

BOSTON STRUCTURE SUPPORTS SCHOOL LEADERS

BY JENNIFER WELSH TAKATA

Bettie Nolan began her career in public health administration as a high school nurse in Boston Public Schools. After witnessing the challenging experiences of many adolescents, particularly pregnant teens, she concluded that access to better educational opportunities could support better life choices. As a result, she decided to become

a school administrator in the hope that she could improve the quality of education for youth.

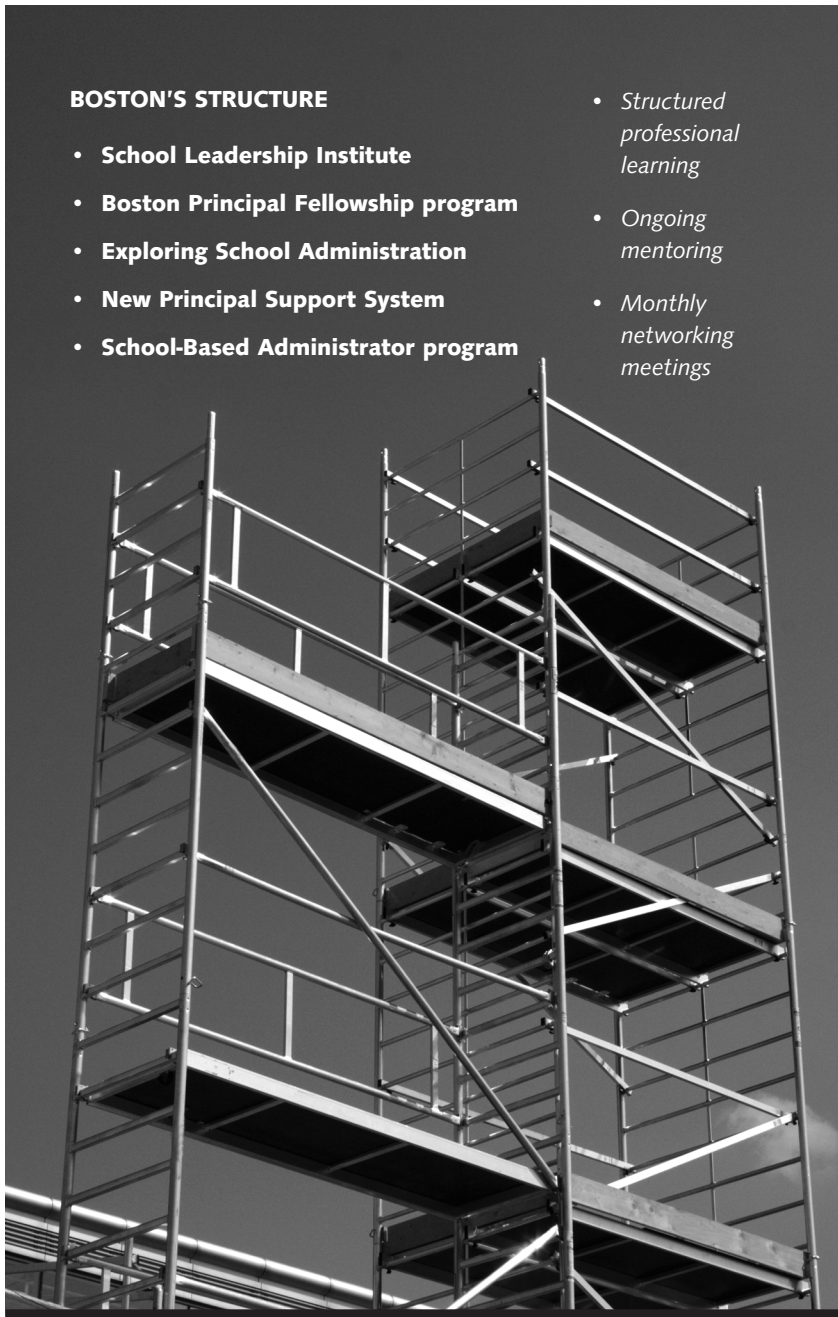
Nolan's decision led her down a path that she describes as "phenomenal." She applied and was accepted to Boston Public Schools' Principal Fellowship program, which prepares and supports the continued development of the district's aspiring and novice school leaders. Nolan's sentiment echoes that of other fellowship alumni who laud the direct route into

school administration that the district's programs provide.

Boston Public Schools, winner of the 2006 Broad Prize for Urban Education (see box on p. 25), creates innovative programs to develop school leaders based on the idea that "school leadership is the single most important factor in schools' success" (Boston School Leadership Institute, n.d.). Teachers play an invaluable role in determining the quality of classroom instruction, but a principal is, in the

BOSTON'S STRUCTURE

- **School Leadership Institute**
 - **Boston Principal Fellowship program**
 - **Exploring School Administration**
 - **New Principal Support System**
 - **School-Based Administrator program**
- *Structured professional learning*
 - *Ongoing mentoring*
 - *Monthly networking meetings*



words of former Boston superintendent Thomas Payzant, the “teacher of teachers” who envisions, implements, and supports high-quality learning environments (Rubenstein, 2006).

