Education Week's national public school study Quality Counts 2001.

Florida has taken the "consumer choice" concept a step farther by instituting the first state-wide voucher program in the country. The 1999 A+ Education Reform for High Quality Schools legislation sets tougher standards for Florida schools based on student performance and mandates that Florida schools be graded annually on a scale from A to F. Grades are reported to the public, and schools that fail twice in any four-year period are required to offer state-funded vouchers to students to enroll in another public or private school of their choice. So far, students at two schools in the state have qualified for vouchers.

Another Florida law ties teacher salary increases to school improvement. But most of the accountability rests squarely on the shoulders of Florida's 3,200 principals--in public perception as much as policy.

So principals are using a simulation called Paper Planes, Inc., to gain insight into their effectiveness as leaders and facilitate their school's success with the new accountability legislation. Designed by North Carolina-based organizational development products and consulting firm Discovery Learning, Inc., the simulation has been used in widely varying corporate and educational environments, from pharmaceutical sales teams at Merck to NASA test pilots to teachers, principals and superintendents in school systems in other areas of the country.

Paper planes used to be bad news in the classroom. But now the principals are making them, and it's not just for fun.

Rising to the Challenge

Principals occupy a difficult position in the school system. They aren't on the front lines with the students, like teachers are, and they aren't on the top line of management, like superintendents. In spite of the fact that they're not the ultimate decisionmakers nor implementers, principals are often considered responsible for both sides of the equation.

So Florida has launched an innovative state-wide initiative designed to help school principals develop "CEO-style" leadership strategies. The goal is to help Florida principals ensure that their schools meet or exceed the new standards set by the A+ Education Reform legislation.

The new two-year program, Principal Executive Leadership Development, seeks to give principals the tools to successfully address the high-stakes requirements of Florida's accountability legislation--not just in quantitative terms, such as test scores, but also in qualitative terms, as in rethinking who they are as leaders and how they can facilitate success throughout their entire organization. Funded through the Florida Department of Education and administered by the Florida Association of District School Superintendents (FADSS), the program is open to principals who are nominated by their superintendents. It spans four three-day sessions over the course of several months. The first two sessions offer a mix of state-specific technical training and leadership development, while the third and fourth sessions consist almost entirely of leadership development.

Drawing from training methodologies used with for-profit corporations, principals are thought of as CEO's and are given business-oriented strategies for encouraging school improvement. Group activities called simulations, which allow participants to experience the success or failure of their decisions under controlled circumstances, give principals the added benefit of self- and peer evaluation. Principals leave with a plan for their ongoing professional growth and for continually improving teacher development and student achievement. They develop a better feel for how to facilitate the success of others.

"Most principal training is canned--a speaker comes for a day and that's supposed to make a difference," says FADSS associate executive officer David Mosrie, Ed.D. "But we had to provide both state-specific training and meaningful leadership development that principals could apply in practical ways to improve student achievement in their schools."

Think Like a CEO.

Larry Coble, Ed.D., Director of The Collegium for the Advancement of Schools, Schooling and Education at the University of North Carolina Greensboro, designed much of the program's leadership development component. Recognizing the fact that

principals can't improve schools by themselves, he chose to use Paper Planes so principals could get quick feedback on their effectiveness in teams and apply new ideas immediately.

"Being able to work well in teams is crucial to achieving high performance in organizations," says Dr. Coble. "Although Paper Planes simulates a production process, it helps people experience the improvement in quality that results in any organization when people are truly united in their goals."

In Paper Planes, Inc., participants fill various roles such as airfoil technician, wing cutter and test pilot for a day. The simulation replicates a regular production facility—except the planes are made of paper, and success is measured in terms of participants' ability to reengineer processes in order to work more effectively with others. The goal is to "sell" as many planes as possible to a "customer"--usually one of the simulation facilitators. Planes must meet high quality standards; usually nearly all the planes are rejected during the first round of production.

