

Developing Instructional Leaders

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An effort in Connecticut is aimed at developing cadres of school leaders for urban districts who are prepared to lead instructional improvement.

Leadership is not about control. It is about guiding people to think and act differently.

— A participant in the Urban School Leaders Fellowship

School leadership matters. Recent research demonstrates that second only to the quality of teachers, effective principals are the most important schoolhouse variable linked to the improvement of student learning, achievement, and attainment (Leithwood et al. 2004). School leadership matters even more in the persistently low-performing schools that Education Secretary Arne Duncan has targeted for improvement. In their review of the research on leadership effects on student learning, Kenneth Leithwood and his colleagues found that “there are virtually no instances of troubled schools being turned around without intervention by a powerful leader” (p. 3).

For urban districts, the principal leadership crisis is more than just a human resources issue; it is a vexing systemic problem impeding large-scale improvement. Given the essential role of effective leaders in urban school improvement, districts must put in place

a comprehensive leadership development strategy. They need to figure out how to identify and develop a viable pool of aspirants; make sure that as these aspirants become applicants for leadership positions they are prepared for the context-specific realities of urban schools; and foster the organizational conditions that can support and retain these leaders once hired. This multi-dimensional problem requires a systemic solution.

A Need for Strategic Partnerships

Traditionally, districts have relied upon universities to produce and certify – in conjunction with state departments of education – principal candidates. More recently, several districts have created their own leadership academies and principal induction and mentoring programs in order to ensure a pipeline of quality applicants. In addition, organizations such as New Leaders for New Schools and charter management companies have challenged the university cartels and entered the marketplace with

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alternative routes to principal preparation programs. But while large urban districts are able to launch and take advantage of such programs, smaller urban school districts are often poorly positioned to identify, develop, and retain leaders because they lack economies of scale and access to leadership development expertise (Campbell, DeArmond & Schumwinger 2004).

Ultimately, solving the urban leadership problem may be beyond the capacity of any one institution, especially for small districts. One solution may be for districts to work collaboratively and in concert with partners who can bring the necessary leadership development expertise, professional learning experience, and financial support to the enterprise. The Urban School Leaders Fellowship (USLF) is such a partnership – one that engages multiple organizations in a strategic effort to support school improvement through leadership development.

USLF is a collaborative partnership founded and funded by the Fairfield County Community Foundation (FCCF). Faced with low-achieving schools in four urban communities and demographic data that indicated that 40

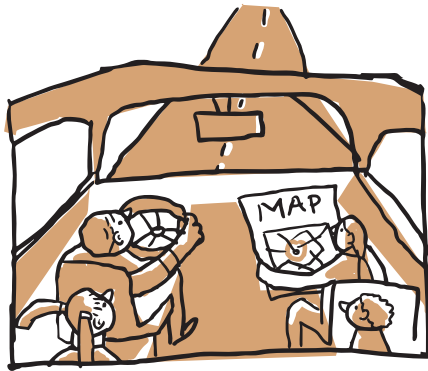
percent to 50 percent of the principals in those districts would be retiring over the next ten years, the foundation formed the fellowship to identify and develop the next generation of instructional leaders. The partners, including the foundation, the four urban districts, an educational improvement organization, and three institutions of higher education, designed and operate USLF.

From its inception, USLF was structured to accomplish more than simply prepare principals; it was also conceived as a tool to foster systemic instructional improvement within the districts. This article describes the inter-organizational partnership that created USLF, the program design, and the lessons learned that may inform the work of other districts and organizations committed to the development of instructional leadership.

The USLF Partnership

USLF was the brainchild of the FCCF, launched in response to identified needs to develop the next generation of urban principals in the Bridgeport, Danbury, Norwalk, and Stamford public schools in Connecticut. FCCF and the four districts partnered with the





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Connecticut Center for School Change, a not-for-profit educational support organization that consults to districts to improve student outcomes through systemic improvement efforts. The partners then collaborated with faculty at the University of Connecticut's Institute for Urban School Improvement. Finally, faculty members at Bank Street College and Hofstra University joined the collaboration, with the role of conducting a formative and summative program evaluation.

The USLF program has three goals. The first is that fellows who complete the program have a better understanding of how schools and districts function, the principal's role, and their own leadership potential and that they improve their ability as effective school leaders. The second is that fellows complete a leadership project that develops their leadership capacity, addresses a student achievement issue in their school, positively influences instruction, and reduces the school's achievement gap. A final, long-term goal is that within three to five years of program completion, 60 percent to 70 percent of the fellows will become principals.

In its first year (2008–2009), the program served twenty-nine assistant principals and teacher leaders in cohorts of six to ten candidates from each of the four participating districts. To be eligible, participants had to already have state administrative certification. The program did not provide course credits or any additional state-sanctioned professional credential. Since the program costs were fully underwritten by FCCF, there were no direct costs to the districts, although they absorbed significant indirect costs for released time and coverage. Fellows received a \$2,000 stipend upon successful completion of the program.

