Identifying, training, and clearing the path for potential school leaders.

Mike Johnston, R.K. Walker, and Andy Levine
Since its inception, New Leaders for New Schools has been driven by the fundamental belief that every child can succeed academically at high levels. We also believe that an effective principal is a crucial lever for school improvement and transforming student achievement at scale. In recent years, research has validated this conviction: In *School Leadership that Works*, researchers Robert Marzano, Timothy Waters, and Brian McNulty calculated that principal and teacher effectiveness account for nearly 60 percent of a school’s impact on student achievement. Thus, a focus on the selection, training, and pipeline to the principalship is especially important in our nation’s most challenged districts and schools.
Learning From Experience

For the past three years, New Leaders for New Schools has been studying our most rapidly improving schools, and we have codified our findings in The Urban Excellence Framework. This framework is rooted in data from more than 60 site visits comparing incremental and breakthrough-gaining urban public schools in 10 cities across the country. (Our analytics define “breakthrough” as gains of 20 or more points in the proportion of students who reach proficiency; or, in schools that have reached proficiency, gains of 20 or more points in the proportion of students scoring at advanced levels.) We have found that certain leadership actions within the following five categories are critical to achieving these transformative results:

- Ensuring rigorous, goal- and data-driven learning and teaching;
- Building and managing a high-quality staff aligned to the school’s vision of success for every student;
- Developing an achievement- and belief-based schoolwide culture;
- Instituting operations and systems to support learning; and
- Modeling the personal leadership that sets the tone for all student and adult relationships in the school.

Our evidence-based framework illustrates what highly effective principals do to transform a school and, therefore, what an aspiring principal needs to know and be able to do. We have aligned our entire program—from recruitment and selection to training and ongoing support—to this framework. Since then, the percentage of K-8 schools led by New Leaders principals for at least two years that are making breakthrough achievement gains has increased from 15 percent to 31 percent. Though we have a long way to go before achieving our vision for the academic success of every student, we believe that the strategies that have led to these gains can be instructive for other principal training programs, districts, and current school leaders.

Identifying High-Potential School Leaders

During the past nine years, we have learned that the selection process for aspiring principals matters—but perhaps not in the traditional ways. Core competencies have proved more important than traditional selection criteria such as continuing education credits or years of teaching experience. Chief among these competencies are the unwavering belief that every child can achieve academic success and the urgency to make that vision a reality. Districts, school leaders, and training programs should also seek aspiring principals who take personal responsibility for student outcomes and consistently drive toward measurable results. As instructional leaders, candidates must exhibit deep knowledge of teaching and learning and therefore must have a minimum of two to three years of classroom experience.

In addition to these fundamental—and non-negotiable—characteristics of belief, personal responsibility, and instructional expertise, our learnings from The Urban Excellence Framework point to the importance of a leader’s skill sets related to the day-to-day management of a school building and of an adult staff: communication and listening, interpersonal skills, self-awareness, commitment to ongoing learning, and strategic management. Project management and problem-solving skills are also useful selection criteria.

A rigorous selection process is only the beginning for leadership preparation; it can help to provide an initial diagnosis of strengths and growth areas to focus on throughout pre-service training and into the first few years of the principalship.

Training Future School Leaders

As all principals know, there is no coursework that can substitute the experience of managing a complex urban school. We have found case- and problem-based training through interactive pedagogy to be most effective for the acquisition of problem-solving skills. We also believe deeply in the importance of a pre-service residency year. In this model, aspiring school leaders should work alongside mentor principals to take on genuine leadership challenges such as increasing student achievement across an entire content area or grades and managing a subset of teacher teams. Mentors should frequently monitor the resident’s growth and progress toward achieving their project and personal development goals. Similarly, outside coaching should continue throughout a new principal’s first year.

Aspiring principals themselves must also constantly strive to get better. Not only must they learn how to lead teams of adults and stakeholders; they must also demonstrate a sincere willingness to adopt and implement the practices increasingly known to drive the most dramatic change for their students, staff, school, and community.

Developing High-Quality Pipelines

Rigorous selection criteria and training programs are essential for developing school leaders poised to drive dramatic student achievement gains, but they will mean little without a pipeline of interested and high-quality candidates. Cultivating and recruiting school leaders is something few school districts have done in the past. Most have relied instead on self-selection by internal candidates who met primary requirements for years of service and continuing education credits. And though some excellent principals have emerged this way, it will take a far more concerted effort to identify principals capable of transforming the most challenging schools or whole school systems.

A more sustainable leadership pipeline begins and ends with the actual role aspiring principals are asked to assume. School systems will be more
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likely to attract quality candidates if they are explicit about how they define principal effectiveness and, therefore, what they expect principals to do. New Leaders for New Schools strongly advocates for a three-pronged definition of principal effectiveness: increasing schoolwide student achievement, increasing the number of effective teachers in a school, and taking the leadership actions that will put in place practices proved to improve schools such as those identified in *The Urban Excellence Framework*. This is a meaningful charge, and it requires meaningful accountability. Success against this definition of principal effectiveness also requires the decision-making authority to manage a school, particularly its human capital, as well as ongoing professional development and aligned district leadership. Creating these supportive conditions for a principal’s work will no doubt make the position far more attractive to potential candidates.

Furthermore, school systems can provide incentives for aspiring principals to serve in schools with the highest needs. These might involve financial rewards, but even more powerfully, districts can position high-need schools as the best place for principals and teachers to serve if they are interested in leadership and rapid professional growth. This requires that school systems and principals build structures for constantly monitoring staff professional development. They will need resources—potentially including additional staff time, consulting funds, internal coaches, or outside expertise—to build professional learning communities and provide job-embedded professional development experiences.

Schools and school systems will also need to create a more differentiated career trajectory within the turnaround context, one in which highly effective teachers become mentors or teacher leaders, then principals, and effective principals become mentors or supervisors of other turnaround leaders.

Finally, at the school level, we have found that expanding the number of leadership team positions and the principal’s ability to select those team members are crucial levers for dramatically improving student achievement and sustaining that growth over time. These strategies might also be helpful for teacher growth, for teacher and principal retention, and as an incentive for attracting qualified principal candidates.

Too many of our school systems, especially those in large urban cities, are simply losing too many of those prepared to enter the challenging role. This happens for a number of reasons, including the lure of higher pay and greater autonomy in other districts and sectors, but also too often due to routine recruiting policies and practices such as hiring delays and a lack of strong talent development systems. By committing to identifying (includ-
ing through a longer term leadership pipeline) and hiring for their principal vacancies as early as possible, districts will not only ensure a greater reliability when it comes to identifying and matriculating the right people for the right roles, they will also give their new hires more time to plan and prepare for the year ahead.

Beyond the school system, individual principals also have an important role to play in expanding the pipeline of future leaders. As managers of teachers and other administrators, they are closest to the candidate pool. The professional development of these individuals is already their charge; ongoing learning is critical both for increasing student achievement now and building leadership potential for the future. This process begins as early as the initial recruitment and hiring of a new teacher, when current principals can begin to identify potential leadership strengths. It then continues through an educator’s career—including structuring growth plans and connecting to training in order to help them get there—even and especially if that means losing a talented staff member so that he or she can take on a leadership position elsewhere. Thus, succession planning extends beyond the principal role to teacher leaders, and to the entire teaching staff, recruitment is constant, and expectations for performance and ongoing growth remain high.

Only by re-imagining the educational career in these ways can we ensure effective teachers and leaders at scale for every child, in every circumstance.

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