



ASPIRING PRINCIPALS NEED FORTIFIED PROGRAMS TO PREPARE THEM FOR THE CHALLENGES THEY FACE

By Jennifer Gill

Bob Bender had been teaching for only three years when in 2005 he was tapped as principal of P.S. 11, a struggling elementary school in New York City. Many might have called his hiring foolish. After all, how could a novice teacher possibly be ready to turn around a school?

A closer review of Bender's résumé reveals how prepared he really was — and how smart that hiring decision would ultimately be. Bender is a graduate of the NYC Leadership Academy, a nonprofit established in 2003 that aims to shape the next generation of school leaders. Through the academy's Aspiring Principals Program, Bender took courses and spent a year working under the guidance of an expert principal, getting a first-hand view of the ins and outs of running a public school. He joined her on classroom visits, attended faculty meetings, and led special projects, such as overhauling lunchtime to teach kids

manners and respect for the kitchen staff. "She treated me like a second principal, except I was allowed to make mistakes and nobody could yell at me," Bender says.

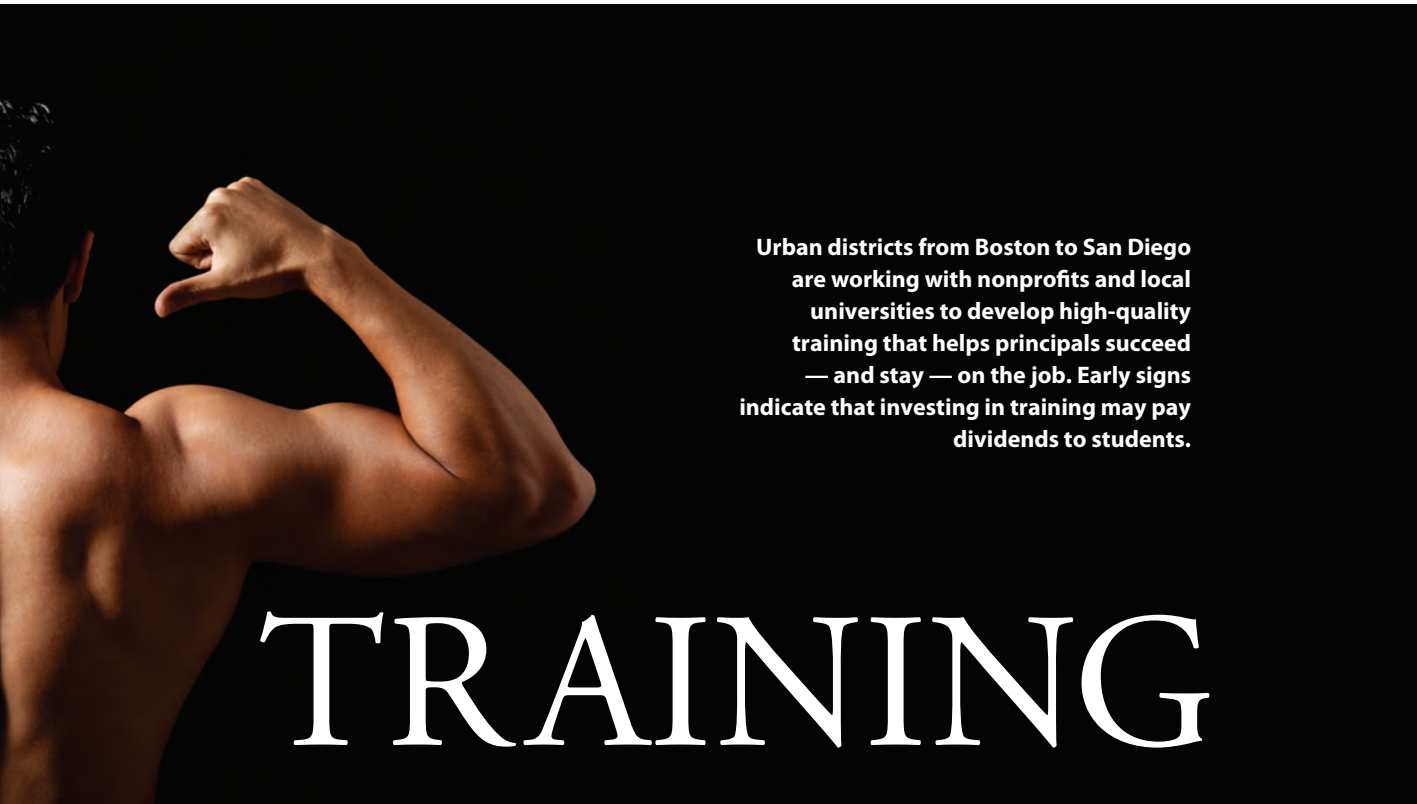
Bender's intensive training equipped him well for the challenges that lay ahead as principal of his own school. Today, P.S. 11 is a transformed place where teachers work closely with Bender on instructional improvements and are held accountable for student performance.



