Center for American Progress

Great Leaders for Great Schools

How Four Charter Networks Recruit, Develop, and Select Principals

By Simmons Lettre and Neil Campbell   October 3, 2016

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Introduction and summary

Highly effective principals are the lynchpin to a school's success. They create the vision for the school and the strategy to get there. They establish a school culture and hold staff accountable for meeting their rigorous goals. Most importantly, principals hire, support, and manage effective teachers to guide students toward high academic achievement. They are much more than the building managers of yesteryear, making sure the heating system is working and the teachers are in their classrooms. They are instructional leaders who reflect on their own practice, help teachers reflect on theirs, and ensure educators have the support and coaching they need to help students meet high expectations. Clearly, great principals matter.

While not studied nearly as much as teachers, research shows that the total direct and indirect effects of principal leadership accounts for 25 percent of in-school factors that influence student performance, and principals are second only to teachers in terms of school-level influences on student outcomes.[1] Principal impact also touches all students attending a school in a way that individual teachers cannot, and when schools have the highest-performing principals, all students across the building post gains.[2] Furthermore, studies have shown that frequent principal turnover has a negative effect on school performance and teacher retention, with those effects being most harmful in high-poverty and low-achieving schools.[3]

However, recruiting, selecting, and hiring highly effective principals is difficult, especially in urban districts.[4] Annual turnover of principals in the United States is 25 percent per year, with 50 percent of new principals leaving their schools by the end of their third year in the job.[5] Principal hiring practices across the country often lack the rigor, thoughtfulness, and data needed to hire the right talent, and according to a study from TNTP—formerly called The New Teacher Project— hiring practices can result in districts, particularly urban districts, "not selecting the best candidates from [their] limited pool."[6] While recruitment and hiring practices do seem to have improved marginally over the past decade, they continue to fall short of what is needed.[7] For example:

- Recruitment is often informal or passive, and urban schools experience a distinct shortage of high-quality candidates in principal candidate pools.[8] One study of 83 school districts found that "the districts with the fewest applicants were those with the most challenging working conditions, higher concentrations of poor and minority students, and lower salaries for principals."[9]

- Many districts rely on internal recruiting, but it is not done systematically or strategically—most likely missing access to great talent. While some districts are building internal principal development programs to bolster the quality of their pool, a TNTP study found that assistant and regional superintendents report that "they had far fewer assistant principals—fewer than half in most districts surveyed—ready to become excellent principals than they had openings."[10]

- Prior impact on student learning is not a critical criterion in many principal selection processes.[11] While districts are beginning to use more formalized rubrics and the process is improving, more needs to be done to align more closely with research-based practices.

- Matching principals to schools is not strategic, leading to an inequitable distribution of principals across schools; the least experienced principals often end up in the highest-needs schools, a result that takes a toll on students of color, low-income students, and low-achieving students.[12]

- Most districts do not evaluate whether or not their recruiting efforts are working using human resource, or HR, data, nor do they link their school performance data to their principal recruiting efforts.

To deepen the education field's understanding of effective leadership development practices and provide models for districts and other charter networks, this report examines case studies of four high-performing networks of charter schools that are generally outperforming other schools in their areas and posting strong graduation rates. The charter school networks featured include Achievement First Public Charter Schools; Green Dot Public Schools; IDEA Public Schools; and High Tech High—which together represent 110 schools. This report shows how these networks identify, recruit, select, and match principals to their schools. While the school models, geographies, and even principal job descriptions may differ, patterns do emerge.

All charter school networks in these cases are obsessed with hiring the right principals. They believe principals are critical to achieving high expectations, and they invest significant resources in building systems designed to ensure they have the right people in the right roles. Specifically, these four charter school networks have built their own formal principal development programs to ensure that they have a pool of high-quality candidates prepared to meet the leadership standards of their networks. Accordingly, their principal pipelines and development programs do the following:

- Clearly articulate a framework for principal core competencies in their network

- Include explicit and thoughtful leadership development opportunities at all levels of the organization, charting transparent paths to leadership in the classroom, the principal's office, and the central office

- Provide aspiring principals significant opportunities to integrate theory and practice and allow them to experience the principal role first-hand with a support system around them that is embedded in schools

- Develop principals with network-specific training to prepare them to lead in the network's context

- Build a principal candidate pool of what are best termed known quantities, where network leaders have worked with candidates for long periods of time before considering them for a principal role, which means leaders know candidates' strengths, challenges, and professional development needs

- Enable the networks to tap a well-qualified talent pool and hire principals internally—90 percent of sitting principals at these combined 110 schools were internal hires with experience serving in a critical leadership role in the network

- Measure results of principal recruitment, development, and selection efforts by the effectiveness of the schools lead by their recruits

- Provide continued job-embedded support and coaching for principals after they are hired

- Emphasize the effectiveness of principals over certification requirements

Innovative districts are beginning to employ similar strategies, and efforts are underway to spread best hiring and development practices across the country. For example, New Leaders has had a partnership with Oakland Unified School District since 2003 that began with training and supporting aspiring principals. The effort now spans from support for teacher leaders to sitting principals and principal supervisors and accompanied district policies providing greater autonomy to principals and more explicitly focusing the principal's role on instructional leadership.[13] The Wallace Foundation is also investing $84 million in six districts over the course of six years to support them in building effective principal pipelines by setting high hiring standards; providing effective training; executing selective hiring; and providing ongoing professional development to principals.[14] Other districts, such as New York City, Boston, Dallas, and Gwinnett County Georgia, are implementing principal development academies to train aspiring principals. While these trends are steps in the right direction, they are not yet widespread.

This report explores how each of these four leading charter networks approach principal recruitment, development, and hiring. It then shares recommendations for scaling best practices across the education sector.

Achievement First
Public Charter Schools

Achievement First, or AF, launched in 1998 with a single school in New Haven, Connecticut—Amistad Academy Public Charter School—and has grown to a network of 30 charter schools in three states. A high-performing network of charter schools, AF students consistently post strong outcomes:

- In 2015, AF schools significantly outperformed New York City public schools in math by 15 percentage points and the state average by 13 percentage points.

- In Connecticut, every AF charter—which is considered its own district in the state—ranked among the state's top five districts for student performance among critical subgroups such as English language learners, low-income students, and students of color in 2015.

- AF's "2015 Annual Report" highlights that 100 percent of graduating seniors were accepted to 4-year colleges, 85 percent of those alumni are first-generation college students, and 85 percent are currently persisting in college.

- AF was also one of three finalists for the 2015 Broad Prize for public charter schools, the top national award for charter management organizations, or CMOs, based on student achievement.[15]

By 2008, AF—which boasts as its brand, "We develop people"—grew to a scale that required it to create efficiencies across its network. Other charter school networks were expanding as well, creating a more crowded sector. AF responded by investing in one of its key competitive advantages—talent development. According to an interview with AF regional superintendent Morgan Barth, "AF's brand is that we're the CMO that develops people—this is a place that you come to grow, get coached, developed, and advance over time via either our teacher career ladder, or the school leadership path." The AF network worked hard to develop a clear leadership opportunity throughout the organization. Elements of AF's success include the following:

Recruit from within

AF focuses its principal recruitment efforts internally. "Recruiting internally reinforces our culture of growth—most of our principals came to AF as teachers and they serve as proof points of what growth, development and career advancement can look like," says Barth. Out of the approximately 50 principals that have worked in AF schools over time, only two were hired directly from external sources. AF has found that the rate of success increases when principals previously know the AF systems, culture, and expectations.