The district’s leadership development programs evolved under Payzant’s direction in 2002-03 as part of a school improvement effort initiated in 1995. Through analysis of best practices in the field, Boston identified the “Essentials of Whole School Improvement,” a framework that has received national recognition for its results (Boston Public Schools, 2004). The framework’s emphasis on leadership and professional learning led to the creation of the School Leadership Institute, which serves as the major pipeline for developing Boston Public Schools leaders.

THE BOSTON PRINCIPAL FELLOWSHIP PROGRAM

While the district offers a range of programs to recruit, develop, and support leaders, the Boston Principal Fellowship program is particularly notable. This one-year urban principal preparation program features opportunities for participants to receive hands-on experience four days a week with an experienced school leader. The fellowship includes full-time placement with one of Boston’s strongest principals, 90 days of seminars and coursework, a Massachusetts Initial Principal License, an optional master’s degree, consideration for administrative positions in Boston Public Schools, and membership in a lifelong professional network. Approximately one-third of those exiting the year-long program move directly into a principal or headmaster position.

The fellowship begins with a summer intensive session made up of five weeks of coursework to prepare the participants for their residencies. The courses, covering topics such as the history of schooling in Boston, leader-

ship, and learning and teaching, are designed around key elements of leadership defined by the district to align to the district’s whole-school improvement principles.

In the fall, fellows begin their school-based residency four days a week and meet on Fridays to continue their coursework. Every course focuses on a particular theoretical perspective, and fellows implement a related practical project at their school site with the support of their mentor. For example, one fellow conducted an audit of race equality at her school and developed a plan to address chal-

“looks from the inside for certain instructors” so that, for example, the fellows learn about budgets from the district’s budget department. Fellows believe that such opportunities enhance their learning by enabling them to “network within the greater school system,” according to Cox.

Program leaders have learned that there are three critical factors that prepare future principals for success.

Factor 1

The first is the cohort of fellows, which provides a critical support network during residency and principalship. Fellows recognize the value in

Broad Prize for Urban Education

The Broad Prize for Urban Education is an annual \$1 million award created to honor urban school districts demonstrating the greatest overall performance and improvement in student achievement while at the same time reducing achievement gaps among ethnic groups and between high- and low-income students.

Each year, five finalists are selected from 100 eligible school districts across the nation based on academic performance data, site visit observations, and interviews with district administrators, teachers, principals, parents, union leaders, school board members, and community representatives. To learn more, visit www.broadprize.org.

lenges that she witnessed. Twice a month, fellows participate in residency seminars, where a panel of principals addresses best practices on the topic. The first seminar of the month is designed around the fellows’ interests and particular learning needs; the second seminar is based on the monthly theme, such as family and community engagement or race and culture in schools.

All program coursework and learning is designed to support the specific urban needs and challenges of Boston Public Schools. The program’s senior leadership team aligns learning topics to the district’s key challenges, such as closing the achievement gap and supporting family and community engagement in schools. Emily Cox, a program fellow, says the district

the peer network they gain as part of the program. Given the isolated nature of their position, principals appreciate finding “ways to stay enthusiastic, current, and in sync with the world outside their small buildings,” said Valdez. According to Cox, “The program does an incredible job in selecting a diversity of fellows who support each other’s learning and open each other’s minds.” While the average tenure of principals is declining nationwide, virtually all of the principals from the first fellowship cohort have remained in the same school for three years following their appointment, according to an informal review conducted in 2006. Therefore, support networks for principals may prove to be powerful tools in increasing principal retention.

Factor 2

Additionally, the school residency gives fellows an opportunity to

JENNIFER WELSH TAKATA is program analyst at the Broad Foundation. You can contact her at jtakata@broadfoundation.org.

observe and practice school leadership skills under the supervision of a successful principal who offers constructive feedback. Principal Traci Walker Griffith identified the internship as the most helpful program component because she was immersed in a school with a thoughtful, reflective, and transparent mentor whom she felt comfortable probing about his work. However, a successful residency experience hinges on the right match between mentors and fellows. Though fellows are given an opportunity to request preferred characteristics of a mentor during the admissions process, some fellows acknowledge that they come to the program unsure about what qualities are most important in a mentor principal (Levy &

Neufeld, 2005). One feature that fellows later identify as critical is reciprocal learning. For instance, the “second-guess memo” assignment encourages fellows to critically evaluate an administrative choice of their mentor and write a constructive memo, which encourages dialogue and mutual learning between fellow and mentor. Cox

explained that “as much as I’m taking from my school, as time passes, I’m able to give back a lot more.”

