



CLIENT PROFILE

Developing an Aspiring Principals Program to Improve Leadership Pipelines

Lexington School District One, SC

In 2016, Lexington County School District One in South Carolina was on the verge of a school leader shortage. It was expected that the district would need to hire up to 20 new principals over the next five years due to expected promotions and retirements as well as demographic shifts. The district was growing by about 500 students per year. In just his first few months on the job, newly appointed district superintendent Dr. Gregory Little had to hire several new school leaders. “I realized that if we as a district were going to continue to move our work forward, we needed a pipeline of people who can step into critical roles and continue the work,” Dr. Little said. “Otherwise, when people turn over, would all of our work be lost? Would the success of our work hinge upon just a few critical people, or would we have people ready to step in and continue that role?”

As part of a commitment to leadership development, the district decided to launch its first Aspiring Principals Academy. With support from the NYC

Leadership Academy, Lexington District One created a year-long program that offers participants intensive classroom instruction and an in-school residency with hands-on school leader experience and guidance from a mentor principal. Since its founding in 2003, the NYC Leadership Academy has supported close to a dozen districts across the country in developing their own aspiring principal programs.

Lexington District One’s program focuses on preparing assistant principals for the principalship. In its first year, the district’s Aspiring Principals Academy graduated eight aspiring leaders who either remained in their assistant principal positions awaiting a good-fit principalship or became principals or district leaders. A second cohort of nine aspiring leaders began the program in June 2018. In a short time, the program has had a far-reaching effect, serving as the foundation for the district’s executive leadership program.

Designing and launching a school leader development program is critical but challenging work. This profile offers a close look at how one district did it and is starting to see results.

DESIGNING THE ASPIRING PRINCIPALS ACADEMY


Identifying the need

For Lexington District One, the first step to designing an academy that would cater to the specific needs of the district while also incorporating best practices for leader development was to conduct a needs assessment. The NYC Leadership Academy supported this effort by interviewing key district stakeholders -- district leadership, central office staff, principals, assistant principals, and teachers -- about the existing district efforts to develop school leaders and the gaps they saw in those offerings. Two challenges quickly became clear: The district lacked a defined process for preparing and hiring school leaders; and a growing and increasingly diverse student population brought a new set of needs that the district and schools were struggling to meet and that required skilled leaders to address.

Setting goals and standards

The findings from those interviews guided district leaders in setting goals for the new leadership academy: In the short-term, they wanted to create a common language of leadership for mentors, aspiring leaders, and district staff. They hoped that after two years, 75% of district leadership hires would come from the leadership academy, that graduates would work for the district for at least five years, and that graduates would outpace achievement growth in comparison schools.

Little and his team then used these goals, along with the Leadership Academy's own set of school leadership standards, to develop leader standards aligned with those of the state and the Lexington District One context. For example, to ensure that parents who are eager to be involved in the schools had a structure for doing that, the team included a standard for "facilitating a culture of collaboration with families and community." The standards were then used to determine the skills and leadership dispositions that program participants would be expected to develop throughout the program.



"This is my 20th year in education, and I have never felt like I've had the impact that this work is having. I feel like every ounce of the time that I am putting in, that we're putting in, is worth it."

– Mary Gaskins,
Director of Leadership
Development and
Continuous Improvement

Designing the academy

To help design and facilitate the program with the NYC Leadership Academy, district leaders identified a cross section of central office staff members from human resources, instructional services, and student services. “We wanted to make sure the program was informed by expertise from across the district and that the key people responsible for implementing the program would have the knowledge and capacity to do so,” said Mary Gaskins, Director of Leadership Development and Continuous Improvement. Having a multidisciplinary group designing the program would ensure they were preparing leaders to excel in all aspects of leadership, from instruction to school culture. The team members together examined what support for school leaders needs to look like across the system and ensured that the work was not being done in silos.