When AF does hire externally, they typically hire for dean roles that are similar to assistant principals, rather than directly to a principal role. This lets new hires deepen their understanding of how to lead in the AF context. AF's school leadership structure includes deans who provide targeted leadership in several key school areas—academics, school culture, and special services. Barth explains that many external candidates for dean roles could get principal offers elsewhere, "but the right people respect that we tell aspiring principals that you need to come to AF, grow, and have a track record of dean success before we consider you for a principal role." Deans are expected to have been successful teachers at AF or other schools and then demonstrate that they can drive results as a dean before applying to join the principal-in-residence, or PIR, program.

Principal-in-residence program

In 2007-08, AF launched its PIR program that has served as a gateway for its principal recruiting ever since. If accepted into the program after the rigorous PIR application process, residents undergo a one- to two-year program where they hone the skills and attitudes needed to be an effective AF principal. Barth explains, "most members of any PIR cohort are internal – typically candidates who have been AF deans for at least two years. We do accept high-potential external candidates—these are folks who are hired as deans that we accept to PIR program." Residents serve as fulltime deans in AF schools while participating in the program, ensuring that their learning is firmly grounded in daily practice.

AF's senior director of principal preparation, Hilary Cymrot, explains in an email that the PIR program is grounded in what they term "leadership competencies," which articulate what it takes to be a successful principal. (See Sidebar) Participants deepen their practice in these competences through practice-based learning, divided into two distinct phases. Phase 1—known as PIR1—residents engage in self-reflection focusing on their leadership, examine self-assessments and student achievement data to build their own individualized learning plans, or ILPs, that include goals and strategies to strengthen core practices. Program directors and mentor principals support residents creating their ILP. The residents, while carrying out their dean duties, take on additional responsibilities that are tailored to promote growth in the most important areas for each resident. In addition, residents participate in the following:

- National Principal Academy Fellowship, offered by the Relay Graduate School of Education, which is designed to build instructional leadership and teacher development skills such as practice-based professional development, leading strong data meetings, and observation and feedback

- PIR Cohort Days where residents learn and collaborate together

- Targeted coaching and mentoring sessions from the school's principal and AF's regional superintendent. Residents receive coaching at least once per month

Upon completing Phase 1 of the PIR program, residents must reach clear benchmarks for promotion, including:

- Achieving measureable positive impact on student outcomes at their current school assignment. Cymrot explains in an email, "At the beginning of the year, PIRs identify the student outcome areas they are responsible for. For example, a dean of students may be responsible for student attendance and suspensions, whereas an academic dean may be responsible for 5th–8th grade math achievement. We then look at both absolute data and growth data."

- Making significant progress toward the goals in the ILP

- Completing the Relay National Principal Academy Fellowship program

- Attending all PIR Cohort Days[16]

Phase 2 of the PIR program is further tailored to residents' areas of growth and future plans. Some residents move to a different AF school to learn from another school leader. Others stay at their current school for the fall semester and then spend the spring semester preparing to open a new AF school.

Principal selection process

AF has codified its principal selection process to include what it describes as a "triathlon of teacher development skills such as lesson observation and feedback, real time coaching, looking at student work, managing a conflict with a team."[17]

All principal candidates, including those who have completed the PIR program, must go through a rigorous hiring process to secure a principal position that includes: the submission of written materials, including their professional growth plan, individual learning plan, and student data. Next, candidates participate in a full day interview that includes three interview modules, each focusing on different leadership competencies. Each of the three interviews is co-led by two senior AF leaders. The senior leaders then review the data and engage in an extensive debrief discussion to make final decisions. The successful candidates are then matched to an AF school that needs their specific talents and strengths.

Barth notes that AF has changed its strategies for matching principals to schools over the years. In the beginning, AF hired its newer principals to run existing schools and its more experienced principals to launch new schools. Barth said AF recently decided to flip that paradigm, learning that more experienced principals are better suited to "succession schools," as they are much larger in size and "greener" principals are more effective in launching the new schools, which begin much smaller in student and staff size.

Evidence of success

AF measures the success of its principal recruitment, selection, and development process by measuring school performance and its ability to fill vacancies with strong candidates. To date, 93 percent of sitting principals are internal candidates, and 70 percent have come through the PIR program.

For AF, building a strong internal principal pipeline program is a win-win. As Barth explains, "An investment in internal [residents] immediately has a positive impact on AF schools. If we are spending time and money resources to develop a principal, that individual is working in an AF school as a dean. That means residents are growing in the role while they are residents—they are becoming better deans, better instructional and school culture leaders, and increasing their impact on student achievement during their two years in the PIR program."

Residency program for school leadership
New collaboration to expand AF's reach

In 2011, Achievement First and New Haven Public Schools in Connecticut launched a joint residency program—a charter-district collaboration to select and train future high-performing assistant principals and principals. Now expanded to Hartford, Connecticut, and Bridgeport Public Schools, the goal of the residency program is to "collaborate to recruit and develop outstanding leaders to serve as the next generation of great principals in traditional district schools in New Haven, Hartford, and Bridgeport."[18]

Both AF and district staff designed the residency program, leveraging best practices from both the charter and traditional school district sectors. Once residents complete the program, they deliver on their commitment to lead in their host district for at least one year. The program is accredited by the Connecticut State Department of Education as an alternate route to administration and supervision certification.[19]

Residents, typically emerging leaders from the host districts, undergo an intense, one-year residency program modeled after the medical profession's training practices. The program rests on three pillars of learning: hands-on residency; a closely aligned cohort learning seminar series; and intensive coaching

and mentoring. Specifically, the program includes the following elements:

- **Residency practicum.** Participants engage in two paid residencies—one in an AF school and one in a district school—where a high-performing principal and a leadership coach serve as mentors. Residents engage in meaningful principal-level work, practice specific leadership responsibilities, and use real-time feedback to reflect on and improve performance.
- **Academic year seminars.** Residents engage in weekly evening seminars to learn, discuss, and practice key leadership competencies such as creating an effective school culture or setting vision.
- **Leadership development seminars.** Two intense, weeklong sessions that focus on management, instructional leadership, fiscal management, district-specific school administration, and leading change in the district context.
- **Ongoing professional development and support**. Residents have formal opportunities to continue to collaborate as a cohort after the program is completed, and receive training, coaching, and access to district and AF professional development experiences.[20]

Matt Taylor, senior director of the residency program for school leadership at AF, explained AF's interest in this partnering with districts: "This is a partnership venture. We want to give back because we knew we couldn't impact all of the kids we wanted to because charter schools are not the full answer." The residency program also informs leadership-training practices within AF. After five years of operation, the program has trained more than 30 principals and assistant principals.