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Bob Bender

A NEW KIND OF JOB

Every district wants its schools to shine, and more are recognizing that, in order to raise performance, they need well-trained principals who can shake up the status quo and create an environment where all students flourish. Indeed, in a six-year study analyzing data from 180 schools in nine states, researchers from the Universities of Minnesota and Toronto found



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TRAINING

that leadership is second only to teaching among school-related factors as an influence on student learning (Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010, p. 9).

But principals who can make a difference, particularly in troubled urban schools, are in a new kind of job, one no longer centered on “books, boilers, and buses.” Instead, today’s principal needs to focus on improving teaching and learning. Virtually all states have taken the first step toward bolstering this type of leadership by adopting new learning-centered standards that redefine the principal’s role. Some are using those standards to push for long-overdue redesigns of training programs. Urban districts from Boston to San Diego, meanwhile, are working with nonprofits and local universities to develop high-quality training that helps principals succeed — and stay — on the job. Early signs indicate that investing in training may pay dividends to students. An independent evaluation of Bender’s alma mater, the NYC Leadership Academy, found that elementary and middle schools led by academy-trained principals showed more accelerated growth in English language arts and math than comparison schools led by other novice

principals (Corcoran, Schwartz, & Weinstein, 2009, 2011).

Unfortunately, strong principal training programs remain the exception, not the rule. Too often, programs, especially university-based ones where the majority of school leaders are trained, inadequately prepare future principals for the challenges that will face them, most notably in schools with high needs.

A recently published report by The Wallace Foundation, a New York City-based philanthropy that works on school leadership matters (and helped finance the NYC Leadership Academy), offers five lessons about how to address the chronic weaknesses in leadership training (The Wallace Foundation, 2012).

The lessons are culled from research Wallace has commissioned and leadership efforts it has funded in districts and states since launching its work in school leadership in 2000.



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LESSONS FOR LEADERSHIP TRAINING

1. Principal training programs need to be more selective.

Too many programs today accept nearly everyone who applies, often with little input from the local school district. Scant attention is paid to a candidate’s leadership competencies or ability to work well with teachers. With such lax admissions, many programs don’t weed out candidates who are more motivated by the raise or promotion that comes with an advanced degree than their desire to run a school. And because the programs often generate revenue for universities, there is little incentive to change.

Exemplary programs, on the other hand, take considerable care in reviewing an applicant’s skills, experience, and leadership potential. Some school systems, such as Gwinnett County, Ga., (Georgia’s largest district) and Springfield, Mass., have adopted online research-based screening tools to identify candidates with the right aptitudes and personality traits to achieve district goals. In many cases, the district takes an active role in recruiting and financially supporting rising stars. According to researchers at Stanford University, two-thirds of graduates from high-quality programs were initially recommended by their districts and/or had some expenses paid for by those districts. That’s roughly twice the proportion

found in a national sample of program graduates (Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, Orr, & Cohen, 2007, p. 65).

