

The Urban Education Collaborative



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Grow Your Own School Leaders: A Case Study of Principal Development in Philadelphia Schools

In 2004–05, the School District of Philadelphia (SDP) began a groundbreaking partnership with the Eli Broad Foundation to develop the Academy for Leadership in Philadelphia Schools (ALPS), one of several Broad-funded, alternative principal development programs initiated across the country. The ALPS effort was designed to respond to two challenges: (1) expected shortages in the supply of school leaders due to retirements, as well as limited succession planning, and (2) concerns about the quality of the leadership pipeline, particularly new principals' readiness for turning around low-performing district schools. Following a "pilot year" in 2004–05, ALPS underwent a variety of design changes, including the application and selection processes, seminar frequency and content, clinical experience, and coaching supports. As the second year of Philadelphia's effort to "grow its own" school principals got under way in spring 2006, so too did the Urban Education Collaborative's study of program implementation and outcomes, following closely the progress of Cohorts 2, 3, and 4, for the years 2005–06, 2006–07, and 2007–08, respectively. Over time, the program was dramatically altered and then abandoned after 2007–08. However short-lived the Philadelphia experiment, amidst growing interest and investment in alternative paths to principal development, ALPS offers a rich case study in both program design and implementation that can support similar efforts in other urban districts.

The Academy of Leadership in Philadelphia Schools successfully graduated four cohorts of aspiring principals, including those from the pilot year. This evaluation study took a systematic longitudinal approach to understanding the process and outcomes of the initiative beginning with the second cohort. Both qualitative and quantitative data were used to support the conclusions that were drawn. All efforts were made to identify representative samples of participants for the interviews and observations. In addition, 72% of ALPS graduates par-

ticipated in the survey. Even though a small minority of perspectives hypothetically remained unexpressed, every opportunity was made to enable participation of both a majority and range of participant voices.

The main features of ALPS were a standards-based seminar curriculum, a yearlong residency in an urban school, and designated mentorship through host principals and coaches. The evaluation identified several strengths of the program, including a well-defined curriculum, increasing selectivity, commitment to a diverse candidate pool, the yearlong residency, committed leadership and mentoring, and expert seminar presenters. On the other hand, ALPS could have benefited from a clearer theory of action about outreach to potential candidates, residency and principalship assignments, assessment of and feedback on participant progress, and ongoing supports. Also, because early outcome indicators suggested that factors may have negatively influenced program outcomes, more strategic data collection and use for continuous program improvement deserved new attention. Specific ALPS strengths and challenges and related recommendations are summarized below.

Program Leadership and Staffing

ALPS benefited from consistent and committed leadership and staff support. Program-related activities were well run, relationships well managed, and expectations of participants and staffs (e.g., facilitator, coach) generally well understood within the residency year. Staff were seen as nurturing, accessible, and thoughtful, and generally modeling the leadership characteristics they target for others in both qualitative interviews as well as aggregate participant surveys. However, lack of clarity about the district's hiring process for new principals, the questionable availability of such opportunities, and the lack of clarity about the role of the ALPS exit interview created

increasing levels of confusion and distrust among participants and should have been attended to.

Outreach and Recruitment

Despite the absence of a clear online presence or comprehensive outreach plan, the ALPS program continued to build interest among SDP personnel, as evidenced by increasing numbers of applicants, allowing greater selectivity. Nevertheless, outreach to and recruitment of specific groups—notably men, Asian-Americans and Hispanics, and non-Philadelphians—needed to be augmented, if indeed greater diversity was a program priority. Increasing the share of participants with significant secondary schools experience may also have proven important to meeting local leadership needs. Likewise, better efforts to communicate ALPS's purpose and expectations to both potential applicants and the larger community promised much for a program whose policies and practices were often seen as inconsistent or less than transparent. Building a broader community understanding of the program would also have helped to ensure that ALPS played the leadership role intended for it in the larger context of leadership development and school improvement in the district. The director did take significant steps to improve and expand the district's leadership development plan, including creating complementary professional development programs and raising additional external resources (e.g., distributed leadership partnership with the University of Pennsylvania). However, advancing the early efforts to improve the district's metrics and processes for principal evaluation, accountability, and support needed to be pursued. A clearer, more accurate, and better known ALPS mission and vision would likely have supported that effort.

Application and Selection

The invitation to apply to the ALPS program did not explicitly highlight selection criteria. Although the program had a well-defined selection rubric and a rigorous, multistage application and interview process, these were not aligned with the application form itself. The rigor of the application process seemed to provide a useful opportunity for candidates and the program staff to determine a mutual fit—particularly in the effort to ensure candidate quality and diversity. As observed above, applicants of Hispanic and Asian ethnicity represented a very small proportion of the total applicant pool. However, achieving diversity within the cohort—a goal of the selection committee—meant that the selection process was more competitive for some groups, those with greater numbers of applicants, compared with other groups. While the outcome was aligned with program goals and may have contributed

to the overall quality of the cohorts and the program, the disparity reinforces the need for better strategies to recruit underrepresented minorities. For at least some individuals, the application and selection process was perceived as biased because many of the candidates were invited to apply through informal professional networks. As with the disparity in selection competitiveness for applicants of different racial/ethnic backgrounds, the perception of bias should have been anticipated and accounted for in outreach and recruitment, application and selection, and communications processes.