The residency program has built strong bridges between AF and the districts in which it runs schools. School and network leaders across organizations have not only built shared leadership practices but have also been able to play important communication roles between organizations over time. Graduates of the residency program maintain bonds with their mentor principals across organizations and act as ambassadors who can provide colleagues with a more balanced and positive view of each other. Most importantly, program graduates have brought high-impact instructional leadership practices to their districts that are having a positive effect on student achievement in their schools and beyond. The residency program is currently working to expand to more districts and small charter operators in Connecticut that do not have the organizational or financial capacity to develop and offer strong leadership development to their leaders.

Green Dot Public Schools

In 1999, Green Dot Public Schools—a nationwide network of public charter schools—was launched with a mission to "help transform public education so that ALL students graduate prepared for college, leadership, and life."[21] Green Dot runs a portfolio of independent charter schools and transformation charter schools—schools that were once chronically low-performing district schools. Moreover, Green Dot is unusual in the CMO landscape in that its teaching force is unionized and operates under a contract.

Green Dot students consistently outperform their local neighborhood counterparts, both in their new schools and in their turnaround schools. For example:

- All five independent charter high schools that Green Dot launched by 2005 have since been recognized by *Newsweek* and U.S. News and World Report in annual rankings of the country's best high schools.[22]

- Green Dot opened its three Jefferson Cluster schools in Los Angeles in 2006 in an effort to provide new options in the neighborhood surrounding Thomas Jefferson High School, which was the lowest-performing school in Los Angeles at the time. Most recently, Green Dot school students score between 100 points to 200 points higher on California's Academic Performance Index than the neighborhood public school.[23]

- Green Dot has an 89 percent graduation rate.

- Transformation schools are outperforming the district and state schools by wide margins as well. In 2008 in Los Angeles, Green Dot took on the transformation of the Locke High School, a chronically low-performing school. After becoming a Green Dot school, the students are 1.5 times more likely to graduate and 3.7 times more likely to graduate college ready than peer neighborhood schools.

Green Dot Public Schools

Locations
California, Tennessee, and Washington State

Number of schools
23

Number of students
11,000

Racial and/or ethnic diversity
97 percent African American or Hispanic

Socioeconmic diversity
94 percent low income

Source: Green Dot Public Schools, "About Us," available at http://greendot.org/about/ (last accessed September 2016).

Elements of Green Dot's success

Thinking administrators, not just principals

Green Dot Public Schools has created a leadership pipeline throughout the organization, enabling individual growth opportunities from the classroom to the central office. When Green Dot talks about the leadership of its schools, it focuses on its school administrator team that includes one principal, two assistant principals, and a dean for the transformation schools. All members of the administrative team are an integral part of the instructional leadership of the school. Assistant principals direct and supervise the curriculum and guidance program of the school and manage student discipline and attendance. The deans oversee the implementation of the school-wide discipline system, analyzing data and supporting faculty and parents surrounding discipline.

Leaders in each position are responsible for ensuring strong school-wide academic outcomes and play core functions toward that end. Green Dot takes great care in building these administrator teams, balancing team member strengths and areas of expertise to ensure each school's leadership team has the full complement of hard skills—creating budgets, designing strategic plans, and developing systems—as well as soft skills—people management, school culture, and coaching teachers—needed for success.

Looking inside

Green Dot focuses its administrative team recruiting and hiring on internal candidates, according to a phone interview with chief talent officer Kelly Hurley. He shared that 90 percent of Green Dot's current administrators were hired from within the organization. But recruiting for the principal really begins with recruiting for assistant principals. Currently, 80 percent of current Green Dot principals cut their teeth in the assistant principal or dean position. Green Dot believes that playing one of these key roles for three to five years prepares leaders to assume the principal role. Fully, 75 percent of sitting principals have been with Green Dot for more than five years.

Hurley explains that the organization hires in this fashion because it has found that it takes emerging leaders at least one year to learn the Green Dot model, culture, and expectations for successful principals. He describes Green Dot's teacher

evaluation system as specific and deliberate, and that there is a way Green Dot administrators evaluate teachers. To normalize evaluations across campuses, all administrators must be certified in the teacher evaluation system by a Green Dot coordinator before being allowed to conduct an evaluation. In addition, Green Dot principals need to understand the school's contract with the teachers' union and know how to build collaborative relationships with union reps in order to get things done.

Green Dot principals also need to be comfortable with the schools' culture of transparency, which relies heavily on student data to identify individuals' strengths and weaknesses. As Hurley explains, "I was a principal for ten years at a cutting edge district. As an administrator, they left me alone. However, in our organization, you are coached for two hours every other week and it is about accountability around what you are doing in your schools. It is a real eye opener to those coming into it for the first time."

Administrator-in-residence program

To deepen their leadership bench even further, Green Dot created a one-year administrator-in-residence, or AIR, program. The program targets emerging leaders with great talent but who are not yet ready to take on an assistant principal role.

In 2015, the AIR program was approved by the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing to award a preliminary administrative services credential. The credential is available for California AIRs at this time, and Green Dot will consider whether to partner with higher education institutions in other states in the future to expand certification to AIRs in their respective regions.

Xochitl Avellan, Green Dot director of the AIR program, explains in an email:

AIRs begin in July, and are paired with a mentor principal to shadow that administrative team and immerse themselves in the world of leadership from a learner's perspective. They also explore their own leadership strengths and challenges and set individual leadership goals that become the foundation of one-to-one coaching throughout the year.

Developing transformational leaders:
Green Dot Administrator-In-Residence program goals

Instructional leadership	People management
Teacher coaching Professional development Use of data Shared vision of college readiness Curricular program Tiered Response to Intervention	Teacher leadership teams Situational leadership Effective communication Mentorship Conflict management Accountability systems
Resource management	School culture
Time management Resource management Strategic thinking and planning Organizational support	College for certain Safe and healthy environment Reflective practice Families, students, and greater community

Source: Original image from an internal presentation by Green Dot Public Schools.

The AIRs immerse themselves into the program's three primary components:

1. **Relevant curriculum.** The AIR program's curriculum aligns to California and national standards for school leadership, enabling the school to support aspiring school leaders from its entire nationwide network. (See Figure 2) This curriculum permeates the entire AIR program experience and grounds residents in the content they need to be effective Green Dot school leaders.

2. **Collaborative problem solving.** All residents experience significant training, coaching, and professional development. For example, in the Onboarding New Leader Boot Camp and the spring and summer retreats for administrators, AIRs join the administrative team to participate in all of the components involved in kicking off a school year such as summer planning, retreats, and professional development. AIRs participate in weekly seminars with their program cohort and join all Green Dot assistant principals for the monthly administrators' offsite professional development.

3. **Supported immersion.** To provide AIRs an opportunity to practice their new learning, residents rotate through four different Green Dot schools per year, moving to a different site each quarter. As Avellan explains, "They are learning from different types of leaders in different contexts. All leaders in our network implement the same framework, but we put our salt and pepper on it." Avellan says the goal is to have residents see many different leaders "in action" and learn from their varying leadership styles. Finally, AIRs receive regular coaching and feedback from their site mentor, as well as from the program director.