In later cycles, workers can redesign the production process to their requirements. They then compare their process to the original in terms of cost, quality and delivery time, as well as worker satisfaction. "In this phase they begin to resolve problems and experience the real improvements that result from working within a more flexible, communicative team," says Dr. Chris Musselwhite, the simulation's designer and CEO of Discovery Learning.

In corporate scenarios, the focus is often on reducing cost while improving efficiency among teams. In the education setting, Paper Planes can be particularly effective in helping people understand and manage the gaps between their job descriptions and their day-to-day responsibilities.

Debbie Iseman, principal of Floresta Elementary in Port St. Lucie, Florida, credits Paper Planes with helping her to see beyond her school's role in the many steps required to support high student achievement over the course of an entire student career. "In the Paper Planes exercise I was the test pilot, and it was my job to make sure the plane met certain standards before it could be 'sold'," recalls Iseman. "When people delivered a shoddy product, I was frustrated. But then our team found ways to better communicate with each other about what we needed to accomplish in each step of the process, and our performance improved."

How has this translated into changes in her school? "We use a reading diagnostic at the beginning, middle and end of the school year," says Iseman. "In the past, if a student didn't show improvement, we'd look to the teacher for an explanation, but we didn't always look for further data. Now I ask for more data so we can get to the specific reasons why a student isn't advancing. That way we can get to possible sources of problems."

Paper Planes helps people communicate clearly with each other about what they need

to get the job done instead of making assumptions and harboring resentment, according to Dr. Musselwhite. "After the first production and sales cycle, the workers are frustrated, because the simulation forces them to face conflicts from their real-life workplace," says Musselwhite. "They try to focus on the product rather than the process—and process is crucial when you're working with others to achieve great results."

The entire three-day program gave Iseman a view of the bigger picture of student performance. "If you can't think about the final product--what are these students going to need in middle school, in high school--then you'll never have an effective process for supporting them," says Iseman. "We have started talking with kindergarten teachers about the competencies students must have for fifth grade. I'm visiting middle schools and high schools so I can anticipate those needs. It's been a big 'a-ha' for me."

A proven solution.

"Principals often find themselves operating in a reactionary mode, with little opportunity for reflection," says Dr. Coble. "As part of accountability, they face practical issues, such as how to improve student performance and support teachers, who have little policy-making power and yet must implement policies in the classroom. The Paper Planes simulation allows principals to reflect on their experiences so they can successfully apply their new knowledge in leading high-performance schools. "

Dr. Coble has used Paper Planes extensively in educational settings, most recently in a two-year program called Ohio's Appalachian Initiative for teachers, principals and superintendents in Ohio's twenty-nine Appalachian counties. Specific program requirements were different than Florida's but the overall goal was the same: support high achievement among students. "Just as in Florida, we've used Paper Planes to help participants rely on objectivity in decisionmaking, rather than intuition, and to improve their management and leadership skills," says Coble.

In Florida, preliminary findings are positive. Participants have rated the sessions highly in terms of usefulness and applicability to the challenges facing them. FADSS has also contracted with TaxWatch, a business-funded financial organization with the mission of monitoring government spending, to evaluate the pilot sessions against the proposed outcomes in an effort to measure long-term success. "We'll know more about what the participants got out of the process after the final session," says Dr. Mosrie. "It will take some time to see if this process positively affects student and school performance. But we're optimistic."

Sources:

Dr. Chris Musselwhite, CEO of Discovery Learning, Incorporated, (www.discoverylearning.net) is an expert on adult learning and has designed assessments, simulations and custom programs for human resources trainers, consultants and executives in over 30 countries around the world. Discovery Learning provides solutions for creating learning environments that lead directly to individual, team and organizational improvement. Since 1990, Discovery Learning has been a source of valuable normative data about business managers' attitudes about change, goal setting and decision making. For more information, call 336.272.9530.

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