



Putting New Principals in the Pipeline

Two districts share how they nurtured their development cultures to cultivate new leaders

By *Susan McLester*

Cultures reflect visions of an ideal, especially in the world of education. So, when six school districts across the country took on the challenge of transforming their leadership cultivation practices through The Wallace Foundation's Principal Supervisor Initiative (PSI), they knew it would involve changing their existing cultures and visions.

This article examines two such districts to see where an effort to grow their leadership cultures has taken them over the past few years.

A District in Transition

Des Moines (Iowa) Public Schools (DMPS) is a large, diverse urban district in a rural state. While the average district in Iowa serves approximately

600 students, Des Moines has almost 34,000. More than 120 different languages are spoken within the student population, and there are more than 200 countries of birth origin. Nearly one-quarter are English-language learners (ELLs), and 70 percent are economically disadvantaged.

A refugee resettlement community, Des Moines has experienced an influx of families from countries such as Syria, Malaysia, Burma, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. It is faced with the challenge of not only meeting the needs of ELLs, but also with integrating families into the community through language and cultural education.

"The district's rich cultural, ethnic, and racial diversity is the strength of our community and



our 60-plus schools,” says Matthew Smith, associate superintendent of DMPS.

But Smith and other administrators understood that cultivating leadership while meeting the needs of new student populations would require a seismic shift in the district’s leadership support practices. It would need to replace a once-monthly, daylong principal management meeting with collaborative structures that supported a shared vision of equity-based instructional leadership.

Collecting Evidence of Impact

Like many districts across the country, DMPS had traditionally selected and developed leaders based on personal opinions. Though

well-intentioned, the practice not only perpetuated hiring inequities, but it also set up leaders for failure. Ultimately, students and staff suffered, says Smith. “We are a profession of givers,” he says, “but not necessarily gatherers of evidence.”

With guidance from PSI, DMPS changed its approach to develop a transparent, evidence-based system in which administrators observe and collect evidence of the impact of instructional leadership as seen in teacher practices and student work. The district does this through a combination of on-site visits and broad-scope professional development programs.

Principal supervisors, formerly assigned 19 schools each, now support a smaller



network of eight to 10 schools, meaning they have more time to provide direct support to principals. At least twice a month, principal supervisors coach principals and school leadership teams by conducting side-by-side instructional walkthroughs, assessing professional learning community effectiveness, analyzing student achievement data, and planning professional development activities. The biweekly visits include documented conversations surrounding leadership actions and evidence of impact.

Howe Elementary School principal Jill Burke says that before implementing PSI, many principals saw their supervisor just once a month. Most communication was conducted via email and focused on managerial topics, such as how to deal with upset parents. “It was all about putting out fires,” she says. “Now it’s about evidence and demonstrating growth.”

A centerpiece of improving instruction in Des Moines is a commitment to inclusive, collaborative professional development. For the last three years, the district has gathered more than 400 leadership team members, including counselors, instructional coaches, teacher leaders, and administrators at the Iowa Events Center six times a year to collaborate and calibrate practices, self-assess against standards, and engage with colleagues.

Additionally, principals and school leadership teams attend three-hour teaching and learning sessions facilitated by curriculum coordinators once a month. The district also altered its school calendar to include a full day of professional development every 45 days to focus pedagogy around the implementation of one or two instructional techniques, followed by implementation coaching.

Sustainability in Broward County

At nearly eight times the size of Des Moines Public Schools, Florida’s Broward County Public Schools (BCPS) is the sixth-largest district in

the nation, serving more than 270,000 students; 191 languages are represented, and 60 percent of students are economically disadvantaged.

With a variety of responsibilities in addition to leading the district’s Principal Supervisor Program, Veda Hudge, BCPS director of service quality, teamed with Ted Toomer, director of leadership development, to build and sustain a healthy district leadership culture with the help of a Wallace PSI grant. “Wallace really pushed us on the sustainability issue, so we’ve learned that is key to ongoing progress,” she says.