While AIRs begin by shadowing principals, by the end of the program year, they gradually take on increased responsibility. Green Dot uses observations and portfolio data to determine whether or not a resident should be recommended for both the preliminary administrative services credential and for an assistant principal position at a Green Dot school. Not everyone who participates in the AIR program is offered such a role. "They must demonstrate that they are ready to be the assistant principal. It is not just about completing the AIR curriculum," notes Hurley, Green Dot's chief talent officer.

Principal selection is a team effort

When Green Dot needs to fill principal vacancies, the organization draws on its arsenal of assistant principals and, on rare occasions, AIR residents and external candidates. In the case of internal candidates, principals, AIR directors, and cluster directors–who oversee five to seven schools—know candidates' strengths and challenges because they are typically already Green Dot staff who have been extensively evaluated and coached for several years. As Hurley explains,

> *[The selection process] is a collaborative effort by various stakeholders in leadership positions across the organization. These stakeholder leaders spend numerous hours discussing the ongoing progress of the administrator pipeline to determine who is ready for a principalship. These conversations are important in that the decision makers must use data to support their position on why an internal or external principal candidate should be considered.*

Once principals assume their roles, they continue to receive significant support, including biweekly coaching sessions from their cluster director and other professional development offerings.

Evidence of success

Green Dot measures the success of its principal recruitment, development, and matching efforts by the network's ability to fill vacancies, retain principals, and by schools' success. Principal retention is high, with approximately 83 percent of principals continuing at Green Dot over the past three years. Add to that the strong student achievement results, it appears that Green Dot's principal recruitment efforts are working.

"All of the research and our own data supports the notion that a strong principal has a significant impact on the retention, stability, academic achievement, student, and staff culture of a school," explains Hurley. He says that Green Dot strongly believes a school leader must possess all of the criteria outlined in the network's school leader framework in order to be successful. Green Dot understands that it must invest in its pipelines—whether through the AIR program or their assistant principal or dean professional development efforts—in order to have the talent pool needed to deliver expected results.

IDEA Public Schools

IDEA Public Schools is a fast-growing network of public charter schools across the state of Texas that was founded in 2000 in the Rio Grande Valley and now also operates schools in San Antonio and Austin.[24]

IDEA students post impressive results[25]:

• Outpacing their statewide peers on standardized tests for the past 13 years

• A 100 percent college acceptance rate for the past nine consecutive years

• 70 percent of schools in the network outperform the state average

• 85 percent of schools in the network outperform the district average

• IDEA has a 98 percent graduation rate

• National rankings for school quality by U.S. News and World Report and *The Washington Post*

Tom Torkelson, co-founder and CEO of IDEA Public Schools, says in a phone interview that hiring talent is the most important contributor to the success of the IDEA schools and students. "Think of how many kids you are reaching by investing in your team," says Torkelson. "The talent pipeline is the one thing I obsess about."

Preparing for future needs

IDEA works hard to forecast school leadership needs for a five-year timeframe, taking into account the projected principal attrition and the number of new schools opening. It also invests resources in intentional succession planning. To ensure that each campus has a succession plan for leadership, the IDEA central

office meets with principals annually, discussing individuals with leadership potential and asking principals to rate their leadership teams. Torkelson shares that each principal is expected to have an individual designated as an "A player," meaning someone who can step up for them in an emergency.

Principal talent is a particular priority because the IDEA network of schools is growing at such a rapid rate. Between 2013 and 2017, IDEA expects to have doubled in size, growing from 30 schools to a projected 60 schools.[26] To ensure consistency and the continued success of new schools, IDEA must find a large pool of principals to open new schools and also run existing ones.

Recruiting internally

When seeking to recruit new principals, IDEA looks inside—to its own neighborhoods and communities and at its existing team.

When IDEA first launched in 2000, the leadership knew that it could be difficult to attract outside talent from across the country to relocate to the Rio Grande Valley in Texas to a new, untested school. To meet the need of the talent pool, the organization created strong structures and systems to recruit, identify, support, and evaluate the talent already located within walking distance of the new schools. Torkelson points out, "if you have a good model and a good system" in place, one does not have to find superstar principals, but instead, "you can grow them."

An analysis shared by IDEA found that 55 percent of the network's principals hail from neighboring communities, including 73 percent of principals working in IDEA's Rio Grande Valley schools. Moreover, 84 percent of IDEA principals, 50 percent of the leadership team, and 50 percent of board members self-identify as black or Latino/Hispanic.

Leadership recruitment plays a formal role in IDEA Public Schools. The organization has a transparent leadership pipeline that provides multiple opportunities for growth in the classroom, across departments, the central office, or the principal's office. The network provides ongoing support and coaching to help team members prepare for new leadership roles. IDEA fosters a culture that is on a constant lookout for talent and has a concrete system of talent review that ranks all teachers and leaders for performance, enabling the organization to build the talent it needs to scale its schools with quality.

Underscoring the above point, during an interview, Torkelson shared the story of a woman working as a recess monitor who was identified by staff as having great leadership potential. Over time, IDEA asked her to apply for a teaching position, which she took reluctantly because of her concerns about her lack of a college degree. However, with a combination of innate talent, hard work, and support from IDEA, she delivered strong results for her students and soon grew into an instructional coaching position. Today, she is an assistant principal for instruction at IDEA. "Her story is so amazing," says Torkelson. "She had such little confidence when she first joined. She is a superstar." It is this intentionality to create systems for performance review, talent identification, and development that is key to identifying the leaders a rapidly growing system such as IDEA needs.
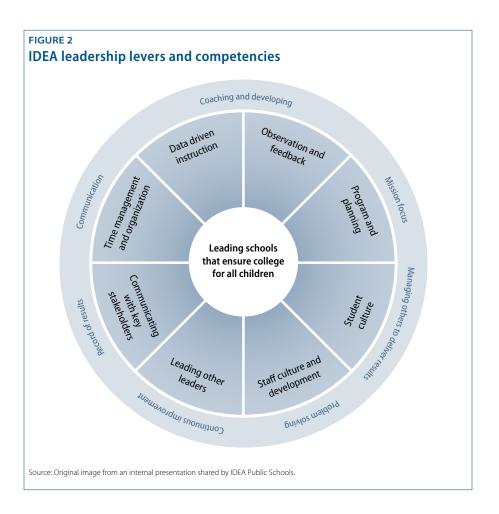
The principal pipeline: Principal-in-residence program

In 2012, IDEA created its principal-in-residence, or PIR, program. The one- to two-year program is "designed to give aspiring principals the 'critical knowledge, skills, and mindset from (IDEA's) most successful leaders.'"[27] PIR participants, or simply residents, undergo a highly selective admissions process grounded in the same standards used throughout the principal hiring process. Once accepted, residents are placed at a campus with a mentor principal for an entire school year and hold responsibilities critical for student achievement. Residents typically spend their second year at a different school, learning from new mentor principals and in new contexts.

