



FELLOWSHIP

CONNECTS

PRINCIPAL LEARNING TO STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

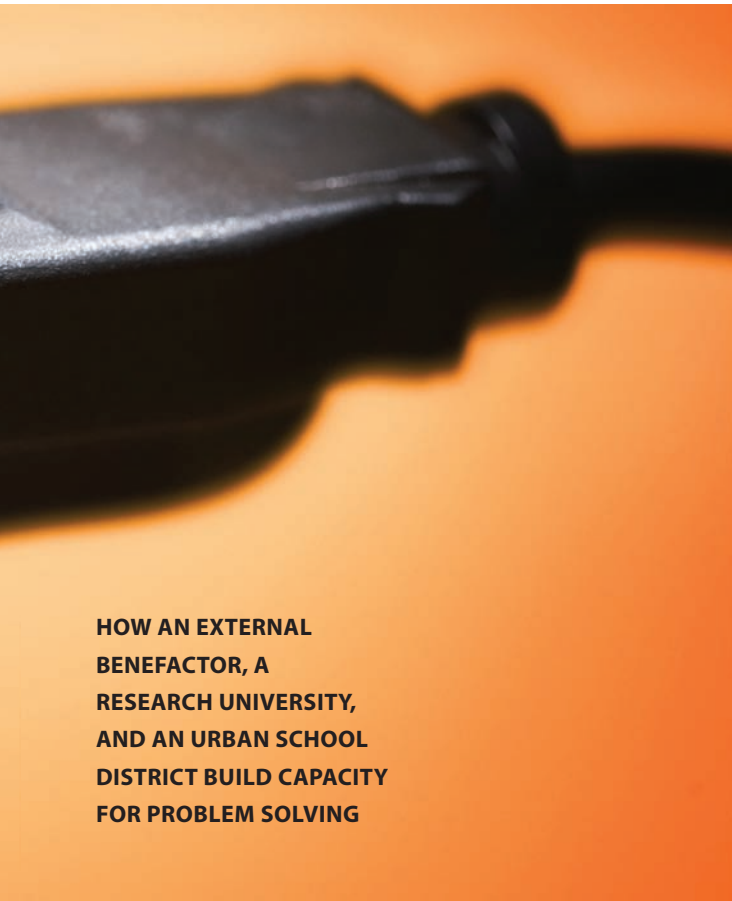
By Krista Dunbar and Robert J. Monson

Much has been written about the disconnect between education research produced in graduate schools of education and the practice of school leaders. We want to share one story of an external partnership that promotes the development of a principal's capacity for complex problem solving and the early research that suggests this partnership is working.

The holy grail of education leadership is that of the principal as instructional leader. Are aspiring principals effectively prepared for this role in the master's degree programs that most states require to obtain a principal's certificate? We think not. At best, these preparation programs require only two to three courses in supervision and curriculum development. Few programs require courses in adult development and complex problem solving.

The graduate school education courses aspiring principals are required to take are usually offered on a university campus, decontextualized from the daily realities of the pre-K-12 classroom. The instructors of these graduate courses are likely to have little knowledge of the content of the other courses in the required principal preparation curriculum. The effectiveness of these programs is often measured by the inputs of preparation, such as whether the course content reflects state and national standards for principal preparation. Rarely, if ever, is the effectiveness of these preparation programs measured by both inputs (what the aspiring principal is supposed to learn) and outputs (how well the principal is able to use this knowledge and these skills to improve teaching and learning). As a result, learning is disconnected from actual application. Some students are able to transfer graduate school learning to their practice as principals; many cannot. And pre-K-12 students are the beneficiaries of that outcome.

With the current political focus on standardized test scores as the means of improving schools, the most common challenge we hear principals articulate is, "If I can get a couple of teach-



**HOW AN EXTERNAL
BENEFACTOR, A
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AND AN URBAN SCHOOL
DISTRICT BUILD CAPACITY
FOR PROBLEM SOLVING**

ers to try a new idea, how do I get the other teachers to buy in?” This is where instructional leadership becomes elusive. This is the challenge that the Cahn Fellows Program for Outstanding New York City Principals takes on as it supports experienced and aspiring school leaders.

