



Great Leaders for Great Schools

How Four Charter Networks Recruit, Develop, and Select Principals

By Simmons Lettre and Neil Campbell October 3, 2016

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.

Author's note:

We are grateful for the opportunity to interview Matt Taylor and Morgan Barth from Achievement First Public Charter Schools; Kelly Hurley from Green Dot Public Schools; Tom Torkelson from IDEA Public Schools; Larry Rosenstock of High Tech High; Thaly Germain from the Lynch Leadership Academy; and Margaret Young from New Leaders by phone in order to learn about each organization's leadership development programs. We would also like to thank their colleagues who were generous with their time to answer follow-up questions via email and provide data on topics such as student success in their networks, principal hiring, and principal retention. Data and quotes not otherwise cited in this paper come from these personal interviews and email exchanges. Simmons Lettre conducted these interviews in February and March 2016.

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