

# STEPPING STONES *to* LEADERSHIP

## DISTRICTS FORGE A CLEAR PATH FOR ASPIRING PRINCIPALS

By Amy Burrows-McCabe

**A**s the stakes for improved student achievement increase, administrators, teachers, and districts are looking for quick fixes. When Glenn Pethel, assistant superintendent of leadership development in Gwinnett County, Georgia, is asked for quick fixes, he responds, “Here is what we know [about leadership]: It is not quick, and it is not easy. It’s not magic, and it’s not secret.”

The Wallace Foundation has invested in a comprehensive strategy for developing a larger corps of effective principals. The Principal Pipeline Initiative, launched by The Wallace Foundation in 2011, is working to strengthen school leadership by documenting and evaluating leadership development in six urban districts. The goal is to find out what works.

Consider Molly McAuliffe, who started her

teaching career 11 years ago. She never thought of becoming a principal. She loved the students and the classroom.

However, her district — Georgia’s Gwinnett County Public Schools — had in place a system to identify leadership potential. Early in McAuliffe’s career, her principal saw her leadership qualities and gave her instructional support and mentoring. He made sure that she was aware of professional learning opportunities.



Molly McAuliffe

McAuliffe took advantage of those opportunities and tackled growing leadership responsibilities in her school and district. Because the district had developed clear standards guiding what the expected outcomes for its leaders should be, McAuliffe had stepping stones to follow.

She felt ready to tackle new challenges. In

2009, she became the internship coordinator at the Gwinnett School of Mathematics, Science, and Technology. She built on her training and collaborated with business partners in the community who were essential to the internship program's success.

She joined a community leadership governance committee. In the business community, she again saw the importance of leadership, networking, guidance, and support. With success behind her, professional evaluations aligning her work to district goals, and multiple examples of good leadership guiding her, she realized, "It was time to take the next step."

McAuliffe started the rigorous application process for Gwinnett County's Aspiring Leader Program — a program intended to foster leadership skills for educators wanting to become assistant principals.

The application required that she demonstrate what she had done to share her knowledge with others in the county. The district used the PrincipalInsight web-based interview tool designed by Gallup to document the required skills (Gordon, 2013).

McAuliffe was accepted, finished the training, and completed a required residency position as a summer school assistant principal. This fall, she will become assistant principal at Peachtree Ridge High School in Suwanee, Georgia.

McAuliffe has systematically followed a pathway created by her district. "My mentor had completed the Aspiring Principal Program earlier, and I have had

the outstanding opportunity to shadow many others," she says. "I am not worried. I feel prepared for the challenges."

McAuliffe exemplifies a professional in the early stages of the process described in the Principal Pipeline, a six-year initiative to research and document best practices to support a corps of highly effective principals (Turnbull, Riley, Arcaira, Anderson, & MacFarlane, 2013). She was identified and nurtured early in her career. To strengthen her skills, she took advantage of standards-aligned ongoing professional learning, evaluations, and mentoring.

To document her leadership development and potential, McAuliffe's district uses a leader tracking system that includes information about any relevant professional learning and supervisor feedback. The platform helps the district identify future leaders and was part of the selection process to move McAuliffe into an assistant principal role.

The goal is for McAuliffe to move from an assistant principal training ground to becoming a principal who can lead change. A decade of research has es-

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tablished that leaders are key to student classroom success (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004) and much work has been done to establish how leaders can guide schools to better teaching (Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyer-son, & Orr, 2007).

#### THE PRINCIPAL PIPELINE INITIATIVE

Understanding the need for principals with strong training, The Wallace Foundation drew on 11 years of research to launch the Principal Pipeline Initiative with six participating school districts that already demonstrated commitments to the four components identified as crucial to building capacity for effective leaders: leadership standards that align work, evaluations, and support; preservice preparation, including highly selective admissions; selective hiring in which the district uses a consumer approach; and on-the-job evaluation and support (Turnbull, Riley, Arcaira, Anderson, & MacFarlane, 2013).

The six districts participating in the initiative are: Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, North Carolina; Denver Public Schools, Colorado; Gwinnett County Public Schools, Georgia; Hillsborough County Public Schools, Florida; New York City Department of Education, New York; and Prince George's County Public Schools, Maryland.

Now two years into the initiative, decision makers are looking for evidence of what a strong pipeline looks like. An evaluation by Policy Studies Associates (Turnbull, Riley, & MacFarlane, 2013) collected and reviewed qualitative data,



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including interviews with 113 administrators and surveys of novice principals and assistant principals.

Evaluation of the six districts showed evidence of these desired features in all of the targeted programs:

- Selective admission;
- Standards-based content;
- Problem-based learning;
- Cohort models; and
- Clinical experience.