Factor 3

Finally, the coursework portion of the program offers fellows an opportunity to prepare for their school-based work, especially since the program works carefully with “senior leadership to align the topics of study to key priorities and challenges in the district,” according to Khita Pottinger, acting director of the School Leadership Institute. Given the pressure on school leaders to produce rapid results, fellows prefer projects that foster the application of their knowledge in the school setting rather

Fellows prefer projects that foster the application of their knowledge in the school setting rather than ones that require a lot of sitting and listening.

Boston Public Schools

Boston, Mass.

Schools: 144 (67 elementary or early learning centers, 17 K-8 schools, 17 middle, one 6-12 school, 30 high schools, 12 additional schools, including special education and at-risk programs)

Enrollment: 56,770

Staff: 9,368

Racial/ethnic mix:

- White:** 14%
- Black:** 41%
- Hispanic:** 35%
- Native American:** <1%
- Asian/Pacific Islander:** 9%
- Other:** 1%

Limited English proficient: 18%

Languages spoken: Spanish, Haitian Creole, Chinese, Cape Verdean Creole, Vietnamese, and others.

Free/reduced lunch: 71%

Special education: 20%

Contact: Boston Public Schools
www.bostonpublicschools.org

than ones that require a lot of “sitting and listening” (Levy & Neufeld, 2005). Cox noted that their instructors are some of the top professors in New England who challenge them to connect the research and theory to their experiences in a school.

Bettie Nolan’s fellowship at the Academy of Public Service in the Dorchester Education Complex is near an end. She appreciates the opportunity to work with an innovative headmaster who allowed her to observe, shadow, and participate in instructional leadership in a hands-on manner. Nolan plans to apply for a full-time position as a headmaster or assistant headmaster in Boston Public Schools. She intends to use her background in health care to become a school leader who can address the wide range of needs that each student has.

SUPPORT AT ANY STAGE OF GROWTH

In addition to the fellowship program, the district offers Exploring School Administration to reach prospective school leaders. Through after-school seminars, this program

introduces the principalship and other school leadership roles to educators and community leaders who show leadership potential and have a deep knowledge of instruction but might not have considered becoming a principal. Each of the 10 after-school seminars focuses on a different aspect of the school leader’s role. Participants review readings and case studies, meet with school and district leaders, and visit schools to observe principals or assistant principals in action.

The district also offers the New Principal Support System. First-year principals attend a five-day summer institute to prepare them for effective entry into their school. Throughout the year, new principals participate in monthly networking sessions, where principals discuss current challenges and “utilize their collective knowledge to support each other when facing complex issues as school leaders,” said Anthony Valdez, a principal in Boston Public Schools. Principals value this support system, which enables them to “reach out to people who share the same language and passion for student achievement,” said Walker Griffith.

Additionally, principals participate in structured professional learning designed to support them in addressing districtwide challenges. Monthly meetings may also take the form of school site visits, where facilitators with experience in school administration arrange one-to-one meetings at principals’ schools. Principals also receive ongoing mentoring from an experienced principal selected to match the novice principal in geography and type of school. Second- and third-year principals do not participate in a formal mentoring program; however, they have a coach who assists them with leadership or operational challenges. They continue to participate in monthly networking meetings, which are organized by the principals’ years of experience, as well as just-in-time sessions, which com-

bine principals of all years.

Recognizing the needs of school-based non-principal administrators, the district has developed its most recent program, the School-Based Administrator program, to provide leadership development for school leaders.

The program serves many functions including educating teachers and recruiting them into leadership roles, providing a two-year system of support for new school-based administrators, providing professional learning that facilitates instructional improvement, creating professional networks to support sharing of best practices, and providing school-based administrators who aspire to the principalship with the skills and experiences required to be competitive candidates for the role.

CONCLUSION

While the results of Boston Public Schools' leadership development programs are preliminary, the district has been successful in developing "new cadres of leaders ... who share the same passion for fulfilling the dream of proficiency for all," according to Walker Griffith.

The district provides an accelerated career path that addresses the continuum of developmental levels for leaders from both traditional and nontraditional backgrounds; it exposes future leaders to the reality of the field through a one-year hands-on residency, and builds a cohort of colleagues who serve as an ongoing support network throughout their careers in school administration. The lessons learned from the district's experience serve as a model for other school sys-

tems looking to grow and sustain strong school leaders.

REFERENCES

- Boston Public Schools. (2004).** *Boston Public Schools whole-school improvement: The six essentials.* Boston, MA: Author. Available at www.boston.k12.ma.us/teach/offices.pdf.
- Boston School Leadership Institute. (n.d.).** *About the Institute.* Boston, MA: Author. Available at www.bostonsli.org/program.html.
- Levy, A. & Neufeld, B. (2005).** *Mid-year findings: Boston Principal Fellows (BPF).* Cambridge, MA: Education Matters.
- Rubenstein, G. (2006).** Payzant on principals. *Edutopia, (2)4.* Available at www.edutopia.org/payzant-principals. ■