Being a PIR resident is a promotion from the assistant principal role. Bethany Solis, vice president of talent development at IDEA, explains in an email that a PIR "is its own specific position and title 'between' the assistant principalship and the principalship." She says residents have formal management roles at their schools while in the program, "This is one of the most important reasons our residency is school-year based so that they can supervise a portfolio of teachers—and, sometimes, other leaders–lead initiatives, and manage key campus work."

Leadership levers

IDEA has outlined the elements key to being a successful principal in its Leadership Levers and Competencies framework that details the actions principals must take to both drive high achievement, as well as eliminate common roadblocks on the path to achieving high standards.[28] (See Figure 2) All

learning, practice, and feedback are centered around these levers. Residents begin their semester by working with mentors and the PIR director to create an individual learning plan anchored in the levers and competencies that describes each individual's "target levers, a clear plan for action, and measures of success for substantial development in these areas."[29] At the end of each semester, residents reflect on their own implementation, growth, and areas for improvement within this framework.

FIGURE 2
IDEA leadership levers and competencies

Coaching and developing · Mission focus · Managing others to deliver results · Problem solving · Continuous improvement · Record of results · Communication

Data driven instruction · Observation and feedback · Program and planning · Student culture · Staff culture and development · Leading other leaders · Communicating with key stakeholders · Time management and organization

Leading schools that ensure college for all children

Source: Original image from an internal presentation shared by IDEA Public Schools.

Practice-based learning

PIR residents spend an average of four days per week with their mentor principal in school. While there, they receive ongoing coaching from the mentor principal through weekly meetings and informal collaboration. Residents also have a leadership coach who meets with them every two to three weeks, observing them on campus, providing feedback on their work, and focusing on progress within their individual learning plans.

Mentor principals work to involve residents in the leadership of the school in authentic ways. Using what it terms as principal moments—a long list of experiences that principals typically manage across the year—this list is one of the ways that IDEA makes the PIR learning process authentic. Mentor principals ensure that residents experience a new principal moment each week and allow them to practice performing in those situations by using an 'I do, then we do together, then you do on your own' process. Residents and mentor principals debrief these experiences during weekly check-ins.

PIR participants also receive trainings with the full cohort of residents, learning from each other and building networks of support that will help sustain them throughout their tenure as principals.

"We believe you learn to lead by leading," reports Solis. "PIRs become ready for principalship by doing the work of a principal in real, significant, and urgent situations, but with the safety net of a mentor principal who models, co-leads, and observes to provide feedback at any moment."

Residents also train to be reflective in their practice, not only through the intense coaching process but also through IDEA formal systems such as weekly written reflections for mentor principal check-ins. In addition, IDEA conducts a midyear and end-of-year individual learning plan evaluation. Residents reflect on their own progress to goals and receive detailed feedback and ideas for ongoing professional development from their leadership coach, mentor principal, and occasionally the IDEA vice president of schools.

The PIR program does not address credentialing because Texas charter-school principals are not required to hold a particular certification.[31] However, most principals do secure certification on their own, typically through a master's degree program.

Sample suggested IDEA principal moments:[30]

- Make and communicate hiring decisions
- Problem-solve morale issues
- Facilitate professional development sessions
- Participate in a vice principal/principal check-in
- Analyze school-wide data and report to staff
- Create the master schedule
- Lead a student recruitment initiative or event
- Manage staff substitute issues
- Attend a governance board meeting

Hiring from a clear talent pool

This constant reflection and feedback loop along with ongoing formal evaluations means that the IDEA leadership knows each potential principal's key strengths and challenges. Solis notes that by the hiring stage, "We know [the candidates] incredibly well," which, according to Solis, makes it easier to create a strong match between a school and a principal.

In most cases, IDEA hires PIR residents to open and lead new schools scheduled to launch in the coming year. Because new schools are smaller, it is more manageable for first-year principals. To apply for these roles, residents identify the schools they hope to lead and articulate why it is a good fit for both the individual and the school. Once selected as an incoming principal, the resident spends the subsequent year completing a fellowship, where they receive intensive support tailored to their needs, specifically focused on transitioning to the principal role and opening a school.

According to Solis, once principals are placed in their schools, they receive significant support from the network. "Our leadership coaching now extends into a PIR's first year of principalship," she explains. "Because we've already spent so much time with them for their year or two in the PIR program, we are able to customize first-year principal coaching completely to the individual principal and his or her manager. The focus and frequency of new principal coaching is 100 percent differentiated, based on what we've seen during their time as a PIR, as well as their new school context."

Evidence of success

IDEA defines success of its overall principal recruitment efforts by the performance of the schools; the ability to fill vacancies with PIR alumni; and principal tenure. Principals who have graduated from the PIR program are showing strong student results in their schools. In fact, while a large majority of IDEA schools outperform the state—and almost all outperform their surrounding local districts—every IDEA school led by a PIR alumnus outperformed both the state and their local surrounding districts.

The network has found that it is, in fact, able to tap into the PIR talent pool to fill its principal vacancies. In the 2015-16 school year, Solis shared in an email that 90 percent of IDEA principal vacancies were filled with a PIR alum. Finally, IDEA also measures success by the number of principals who stay in their role for at least four years, as the average tenure for Texas principals is approximately three years.[32] The rationale is that if the principal is still in their role, they are successfully delivering on their student and school goals. Solis notes that IDEA's "very first PIR to become a principal" will enter his fourth year in that position at the start of the 2016-17 school year. "Every PIR that we have promoted to the principal position since the inception of the PIR program [total of 15] has remained in their role as principal, so we are very much on track to have all PIR-alum principals remain in their roles for at least four years—hopefully more!"

Lynch Leadership Academy

A program linking best practices across education sectors

Lynch Leadership Academy's Aspiring Principal Program, or APP, is an example of executive leadership coaching and training for prospective principals that spans the charter, district, and parochial school sectors in the Greater Boston area. The academy's tri-sector model intentionally leverages the different perspectives and unique experiences gained in each sector and builds cohorts of fellows who not only support each other but also advocate for broader, system-wide changes that can truly effect a critical mass of underserved students across the area. Thaly Germain, executive director of the Lynch Leadership Academy, explains in a phone interview, "People working collaboratively over sectors will make them all better over time—there are different skills those leaders have that are valuable across sectors."

All APP fellows participate in a year-long program that is grounded in a set of core competencies and engage in practice-based, differentiated learning that prepares individuals to serve as leaders in high-need communities. (See Sidebar) A partner with the Carroll School of Management at Boston College, Germain notes that "our leaders in education need the same skills CEOs have to be effective."

