Developing Great Administrators
This California school district developed its own principal training program, producing administrators straight from its teaching ranks.

Kristen Nelson

Principal shortages have become a nationwide issue, with education publications frequently discussing the devastating problem of not having enough high-quality candidates apply for administrative positions. The conundrum begs the question: Where have all the instructional leaders gone? To meet the challenge of keeping high-quality principal candidates coming through the front door, Capistrano Unified School District (CUSD) in Southern Orange County, California, has developed the Teaching Assistant Principal (TAP) program—a “build your own” school administrative program—that has produced hundreds of high-quality, well-trained administrators ready to experience the hard work and excitement of school leadership.

Teaching Assistant Principal Program

The TAP program was first created in CUSD in the early 1970s as a way to enable teachers to extend themselves beyond their classroom responsibilities. The position, a teaching assistant principal, was originally designed to provide teachers with the opportunity to experience administrative responsibilities as they make the decision to become an administrator. It is a year-to-year position where teachers and administrators can decide if the administrative position is a good match for the teacher and the school. Candidates, who have served a minimum of three years as a teacher, are selected by their site principal and recommended for consideration by the executive director of elementary school operations or executive director of secondary school operations.

One of the great benefits of the TAP program is that it provides the district the opportunity to train teachers in administration policies, procedures, and culture, which allows teachers applying for principal positions a great advantage. Becoming a TAP gives

One Teacher at a Time
teachers the opportunity to experience school life outside of their classroom walls and to have the satisfying feeling of making a difference in their school communities. Most TAPs are at a place in their careers where they are ready for more responsibility and more say in their school’s policies and procedures. If they want to continue along this road, the decision to move into administration can now be made from a more informative stance and not one of guessing what the job might entail.

In the past 30 years, the program has matured and has been further refined. The TAP program now offers elementary (ETAP) and secondary (STAP) teaching assistant principalships that are delineated as TAP I and TAP II. A TAP I does not have an administrative credential (most are working on their credential concurrently), receives a $1,000 stipend to perform extra duties at school, and remains a member of the teacher bargaining unit. A TAP II has already earned an administrative credential, receives a $2,000 stipend, is not a member of the teacher bargaining unit, and is entering the world of administration.

Though there are many benefits to the program, the challenges of serving as a TAP lie in two areas: extra work and losing teacher status. The extra work of being a TAP is a reality. The teacher already has his or her own classroom and must still do all the work it takes to educate a room full of students, layered with additional administrative responsibilities. The other challenge is that fellow teachers might see TAPs as “going to the dark side” of administration. TAPs can find that long-time colleagues suddenly view and treat them differently. This of course is especially true of the TAP II position, where teachers formally leave the protection of the teacher’s union.

An Inside View

As principal of Las Palmas Elementary School in CUSD, I have found the TAP program to be a lifesaver. With more than 700 students and 50 staff members, having three TAPs on staff provides coverage for many of the details that need to be attended to if we want to be a high-performing school.

Though there is no formal training program for principals, asking colleagues how they best interact with TAPs has greatly helped over the years. In addition, I draw upon my memories of what I really enjoyed the principal teaching me or allowing me to do when I served as a TAP years ago.

TAP responsibilities include a wide variety of activities and responsibilities. These can include: assisting with student discipline, enforcing dress codes, facilitating meetings, organizing schedules, developing curriculum, ordering textbooks, working with parent organizations, and other activities that come up at individual school sites. There is no formal training for TAPs—instead they learn as they go, shadowing site administrators and meeting frequently with the principal and assistant principal to discuss issues and gain valuable insight and advice.

It is important for the principal to remember that each TAP comes to the position with his or her own unique talents, gifts, goals, and dreams. Having up to three TAP participants in a single building is not unusual in this school district because assistant principal positions have been eliminated. It is up to the principal to know these individuals well and to plan their TAP program based on each teacher’s

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prior experience and future goals. For example, here are descriptions of three different teachers and corresponding TAP responsibilities.

**TAP I.** This fourth-year teacher is unsure what her future holds, though she has natural leadership abilities and enjoys the challenges of added responsibility. She is researching possible administrative credential programs. Her responsibilities might include serving as the English-language parent advisory committee co-chair and the study team coordinator for at-risk students.

**TAP II.** This sixth-year teacher has almost completed his administrative credential training and is very motivated to be a principal in the future. He is willing to take on any task but is very busy. His responsibilities might range from serving as the English-language parent advisory committee co-chair and the Red Ribbon Week coordinator to assisting with Friday morning assemblies and with student discipline.

**TAP III.** This 22-year veteran teacher has completed her administrative credential and is a well-respected teacher in the district. She has goals of becoming a principal. The duties she might be responsible for are completing teacher evaluations, ordering textbooks, serving as safety plan coordinator, recess duties and bell schedules, overseeing and assisting lunch supervisors, and serving as acting administrator when the principal leaves the building (no assistant principal position at school).

**Working Relationships**

The principal’s role in scaffolding the TAP’s responsibilities is one of the most critical aspects of the program’s success. If given too much responsibility too quickly, a TAP can become overwhelmed and view the extra responsibilities as negative. If given too little responsibility and too much mindless work (e.g., counting textbooks), a TAP can become bored and decide that administration is not a good fit. With the appropriate balance of responsibility and extra work, a TAP will have the opportunity to significantly contribute to his or her school in a way that is meaningful and fulfilling.

I try to touch base with TAPs on a weekly basis. Sometimes the best I can do during busy weeks is to talk to them during recess duty about their projects, college classes, and what is going on in the school. I always make it a point to ask how their own classroom teaching is going because I want them to know I cherish them first and foremost as a great teacher. It is difficult for TAPs to balance their teaching with administrative duties and I want them to know that their teaching comes first. I also encourage TAPs to let me know if they are feeling overwhelmed or stressed so that I can take responsibilities off their plate and help them focus on what is most important—their students.

One thing I have learned is to take the time to individually mentor TAPs. Because it is easy to get caught up in the “to do” list and only talk about the next project or activity that needs completion, I have found that it is important to share my own thought process on how I deal with specific problems.

**A Win-Win**

I actively encourage teacher leaders at my school to participate in the TAP program because it is important for them to feel they can have an impact on the school as a whole. In our district, the TAP position has grown increasingly important during the past decade since budget reductions forced us to cut all assistant principal positions in the district. The TAP position has allowed principals to continue to have some level of administrative support at their sites while they contribute to the future of the principalship. In CUSD, 55 percent of the site administrators began their journey as a TAP and principal shortages do not exist in this school district.

The TAP position is not for every aspiring principal, but for those who are ready for some extra challenges in their career this program provides an inexpensive option. It is a win-win for all involved. Jose Pedraza served as an ETAP I at Las Palmas Elementary School. “At first I was overwhelmed. I was teaching, going to night school, and now had extra jobs around campus,” he said. “After a few months, I started feeling more comfortable and really enjoyed stepping up in leadership. It has been rewarding and given me a good feel[ing] about what the principal job is all about.”

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**WEB RESOURCES**

The Knowledge Loom, which is developed by the Education Alliance at Brown University, is an active, online learning community that provides promising practices for instructional leadership.

http://knowledgedloom.org

This Web site provides free professional activities and strategies to improve teaching and on-the-job strategies for administrative leadership.

www.teachersontarget.com/index.htm