What’s the best way to train an aspiring principal? Partnerships between universities and districts focused on building school leaders are not the norm—but perhaps they should be. In recent reports, the Southern Regional Education Board has noted a need for universities and school districts to share the responsibility of preparing future principals to ensure that public schools are able to meet student needs and increase academic growth. The Southern Regional Education Board also asserts that until such a partnership is forged, a serious division will persist between what districts expect of newly hired principals and what universities prepare them to do.

This disconnect can have crucial consequences for a school district. But a joint venture between Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (CMS), an urban school district in North Carolina, and Winthrop University addresses this particular problem. A shared sense of purpose led the two institutions to collaborate on the design of an educational leadership program that will give the district the strong, savvy leadership required by a large, diverse public school district. CMS, the second-largest school district in the state, has annual turnover typical of any large system, with up to 25 percent annual change in leadership at schools.

In building the partnership, both the district and the university have acquired expertise and experience that could be useful to others interested in an effective program for aspiring principals. This model provides a prototype that could easily be replicated and customized by other school districts, particularly those with a strong institution of higher learning nearby.

Thorough Coordination
Prior to the beginning of the partnership, Winthrop began retooling its program for educational leadership. The university hired two educators—one a former elementary principal and curriculum administrator, the other a former high school principal and superintendent—to redesign the coursework and the internships. The new Winthrop faculty met with the CMS superintendent and his associates to discuss a possible partnership. The revisions to the program were shared before Winthrop asked for the opportunity to align the program specifically for an urban school district. CMS leaders connected with the university to address the strategic plan that outlined a need to expand leadership training to develop future principals from exiting staff. Over a six-month period, details were ironed out and the partnership became reality.

An advisory board of principals and superintendents ensures close communication between the university and school district. Board members meet...
twice a year with faculty to discuss programmatic issues and to review course content and create authentic assignments that will help students prepare for an urban school district. In addition, university faculty members meet periodically with the district superintendent to discuss the partnership and student progress. Together, the district and university monitor the success of aspiring leaders and work together to intervene when problems occur.

Both the university and the district have standards that are paramount to their work. The university, recognized by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, bases its program heavily on the Educational Leadership Constituency Council standards. The district, however, evaluates principals on the state Principal Evaluation Standards. While there is clearly an overlap in these expectations, connections between the two sets of standards were examined.

Shared Recruitment and Selection

In the fall of 2008, the program—dubbed Leaders for Tomorrow—formally began following a rigorous recruitment and selection process. The first cohort comprised 25 students who began their journey toward an administrative license and a master’s degree in educational leadership.

The selection process is by nomination only, so principals and area superintendents across the district are asked to recommend candidates for the program. Candidates must have a complete knowledge of curriculum and instruction, strong communication skills, and a passion to increase student achievement. Tapping students in this manner is a direct attempt to ensure quality leadership for the district.

Interested candidates apply to the university following procedures for all graduate students, then a collaborative screening process is implemented to select candidates for the program. Next, an interview is held with an educational leadership faculty member along with human resources directors from CMS.

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After selection for the cohort is complete, an official kick-off by the district and the university welcomes members to the Leaders for Tomorrow program. The team-building between participants and district leadership is critically important as the cohort begins its work together. At this orientation, more detail is given about the district’s expectations. While the district makes no guarantee of an administrative position to participants, the district anticipates that they will develop leadership skills and acquire knowledge related to the district’s initiatives for student achievement.

Specifically Designed Coursework

The course of study for the Leaders for Tomorrow follows the university guidelines; however, curriculum is designed with an emphasis on preparing administrators for high-need schools that struggle with student achievement.

Classes are held in the school setting rather than on the university campus. Courses are a combination of face-to-face and Web-based instruction, allowing for a “high-tech/high-touch” approach to leadership development. Courses are scheduled in eight-week blocks to allow focus on one content piece at a time. Four strands are woven through each of the courses: technology; data collection, analysis, and interpretation; oral presentation skills; and ethical leadership. Both CMS and Winthrop see these areas as that can make or break a strong leader. The district provides resources, readings, and activities for the coursework that connect to district initiatives.

The courses are sequenced intentionally to avoid redundancy and to build upon each other. For example, the foundations course at the beginning of the program is specifically designed to examine in depth both the Educational Leadership Constituency Council standards and state standards that are referenced throughout the two-year program. The school law course precedes the class on leadership for special needs so that court decisions are shared in one course and then adequate time is provided for leadership issues that specifically deal with how principals serve children of poverty, second-language learners, exceptional children, and children with specific home and/or health needs.