Seminars

The content and delivery of ALPS seminar content were of high quality, aligned to high standards, and generally similar to that of other highly regarded alternative principal preparation programs. Seminar content was aligned both to program standards and best practices, with the overall content foci relatively unchanged between 2005–06 and 2006–07. Seminars were well-planned and facilitated by a mix of internal and external experts. However, early feedback from participants suggested an interest in fewer sessions with specific facilitators or on specific topics and more time dedicated to “how-to,” rather than building conceptual knowledge. Further inquiry was needed to better understand the extent to which residents already had—perhaps as a result of their prior principal preparation/certification—developed knowledge, skills, and confidence with specific concepts and therefore were more interested in learning about day-to-day operations. Also to be explored was the question of whether the need for learning about such operations was part of a larger district challenge concerning the clarity, consistency, and appropriateness of and implementation supports for specific policies. What do new principals know and need to know to “get by” in Philadelphia schools? And what do they need to know and be able to do to lead effective school improvement efforts? How does the answer to the one support or detract from the other? Changes suggested by participants included the inclusion of more seminar material on the topics of operational management, engaging parents, and building relationships with the community.

Residency

The residency provided a yearlong internship for ALPS participants. Each resident was assigned a school with a host principal and a coach who played a smaller role. The participants were nearly all very appreciative of the role played by coaches. Several coaches and host principals continued to serve as informal advisors beyond their role as mentors in the first year. The role of the host principal varied, with some actively model-

ing leadership styles in a range of domains, and others assigning residents to specific roles within the school. The experiences of the residents seemed equally varied; and it was unclear how host schools were chosen, how residents were assigned to the schools, and how the different residency experiences matched the skills and educational needs of the residents. The program had more success with placement and retention in earlier cohorts. The articulation of a clear theory of action aligned with explicit processes for selecting host principals, residency school sites, and coaches was recommended. Likewise, a review of both the coach's and host principal's job descriptions, orientation, and professional development supports was encouraged in order to better distinguish roles (and thus better assess impacts) and better support these mentors, enabling them, in turn, to reinforce ALPS program standards and seminar content and better bridge the theory-to-practice divide.

Assessment

The assessment formats remained largely unchanged for the last two cohorts. In particular, the exit interview offered an excellent opportunity to better identify candidate strengths and ongoing professional development needs. Although all candidates were rated as proficient in all standards, the portfolio and presentation during the exit interview could have been used to offer individualized and constructive program feedback to each candidate along a broader continuum of leadership development. Further refinement of these sessions as opportunities for more systematic assessment and review was also recommended. ALPS residents were probably not as equally skilled in all areas as their exit interview scoring suggests. They would thus have benefited from more specific feedback on their individual strengths and needs. A role for the coach and/or host principal might therefore have been considered in this process.

New Principal Placement and Support

Several challenges surrounded the assignment of

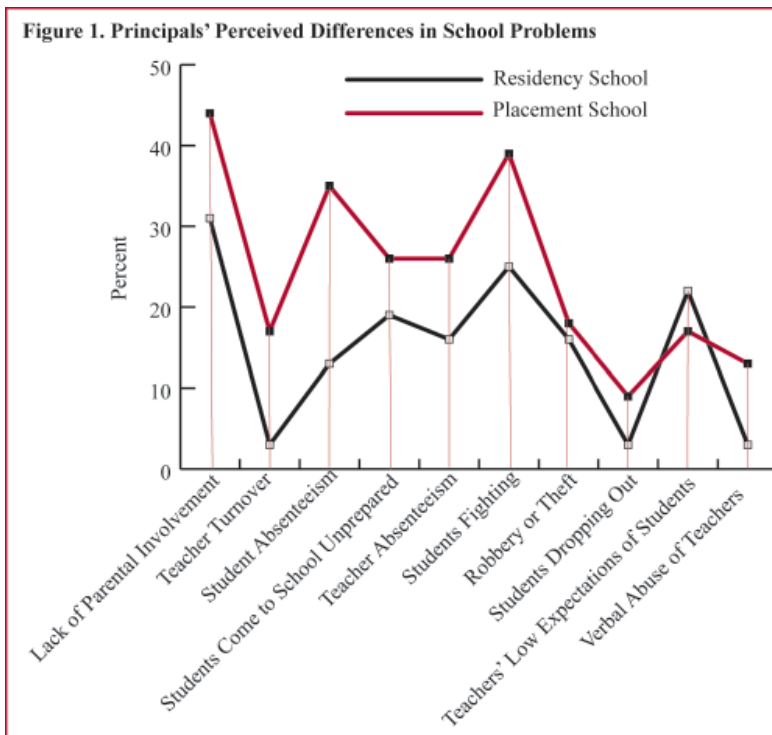
program completers to school leadership positions in the district.