The types of leader support vary, but the essence is that all of the districts have brought in help to support capacity building of coaches, mentors, and supervisors.

## PIPELINE SYSTEMS IN ACTION

### Prince George’s County

Prince George’s County Public Schools is one of the districts participating in the Principal Pipeline Initiative. Doug Anthony, executive director of the office of talent development for the district, says, “Work is an ongoing evolution of best practices. We need to be publicly transparent about the direction we’re moving, and we’ll continue to make inroads.”

Anthony says the district has shifted its focus to collaborative professional learning and revamped its curriculum under the guidance of the National Institute for School Leadership, a provider of professional learning for school leaders.

Principal professional learning is now more grounded in theory and instructional improvement and less focused on management. The district has instituted residency and clinical requirements.

This shift in approach is forcing the district to think differently about professional learning, focusing on adult learners’ needs. There are no more sit-and-get trainings.

Another priority is alignment of resources. A leadership group meets weekly to coordinate the district’s initiatives. This ensures that valuable resources aren’t siphoned off in many directions. “It keeps us moving forward,” says Anthony, who is helping to lead that change in a complex county school system that serves a diverse student population from rural, urban, and suburban communities.

In Prince George’s County, 90% of first-year principals and 40% of assistant principals receive coaching and mentoring (Turnbull, Riley, & MacFarlane, 2013, pp. 46-47). Anthony says succession planning is important to the district, which offers leadership opportunities to assistant principals so the pipeline will continue to support well-prepared leaders.

Anthony cites better coordination and a strong vision from the district’s chief executive officer. “We are more thoughtful about where we put resources now,” Anthony says. “We also look for new sources of support, including outside partnerships.”

### Gwinnett County

In Gwinnett County Public Schools, visionary leadership

is also committed to developing principal leaders on a large scale in Georgia’s biggest school district. Because of tremendous growth over the last few years, the district has added 53 principals and 133 assistant principals.

To manage these changes, the district turned to the use of analytics to track leader data with an electronic leader tracking system. While many schools track student data, the leader tracking system includes data from teachers and principals over the course of their careers and holds the data in a central depository.

Data include what professional learning teachers and principals have participated in and why, the impact of the learning, the mentoring or support in place, conversations that have occurred, and the main focus of support.

A dashboard gives a quick overview, but users can drill to deeper levels (IBM, 2012). McAuliffe benefitted from the district’s individual tracking and evaluation. Glenn Pethel, assistant superintendent of leadership development, says the leader tracking system “has empowered us to do our work.”

Using data to track and inform professional learning goals is called for in the Principal Pipeline Initiative. Districts are encouraged to work with external partners to accomplish these goals both within districts and between districts and university programs that graduate educational leaders.

## PRESERVICE, SUPPORT, AND PARTNERSHIPS

The Policy Studies Associates evaluation of the Principal Pipeline progress also focused on preservice opportunities, support for novice leaders, and the role of partnerships in preparation and support.

### Preservice

All six districts were building on strong preparation experiences in instructional leadership. The cohort model, problem-based learning, and clinical experiences were widespread. Content instruction tailored specifically to a district was not as widespread but was growing.

The average time frame of five years for typical principal preparation was seen as too long for effective implementation of change. This points to the need for developing a large number of assistant principals who hope to become principals as key to building capacity in the pipeline (Turnbull, Riley, & MacFarlane, 2013).

### Support for novice leaders

Districts implemented changes to improve the support systems already in place. Effective strategies included:

- Individual goal setting with supervisor and/or coach mentor;
- Weekly 90-minute one-on-one support sessions;
- Small cohort group professional learning communities;
- Executive coaching focused on leadership behaviors;
- Mentoring provided by trained, high-performing principals;
- Analysis of principal time use; and

- Nonevaluative feedback (Turnbull, Riley, & MacFarlane, 2013, p. 43).

In Gwinnett County, first-year principals interacted regularly with lead mentors who were retired principals. The new leaders do a lot of shadowing to increase their perspectives. Second-year principals might also work with mentors. Some principals participated in a professional learning process developed for school administration management and received coaching on time management and instructional leadership (The Wallace Foundation, 2011).

All new leaders are assigned mentors — and can't opt out, Pethel notes. "Having someone to support you and be a confidante and someone who understands the job at a deep level is essential," he says.

New leaders and mentors are expected to make a two-year minimum commitment, and the expectation is for frequent and ongoing communication. "Most [new leaders] are overjoyed that there is someone out there pulling for them," Pethel says. "They candidly discuss their frustrations and other struggles."

