



ROOTS AND WINGS

PRINCIPAL PREPARES ASSISTANTS FOR CAREER TRANSITIONS

BY THOMAS M. VAN SOELEN,
SHANNON N. KERSEY,
CHARLES CHESTER,
MICHAEL LeMOYNE,
AND REBECCA WILLIAMS PERKINS

School leadership turns over frequently. Superintendent succession is well-documented, particularly in urban areas, where average tenure is about 5.5 years (The Broad Center, 2018). In 2015-16, 16% of public school principals left their jobs, with most of them leaving the principalship altogether (Goldring, Taie, & O’Rear, 2018). These patterns are discussed often and with some concern.

Less often discussed, however, are the career trajectories of assistant principals or vice principals. There is little research on how often they change schools or are promoted to full campus leadership. Such changes could be destabilizing — but they could also be positive.

If assistant principals are intentionally and thoughtfully prepared for the principalship, they could help fill the gaps created by principal attrition, and perhaps even stem the turnover tide by being more fully prepared for leadership.

Shannon Kersey, principal of Alpharetta High School in Georgia and one of the authors of this article, believes in the benefits of building assistant principals’ leadership capacity, not just for success in their current jobs but to support their eventual transition to principal.

Three of her former assistant principals are now principals of schools within six miles of each other. One of these three developed one of his assistant principals to assume a principalship. They jokingly refer to this generational advancement as the “Kersey Family Tree.”

Kersey began this work in 2011 as the fifth principal at Alpharetta High School over the previous six years. Given the instability her students and staff had experienced, she made it an immediate goal to create an intentional and long-term plan for leadership in her school.

One of the keys to her approach is personalizing professional learning designs to the needs of the assistant principals. These designs share common threads, however: transparency, trust, and scaffolding.

CO-OBSERVATION BUILDS INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP

When she became principal of Alpharetta High School in Georgia, Shannon Kersey focused on two interrelated goals: improving teacher quality and preparing assistant principals to become school leaders themselves. She focused on a key link between the two goals, which is also perhaps the most important job of a principal: instructional leadership.

To build the assistant principals’ capacity, she called on work she had done in another district with Thomas Van Soelen, then a central office administrator. Together, they had identified the need for higher-quality observational feedback from leaders to teachers, and they had implemented a new evaluation system (Van Soelen, 2013). Results included improved feedback, stronger teacher practices, and 73% reduction in the achievement gap between black and white students (Van Soelen, Kersey, & Perkins, 2016).

At Alpharetta High School, Kersey invited Van Soelen to lead professional learning sessions, co-observe with every leader involved in teacher observations, and engage in reflective debrief after the observations. He helps them focus and align what they see and hear in classrooms with school goals.

In the spirit of the “family tree” approach to cultivating strong practice, Charles Chester and Rebecca Perkins have adopted the process, which they learned as assistant principals, in the schools they now lead.



Members of the "Kersey Family Tree" include, from left: Charles Chester, Rebecca Williams Perkins, Shannon Kersey, Michael LeMoynes.

MICHAEL LeMOYNE

LEARNING DESIGN: *SHADOWING*

During Kersey's first two years as principal, Michael LeMoynes worked as an assistant principal, focused on curriculum and instruction. During that time, he identified a pressing need in math. The past several years had seen heavy transition in the statewide math standards and course offerings.

As a result of frequent changes in curricula, some Alpharetta High School students lacked key knowledge and skills in geometry and were therefore not on track with their peers for graduation.

Kersey had several choices in how to lead the situation: assume full responsibility for developing a solution, empower LeMoynes to act unilaterally, or create space for collaboration. Her decision was based on the fact that she saw a prime learning opportunity for LeMoynes, even as she was focused on improving the students' learning.

She decided to use the shadowing learning design, in which a school leader shadows a student, living his or her school life for a day. But she adapted it in an important way to develop LeMoynes's skills: She focused the shadowing on this particular project, rather than on a particular period of time, as is typically the case.

Kersey included LeMoynes in each step of her research and proposal process, consistently asking, "What are we authorized to do? For what do we need permission and from whom?"

Starting with a study of board of education and district policy, Kersey and LeMoynes planned and then pitched to her principal supervisor and the curriculum office a solution they had developed: Create a class for struggling students in which the first part of the school year is spent on the geometry standards, which would better prepare them for the rest of the school year's curriculum: Algebra II.