2. Aspiring principals need training that prepares them to lead improved instruction, not just manage buildings.

Top-notch training programs prepare future principals to make teaching and learning everyone’s top priority. Aspiring leaders learn how to coach teachers, plan the proper professional development for them, and use data to spot student needs. Coursework goes beyond textbook theories and uses real-world examples that bring the material to life. Trainees at the University of Illinois at Chicago, for instance, take part in a group exercise where they analyze test results of an elementary school class. Through role-playing, they learn how to collaborate with teachers with varying attitudes about change in devising a plan to improve student performance. Later, they discuss how well they handled the situation.

Internships are a common feature of many programs, but all too often they lack the hands-on experiences that a future principal needs before leading his or her own school. Those offered by premier programs immerse participants in fully paid school experiences where they work alongside a veteran principal for

an extended period and get to make actual leadership decisions. When he was an intern, Bob Bender found lessons about leadership awaiting him even when he didn’t expect them, such as when he sat in the office he shared with two assistant principals. “What I learned just from listening to them on the phone or in meetings with parents was invaluable,” he recalls.

One fact school districts need to face is that there are no cheap shortcuts to high-caliber programs, which pay the salaries of participants on leave from teaching or other assignments. Indeed, some districts, among them Springfield, Ill., and Jefferson County, Ky., restrict the number of full-year paid internships because of the cost and a desire to maintain the quality of the experience.

3. Districts must exercise their “consumer power” to raise the quality of principal training so that new hires better meet their needs.

Nothing gets the attention of a program provider faster than a district declaring it will hire only graduates of programs that meet its leadership standards. “Setting standards and applying them to important training and selection decisions is the most common tactic to increase district clout,” notes a 2010 report commissioned by The Wallace Foundation, citing research published by the Education Development Center (Orr, King, & LaPointe, 2010). School systems benefit because they develop a ready-made pool of qualified job candidates. Programs, meanwhile, gain better insight into district needs and can tailor their training accordingly. One hurdle exists, however: The researchers have found that setting standards can take months, even years, to complete. And the effort’s ultimate success hinges on the willingness of district and university leaders to go through the tough work of meshing policies and practices with the standards (Orr, King, & LaPointe, 2010, pp. 45-46).

Some districts are taking a collaborative approach, blending partnerships and lucrative incentives to influence the content of university programs. The school district in Springfield, Ill., for instance, gave preferential status to a leader training program that was based on the district’s six qualities of an ideal principal. Other districts offer scholarships or internships to participants in preferred programs. Still, such efforts can be hard to maintain amid budget tightening or turnover in district or university leadership.

Other school systems are taking the training in-house, creating their own programs or independent academies with curricula tied directly to their needs. Prince George’s County, Md., is establishing a program with the National Institute for School Leadership, a for-profit arm of the nonprofit National Center on Education and the Economy, a Washington, D.C.-based education policy and development organization. The district and the National Institute for School Leadership are jointly designing the program’s curriculum so that it emphasizes instructional improvement over management and includes ongoing

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ing mentoring for new principals.

This approach affords districts the most control over training, but it is also the costliest (Orr, King, & LaPointe, 2010, p. 55). The NYC Leadership Academy has found an innovative way to help support its operations. In 2008, it established a fee-for-service consulting division that advises organizations across the nation on how to improve the quality of their training by adapting the academy's tools and methodologies.

4. States must use their authority to influence the quality of leadership training.

As noted earlier, most states now have standards that define the basic leadership competencies that all principals should have. State lawmakers are acting, too. In 2010 alone, close to half of the nation's state legislatures enacted laws to boost school leadership. Included were a number of measures specifically focused on better recruitment of principal candidates and improvement of training programs (Shelton, 2011, pp. 2-9).

The bad news is that only a handful of states are working in a coordinated fashion with districts, universities, and other training providers to ensure that the standards they have adopted are being met. "The lack of coordination between these different actors within the school leadership system severely inhibits the ability of state leadership standards to take hold regardless of their quality," notes a 2011 report from the National Association of State Boards of Education (Sun, 2011, p. 6).

Still, there are bright spots that show the positive impact states can have on principal training. Kentucky, for instance, requires that universities collaborate with districts in designing their leadership programs and determining admissions criteria. Georgia, Illinois, Florida, and Louisiana are among states that have mandated that universities revamp training programs to be in line with standards focused on student learning. Those programs must then reapply for state accreditation. States such as Mississippi, North Carolina, and Delaware provide funding for recruitment, meaningful internships, or mentoring.

