WHAT IT TAKES TO BUILD
A STRONG PRINCIPAL PIPELINE

Beginning in August 2011, six urban districts received funding from The Wallace

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Foundation to participate in the Principal Pipeline Initiative, an effort to strengthen novice principals' capabilities. Over a five-year period, the districts were expected to address at least four components of a strong pipeline: standards for what principals need to know and do; preservice training; hiring processes; and evaluation and support. At the 2018 Learning Forward Annual Conference, leaders from two of those districts — Denver, Colorado, and Hillsborough County, Florida — joined Wallace Foundation Senior Program Officer **Nicholas Pelzer** to share what they learned about strengthening school leadership pipelines. This article includes highlights of that session and a follow-up conversation.

Mikel Royal is director of school leadership, preparation, and development for Denver Public Schools. **Tricia McManus** is assistant superintendent of leadership, professional development, and school transformation for Hillsborough County Public Schools, and **Yinka Alege** is deputy director of the Achievement Schools learning network in the district.

Q **What was the impetus for focusing on the principal pipeline?**

Nicholas Pelzer: Around 2000, when The Wallace Foundation started focusing on leadership, it wasn't really on the national agenda. It was considered a tertiary issue. Through the first 10 years of our work on the topic, we were asking questions like, "Does leadership matter, and if so, in what way?" and "How do you develop effective school leaders?" We started seeing an emerging body of evidence that leadership matters. For example, Kenneth Leithwood and his colleagues found that principals' influence on student achievement is second only to that of classroom instruction. We learned a lot about what elements contributed to developing effective school leaders, but we didn't have proof of concept that effective leadership could be developed at scale, across an entire district, and make a difference for students.

The Principal Pipeline Initiative was an attempt to challenge urban districts who already had some of the leadership components in place or in mind to do it cohesively and at scale. The foundation provided a framework for the main components that districts needed to put in place but gave districts complete freedom in how to do that.

Q: What was your starting point in strengthening the principal pipeline?

Mikel Royal: In Denver, we started with identifying and defining competencies that an effective school leader in Denver Public Schools should have. When we looked at our existing standards and expectations, we saw that our evaluation system led to evaluations that mostly checked off a box. Every two or three years, school leaders would get rated as either satisfactory or unsatisfactory. [That wasn't very useful because] you could be a very strong principal and get the same evaluation as someone who was just adequate, and you got no feedback. We worked with the state and the district to [change that and to] define the attributes and competencies of leaders. That became the core of our whole pipeline, including a rubric for leaders' growth and development.

In rolling out the framework and the rubric, we leveraged learning from a recent revamp of the Colorado teacher evaluation system. That system, too, had gone from a binary evaluation system to a more detailed one. From the reaction to those changes, we knew it was important that we took

our time and paid attention to how we communicated about it. For example, we stopped using the word "evaluation" and began referring to it as a growth and performance system, and we labeled the performance bands in a way that emphasizes growth. We made sure we were messaging that principals would not necessarily be rated effective in all competencies right away, and that it is OK to be in the "approaching" band.

Tricia McManus: [In Hillsborough County] we also started by creating a set of core competencies for leadership. We needed to define what it means to be a good leader and the specific competencies needed in the roles of principals, assistant principals, and others. A strong pipeline has to have alignment across components. We had many of the components in place, but we had to integrate them in an aligned way. We spent the whole first year on the competency work. With that in place, we focused on finding teachers in our buildings who showed [emerging] signs of those skills in their classrooms or in teacher leadership roles. Everything now is connected to the core competencies.

Pelzer: In fact, all six of the districts decided to start with leader standards or competencies, which isn't surprising. The districts saw them as the foundation. All the components matter, but you have to get this part right for the others to be aligned and effective. Standards are also relatively inexpensive and quick, compared to other components of the pipeline, because they don't require hiring new people or investing in new structures.

Q: Once you had defined the competencies, how did you support leaders in developing them?

McManus: We knew we wanted to support and strengthen local university programs because in Florida, you have

to get an education leadership degree [to become a principal]. We also knew we needed to start earlier in the pipeline and better prepare assistant principals. So we created a Future Leaders Academy to develop teachers into assistant principals. We worked with principals to tap teachers in their schools, who could then apply for the academy.

When an assistant principal position would open up, we would then have qualified candidates lined up. If an academy graduate hadn't gotten an assistant principal job within five years, we gave them competency-based feedback and required them to go back through the selection process before they could continue interviewing. Gathering current data allowed us to adjust program curriculum and find additional ways to support future leaders to ensure readiness for the role.

Royal: We were aligning competencies and expectations with the university curriculum, but we had an epiphany that it is rare that coming out of a university program you are prepared to lead a school. Universities do a really good job with foundational skills and preparing for entry-level leadership, but at best, our partnerships were preparing assistant principals. The principalship

is a much more complicated role, and leaders needed to be developed significantly more by the district.