Instruction is delivered by Winthrop faculty, but CMS administrators are included in most courses as guest lecturers and discussion facilitators. For example, principals from high-need, turnaround schools speak to instructional leadership, while the director of accountability shares district initiatives with data analysis and testing procedures. In addition, the district’s legal team has participated in the school law class and the finance officer, public information director, and security department personnel facilitated dialogue in the business and finance course. The superintendent has even served as a guest lecturer. He discussed his strategic plan for the district, personnel issues, and challenges for leaders in the district.

Most of the assignments are presented in a format that mirrors what participants will encounter as a school administrator. Winthrop has shifted assignments away from term papers and essays to documents that principals actually produce such as school improvement plans, teacher evaluations, brochures, and letters. Many assignments are problem-based, using realistic situations from school settings—specific course modifications are frequently made to address current issues occurring in the district. For example, in one course participants are asked to write a formal letter to the district superintendent, explaining the needs and services
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being provided to a student with special needs. In the supervision course, participants conduct walkthrough observations in classrooms and analyze the information to develop a detailed coaching plan for a principal to follow. Principal candidates also conduct mock interviews with student teachers at the university, providing a rich learning opportunity for both groups.

While participants are enrolled in the Leaders for Tomorrow program, the district provides many opportunities for the cohort to participate in additional training. For example, participants frequently attend principal meetings and leadership workshops to interact with district personnel. These opportunities enhance, rather than supplant, the program of study while also creating networks for support and professional dialogue in many different arenas. Participants in the program also have been invited to districtwide professional development on professional learning communities, have participated in and helped lead training in data analysis, and were invited to participate in the district’s Summer Leadership Conference. All of this focused training helps ensure that the program’s graduates will be ready to lead a school.

The Internship Experience

In the CMS-Winthrop partnership, the internship becomes the cornerstone of the Leaders for Tomorrow program. The superintendent works with university faculty to assign interns to a strong principal mentor and requires the mentors to attend orientations conducted by the university. The full-year internship is intended to develop the expertise of a principal candidate in problem-solving and instructional decision-making necessary to provide effective leadership in high-need schools.

The Winthrop Educational Leadership internship is standards-based and centers on activity choices that have been adjusted to include district initiatives. With guidance from the principal mentor, activities are selected that provide a service to the school while ensuring new and relevant learning experiences for the intern. According to the advisory board, every activity choice is directly applicable to the job responsibilities of a principal. For example, one task during the spring is to plan a school celebration, activity, or ceremony involving parents and/or community organizations. In the summer, interns might review teacher attendance records from the past year to determine substitute teacher utilization. Interns then analyze this data and make a plan for improvement.

The summer culminates with a special event where CMS senior staff, principal mentors, and faculty come together to view videos created by interns to showcase new learning. Interns might share what they have learned about creating classes, a master schedule, or hiring new staff. Interns get the experience of seeing themselves involved as a leader on camera, simulating an event most principals face. The fall concludes with a panel discussion during which a member of the faculty poses improm-
tu questions to the interns while practicing CMS administrators rate each intern’s performance. Providing interns the experience of responding to issues and questions on the spot, the panel discussion is also preparation for future interviews.

Reflection and sharing are critical components of the internship. Interns meet regularly with the principal mentor to get direction for their work and feedback on their efforts. Periodically, the interns gather with faculty, colleagues, and CMS staff to discuss their internship activities. The capstone assessment for the program is the oral comprehensive examination that is assessed by both university faculty and school district administrators.

Success in Progress
A full assessment of the program’s success will come as its graduates bring the leadership skills and specialized knowledge they have gained into the district’s schools. The first cohort of students from the CMS-Winthrop partnership will become eligible to become principals this summer. At the same time, a third cohort will begin its coursework.

Winthrop and district officials believe that their partnership in creating Leaders for Tomorrow has already begun to enrich both institutions. In the words of Ann Clark, the associate superintendent for the district, “The collaborative nature of this program, and the opportunity for our administrators to serve as mentors, has helped all of us think about the challenges of leadership in a more analytical way.”

This unique partnership journey is providing a customized leadership pipeline for the district that will be prepared to raise the academic achievement of all students.

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