

HILLSBOROUGH'S PRINCIPAL PIPELINE

ALIGNED LEARNING STRENGTHENS LEADERSHIP IN FLORIDA DISTRICT

BY TRICIA McMANUS

The path to principalship in Hillsborough County Public Schools in Florida is not one taken lightly. After receiving the Wallace Foundation Principal Pipeline Initiative grant, Hillsborough was one of six districts that developed a comprehensive principal pipeline based on four key components: leader standards that define the role of principal, quality selection and preservice training practices, effective hiring practices, and on-the-

job evaluation and support to provide coaching and ongoing professional learning.

To become a principal, teachers must first obtain Educational Leadership Certification and enter the Hillsborough Principal Pipeline. After serving as an assistant principal and successfully completing the Preparing New Principals program, they can be matched with a principal vacancy. But even after they become a principal, their professional learning continues.

As the district's assistant superintendent of educational leadership and professional development and a former principal, I have a direct view into the efforts the district has undertaken to elevate and improve professional learning. Historically, Hillsborough's professional learning for instructional leaders was described as a one-size-fits-all, sit-and-get experience. There was virtually no follow-up on professional learning. The district lacked a formalized mechanism for gauging



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professional development's impact on improving principal, teacher, and student outcomes. Principals had little access to coaching and were limited in whom they could go to for support.

That changed when the Florida Department of Education awarded the district an Instructional Leadership and Faculty Development grant to develop and implement a one-year professional learning pilot program for principals throughout the district for the 2015-16 school year. The model, Leaders Engaged in Accelerating Performance, or LEAP UP, aligns individual principals' professional learning needs with strategies designed to address

challenges unique to each district area.

Area leaders, a largely managerial role, became area superintendents responsible for supervising school leaders and strengthening their practice in instructional leadership, managing and developing people, and building relationships. With this shift, Hillsborough redesigned principal network meetings to allow for principal professional learning and collaboration.

MODEL FOR SUCCESS

LEAP UP's goals were twofold. First, the aim was to provide principals with relevant, timely meetings to improve their practice through

aligned learning goals and job-embedded learning. The second goal was to provide area superintendents with autonomy while at the same time shifting their role to focus on supporting principals' professional learning.

LEAP UP's implementation incorporated input from the chief of schools, the executive director of leadership and development, area superintendents, and principal coaches. Intended outcomes included:

1. Area superintendents and principal coaches will provide guidance and support to principals in discovering and

writing the two competency-based goals that drive each principal's professional learning for the year.

2. The chief of schools and executive director for leadership development will support area superintendents and principal coaches by facilitating a session to map out goals for principals in each area, looking for trends, and planning professional development for the year.
3. Area superintendents and principal coaches will facilitate training for principals related to the areas of school culture, developing teacher practice, and improving instructional expertise.
4. The chief of schools and executive director of leadership development will receive planning, coaching, support, and guidance to ensure implementation of professional development, ongoing collaboration between area superintendents and coaches, monitoring, and course corrections as needed.
5. Principals will embed practices learned through area principal learning sessions into their daily practice with teachers and students.
6. Area superintendents and principal coaches will use a principal goal tracker to monitor the effectiveness of development supports in improving instructional practice of principals.
7. Area superintendents and principal coaches will observe and coach principals while they are working with individual teachers and groups of teachers on key focus areas.
8. An outside consultant will

EVALUATION QUESTIONS

The following evaluation strands and questions were central to the evaluation.

Progress monitoring questions addressed:

1. To what extent were the program's components implemented consistently with the program plan?
2. To what extent did key participants participate fully in all program activities?

Formative evaluation questions addressed:

1. What adjustments were made to the program components?
2. What were the opportunities for program improvement?

Program impact questions addressed:

1. To what extent did the program positively influence the target population's behavior?
2. How likely is the program to continue beyond the funding period?

provide individual coaching and support to each area superintendent and principal coach as they work with principals in the field and plan follow-up professional development related to the core topic areas.

PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT

LEAP UP implementation included three broad phases: preplanning, planning and goal setting, and coaching and delivery. In the first phase, the chief of schools and executive director of leadership development designed the overall LEAP UP model for developing district leaders through continued

coaching and professional learning. In addition, in preparation for LEAP UP implementation, external consultants led train-the-trainer sessions to prepare area superintendents and principal coaches.

During the second phase, the consultant and district leaders worked with area superintendents to identify and assess area priority challenges and identify professional learning goals for all principals. Designed to honor the unique character and address the specific needs of each area, the group developed a professional learning system for principals based on area priorities and individual learning needs. The consultant began mentoring area superintendents and monitored their progress.