Over a series of in-person and virtual meetings, the team designed program curriculum and assessments, facilitation guides, and recruitment and selection materials.

SAMPLE ASSIGNMENT

Purpose	<ul style="list-style-type: none">⇒ To assess the evolution of your leadership over time⇒ To prepare for your next steps: interviewing and the principalship
Your Task	Over the course of your residency year, collect artifacts that reflect leadership events and experiences from your residency and reveal your progress against standards. Consider how each artifact reveals who you are as a leader, your knowledge of instruction, and/or where you still need to grow.
Your Deliverable(s)	A written summary and presentation detailing: <ul style="list-style-type: none">⇒ Five (5) chosen artifacts for mid-year presentation.⇒ Description of how each artifact demonstrates alignment to and proficiency in the performance standards and who you are as a leader.⇒ Evidence of your progress toward your personal goals as articulated in the residency compact (where you are in your journey toward principal readiness).⇒ Where you feel you need to focus your learning as you continue to move forward (with rationale).

Training Academy facilitators and mentors

To ensure that the Lexington District One team was equipped to facilitate the Aspiring Principal Academy sessions, the five team members attended facilitation training at the NYC Leadership Academy, where they practiced tailoring teaching strategies and interventions to push individual and group thinking. When team members began facilitating learning sessions, NYC Leadership Academy staff observed sessions and gave facilitators direct and specific feedback.

The mentor principals also received training from the NYC Leadership Academy, focusing on standards-based learning, designing scaffolded learning experiences, and assisting aspiring principals in developing systems and strategic thinking as well as problem-solving skills.

KEY ELEMENTS OF THE ASPIRING PRINCIPALS ACADEMY

1

Rigorous Selection Process

Research has found that a rigorous screening process for school leader program applicants leads to stronger school leaders.¹ The NYC Leadership Academy and Lexington District One teams developed an application process that included essays, group and individual interviews, and letters of recommendation. Applicants were assessed against a set of baseline admissions standards, aligned to the program leadership standards, and only eight were selected for the first cohort.

2

Summer Intensive

Over three weeks in June, the aspiring leaders participated in an intensive learning experience. Serving as principals of a “simulated school,” they completed individual and group assignments mimicking the principal role, allowing them to practice being school leaders without the immediate consequences for actual schools, teachers, or students. The Summer Intensive focused on such topics as root cause analysis and system-thinking, challenging mental models, and data-driven decision making. Participants wrote personal vision statements, analyzed data, and developed communications and SMART-goal driven school improvement plans.

3

In-School Residency

Research has found that experiential learning can have a profound impact on adult learners.² While some school leader residencies place aspiring leaders in a new school, Lexington District One chose to reduce costs by keeping most participants in the schools they had already been working in, mentored by their current principal. Working with their mentors, the aspiring leaders participated in monthly instructional learning walks, reviewed budgets and finances, and engaged in regular teacher observations. They also worked with their mentor principals on a comprehensive assignment focused on leading a change process. Participants determined an area of focus based on comprehensive data collection, developed a theory of action for addressing identified student inequities, and implemented a strategic plan involving instructional team members and other staff in the building.

4

Continuous Reflection on Learning

To encourage the aspiring leaders to reflect on and evaluate their learning, each month they were required to write reflections on their learning, to which they received feedback from Lexington District One staff and peers. Midway through the program, participants also presented their portfolio of work to others in the district, including five artifacts from meeting agendas to professional learning plans.