Specifically, the APP provides fellows many different opportunities to practice their craft, receive feedback, and engage key stakeholders in the community, including:[33]

- A 360-degree leadership assessment that builds on feedback from those who have worked with the Aspiring Principals, as well as Lynch coaches and team members
- Individual development plans that articulate each fellow's goals for the year
- Year-long residency with a mentor principal in their chosen sector. All residents are embedded in a school, working with the mentor principal and taking on meaningful work. For example, throughout their residency, fellows have the opportunity to lead professional development, facilitate leadership team meetings, observe teachers, and provide feedback
- Each fellow is assigned a leadership effectiveness director who provides 10 hours of individualized coaching each month. Coaching serves as a key component of the program, providing each fellow with the feedback and support they need to grow their leadership[34]
- Professional development workshops during the year provide additional content and opportunities to deepen fellow learning toward their individual goals
- A 10-day summer institute taught by education and business experts that ground fellows in a wide range of topics critical for principal effectiveness such as school culture, data-driven decision making, and educational equity

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The Lynch Leadership Academy principal core competencies:

- **Instructional leadership.** Enhance principals' capacity to promote instructional leadership across district, charter, and Catholic schools

- **Human capital management.** Enhance principals' capacity to improve staff effectiveness, learning, and teaching across district, charter, and Catholic schools

- **Systems and operations.** Develop principals' operational skills and systems knowledge across district, charter, and Catholic schools

- **Problem Solving.** Increase principals' skills to use data to inform decisions and instruction

- **Self-awareness.** Develop principals' skills in distributed leadership and ability to manage up

- **Interpersonal relationships.** Improve quality of relationships between principals and students, staff, families, and other stakeholders

- One cohort retreat that bolsters relationships among the cross-sector fellows, allowing them to learn from each other and provide feedback and support throughout the year and beyond. This retreat also teaches fellows how to "empower and engage their own employees, lead with presence in order to motivate teams, and inspire a shared vision"[35]

Also critical to the Lynch Leadership Academy model is its focus on equity. Germain explains, "We are one of the few programs that does equity work with our fellows—not just teaching people to have conversations about race and equity but also to create systems that provide opportunity for everyone. If you have a critical mass of people who know how to address inequity, they will advocate more."

Lynch Leadership Academy is a learning organization that constantly seeks feedback from its fellows; reviews recent education, leadership, and business literature; and collaborates with other nonprofits and for-profit corporations. "We do a lot of rapid prototyping," notes Germain. "We try things out in small chunks before making larger programmatic changes and measuring impact." She also noted that last year, the leadership academy launched a think tank that focuses on bringing learning from other sectors and companies, including Google, Pixar, and Tesla, with the goal being:

> … *to tease out what practices make those organizations successful and how we [APP fellows] can replicate those practices as principals. We learned things that we would never have thought of, especially in terms of effective management and communications strategies. We try the new ideas out and keep some things and not others. The point is that we are constantly trying new things to learn what gets us the best results.*

Lynch Leadership Academy fellows are posting noteworthy results. A recent evaluation showed that each year, 100 percent of fellows demonstrate growth in all six leadership competency areas noted above. In addition, fellows come out of the program competitive in multiple job markets, and 100 percent have secured principal jobs upon completing the program. Once hired, fellows drive change in their schools as initial data show that student absentee rates decrease and teacher retention rates increase after fellows take over their new schools.

High Tech High

Located in San Diego, California, High Tech High, or HTH, is a network of public charter schools serving elementary through high school students on three campuses. Founded in 2000, HTH describes itself as an equity experiment in social class integration designed to create schools that are socioeconomically integrated and reflective of the communities they serve. To afford full opportunities to students of diverse academic backgrounds, classes are not tracked. Instead, classes are designed to include and focused on core principles such as personalization and connecting with the adult world beyond the classroom. Based on these principles, the small schools are alive with project-based learning, student exhibitions, and students linking their internship experiences with their classroom conversations.

HTH's students earn strong results academically and make an impact in their communities. Results across the five HTH high schools in 2015 included:

- 98 percent graduation rate

- 95 percent of graduating seniors took the SAT and/or the ACT

- 81 percent of graduating seniors were accepted to at least one four-year college or university

- 65 percent of graduating seniors reported that they would be attending a 4-year college or university in the fall

- 43 percent of college-bound seniors reported they were first-generation college students in their families

- 94 percent of HTH's graduating young men of color went on to college, with 53 percent going directly to 4-year colleges; 78 percent of HTH graduates are either still in or have graduated from college—compared to 59 percent nationally—as the network focuses on college persistence

High Tech High

Locations
California

Number of schools
13

Number of students
5,000

Racial and/or ethnic diversity
63 percent students of color

Socioeconmic diversity
42 percent low income

Source: Personal communication and interview with High Tech High.

- HTH students have added value to more than 300 local organizations by way of 1,000 internships where students execute meaningful projects and use their in-the-field learning to inform their classroom learning[36]

Role of HTH directors

Larry Rosenstock, High Tech High's CEO, shares in an interview that he thinks about leadership in his schools constantly and knows that the school leadership role is one of the most important. HTH's school leaders are called directors instead of principals. As shown in Figure 5, HTH articulates the directors' roles beyond the typical job description, and this framework serves as the foundation for director professional development, evaluation, and hiring.

The role of a High Tech High director

1. Hires fantastic teachers and staff
2. Gets it—thoroughly understands HTH design principles; is a "capital L" leader and a "small m" manager
3. Pushes the school project based learning, interdisciplinary curriculum, authentic assessment, no-ability grouping, promoting public displays of student work
4. Removes obstacles that get in the way of teaching and learning; creatively noncomplies with dictates from above.
5. Ensures compliance with necessary federal, state, and district mandates
6. Is solution oriented when problems arise
7. Finds time to think
8. Has integrity
9. Strikes a balance between supporting and evaluating teachers
10. Makes as few decisions as possible
11. Celebrates excellence within the school community
12. Works well with parents
13. Is improving as a reflective practitioner
14. Strives to develop a strong student culture
15. Connects with all students
16. Strives to develop a strong staff culture
17. Maintains a calm presence under fire—"There are no emergencies"
18. Effectively manages the school budget

Developing leaders throughout HTH

Since its launch, HTH has offered formal leadership opportunities at all levels of the organization, and serving as director is only one of many options for growth. Staff members at each school participate in school-based professional development each week, which enables them to pursue their areas of leadership interest and need, try new strategies, and share experiences with other members of staff.

HTH regularly and formally evaluates staff performance. This significant professional development and ongoing performance evaluation not only improves real-time practice across the network but also includes the added benefit of giving HTH leaders key information about its leadership pipeline. High Tech High leaders have a deep knowledge of each team member's strengths and challenges; provide targeted support where possible; and use data to help determine how emerging leaders might fit into different leadership positions across the organization.

This deliberate system of pipeline development has allowed HTH to hire a vast majority of its current directors internally. Even those directors who have come from other school systems have a deep connection and have previously worked within the HTH community. Hiring directors who are deeply involved with HTH is critical, as the model, culture, and vision for the schools are significantly different from many traditional school districts, and HTH leaders take deliberate steps to avoid mission drift.

Looking across the organization

Rosenstock says he thinks about talent strategically across the organization. When he needs to fill a position, among other things, he reviews staff lists and organization charts to build a clear picture for how talent is organized across schools and the home office. He identifies all staff members who might excel in the leadership role he needs to fill and then explores the next move: Who is in the pipeline to succeed this leader? Rosenstock says that he wants to ensure that he is preparing the right people to step up without leaving a vacuum.