THE CAHN FELLOWSHIP

In 2002, philanthropists Charles and Jane Cahn approached Teachers College, Columbia University, to design a part-time, year-long fellowship experience for sitting New York City public school principals who had already demonstrated effective leadership (defined as improving student achievement in significant ways). They recognized a need to honor and support high-caliber, experienced school leaders and believed that investing in leaders who have demonstrated an ability to continuously improve their schools would be the soundest way to make a dramatic difference in the school system.

Each year, 20 to 25 principals with four or more years of experience are selected to be members of a Cahn Fellows cohort based on the consistently high or dramatically improved per-

formance of their students on standardized tests, school environment surveys, and a culture of high expectations as evinced by school visits conducted by the selection committee. Recognizing that great leaders cannot act alone, the program requires that fellows identify an aspiring principal from within their school to mentor throughout the year; these upcoming leaders are called allies. This relationship supports the notion that great leaders should groom their successors, and this fills another void in the system.

Before they can work together as a group, it is important for fellows to meet other outstanding principals in the system and see themselves as part of a high-caliber cohort. Fellows meet in the spring to be publicly honored and officially inducted into the Cahn Fellows Program at a welcome reception. The program deliberately designs experiences to build trust amongst the cohort, which enables leaders to speak openly about their challenges and learn from each other.

The leadership development and problem-based learning curriculum begins with the two-week summer leadership institute, which takes place at an off-site retreat — typically, the Gettysburg National Battlefield and at Teachers College. Fellows first explore leadership by standing where great leaders have stood, analyzing the decisions they made and their outcomes on the battlefield. Over the course of the two weeks, fellows meet leaders from a variety of sectors including business, the arts, foundations, and media and engage in conversations about ethics, human development, innovation, and the challenges that leaders face. Teachers College faculty advisors draw on these discussions as they lay the leadership development, mentoring, and problem-based learning foundation.

Faculty begin by debriefing a thinking preferences inventory to better understand how these affect how fellows and allies approach their work, manage change, and supervise and mentor the adults in their building. They are then introduced to the action inquiry cycle and begin, together, to identify a strategic challenge that they are facing in their school and would like to learn more about during the fellowship.

The challenge project becomes the centerpiece of the year’s

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work. A challenge typically represents a problem or barrier to improving student achievement. For example, how might a faculty increase the quality and variety of student writing in the 6th grade? Or how can the cultural norm of the school that teaching is isolated work be shifted to a belief that teaching is shared work? Fellows are asked to shape the challenge into a question that forms the basis of their inquiry and reflection throughout the year.

Because strong leadership and change management depend on how effectively leaders support and challenge the people within the organization, fellows and allies delve into adult development theory and practices with faculty experts. They apply what they learn from theory to their own mentor/mentee relationship as they focus on the challenge project that they will undertake during the year through case studies and the action learning conversations protocol to investigate assumptions and engage in questioning and reflection.

During the school year, fellows and allies participate in a weekend retreat to continue to refine their challenge project inquiry focus and the roles that they will play in learning more about their topic. Four small advisory groups based on challenge project themes are formed at this fall meeting and led by faculty advisors.

Five study sessions are held throughout the year and are structured to include plenary and advisory components. Each plenary session builds on the action inquiry cycle and provides an opportunity to:

- Describe the initial conditions of the challenge, including important benchmarks;
- Identify key people and factors involved in the challenge and identify data to gather;
- Analyze data and make inferences;
- Plan a new approach with immediate action commitments; and
- Reflect on the new approach and make adjustments.

The advisory meetings build on the plenary sessions and offer a space to check in on each pair's progress, share perspectives, reflect, and make action commitments.

The fellowship culminates in an annual leadership conference held at Teachers College, where fellows and allies showcase what they've learned about their challenge project by presenting to other practitioners, including principals and teachers, New York City Department of Education officials and the broader education community. This event provides a forum for outstanding practitioners to share their ideas and challenges and start a conversation about the most pressing issues they face with colleagues, researchers, and policy makers.

POSITIVE RESULTS FOR SCHOOLS

Since 2003, the Cahn Fellows Program has positively impacted the New York City school system in a variety of ways. It has refocused and re-energized the experienced principals that



IN A NUTSHELL

For successful partnerships:

- **Begin** with interests of each partner and uncover mutual interests (e.g. supporting outstanding leaders in order to improve student learning);
- **Identify** the right partners (outstanding, experienced principals, aspiring principals from within their schools, benefactor outside of Departments of Education, university with strong educational leadership department);
- **Gather** participant data and continuously improve programming; and
- **Measure** program outcomes.

it aims to keep in leadership positions. As one participant said, "It was the first time in 8½ years that I was truly inspired and invigorated. ... I wish every principal in New York City could experience this!"