In the third phase, area superintendents implemented small-group meetings and professional learning communities (PLCs). A consultant observed sessions and provided individual coaching to area superintendents. Because the sessions would coincide, the consultant relied heavily on self-reports of progress, reserving in-person session observations for those where the greatest needs existed. Feedback was based on the identified needs of each area and according to the key tenets of adult learning theory.

EXTERNAL EVALUATION

The grant provided for an external evaluation that addressed three objectives: monitoring LEAP UP delivery, gauging implementation and identifying opportunities for its improvement, and determining indicators of LEAP UP's impact on principals.

The evaluator's role was to amass data, develop credible yet timely findings, and provide LEAP UP leaders with regular feedback through reports, facilitated discussion, and collaborative inquiry. The evaluation would thus serve both as a reporting function as

well as one of continuous improvement. The box on p. 38 lists the evaluation strands and questions that were central to the evaluation.

As the district refined the program throughout implementation, the evaluation team supplied frequent data analysis summaries to LEAP UP's leaders, followed by facilitated conversations that explored the implications of findings, redirected or added new evaluation activities (e.g. new participants, new protocol questions), and led to program adjustments.

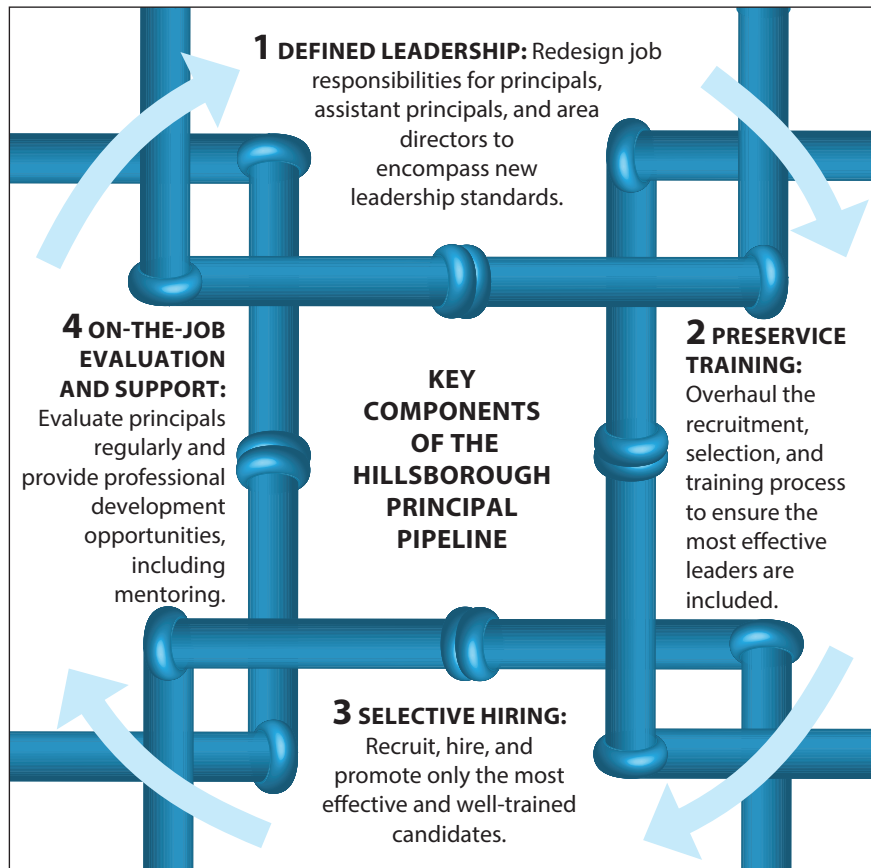
EVALUATING LEAP UP

The program evaluators gathered and analyzed evidence that would be used to improve LEAP UP's model, gauge its implementation, and assess its impact.

The district asked the evaluators to facilitate a collaborative review process. To make the evaluation findings as useful as possible, the project put a strong emphasis on engaging key stakeholders throughout the process. Ultimately, the evaluation was designed to collect credible information, share findings with its intended users in short time frames, and simplify the integration of relevant information into a continuous feedback cycle for LEAP UP.

The evaluation gauged the extent to which area superintendents and principal coaches were sufficiently prepared, willing, and positioned to participate in planning, coaching, and monitoring aspects of the program. In addition, the evaluation examined whether principals reported receiving the professional learning they needed. The evaluation team used a mixed-methods approach to assess professional learning needs, capacity, provision of professional learning activities, and use of follow-up, monitoring, and supports.

