



*The Support Network for Innovative Principals (SNIP) was formed in 2002 by the Project for School Innovation (PSI). In a series of monthly meetings throughout the school year, SNIP brings together district and charter school leaders to share and reflect on the strengths and challenges of their leadership skills. Each group includes veteran and new school principals, as well as a professional facilitator and peer alumni leader. Veteran educator and retired principal **Joe Petner is a current SNIP facilitator**. Joe recently took a moment to reflect on SNIP, on the power of reflective inquiry, and on the future of school leadership. He makes a case for integrating a sustained process of reflection into one's professional development and reminds leaders of the importance of taking time out to read a good book or two along the way.*

How did you start your career in education? How did you get involved in SNIP?

I was part of the first cohort of SNIP a few years ago, but I've lived my life as an educator. I started teaching in Philadelphia in 1967. I began my first principal job in 1989. I have been facilitating SNIP sessions for a few years now.

Why SNIP? How did you choose to get involved?

I was hesitant to do this at first. My hesitation was largely due to professional baggage. I didn't think public school leaders and charter school leaders had anything to talk about. But in that first meeting I was struck by the sheer amount of common ground there was. That made me see it differently.

What else would you say changed as a result of SNIP?

I have always subscribed to John Dewey's idea that schools are a center for inquiry. Reflection has always been a part of my work. SNIP was powerful because I was doing it with others. The benefit of others perspectives on my own thinking was so important. There is a professional and intellectual reciprocity to this work that is hard to really describe, but it's present all the time in our meetings.

Is leadership lonely?

Yes. Leadership can be lonely. The principal's job can be lonely. Institutionally and systemically speaking, school districts don't pay attention to middle management. The work itself, the work of school leadership, is often focused on the business aspect of things. It's by nature not a reflective job. Reflection is powerful, but it must be done in a sustained way that incorporates many points of view. It's not consequential if the principal is the only one in the building doing the reflection.



Is the job different today than when you started as a new principal?

It's a sad reality that we haven't, as a movement, re-imagined the job of school leader. I know that I tried to be an instructional leader, but my paperwork just kept mounting up and it became very hard to do both. Today it's really a lot worse. There has been a shift in expectations without a parallel shift in the requirements of the job. The responsibility is to a large extent managerial, but there is also a lot of simple clerical work you have to do because teachers and staff do not work the same calendar. That means life can get pretty crazy. For example, I would be doing a lot secretarial work in the summer because the staff was off for the month. It was very frustrating. In all my years there, I could never get my superiors to see that they were paying me a lot of money to answer the phone and take messages.

What are you reading right now?

I read a lot of Jim Collins. *From Good to Great* is really one of the best books out there. Collins is really thinking about the right things. He talks about seeing the change you're trying to create by employing a cycle of inquiry to ask tough questions, collect the knowledge you need, and use that knowledge to manage long-term performance. I recommend it to you.

What is the benefit of having SNIP include school leaders with varying levels of experience?

This process of reflection is an antidote to burnout. As you get burned out you become more cynical. Reflection with a mixed group is very helpful because some of the young principals remind you of why you started doing this all these years ago. There is such added benefit to the individual to be part of a professional community that is dedicated to reflection. Universally, the principals in our group come out of this and say to me, "Joe, this is the best professional development I've ever had."

Why is reflection necessary for leadership?

Reflection is a necessity if we're going to keep good leadership in our schools. Incorporating a practice of reflection is a systemic, cultural change we have to make. It's part of what is at the heart of the issue of leadership burnout. We have technical knowledge, and some cases we have the organizational knowledge to change our schools, but to date we have used this knowledge to create a lot of superficial change at the school level. Where we really need the change is at the system level. We need reflection to be part of principal training programs. This really has to be at scale.



Where do you see this system heading?

We're in a generational shift. I am part of that 1960's generation of educators. There's a lot of us out there right now who are in leadership positions, or about to retire from leadership positions. We weren't left a culture of reflection, but I think it's now our responsibility to create one. It has to be created as part of the practice of leadership. For example, look at the medical rounds process. Now that's a process of critical reflection. It's made the medical community better. It can happen in education if we're committed.

--Adam Sapp

To learn more about SNIP click here:

[http://www.psinnovation.org/what we do/support and study groups/snip](http://www.psinnovation.org/what_we_do/support_and_study_groups/snip)