They assessed essential learning targets from geometry and received permission to re-award the credit and repost a higher grade, therefore meeting both goals: boost students' self-confidence and help them get back on track with their peers.

Each conversation with the central office included both Kersey and LeMoynes, whether in person or on the phone. LeMoynes was able to watch Kersey leverage relationships and navigate roadblocks to make this innovation happen. He believes that he learned things he otherwise would not have known.

"We are not always exposed to the bigger picture as an assistant principal,"

LeMoynes remembers. "Shannon [Kersey] helped me see the importance of strategy and communication."

In 2013, LeMoynes became principal at Hopewell Middle School, a feeder school to Alpharetta High School. It wasn't long before a situation emerged where he needed the strategic thinking he learned from Kersey.

LeMoynes and his leadership team wanted to think more creatively about when and how to award course credit because they believed some students needed more time to master content than the traditional schedule allowed.

"These somewhat arbitrary markers, like the end of the semester, to award grades were really problematic," said LeMoynes. "It is quite hard to convince a middle schooler to relearn material when the grade can't be impacted."

District policy stated schools could only award "incomplete" grades (rather than failing letter grades) for medical or personal issues. But the district has an unusual blend of central office and local school control, which includes a process through which schools can submit a "request for flexibility" to have district requirements waived.

LeMoynes successfully made his case and received the flexibility to issue an Incomplete for individual students who met a set of criteria (e.g. positive

work ethic, engaged in recovery and reassessing), then change the Incomplete once the relearning took place.

As his shadowing experience with Kersey showed, relationships and strategically managing barriers was key to making this innovation happen for his students.

CHARLES CHESTER

LEARNING DESIGN: *COACHING*

Charles Chester came to Alpharetta High School as an assistant principal in 2012 and found a very different environment than in his previous schools, even though they were in the same district.

His previous schools had served mostly minority populations, primarily from poor families. The families at Alpharetta, who are more advantaged, expected frequent and thorough communication from school staff, a different approach for Chester, who wasn't sure how to navigate this terrain.

"I didn't know the political climate [among families], nor did I understand it," Chester says. "I just watched Shannon [Kersey] and learned how to handle things."

As with LeMoyné, Kersey was open and transparent and scaffolded Chester's communication skills. However, with Chester, Kersey chose coaching as the learning design. Similar to many coaching contexts, she used a gradual release of responsibility.

"At the beginning of my time there, Shannon [Kersey] wrote the communications to parents with us [assistant principals] listening in — occasionally giving a word or two of feedback. By the time I left in 2017, assistant principals were writing many of the communications, sending them to her for feedback," Chester recalled.

After Chester moved on to serve as principal in another school, skilled communication with families became even more important. After

the Stoneman Douglas High School shooting in Florida in February 2018, multiple threats of student violence occurred at Chester's school.

The community needed clear communication from school leaders, not just to reassure them of safety measures but to quash harmful rumors that were spreading on social media about which students were involved. Making matters highly charged, this primarily white community villainized a Hispanic student without evidence that he was involved.

Chester brought forth his learning from Kersey's coaching about communication and knowing the parent community. Now serving a similar demographic to Alpharetta, Chester communicated strategically yet quickly.

"I'm so glad I didn't need to learn that in my first year as a principal," Chester says. He feels he is successfully navigating family communication, proudly pointing out, "Now the district's communications department is hardly revising our letters anymore."

REBECCA WILLIAMS PERKINS

LEARNING DESIGN: *CRITICAL FRIENDSHIP*

Rebecca Williams Perkins is the most reluctant leader Kersey has mentored. Perkins was an accomplished teacher (she was not only Teacher of the Year at Alpharetta High School, but also for the entire county of over 100 schools) and she intended to stay in that role. After a life full of being in charge of everything (e.g. clubs, sororities, organizations), Perkins wanted to focus on her students.

But supervisors saw in Perkins the potential for leadership. A previous principal had asked Perkins two separate times to consider being the English department chair. Each time, Perkins declined.

Kersey, too, saw potential

in Perkins and started having conversations with her about taking the next step as a leader. However, Perkins was clear on her reticence: "I really just want to be a good teacher." Kersey's response was the turning point: "Really good administrators were really good teachers."

Perkins thought: Imagine being a school leader who really understood instruction — that could be amazing. In fact, she and her colleagues were experiencing that with Kersey. One year later, Perkins transitioned to be an assistant principal at Alpharetta High School.