As we were launching the standards, we developed a principal residency program. It is basically a full-time internship supervised by the building principal as well as the district program. Initially, we had 16 or 17 positions a year, and schools could apply to host the residents. The residents' salaries were between 50% and 75% funded by the Wallace grant and the remainder came from the school's budget.

[We later learned that] our mistake was not fully funding the residencies because some principals saw the residency as an opportunity to get an assistant principal for their building without having to pay a full salary. We were well into it when we realized we didn't always have the best principals [supervising the residencies]. It was hard to turn that boat around, but we had to shift.

Q: How do you ensure that sitting principals are providing the support future principals need?

Royal: Effective principals may or may not be great mentors. We had to determine what makes a good mentor and, in some cases, we had to build the capacity of principal supervisors to be good mentors. So our next step [after designing the principal residency] was to design a mentor training program. Elements of our existing framework were helpful. Eventually we started an assistant principal mentoring program as well.

Yinka Alege: One of the leadership competencies for our principals is developing people. Principal supervisors have to help principals recognize their role in mentoring future leaders and model for them what it looks like to be a coach/mentor so they, in turn, provide that level of support to their assistant principals. You can only do so

much telling and training. For assistant principals to grow, they need job-embedded professional development each day and their principal to understand what it looks like in their school, so we go in and model that.

McManus: As we are growing and better understanding what leadership is, we're beginning to realize that the approach to the work should look the same at all levels. We want principals to be collaborative leaders and engage in coaching, so we interact with them in the manner we want them to lead. [District staff] don't tell them how to run their schools. We ask them questions to reflect on their practice and then ask them to do the same with their assistant principals and teachers.

Q: What did you learn about the process that could be useful to other districts building pipelines?

Alege: I was a principal when this work began, and as a site-based administrator, we were part of the whole process of developing the pipeline. Being part of the design is what helped us have ownership. When principals and assistant principals do not have input into the process, they feel like something is being done to them. We felt like we were part of something that will help us all.

McManus: Yes, principals were at the table from day one. They were involved in developing the competencies, the rubric for aligning to it, what the academy should look like, principal induction, and assessing candidates. They are an active part of keeping our pipeline alive and continuing to strengthen it.

Pelzer: The community of practice created among these districts is powerful. In the professional learning communities that Wallace organized, districts were constantly meeting and were on a learning journey with each other. Most

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RELATED RESOURCES

- **Building a Stronger Principalship Vol 5: The Principal Pipeline Initiative in Action,** https://bit.ly/2IBINN5
- **What It Takes to Operate and Maintain Principal Pipelines: Costs and Other Resources,** https://bit.ly/2T4LOdG

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of the time, districts work individually, but in this initiative they were learning from each other's challenges and struggles and deploying that learning.

Royal: We had created a culture all about growth and development. That growth is what fills our leaders' buckets and motivates them — not the minimal stipend they receive for being mentors, for example. That culture of growth shapes everything. Even our standards that we started with continue to grow and be refined. We have increased their rigor as our leaders started getting higher marks on the evaluations because if the standards become stagnant, they lose their value. They need to keep pointing to next steps.

Q: What changes are you seeing as a result of these efforts?

Royal: There has been such a transformation in the district. We started in a place where we were lucky to get positions filled and we were [hiring some people] who may not have been ready because we didn't have a deep bench. As the years and the pipeline development progressed, our problem changed. Now we have a lot of high-quality leaders who are staying in the role longer because they are prepared, so our pool swelled but we have fewer positions to fill. We had to address that by offering other opportunities for continuous growth, like teacher mentoring and a professional learning scholarship program.

McManus: Our candidate pool is more diverse now than it ever was before. When we ask our principals to recruit in our schools, we've asked them to pay attention to recruiting teachers of color. But since we recruit from our teacher pool, we are only as diverse and as strong as our teachers, so we began working with our teacher recruitment department and with university master's programs to diversify their outreach and support. As a result, we have strengthened our pool of qualified and diverse candidates. Diversity makes us stronger and makes our schools stronger.

Pelzer: When the principal pipeline initiative started, the districts were doing some of the pipeline components, but not always effectively or in a tightly aligned way. The reflection and continuous improvement were missing. For example, job descriptions weren't necessarily aligned with standards and district leaders would send future leaders to graduate programs but then end up retraining them. Now the pipelines are more efficient and the districts are implementing the pipelines in promising ways. Furthermore, in 2017, RAND released a study showing that it costs less than one-half of 1% of a district's annual budget to implement the four components the foundation laid out for principal pipelines. And researchers revisited the districts in 2018, finding that two years after foundation funding had ended, all four components were in place and, in some cases, showing new evidence of effectiveness.

In retrospect, it would be easy to overlook how heavy a lift these changes were for the districts. These are very large districts. There was no guarantee that they would be able to do all of the things we were asking them to do. We saw that they had the potential and the capacity, but the fact that they all implemented all the components of the pipeline is important to recognize. There was a lot to do, and they actually did it. ■