According to a 2009 study on the program, math and English test scores improved in fellows' schools after they enter the program on par with improvements estimated for new principals over the first five years of experience leading their schools (Clark, Martorell, & Rockoff, 2009). A recent program evaluation found that student absences decreased after their principals enter the program and Cahn Fellows' schools have graduation rates that are 19% higher than the comparison schools (Perkins, 2010). Cahn Fellows' schools had significantly better Quality Reviews scores (New York City schools are subject to Quality Reviews, where a team of expert educators assess the learning and collegial environment of the school) than the comparison schools in the areas of gathering data, planning and setting goals, aligning instructional strategy to goals, and monitoring and revising. Cahn Fellows' schools had significantly better Learning Environment Surveys (New York City mandates that every school administer the survey to parents and teachers) than the comparison schools in the areas of academic expectations, engagement, and safety and respect.

The Cahn Fellows Program activities have evolved over the

years in response to the feedback from participants. The advisory board, Teachers College faculty, and program staff meet several times a year to refocus activities and make adjustments that increase the connectedness across content strands and its application to practitioners' challenges.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ENGAGING INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL PARTNERS

Our experiences with this partnership among external benefactors, university faculty, and practitioners suggest that our collective thinking and commitment has enabled us to design a program responsive to the ever-changing challenges school leaders face. We would like to share some recommendations with those who may be interested in forming collaborative partnerships between external partners and schools.

- 1. Come with an idea and open mind.** Partnerships form around common goals and values and work effectively when all partners are flexible about the specific pathways to reaching a shared destination. The Cahn Fellows Program has evolved each of its seven years in terms of the ways it supports leadership development. For example, in the first years, the fellows selected allies who were new principals leading other schools as a way to "cultivate the next generation of school leaders." When participants, faculty, and staff saw that this wasn't addressing the need to groom successors and instead promoted the principal as the "leader" or the hero, the program shifted the model so that allies are now aspiring principals from within the fellows' schools. The fellows now model distributed leadership and have a succession strategy and a way to make lasting change in their schools.
- 2. Establish and articulate mutual interests.** Principals affiliated with the program want to improve their practice as leaders and increase student learning at their schools. Teachers College, the university partner, wants to deliver significant benefits to practitioners in the field of education. The external partner, or benefactor, wants to see that the schools in their community are delivering high-quality education to students. These mutual interests are manifest in the curriculum and the challenge projects that Cahn Fellows take on.
- 3. External partners especially wish to see demonstrable results from their efforts and investment.** If the original goal of the Cahn Fellows Program was to support high-caliber principals to improve their instructional leadership so that their students can achieve, then these goals must be measured by looking at the school environment and student test scores after principals have participated in the program.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRINCIPAL PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

- 1. Start with the immediate challenges facing the principal.** If we ask principals to spend time away from their schools,

they must see how that time away provides knowledge and skills directly transferrable to making progress back home.

- 2. Use problem-based learning** (we called it the "challenge project") as the primary structure for encouraging reflective inquiry within the faculty. Solving a problem together builds teamwork.
- 3. Teach principals to think strategically about the challenge.** In our experience, the nature of the daily work of principals does not encourage strategic analysis of a presenting problem. Too often, principals respond to the symptom rather than the root cause of the challenge. Learning to identify the conceptual framework underlying the challenge is a key to finding a systemic solution.
- 4. Build trust amongst the cohort by taking them off-site** and exposing them to models of leadership other than in the realm of education. External partners can be particularly helpful with this. Design activities and invite speakers that indicate that they and their leadership are at the forefront of the experience rather than decontextualized experts or mandates.
- 5. Assign principals to groups** with similar challenges so they can collaborate rather than compete. Principals are more isolated given the competition they face to achieve the highest test scores in the school district or the greatest test score increases. This isolation will likely increase if performance-based compensation is introduced.

After seven years, the Cahn Fellows Program has a proven track record of success with principals and demonstrable results on student outcomes. This became a reality only because external partners and a large urban school system found common ground.

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The program is designed to be responsive to the ever-changing challenges school leaders face.