The evaluation also sought



stakeholder-recommended opportunities for improving the process and models and gauged perceived outcomes.

COLLECTING DATA

Evaluators collected data in three ways:

- 1. Exploratory interviews and focus groups:** Early on, evaluators conducted unstructured and semi-structured interviews with the project director, the project's data manager, and the external consultant. Evaluators also conducted focus groups with area superintendents, principal coaches, and a sample of principals.
- 2. Thematic interviews:** Evaluators conducted semi-structured interviews with all

principal coaches, a random sample of principals, and the LEAP UP project director to home in on topics of interest.

- 3. Corroborative interviews:** Evaluators conducted structured and semi-structured interviews to gather targeted self-assessments and feedback from area superintendents and a sample of three randomly selected principals (one from each school level) representing each area.

Evaluators used 81 interviews or focus groups to inform the findings in this report. Among these, the evaluation team conducted interviews or moderated focus groups with 46 principals, nearly one-fifth of all public school principals in the district. Because the evaluators collected information from so many key stakeholders across

areas and levels, the findings are moderately robust.

PRINCIPALS’ ASSESSMENT

Most principals echoed the words of one who said that “while the district has historically provided good professional learning for principals, none came close to this school year’s level of quality and relevance.” Many other principals described what they called a dramatic change from previous years’ sit-and-get experiences to a focused learning and support system that includes dialogue, flexibility, and collaboration. All stakeholders described the actionable, problem-solving orientation of LEAP UP as a marked improvement over previous years’ professional learning systems.

Most principals said they appreciated the plan to integrate continuous timely and targeted improvement feedback throughout LEAP UP’s professional learning and the collaboration created through PLCs. In Area 4, 83.7% (a 28.5% increase) of teachers agreed that professional development provides ongoing opportunities for teachers to work with colleagues to refine teaching practices.

In Area 8, the main focus for professional learning was teacher feedback. Principals learned from national expert Robyn Jackson about differentiating teacher feedback based on a teacher’s will and skill level.

This was further extended by offering job-embedded opportunities to practice differentiating feedback through focused principal PLCs. During these PLCs, Area 8 principals learned to fine-tune their teacher feedback and feedback systems as they visited schools and collaborated on the one piece of feedback that would improve instruction. Of the principals who participated in these quarterly Principal PLC Feedback sessions, 71% maintained or increased their school grade.

Feedback that was direct and targeted to meet the needs of individual teachers was a key aspect of the grant. In Area 4, 73% of teachers agreed that professional development was differentiated to meet the needs of individual teachers, up from 54% in 2015.

In Area 8, one principal remarked that a challenge he has always faced was giving feedback to the teachers who are highly accomplished or exemplary in their craft.

By hosting a PLC session at his school that focused on fine-tuning feedback for these high performers, he was able to collaborate with colleagues who helped him improve his ability to provide high-quality differentiated feedback to each teacher.

In Area 7, all principals interviewed commented on the benefits of their PLC in applying the learning at their schools.

Other assessments of LEAP UP include:

- **Professional learner input:** Many stakeholders, especially principals, said that LEAP UP improved the use of principal input in the learning process. Several principals stated that having more input into topic choices improved relevance and motivation. Some principals, however, said that, at least in their area, there was still limited opportunity to share their voice or actively participate in professional learning.
- **Small-group sessions:** Small groups were a central feature of professional learning for principals. Most principals said that, overall, they were very satisfied with small-group sessions and that the sessions were more effective in reaching principals than meeting formats used in the past.

IMPACT ON STUDENTS

Most importantly, LEAP UP had a positive impact on student learning in 2016. In Area 4, 92% of teachers responding to the Teaching, Empowering, Leading and Learning survey said that the professional development enhanced teachers’ abilities to improve student learning, up from 62% in 2015. Additionally, 90% said that professional development enhanced teachers’ ability to implement instructional strategies that meet the diverse student learning needs, up from 58%.

One key indication of improved student achievement is the fact that the graduation rate for Hillsborough schools increased by 3%, from 76% in 2014-15 to 79.1% in 2015-16. Additionally, Hillsborough is closing the achievement gap for minority students. In 2016, graduation rates increased:

- From 67.6% to 72.9% for Hispanic males;
- From 68.5% to 74.6% for African-American females; and
- From 58.6% to 64.7% for African-American males.

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Hillsborough County’s LEAP UP implementation shows that investing in the professional learning of its school leaders leads to a more effective and enhanced school learning experience for all.

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