Gwinnett County also offers different tracks of support for different leader training. The Quality-Plus Leader Academy provides a leadership development model that drives improvements in seven areas. The goal is to impact and improve student achievement (Cheney, Davis, Garrett, & Holleran, 2010, p. 143).

In Prince George's County, novice principals and assistant principals receive coaching and content-specific professional learning. All first- and second-year principals are assigned a mentor principal trained by the National Association of Elementary School Principals. The district also worked with the School Leaders Network, including monthly meetings focused on problems or practice for principals and assistant principals.

Districts reported facing several challenges in supporting novice leaders. District leaders want to support new principals in taking initiative and leading change — not just in complying with district directives, as principals had expected to do in the past (Turnbull, Riley, & MacFarlane, 2013). This represents a change from the traditional culture of the school districts.

Long-term funding also presents a challenge. Jody Spiro, director of education leadership at The Wallace Foundation, says, "One of the greatest hurdles is to find ways to keep mentoring and coaching going at the system level."

The Policy Studies Associates evaluation reports that some districts believe mentoring is an extra and a volunteer role or that districts chose to staff coaches for other areas but not for principal leaders. The evaluation notes the need for a sustainable model so that roles are clear and integrated with other district priorities (Turnbull, Riley, & MacFarlane, 2013).

Survey results from participating principals and assistant principals show the need for a stronger link between professional learning and mentoring and coaching. "As districts move forward in developing their evaluation systems, it will be critically important that they systematically connect evaluation feed-

back with support, as the Principal Pipeline requires," the report states (Turnbull, Riley, & MacFarlane, 2013, p. 51).

### Partnerships

All six districts in the Principal Pipeline Initiative put serious effort into forging university and organizational partnerships for their programs in leader preparation or novice support (Turnbull, Riley, & MacFarlane, 2013, p. 63).

Prince George's County has forged strong connections with many outside partners, including the School Leaders Network, to organize and facilitate peer learning for new principals and assistant principals. Some novice principals also participated in the network's professional learning.

The district expanded its participation in the National Association of Elementary School Principals' Leadership Immersion Institute, where mentor principals develop knowledge of adult learning and techniques to help adults develop strengths to become effective leaders (Turnbull, Riley, & MacFarlane, 2013, p. 46).

The Quality Measures for Education Leadership Systems and Programs, developed by the Education Development Center, has been used in many districts and includes tools and indicators for assessing leader preparation programs using a data-based process.

The evaluations are centered on six program components that draw from the work of effective leadership preparation by Darling-Hammond and colleagues (2007). These components include: course content and pedagogy, clinical practice, recruitment and selection, and three components related to graduate performance outcomes (Turnbull, Riley, & MacFarlane, 2013).

Conditions reported to foster positive working relationships with outside partners include clarity in roles and responsibilities from the beginning of the relationship, frequent communication through established channels, and accountability around clear objectives.

Other contributing factors that were traced to good working relationships include leaders or champions who had previously worked with the district or the partner and outside incentives driving collaborations.

For example, university training programs that require clinical placements were required to collaborate with districts in order to secure those placements. Hurdles to district-university collaboration included state accreditation requirements that made it difficult to adjust curriculum or student requirements.

Tying universities' programs more tightly to districts also has the benefit of allowing districts and programs to track their effectiveness (Zubrzycki, 2012). Outside partners can provide specific leadership skills, including instructional leadership and change management that district level coaches and mentors need to help principals develop.

Partners also bring expertise in coaching techniques and

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**sional learning.** Educators need some form of collecting data on their practice as well as growth or progress in adopting new practices or acquiring new skills (EdSurge, 2014).

The research on disruptive innovation, Lepi's list of preferred technologies, and EdSurge's work to scan the professional learning landscape have had considerable impact on how Learning Forward designs its learning offerings and particularly how the organization approached the 2014 conference content and design.

Conferences no longer can be one-event wonders quickly forgotten once the conference program and notes are discarded, but rather must be part of attendees' ongoing, long-term personal learning network that uses blended learning, social media, and mobile learning as part of their professional learning tool box.

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protocols, i.e. refraining from solving problems but instead asking questions that facilitate principals' on-the-job learning (Turnbull, Riley, & MacFarlane, 2013).

## PULLING THE PIECES TOGETHER

Ongoing evaluations continue for the Principal Pipeline Initiative. As districts head into the next school year, changes that foster success for student outcomes continue. And the data show progress: In Gwinnett County, 94 out of 112 recent graduates from leadership programs were promoted into new leader roles.

Spiro sees these changes as positive. "Partnerships with business sectors, teachers, and other districts can help streamline resources and open up other opportunities," she says. Strong leadership and vision can pull all of these pieces together.

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