ALPS participants were placed mostly in schools similar in school grade configuration to those where they spent their residency year. However, in terms of the size of residency and placement schools, there were some notable differences. For the 2006–07 cohort, resident assignments were on average in smaller schools ($M=632$) compared with schools where they were placed as principals or assistant principals ($M=975$). Two residents were placed in schools that were far

larger (over 2,400) than any residency school.

Academically, the schools differed, too. A large proportion of the schools to which Cohort 2, the 2005–06 cohort, was assigned outperformed district schools in reading and mathematics. Although the residency schools for Cohort 3 were not as high performing as those for Cohort 2, many residents of Cohort 3 were hired to administer schools with PSSA scores much lower than those of

their residency schools. For example, the median scores for percent proficient in the residency schools for PSSA reading was 55%, while that for the placement schools was 30%. Similarly, the median score for percent proficient in mathematics for the residency placements was 60.7%, while that for placement schools was 29.8%. The pattern of placement of the 2006–07 cohort was similar to the 2005–06 cohort in that residents were placed in schools that were lower performing than the ones where they spent their residency. Furthermore, although residents were exposed to school problems in their residency schools, their responses to the survey indicated they experienced both more incidents and more types of problems in their placements schools (see Figure 1). While such placements were perhaps a result of limited principal vacancies and the types of schools in which they existed, the discrepancy between residency sites and placement sites needed closer examination. ALPS placements did not seem to reflect a deliberate, consistent theory of action.



The transparency and consistency of the hiring process remained a concern throughout the program, as did the ALPS relationship to the process. For example, residents wondered if indeed they were better advantaged in the principal hiring process; what role, if any, the exit interview and networking events had in hiring decisions; and when they would have sufficient information to plan for the post-residency year, especially if positions were not guaranteed. The ALPS program was also perceived to be more effective in preparing elementary and K–8 principals than in preparing high school principals. Some respondents believed that, in order to become a high school principal, the candidate had first to be in the position of assistant principal in a high school. This perception needed to be evaluated by the program leadership and addressed during all stages of implementation, including during the process of residency placement, program design, and placement outreach efforts. Both the placement data as well as participant feedback indicate that the ALPS leadership needed to reexamine how it could prepare and also be perceived to prepare leaders for secondary schools. Given the differences in school size, school characteristics, school problems, and school performance between residency schools and placement schools, it remains imperative to examine these issues in detail, if student outcomes are to be the main measure of the principal's success. Program leadership also needed to examine the issues surrounding optimal support for first-year principals.

Conclusion

In a short time, the SDP developed an innovative approach to principal recruitment and development that

ensured the preparation of three cohorts of new leaders, the majority of whom began serving in important school leadership roles in Philadelphia. ALPS likewise earned praise from a variety of stakeholders—from the participants themselves to the coaches and host principals who prepared them to the regional superintendents who hired, supported, and evaluated them. The program's reputation was also increasingly used to leverage other, more strategic improvements in the larger body of leadership development work in the district. The possibilities of ALPS further informing and influencing district practices were encouraging. A clearer articulation and examination of the program's underlying theory of action, and an examination of various program practices and their alignment to that theory of action were called for. Questions for consideration in such a process might have included, for example: To what kinds of schools will ALPS assign residents? What data will inform these decisions? What are the criteria for selecting coaches and host principals and assigning them to specific individuals? What is the purpose of the exit interview? What additional purposes might it serve? To what extent are program completers expected to be prepared to lead all kinds of schools (e.g., K–8 and high schools, comprehensive high schools and small schools, those making AYP and those in Corrective Action II)? What kinds of schools does ALPS need/want to better prepare them for? How will the program reflect this? How does ALPS support the continued professional reflection and development of ALPS program completers? Similarly, more systematized efforts to collect and make use of program data to identify changing participant and program needs were encouraged to ensure continued progress in the implementation.

The Urban Education Collaborative (UEC) was established in 2004 by the College of Education at Temple University, with support from the William Penn Foundation. Collaborating with the School District of Philadelphia and other districts and schools in the region, the UEC seeks to develop a mutually supportive educational reform strategy, one that simultaneously improves both the work of schools and institutions like the college. In particular, UEC's strategy is designed to correct a lack of coordination between school improvement efforts—as pursued by district leaders and staff, principals, and teachers—and educational research and training of educators—as conducted in institutions of higher learning.

This coordinated effort supports urban school reform focused on (a) improving the quality of teaching, (b) developing leaders, and (c) ensuring safe schools conducive to learning. Within each of these areas of its focus, the UEC seeks to

- conduct continuous monitoring in order to develop a thorough understanding of the specific needs of preK–12 practitioners;
- pursue rigorous research in response to specific school or district problems; and
- encourage and support the application of practices demonstrated to be effective by research, practices that will improve the system of education, particularly in the professional education of teachers and school leaders.

Through the effort of the UEC, it is hoped that the college, districts, and schools will identify and develop innovations in urban education and the preparation of urban educators to significantly improve school conditions and student learning.