

Leaders empowering leaders



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—Cathy Nault, principal at Harrison Elementary School in Brainerd

The best gift Cathy Nault has received as an elementary principal was delivered just last year in an unexpected package.

In August 2017, Nault was invited to participate in the Minnesota Principals Academy—a rigorous program designed to create a statewide network of district and charter school leaders with the motivation and skills to create and sustain schools in which all students are on the path to college readiness by the end of high school.

After serving in the education field for nearly five decades and currently finishing her tenure as principal at Harrison Elementary School in Brainerd, Nault said she first learned about the Minnesota Principals Academy two years ago at the recommendation of Brainerd Public Schools Superintendent Laine Larson. Soon after, speaking to a colleague from Thief River Falls, Nault

said the principal raved about the difference the Academy made not only in his career, but also in the interactions with—and skillsets of—his staff.

“I’ve been through how many initiatives since I first entered the district in 1971,” Nault noted, “and this is, by far, the most exciting, most relevant. The Principals Academy truly has opened up avenues between myself and my staff by providing outstanding resources and research.”

The Minnesota Principals Academy was created in collaboration with the Minnesota Department of Education, Minnesota Elementary School Principals’ Association, the Minnesota Association of Secondary School Principals, and the University of Minnesota. It is based on the National Institute for School Leadership (NISL), an initiative of the Washington, D.C.-based National Center on Education and the Economy.

Using the NISL program, the Minnesota Principals Academy enables cohorts of practicing principals to put leadership best practices from education, business, military, and other fields to work on behalf of their students and schools. Delivered in two- and three-day segments over the course of two years, the curriculum combines face-to-face instruction in workshops, seminars, and study groups.

Paul Drange, director of regional programs at Sourcewell, said his staff connected with the University of Minnesota, where the academies and cohorts had been offered in the past, including in the Twin Cities and Thief River Falls. When an application process to host another cohort in outstate Minnesota opened two years ago, Sourcewell and Brainerd Schools co-applied and were selected, as was the Lakes Country Service Co-op in Fergus Falls.

“This cohort model has a strong reputation,” Drange said. “The content and rigor align with other services and training Sourcewell is providing to our schools. The trainers are highly respected and very talented. We believe this opportunity is bringing a high level of value to our region, as the training aligns with current efforts and empowers our instructional leaders—principals—to be the best leaders they can possibly be.”

Through the program, principals across the state have an opportunity to receive a powerful and much-needed source of support as they play critical and challenging roles in improving schools and raising student achievement. The Academy includes content created and led by University of Minnesota faculty, in addition to facilitators who are principals, that is tailored to the unique challenges and opportunities in Minnesota.

Left: Cathy Nault, principal at Harrison Elementary School in Brainerd, said the most impactful training she has received during her tenure came just last year through the Minnesota Principals Academy. Sourcewell and Brainerd Public Schools were selected to co-host this cohort two years ago to provide principals across the state an opportunity to receive a powerful and much-needed source of support as they play a critical role in improving schools and raising student achievement.

Jackie Bruns, education consultant supervisor at Sourcewell, says the Academy has been well received by districts and current participants and has been very powerful as principals learn the “how-to’s” when putting their learning into practice.

“The most beneficial part of the Academy has been the opportunity for collaboration and learning from other principals in Region 5. Topics that have provoked meaningful discussion have included how fundamental changes in the international economy have raised the educational expectations for all students, the three findings of how people learn, what a standards-based instructional system looks like, the importance of teacher development, and how to effectively coach teachers for meaningful professional growth.”

Thirty-four Region 5 principals from Brainerd, Crosslake, Little Falls, Pequot Lakes, Pierz, Royalton, and Staples-Motley school districts are currently participating in the Academy. There are also two principals from Park Rapids Area Schools participating, as well as three from ROCORI Schools. The regional cohort kicked off Aug. 8, 2017, and is ongoing every other month until its culmination on June 13, 2019.

“This is intense professional development for our principals,” Bruns emphasized, “and the learning is relevant and robust, focused on the critical importance of principals being instructional leaders in order to make a difference in student achievement. All of the learning is research-based on what works in schools. The two-year Academy culminates in a day of each principal sharing an Action Learning Project with the participants. The Action Learning Project allows principals to choose an area of growth for their school and apply their learning in their day-to-day work within their buildings.”

Nault said she had no difficulty coming up with ideas for her Action Learning Project. The problem was narrowing it down to just one.

“My Action Learning Project is entitled, ‘High Poverty/High Expectations.’ I will be leading our staff through the research that informs us that, in order to reach our students, we need to build and sustain positive relationships with each and every student and we need to build social and emotional skills for and with our students.”



Nault says the Principals Academy has helped foster deeper relationships not only with staff, but also with her students.

Nault said building positive relationships, particularly in a high-poverty school, is critical, not just with students, but also staff, parents, and the community as a whole.

Harrison Elementary has implemented the Second Step program on a weekly basis for all students. As part of this program, a special education teacher visits classrooms and teaches the Zones of Regulation Skills. These skills help students have another, more acceptable way to express emotions when they're happy, angry, or sad and a way for teaching staff to respond.

“It has already made us a much better school,” Nault said. “This project has helped me focus on providing weekly articles and quotes that address how and why relationships with all of our

students are so imperative to learning and memory. It has also helped me become a better leader, based on research as to why schools of poverty must build a school that has relationships at the heart of everything we do with students.”

Nault referred to a quote by Bill Gates when reflecting on the power of the Principals Academy opportunity: “As we look ahead into the 21st century,” Gates said, “leaders will be those who empower others.”

And this opportunity is a gift Nault said she can continue to pass along to students, staff, colleagues, and generations of leaders to come.

“The Principals Academy is by far the best-designed program for any school leader who wants to improve not only their leadership skills, but those of their teaching team as well. I have three graduate degrees, and Principals Academy is by far the best-designed and delivered leadership program that I have ever attended. It truly addresses collaborative leadership in schools and the amazing results that can be achieved with collective efficacy.” □



Nault (left) participated in a group activity at a recent gathering of Minnesota Principals Academy Participants. Nault is one of 39 principals enrolled in the cohort which meets once every other month until its culmination in June 2019.