Perkins had strong teaching skills, but she wanted to work more productively with adults. Kersey engaged her within a particular kind of learning community called critical friendships. Created by the School Reform Initiative, critical friendships enable educators to learn the dispositions it takes for adult learning to thrive in schools. Their premise is when adults develop, then students achieve.

"Shannon [Kersey] told us this training was the best professional development she ever attended," Perkins says. "She promised it would change our lives — and it did." Kersey's vision for the school was to become a professional community where educators challenged each other for the betterment of their team and the sake of their students.

"We were having our department chair meetings and doing the 'meeting thing,' but I didn't really know them," Perkins recalls. "During protocol training, the walls broke down, even at the end of the first day."

As Kersey cycled more and more teacher leaders and administrators through the critical friendship experience, she began to use the discussion protocols in leadership team meetings, helping them get their work accomplished while also modeling the

structures and behaviors she expected in departments and collaborative teams.

The model expanded schoolwide, with each teacher as a member of a group beginning in 2017. Each teacher took a turn bringing an inquiry question (about an assessment, assignment, data set, rubric, or professional dilemma) to a mixed department group of their peers and received feedback.

This slow, strategic approach to implementation paid strong dividends: At the end of the year, 78% of the high school staff chose 5 or 6 on a 6-point Likert scale indicating the strong effectiveness of the grouping. The learning design for teachers has extended into the 2018-19 school year.

In 2017, Perkins was appointed principal at the feeder middle school to Alpharetta High School. Although many of these teachers and leaders had also been participants in the same professional development, the principles and practices of critical friendship were not evident in this school culture. “It was the classic professional development gap: went to the training — check. Then no implementation,” Perkins says.

Perkins has resurrected the learned but unpracticed behaviors in her new staff. She uses discussion structures with her leadership team and staff. The content chairpersons receive external coaching from Thomas Van Soelen, who was their facilitator for the critical friendship experience.

“They are still getting used to me really listening. I learned that in the institute,” Perkins says. “I go around the table, assuring equity as everyone speaks. I now give staff the support and space to use these protocols. I know they work, and they will work here, too.”

WORTH THE RISK

In some ways, it was a risk for Kersey to develop leaders, both at the teacher and assistant principal level. As leadership prowess grows in employees,

Alpharetta High School Alpharetta, Ga.

Enrollment: **2,263**
Staff: **120**
Racial/ethnic mix:
White: **44%**
Asian: **23%**
Black: **20%**
Hispanic: **10%**
Free/reduced lunch: **10%**
Students with disabilities: **9%**
504 plans: **9%**
Gifted: **40%**

there is an increased probability the newly developed educators will move positions, either inside or outside the school.

Indeed, the leaders Kersey mentored have moved on to new roles. This leads to more newness in leadership positions (e.g. department chairs, assistant principals), causing more and more transition.

However, Kersey believes it was worth the risk. Instead of selfishly wanting to keep high-quality leaders at her school, her systematic implementation of learning designs for her assistant principals created a much broader impact as those leaders now are leaders of their own schools.

And her strategies benefited her school’s students. Even with the assistant principal transitions, Alpharetta High School, already a high-performing school when Kersey arrived, has continued to achieve:

- Letter grade A from the Georgia Governor’s Office of Student Achievement;
- AP awards: Merit, STEM, Achievement, Humanities; and
- US News & World Report top 2%.

Additionally, the schools Perkins, Chester, and LeMoyné lead are also on positive learning trajectories. The three schools scored in the top 5% of

all 800 Georgia middle schools on the statewide accountability measure.

We believe it isn’t enough to relegate leadership preparation to our institutions of higher education. Principals can and should be engaged in this worthy work. Among the current and recent leaders of Alpharetta High School, this work isn’t optional — it’s necessary.

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Thomas M. Van Soelen (thomas@vansoelenassociates.com) is president of Van Soelen & Associates in Lawrenceville, Georgia. Shannon N. Kersey (kersey@fultonschools.org) is principal of Alpharetta High School in Alpharetta, Georgia. Charles Chester (chester@fultonschools.org) is principal of Northwestern Middle School in Milton, Georgia. Michael LeMoyné (lemoynem@fultonschools.org) is principal of Hopewell Middle School in Alpharetta, Georgia. Rebecca Williams Perkins (perkins@fultonschools.org) is principal of Webb Bridge Middle School in Alpharetta, Georgia. ■