5. Principals need high-quality mentoring and professional development once they're on the job.

It can be lonely and stressful in the principal's office, especially for new leaders who are trying to kick-start changes under challenging circumstances. "No matter what preparation anyone has, being the principal is not the same," noted one new elementary school principal in New York City in a 2007 Wallace Perspective report on principal mentoring. "Nothing prepares you for the job" (The Wallace Foundation, 2007, p. 6).

More than half of states require mentoring for novice principals, but the experience often takes the form of a buddy system that's only weakly linked to district needs. One program receiving high marks is Ohio's Entry-Year Program for Principals, which mandates that new principals work with mentors for two years to receive a full professional license. Participants must

also develop a portfolio that demonstrates their competencies in the state's leadership standards (Sun, 2011, p. 8).

Gwinnett County, Ga., makes use of what is normally downtime to reinvigorate professional development: It sends principals to summer school. Every year, more than 800 new and veteran principals, assistant principals, and other school leaders gather for several days to share ideas and attend workshops on such topics as changing school culture. The district also taps the knowledge of its alumni. Retired principals with track records of turning around schools serve as mentors to principals and assistant principals for their first two years.

FINDING SUPPORT IN TIGHT FISCAL TIMES

As shown here, states and districts are trying different tactics to bolster principal training. But they all face some of the same obstacles, including district and university leadership transitions, insufficient planning, and the difficulties of securing reliable funding for the high costs of first-rate preparation, including internships. The cost of coursework at the stellar training programs identified by the Stanford study ranged from \$20,000 to \$42,000 per participant. (The figures are based on 2004-05 data.) Paid internships added greatly to the final bill (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007, p. 103, pp. 107-109).

A 2011 analysis of the education systems in five countries where students consistently outperform their U.S. counterparts, however, begins to make a case for better supporting future leaders. All five countries, the book's foreword says, "invest in high-quality preparation, mentoring, and professional development for teachers and leaders, completely at government expense" (Tucker, 2011). There may be another reason for investment in training: slowing the turnover of principals in U.S. public schools. The average school gets a new principal every three to four years, according to the Minnesota-Toronto research (Louis et al., 2010, p. 173). This can carry a steep price, in both student achievement and a district's bottom line. While no one has yet studied the impact of better leadership training on turnover, officials at the Jefferson County (Ky.) Public Schools see a connection. They credit a high-quality training program, developed in 2002 with the University of Louisville, with a 70% drop in principal turnover between 2005 and 2010 (Mitgang, 2010, p. 18).

Providence, R.I., has stood by its principals despite numerous challenges. Over the last decade, its training programs and extensive coaching and professional development have endured four superintendents, five chief academic officers, and severe fiscal strains. When funding from The Wallace Foundation for its programs ended, this cash-strapped district managed to assume

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It can be lonely and stressful in the principal's office, especially for new leaders who are trying to kick-start changes under challenging circumstances.

Rural schools face challenges that are very different from their urban or suburban counterparts. Fewer resources supporting rural schools mean smaller staffs and larger responsibilities for everyone. At the same time, rural schools and districts must meet the same standards as their larger, better-funded counterparts. One key to making the most of meager resources is to develop teacher leaders who can share their expertise with student, fellow teachers, and administrators alike. The recommendations outlined here illustrate that teacher leaders are an invaluable resource for rural schools.

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Strength training

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all of the costs. It pays about \$26,000 per participant for pre-service training, \$240,000 a year for principal coaching, and as much as \$700,000 annually for professional development. Who are among the program's most vocal advocates? Its graduates, some of whom now hold top district positions and have a say in funding decisions.

The Providence effort is not the only one with alumni convinced that solid training is essential for success in the modern principalship. Just ask Bender. "It was kind of outrageous for me to think that I could be a principal," he says. "I had only taught for three years, period. The leadership academy provided me resiliency and focus. Its format is next to brilliant. Not until I had my own building did I realize how well I'd been prepared."

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