How the Program Works

The USLF program includes a five-day summer institute and monthly all-day seminars during the school year. The curriculum framework draws on the state's common core of leading, with special attention to two domains: systems thinking, and teaching and learning. The sessions are structured around essential questions such as: What does research suggest about high-quality learning and teaching? What does high-quality teaching and learning look like? What are high-leverage strategies for reducing the achievement gap? What core beliefs inform my personal leadership? What is my leadership style?

USLF is organized as a community of practice and the teaching methods are grounded in adult learning theory, with problem-based learning and critical examinations of problems of practice. The curriculum is delivered through video observations, case studies, readings (e.g., Ron Ferguson, Richard Elmore, John Kotter, Ron Heifetz), and thought-provoking exercises and assignments (e.g., shadowing a student for a day, drafting a theory of action for school improvement). The focus is on putting learning into practice. The daily reflection sheet that fellows complete asks: What did I learn today? How will this impact my practice? How will this help my students? Fellows also undertake individual action-learning projects where they can exercise leadership and take risks. Finally, they produce a portfolio throughout the year-long program to document their leadership development.

How the Districts Support the Program

The four districts have invested substantial amounts of time, money, and intellectual capital in USLF, in several ways:

- release fellows for the full-day sessions, provide substitute coverage, help to design the session content and format, meet with fellows to advise and supervise their projects, and troubleshoot and smooth the path back at the fellows' schools;
- identify potential leaders and encourage them to apply;
- determine leadership advancement opportunities and support mentoring and supervision structures for new leaders.

Districts also provide the authentic contexts for the work, ensuring that USLF is a job-embedded improvement initiative, as opposed to an add-on program. The district leaders – primarily assistant superintendents – serving as program faculty bring considerable experience within and knowledge about urban schools and the particular conditions of their districts to the enterprise. The district leaders supervise the fellows' work on the leading learning projects, act as their advisors, and mentor them. As part of the USLF faculty, they help fellows connect theoretical notions of leadership (theory of action, accountability, instructional practice, assessment) to the actual practice of district improvement efforts.

Roles of Each Partner

In addition to conducting the research that led to the genesis of the program, FCCF secured the financial resources to start and sustain the program, contributing real dollars and in-kind support, and worked with individual donors and other foundations to obtain full funding. Leveraging relationships and professional connections, FCCF executives

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and board members brought prospective donors to USLF sessions, allowing advocates of educational improvement to see the promise of the fellows as well as the rigorous learning exercises in which they took part.

The Connecticut Center for School Change is an organization with distinct expertise in district-level leadership coaching around systemic improvement. The Center also has a well-developed infrastructure – from administrative support to curriculum design – for supporting high-quality leadership development programs. Consequently, the Center provides much of the back-office support to the program while providing leadership for curriculum development. Center staff also teach within the program, sharing experience and expertise about school-level leadership with the fellows.

The institutions of higher education have contributed different expertise to the partnership. The University of Connecticut faculty member researches and works with numerous districts on issues of systemic instructional improvement and instructional leadership. He led the development of the

curriculum, facilitated collaboration across the multiple organizations, and served as the central instructor for the program. The professors from Hofstra University and Bank Street College possess expertise in evaluating leadership development programs. These faculty members serve as external evaluators, systemically studying the efficacy of the program. They provide a fresh and unbiased perspective, feeding back patterns they observe and raising issues and questions of program structure, content, and implementation for the USLF faculty to consider.

USLF is an inter-organizational collaboration that attempts to identify and leverage the most appropriate and advantageous contribution of all the partners. The University of Connecticut faculty member does not help fellows solve day-to-day dilemmas – from scheduling to discipline – that tax the lives of urban leaders. District leaders do not try to provide theoretical frameworks that offer new means of seeing and reflecting upon leadership practice. Evaluators do not raise money for the program. Instead, the respective partners work at what they do best.

Successes and Challenges

USLF faculty members, district administrators, and foundation executives are believers in this new leadership development partnership. The program is job embedded and experiential, the curriculum challenging and relevant. Fellows reported the program had a positive impact on who they are as educational leaders. Here are some typical comments:

- “I went by my school this morning and I just stood outside for a moment. It didn’t feel like the same school – meaning I know that I am not the same.”

- “After this, I’ll never be the same. I will never look at classrooms through the same eyes.”
- “USLF made me more aware of what I did not know about myself and how I frame situations and think about my own leadership. I see more of a connection now between leading and teaching. I learned so much more in this program than in my college administrative prep program.”

The external evaluation found that USLF fellows experienced changes in their practice as a result of participation in three areas: using data to monitor progress and solve problems, providing professional development, and engaging others in change efforts. Fellows gained new leadership perspectives, developed a shared understanding of quality instruction, demonstrated improvement in leadership skills, and led teams in new ways. Eighty-five percent to 90 percent of the fellows rated the program as excellent in providing highly relevant content on leadership, urban schools, and instructional improvement.

