

More Principals Learn the Job in Real Schools

Practical readiness, local needs stressed

By **Jaclyn Zubrzycki**

A growing number of principal-preparation initiatives are forsaking university classrooms in favor of much more familiar training grounds: the schools and districts where those aspiring leaders will end up working.

Through coaching and mentorship initiatives, residencies and internships, and other new programs, both districts and university education schools are turning their focus to building practical readiness, in context, and offering continued learning and support for principals already on the job.

Traditional principal-training programs "haven't been as connected to the realities of the profession as they need to be," said Dick Flanary, the deputy executive director of programs and services for the National Association of Secondary School Principals, based in Alexandria, Va. "Universities talk about preparation, and school districts talk about readiness."

Leadership-training programs in Philadelphia; Chicago; Prince George's County, Md.; Gwinnett County, Ga.; Denver; New York City; and elsewhere all aim to give aspiring principals—and in some cases, even struggling midcareer principals—context-specific advice and support from experienced educators. And, in a similar vein, districts in Sarasota County, Fla., in New York state's middle Hudson Valley region, and elsewhere have created homegrown leadership academies and career tracks to supplement university-based principal-certification programs with hands-on experience, mentoring programs, and training in district-specific information and initiatives.

Filling the Gap

"Homegrown programs often set out to fill a gap" in the training provided by traditional principal-certification programs, said Cheryl L. King, the director of leadership for learning innovation at the Education Development Center, a Waltham, Mass.-based nonprofit organization that evaluates and designs education programs and provides self-assessments for university and district leadership programs.

In the 41,000-student Sarasota County district, educators created a leadership academy and mentorship program for leaders.

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"In our experience, developing our own leaders has helped our district maintain its focus on long-term goals," said Lori White, the superintendent of schools. "[Academy graduates] are familiar with our culture and have an understanding of our vision."

Since 2006, 15 of the 25 new principals in the district and 31 of 43 assistant principals have graduated from the leadership academy. The school's leaders credit that leadership flow with the district's top-level A ranking from the state.

That kind of support also appeals to aspiring leaders. David Jones, the principal at the district's North Port High School, said he chose to move to Sarasota County after seeing a presentation on the school system's leadership program.

But such programs are often dependent on a district's budget situation, said the NASSP's Mr. Flanary. "In today's economic times, with budget cuts and scarce and diminishing resources, it's a commitment on the part of a district to create an academy," he said. In some districts, he said, those commitments are not possible. Even Sarasota County has had to put its principal academy on hiatus for a year because of budget pressures. And Mr. Jones said he's seen how the lack of the program has had an impact. One of his assistant principals, he said, "who has phenomenal talent and ability, needs the opportunity to participate in something like that so he can move his career forward."

The district agrees: It is planning to bring the leadership academy back in the coming spring.

Sustaining the Effort

In New York's Hudson Valley, the **Ulster Board of Cooperative Educational Services**, based in New Paltz, managed to continue a principal-training initiative that focused on district-specific content and initiatives even after initial grant funding dropped off.

"The overall value of the program is significant enough that it's no longer in question," said Jane Bullowa, the assistant superintendent for instructional services at the Ulster BOCES. But the program's been unable to build a network with neighboring leadership programs or forge a partnership with the State University of New York at New Paltz, as the creators of the initiative had intended, Ms. Bullowa said.

Elsewhere, districts are increasingly collaborating with universities to provide more coaching and longer-term internships and residencies for aspiring principals. A **2010 paper** from the New York City-based Wallace Foundation found that districts could improve the quality of principals by acting as "consumers," encouraging local universities to craft programs that met their needs. (The Wallace Foundation also supports coverage of educational leadership in *Education Week*.)

The Education Development Center's Ms. King said such training is helpful "particularly in chronically low-performing schools, where context matters so much. Leaders are given an induction into what the experience is like, and how it differs from different contexts."

The **University of Illinois at Chicago's program**, for instance, which is focused on preparing principals to improve low-performing urban schools, puts students in full-time residencies in schools similar to those where they are likely to end up working.

"We didn't believe the best place to train future leaders of Chicago schools was in high-income suburban



Rituparna "Rita" Raichoudhuri, a resident principal at Chicago's Wells Academy High School, instructs teachers on how to discuss standardized-test scores with students.

—Greg Ruffing for Education Week

schools or selective-enrollment schools," said Steven Tozer, a professor of education policy studies at the university and the coordinator of its urban education leadership program. "The right place to develop capacity was in the most-challenging schools."

Working 'Hand in Hand'

Rituparna "Rita" Raichoudhuri, a resident principal at Wells High School in Chicago and a member of the program's first cohort, said her residency had been helpful.

"The biggest learning here has been really learning the day-to-day operations of the school, different things that happen in a day with students and parents," she said. "I work hand in hand with the principal. I'm doing everything he's doing; I'm in every meeting he's in."

Her mentor principal had been in an earlier cohort in the same program.

The University of Illinois at Chicago's program is one of four programs that are part of the Chicago public schools' **Chicago Leadership Collaborative**, through which the district is trying to bring in more principals with internship or residency experiences and whose education has been tied to a set of "principal competencies" outlined by the district.

At Winthrop University in Rock Hill, S.C., the college of education began focusing on coordinating its program with the nearby Charlotte-Mecklenburg, N.C., school system, and now does the same for a number of smaller districts in South Carolina, said Mark W. Mitchell, the program director for education leadership at the university.

"The things you teach are more relevant when you can sit down and talk with your students about what's actually happening in their district," said Mr. Mitchell, who was a principal before he came to Winthrop. "We have to become much more cognizant of how important it is for us to stay current with what's happening in the public schools."

The collaboration with the 141,000-student Charlotte-Mecklenburg system, which now receives funding from the Wallace Foundation, was begun in 2004, when Mr. Mitchell and another former school administrator arrived at the university and set a goal of building a relationship between the district and the university.

Tying universities' programs more tightly to districts also has the benefit of allowing districts and programs to track their effectiveness, said Ms. King of the Education Development Center.

The Chicago program has produced 83 principals in the city's public schools so far. Mr. Tozer said that schools headed by graduates of the program are more than twice as likely to close achievement gaps between students of different racial



Ms. Raichoudhuri reviews paperwork with her mentor principal, Ernesto Matias.

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and ethnic backgrounds.

"We've known for 35 years that a really good principal could transform student learning outcomes in a very bad school—but we have acted as if such principals were born and not made," said Paul Zavitkovsky, a former principal who now coaches aspiring leaders through the Chicago program.

"We have to create the organizational structures," he said, "to take advantage of principals who have succeeded to help pass on to the next generation what they've learned."

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