Director hires are especially important to Rosenstock, and although he consults with key staff, he is responsible for the decision. To that end, he says he strives to ensure it is the right decision for the new leader, for the school, and for the overall network. In making his director appointments, Rosenstock notes that he looks across the organization at the leadership needs and uses his first-hand knowledge about each prospective director to inform his hiring decisions. "The most important decisions I make are selecting school leaders, so I am always thinking about it," says Rosenstock.

HTH Graduate School of Education

In 2006, HTH decided to launch a graduate school of education. It made that move, not because the network needed a new formal training program for their principals—they already had internal leadership development programs for emerging leaders—but because they wanted to scale their work nationally through a pipeline of reflective, innovative school leaders.

The HTH Graduate School of Education is authorized by the Western Association of Schools and Colleges, and students can earn a master's degree in educational leadership in one to two years. According to HTH, the aim of the graduate school is "to develop reflective practitioner leaders who work effectively with colleagues and communities to create and sustain innovative, authentic, and rigorous learning environments for all students."[37] This program is one of few in the country where the graduate school is embedded in a high-performing school. To explain the rationale for this model, Rosenstock references an idea from Ted Sizer, founder of the Coalition of Essential Schools and former dean of the Harvard Graduate School of Education, stating, "Having a graduate school of education that is not embedded in a K-12 school would be like going to a medical school and never seeing a body."

Currently, there are 43 students enrolled in the graduate school program who hail from HTH, other schools across the United States, and from other countries. Additionally, there are about 200 individuals engaged in HTH's various teacher-credentialing programs. The leadership program's goal is to prepare students who aim to learn first-hand how to create and lead a school that, like HTH, is committed to equity, rigor, and relevance for all students.[38] The goal is to have students prepared to seed and grow schools designed for equity in their communities. Most return to their communities to lead schools using HTH principles.

HTH describes the leadership program as one where students learn "collaboratively in a cohort model spanning grade levels, disciplines and diverse learning environments."[39] Students engage in coursework, fieldwork, coaching, and research to learn the theory and best practices of effective school leadership and explore their own areas of inquiry. Each student creates a personal learning plan that charts their own path toward growth. The graduate school includes the founding principles:

- **Authentic learning.** Graduate student learning is connected to the real world, and GSE coursework and experiences are firmly embedded in the real leadership of a school. Students are placed in a school with a mentor principal within HTH who provides coaching and a daily opportunity to practice the art of leadership. Graduate students engage in a project-based curriculum and fieldwork that builds leadership capacity and meets the California Professional Standards for Educational Leaders. (See sidebar for the GSE program's learning outcomes) Students also have an academic advisor who provides additional coaching and support, and they create digital portfolios that show their progression, learning, and accomplishments.

- **Common intellectual mission.** Students explore their own questions through what is known as rigorous inquiry and regularly reflect on the intersection between theory and practice.[40] This involves conducting research, publishing findings, and sharing work with practitioners and academic communities through forums and their peer-reviewed journal, *Unboxed*, which shares research on adult learning in schools.

HTH Graduate School of Education learning outcomes

Practice thoughtful inquiry and reflection
- Reflective practice: Reflect on and critically analyze their own practice to guide future action
- Connection: Synthesize and connect relevant theory and scholarship to their own practice
- Scholarly inquiry: Design, conduct, and share inquiry that addresses essential questions from their practice

Design equitable learning environments
- Instructional design: Work with colleagues to design approaches to learning that emphasize personalization, connect to the world beyond school, and offer access and challenge to all learners
- Program design: Demonstrate understanding of how the allocation of adult and student resources affects the creation of equitable learning environments in schools

Engage in leadership for school change
- Facilitation: Support and facilitate student and teacher dialogue focused on improving teaching and learning
- Collaboration: Engage colleagues and students in sustained efforts to create equitable, engaging learning environments

Evidence of success

HTH ultimately measures the effect of its director recruiting efforts by the success of its schools. The network's deliberate focus on recruiting, identifying, cultivating, and hiring great talent is one of the key ingredients of HTH's performance.

Recommendations

Policymakers at all levels need to recognize that highly effective principals are critical to student outcomes. As Margaret Young, senior policy director at New Leaders—a national nonprofit that develops transformational school leaders and develops effective leadership policies and practices—explains in a phone interview:

> *Historically, there has been an important investment in teacher recruitment, development, and evaluation, but research shows that great principals have a powerful multiplier effect, improving teacher practice and accelerating student achievement across an entire building.*

In order to ensure great teaching happens in each classroom every day, it is essential that policymakers leverage all tools at their disposal to improve the quality and quantity of the principal talent pool.

- **States should leverage the Every Student Succeed Act, or ESSA, to invest in improving the rigor and quality of principal recruitment and development**. State policymakers wield significant authority over the principal pipeline and overall quality of their state's principal leaders. They approve principal preparation programs and determine who is certified, by what standard, and who has the ability to issue licenses to become a principal. Yet many states do not leverage recent research to improve principal quality, preparation, and recruitment.[41]

  The recent passage of ESSA affords states new opportunities to re-examine their standards and invest in high-quality principal recruitment and development. For example, states can now reserve up to 5 percent of their Title II, Part A allocation for statewide human capital activities and an additional 3 percent can be used—at the discretion of the state—for principal strategies, including preparation, recruitment, and development activities. States should consider using some of this funding to develop—or support the development of—residency models supporting high-need districts and their partners.

States may also apply for the competitive School Leadership Recruitment and Support Program through the U.S. Department of Education in order to improve the recruitment, development, placement, and support of effective principals, assistant principals, and other school leaders. This program "provides an evidence-based framework for seeding models of promising principal preparation, scaling up preparation programs that have shown positive results, and supporting effective professional development for leaders in the field."[42] According to a new RAND Corporation report:

> *ESSA's investment in high-quality school leadership has the potential to benefit students exponentially … While states and districts have new flexibility to use federal funds for activities targeting school leaders, ESSA nudges them to consider whether they will pay off by requiring that federal funds be used for improvement activities that are "evidence-based," and laying out standards for what can be considered evidence-based.*[43]

- **The federal government should increase its investment in school leaders.** While the U.S. Congress provides more than $2.5 billion per year to states and districts for teacher quality programs, it directly invests only $16.4 million annually in school leaders.[44] While the past few years have seen an increased acknowledgement of the importance of highly effective principals, federal funding has not increased accordingly. Fortunately, there are a few bright spots, including the $30 million funding request for the School Leadership Recruitment and Support program included in ESSA, and the U.S. Department of Education's $28.8 million investment in the Turnaround School Leaders program in fiscal years 2014 and 2015.[45] Congress should provide significantly more funding for the School Leadership Recruitment and Support program to reflect the immense need across the country.

- **States should review and revise existing principal core competencies or standards to reflect the latest research on principal effectiveness.** States, districts, universities, and community leaders should work together to review current research and best practices for high-performing principals and dig deeply into the complex skills required to be an effective instructional leader, talent manager, data user, and culture builder. (See Table 1 for a sampling of recommended leadership competencies from New Leaders) Upon state approval, the state should then use these competencies consistently throughout the leader pipeline—preparation, hiring, development, and evaluation. Data showing proficiency in these competencies can also drive in future state investments and evaluations of its principal recruitment, preparation, evaluation, and licensure programs.