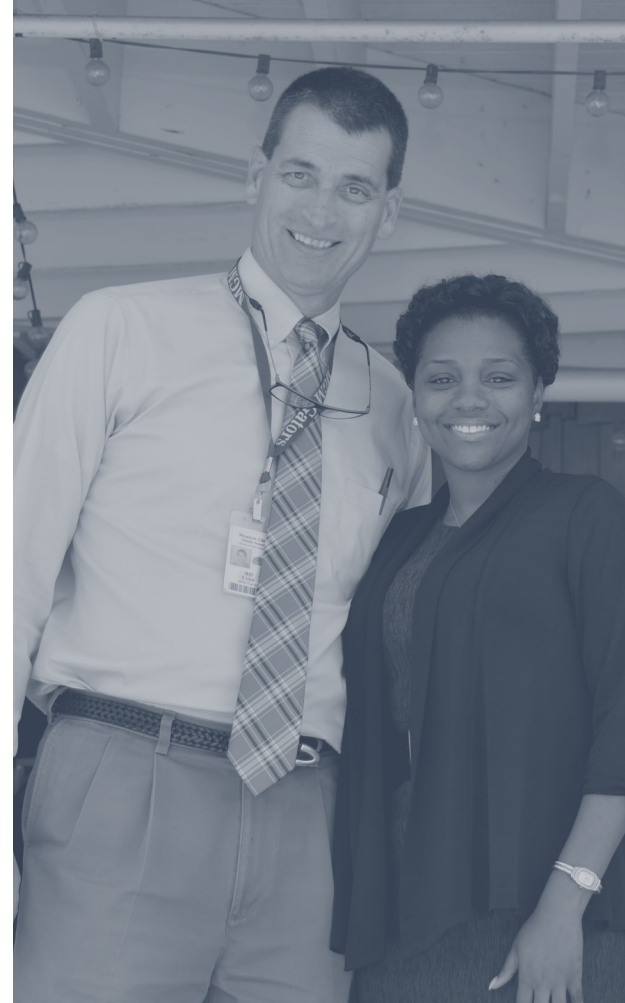
¹Darling-Hammond, L., LaPointe, M., Meyerson, D., Orr, M.T., & Cohen, C. (2007); Orr, M.T., O’Doherty, A., & Barber, M. (2012). Designing purposeful and coherent leadership preparation curriculum: A curriculum mapping guide. University Council for Educational Administration. Retrieved at www.ucea.org; Orr, M.T. & Orphanos, S. (2011).

²Johnson, C. M. (2017). Principal leadership coaching: An examination of principal-coach interactions. College of Education EdD Project Papers, 10; McCay, E. (2001). The learning needs of principals. Association for supervision and curriculum development. Educational Leadership, 58(8), 75-77.

IMPACT OF THE ASPIRING PRINCIPALS ACADEMY

In a short time, Lexington District One's Academy has had a profound impact on the aspiring leaders, their mentors, and district staff. The aspiring leaders noted improvement in their decision-making skills, use of data to drive student learning and instructional practices, and their ability to provide meaningful feedback to teachers. They also felt that they had become more self-reflective and are now seeing things through an equity lens. The staff at their schools agree. In a survey, more than 95 percent of staff at residents' schools said their leader uses data to drive instruction, encourages staff to examine data for specific student groups, investigates existing policies and practices to ensure that they prioritize student need and promote equity, and creates a learning environment where staff feel comfortable speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns, or mistakes.

The program also has had a ripple effect across the district, serving as the foundation for Lexington District One's entire Executive Leadership Program. The program grew the capacity of the five design team members and the six district principals serving as mentors. Training for principal mentors not only built their capacity to effectively coach aspiring leaders, it also helped them learn how to provide the structure and support that program participants needed to act upon their learnings. Meanwhile, educators across the district are becoming more comfortable naming and discussing issues of disproportionality and race and examining data along racial lines for discipline practices and special education services. Lexington District One district leaders are also using their new leadership standards to develop a leadership continuum for the district.



“[This experience] made me more thoughtful as a leader and less quick to react... You're always making decisions but you're never really stepping back to think about the root cause behind a problem surfacing or resurfacing as its coming up in different ways, shapes or forms. If we can step back and ask the right questions, and really look at what all this is stemming from, then we can really make the kind of change that we want, rather than just responding to symptoms.”

– Jacob Nelson,
Aspiring Principals Academy
graduate



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