Under Toomer’s jurisdiction, leadership pipeline programs are designed to develop and support aspiring leaders from teachers and assistant principals to principals and actively promote upward mobility among administrators. Programs for teachers aspiring to become administrators include a yearlong, intensive course that develops leadership skills and an accelerated master’s degree program in partnership with Florida Atlantic University.

Programs supporting administrators include a one- to two-year program to support and mentor newly appointed assistant principals, a one-year intensive program open to successful assistant principals with three years’ experience that develops school principal skills, and two yearlong programs that support and mentor new and second- and third-year principals in leadership within the context of their schools.

The Leadership Intern Program

Also part of Broward’s leadership development program is its innovative Intern Director Program. This almost yearlong program offers successful principals an opportunity to expand their skills by taking leave from their regular principal duties to work with a district-level administrator and prepare for a principal supervisor or other district-level position—or just to make them better site administrators.

One of Hudge’s recent interns took the course to assess her best options for a career



move. Coming from a background that focused on evaluation, she brought this skill to Hudge's work while also learning about grants, field trips, school crises, parent issues, and other topics.

In order to sustain the internship program while also allowing others to benefit from it, Hudge employs a technique called "backfilling." When a principal takes an internship position, the school's assistant principal moves up to backfill that job while still under the mentorship of the principal, and a teacher leader moves up to backfill the assistant principal's job under the mentorship of that administrator.

Another key change in the past three years has been increasing the effectiveness of principal supervisors by reducing their "span of control." Previously, the district had nine principal supervisors, each assigned 24 schools—effectively limiting supervisions to "drive-bys." Today, there are 15 principal supervisors under Hudge at the central office level, where they can regularly collaborate and receive ongoing training in leadership development.

Janice Crosby, principal of BCPS' Flamingo Elementary, says her relationship with her supervisor went from seeing him "a few times a year, mostly at meetings" to regular school walkthroughs, coaching, and joint data analysis. Crosby also now meets monthly with 10 district principals of schools with similar demographics to share best practices. "We have also learned the language of coaching, which makes us able to better coach our assistant principals and teachers," she says.

Over three years, 35 percent of principal interns have become principal supervisors or filled other chief central office positions. Sixty-five percent of those who backfilled principal positions have become principals, and

53 percent of teacher leaders who filled in for assistant principals have become assistant principals themselves.

The initiative has taken root quickly. "The pipeline changes have only been implemented for three or four years, but now they're just part of the culture," Hudge says. "It's like mixing ingredients for a cake and seeing the batter come together."

Before implementing the changes, 30 to 40 of BCPS' schools were rated D or F; after just one year, that number was down to eight. The district is also in its fourth year of hosting the National Summit for Principal Supervisors, which draws 350–400 principals and other educators.

Proof of the Pudding

Broward County and Des Moines aren't alone in reporting positive changes associated with a transformation in the principal supervisor role. In all six districts participating in PSI, principal supervisors' span of control has been reduced from as many as 24 schools to an average of 12.

Nearly two-thirds (63 percent) of principal supervisors report engaging in new practices such as participating in classroom walkthroughs, coaching principals, leading collaborative learning, and providing ongoing feedback. Eighty percent also say they have participated in training sessions designed to build their coaching and principal instructional support skills.

When principal supervisors become part of the day-to-day life of their schools, principals are no longer isolated. Broward's Crosby advises principals to listen with an open mind. "The principal supervisor is questioning your thinking or actions only to enable you to stretch your own thinking and to help you grow as a leader," she says.

"Transparency, being open, and having a growth mindset are important to maximizing the principal's relationship to the principal supervisor," says DMSC's Jill Burke. "It's not personal. It's not about you. It's about what the kids deserve." ■

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Under PSI, almost two-thirds (63 percent) of principal supervisors were able to follow new best practices in coaching, collaborative learning, and feedback.



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