TABLE 1
Sample leadership competencies from New Leaders

Competencies	Sample indicator 1	Sample indicator 2
Shared vision, school culture, and family engagement	Develops a shared vision for high achievement and college readiness for all students	Holds adults and students accountable for demonstrating values and behaviors that align with the school's vision
Learning and teaching: The actions a principal takes to drive dramatic student achievement gains through the development and support of effective teaching	Implements rigorous curricula and assessments tied to both state and college-readiness standards	Monitors multiple forms of student-level data to inform instructional intervention decisions
Talent management: The actions a principal takes to develop and maintain high-quality effective teaching staff	Recruits, hires, assigns, and retains effective staff	Increases teacher effectiveness through professional learning structures
Strategic planning and systems: The actions a principal takes to manage and monitor school systems and operations	Identifies school priorities, sets ambitious student learning goals, and implements an aligned strategic plan	Allocates resources to align with the strategic plan
Personal leadership and growth: The actions a principal takes to demonstrate effective leadership through self-reflection, change management, and clear communication	Demonstrates self-awareness, reflection, ongoing learning, and resiliency in the service of schoolwide continuous improvement	Constructively manages change with the ultimate goal of improving student achievement

Note: This list also includes additional indicators that are not listed above.

Source: New Leaders, "Principal Evaluation Rule" (2012), available at http://www.newleaders.org/wp-content/uploads/NL_evaluationrubric.pdf.

- **States and districts should invest in improving existing principal preparation and pipeline programs.** States, districts, charter schools, and universities should explore building their own innovative principal development pipelines to meet local needs. Aligned to revised competencies, these programs should include several components embedded in the schools profiled in this report, such as:

  – Resident, job-embedded, or practice-based learning where aspiring principals actively practice their new learning with the support of expert coaches or instructors, reflecting on their experience and building toward the competencies
  – Partnerships between districts, universities, and community leaders to ensure local programs meet local needs
  – Robust, rigorous curriculum aligned to the competencies
  – Concrete methods to measure progress

- Prioritizing those aspiring principals whose core strengths and challenges make them the best fit for the school's particular context and needs
- Proactive recruitment of high-potential candidates into the programs

Further, states, districts, and charters should explore partnerships across education sectors so that each sector can benefit from effective programs and ensure that all schools have highly effective principals.

- **Districts should identify strategies that enable principals to focus their time and attention on instructional leadership, managing talent, and building a strong school culture.** Many effective charter management organizations, such as the ones profiled above, have developed director of operations roles to oversee technology, food service, transportation, custodial, and other noninstructional functions in their schools. Centralizing operational functions or creating that type of role may be beneficial in some districts, but what is most important is for principals to have the autonomy to manage their teams in ways that allow them to focus on and meet their school's needs.

- **State policymakers should revamp licensure and/or certification programs to raise the bar on quality and create alternative routes to certification.** Historically, state licensure and credentialing systems do not link to the qualities and competencies that are indicative of effective principals. Instead, as New Leaders has recommended, states should "revamp how [licensing] decisions are made—focusing initial licensure on clear evidence of readiness to succeed and basing renewal decisions on demonstrated effectiveness and the expectation of continued success."[46]

Furthermore, states should expand alternative certification programs, using a rigorous evaluation process to ensure programs link to high standards for principal performance. States should consider simplifying the certification process so that high-quality principal development programs can launch efficiently and are held accountable for reaching clear, rigorous standards. According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, at least 31 states and Washington, D.C., allow nonuniversity-based or alternative programs to prepare principals.[47]

Charter school authorizers should also advocate for higher standards for licensure and alternative routes for certification to be assured that the principals in charter schools have the true skills and competencies needed to improve the outcomes in the local charter school sector.

- **Define and evaluate success of principal recruitment, development, selection, and matching efforts.** Districts and schools invest significant resources in finding great leaders—therefore, they should also identify the indicators of success and the metrics they will use to measure whether or not their efforts are yielding the results they need. States should include school quality metrics, as well as metrics that measure the ability to effectively fill vacancies. For example, if a district invests significant funds in recruiting externally for new principals, the district should consider the number of principal hires the district secures from these out-of-district efforts. It should also closely monitor the impact of these new principals: Are they delivering high student results at their schools? Is the investment in external recruiting paying off for the district staff, for example, in filling vacancies, as well as for students, in this case, leading successful schools? If so, the district should consider continuing the practice, and if not, it should consider new strategies.

Local leaders should work to make the role of the principal more attractive and more manageable so the people who want the job are the people who can do it well. For example, consider giving principals more power over their buildings, increasing salaries, and allowing for flexible leadership structures to add more capacity—for example, including assistant principals, deans, or operational leaders.

In the charter sector, charter school authorizers can play a key role by asking hard questions about succession and principal pipelines as schools seek the approval or renewal of a charter. Too often, even long-standing charter schools have no plan for leadership succession, leaving them vulnerable if a transition occurs.

Conclusion

Achievement First Public Charter Schools, IDEA Public Schools, Green Dot Public Schools, and High Tech High are all networks of charter schools that have different instructional models and therefore, slightly different core needs when it comes to their principals. However, all of these schools work toward the same outcome—high levels of student success. Therefore, they are obsessed with hiring the right principals. In order to recruit, develop, hire, and support the principals they need to lead to achieve the results they expect, all four charter school networks developed internal principal development and or residency programs with the following shared core elements:

- **Organization-wide pipelines.** Each network has created a clearly articulated leadership pipeline that allows staff to exert leadership at all levels—from the classroom to the central or home office. These pipelines are key talent pools for tapping aspiring principals.

- **Principal competencies.** Each network has developed a thorough framework that clarifies the competencies of a high-performing principal and drives all elements of principal recruitment, development, and support.

- **Internal recruitment and development strategies.** Ninety percent of sitting principals at each network's schools are internal hires. As the networks grew, they built formal structures to identify, recruit, develop, and evaluate principals, all of which are aligned to each network's principal competencies. Job-embedded professional development is critical to program success, and aspiring principals experience intensive training, coaching, and reflection as they apply their new knowledge in real-time work.

- **Ongoing support for principals.** The networks use data about principals to provide ongoing, job-embedded professional development long after the principal development program has been completed.

- **Measuring success by student outcomes.** All four networks measure the success of their principal recruitment, development, and hiring by the success of the students in their buildings.

States and traditional public school districts, as well as other charter school networks, can implement many of these same components to fit their own principal recruitment and development needs. Many districts and schools already have some of these components in place. But these efforts cannot be ad hoc, disassociated from current research about highly effective principals and ignorant of specific recruiting needs across districts and states. These efforts need to be deliberate, meet local needs, and be implemented in ways that allow aspiring principals to learn and practice their craft so they are ready to meet the high demands of being a principal.

Effective principals are not a dime a dozen. It is hard to find highly talented individuals to play the very difficult and very important role of guiding schools toward success for all students. But they are the lynchpin for systemic, sustained success, and the sector must invest in them at all levels so they can improve the world in a way only principals can—one school at a time.

About the authors

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