Other signs of success have also emerged. FCCF secured the funding required to support the 2009–2010 cohort. There were more applications for the second year’s cohort, and thirty-seven candidates were selected. District

leaders are beginning to report systemic results, noting how USLF is impacting hiring practices and other professional development. Fellows from the 2008–2009 cohort continue to meet on their own or with support from their central office and the Connecticut Center for School Change. Four fellows, one from each district, have been hired as principals.

Despite these accomplishments, the USLF program still has much work to do in terms of its larger goal of transforming the districts. Liz City, Richard Elmore, Sarah Fiarman, and Lee Teitel (2009) write in their new book that instructional improvement at scale requires that professional development move beyond individuals and groups of educators to the school and district level. They suggest that improvement efforts have to become embedded in the district’s DNA and central to the core work of the district. The USLF program was developed and implemented not solely as high-quality professional development for individual aspiring leaders, but as a central element in changing the organizational conditions of how districts support instructional improvement.

To change those conditions, though, schools and districts will have to change some deeply engrained practices. In its first year, the program has

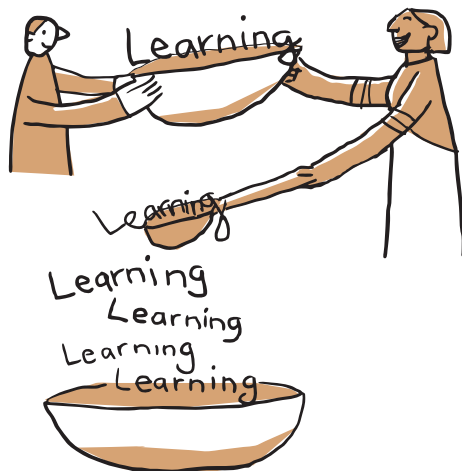
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found that it has bumped up against district practices in the following areas:

- Identifying quality teaching
- Putting learning into practice
- Sharing learning with others
- Aligning messages about leadership roles and strategies for school improvement
- Leveraging a critical mass to facilitate systemic change

Identifying Quality Teaching

In the summer sessions and follow-up fall seminars, the fellows clarified what constitutes good teaching, using a constructivist approach: they viewed videos of classroom teaching, compared their individual ratings, and learned how divergent their assessments of good teaching were. They developed a more fine-grained, learner-centered framework to analyze and describe teaching and learning.



Through this work, they gained understanding of the effects of good teaching and how to recognize it. The USLF exercises revealed that despite the four districts' investments in systemic reform, there was not a strong shared understanding of the attributes of quality teaching, nor a means by which the fellows' new perspectives could be reconciled with existing district expectations.

Putting Learning into Practice

With new insights on quality teaching, fellows who were assistant principals noted how they looked at their own schools' teachers differently, while fellows who were teachers reflected on how USLF pushed them to think differently about their teaching. With each session, the fellows gained insights into promoting quality teaching and learning, reducing the achievement gap, and addressing systemic change. They wanted to bring those insights into work the next day.

This turned out to be an unexpected tension in the program, because the intent had been to facilitate the fellows' development for future leadership positions and not about how they might change their current roles and work to capitalize on what they were learning in the moment.

Sharing Learning with Others

An unexpected consequence of the program was that the fellows wanted to share their learning with their schools' leadership teams, particularly their principals and other school administrators. They wanted to try out some new ideas and methods such as how to work with teachers to improve student engagement and learning. They wanted to engage their colleagues in

collaboratively trying new approaches and jointly reflecting on what they were learning. Some of the fellows engaged in informal conversations with their principal or peer administrators, and others circulated readings and organized video-based discussions about teaching and learning, as they had done in the seminars.

The principals and other school leaders varied in their receptivity to this new information – from active interest, to resentment that they did not receive the same learning opportunity, to fear that they were at risk of being replaced.

Aligning Messages about Leadership Roles and Strategies for School Improvement

Throughout the USLF program, there were discussions of how effective leaders could facilitate school improvement both through work with individual teachers and through collective work with teaching faculty in fostering a vision, raising expectations, using data, and facilitating collaboration.

While district officials provided input into the program content and facilitated fellows' discussions at each session, there was limited discussion about each district's systemic improvement plans and leadership expectations and how these and the program's expectations were aligned (or not). Thus, it was left up to each fellow to sort out the alignment issues and tensions, sometimes with their building leaders and sometimes not.



Leveraging a Critical Mass to Facilitate Systemic Change

As the program unfolded throughout the academic year, participating district officials and the fellows began to see the benefits of having a shared language and shared expectations about quality teaching, instructionally effective leadership, and strategies for enhancing student learning. These shared insights and expectations helped, in some cases, to generate a critical mass of people with leadership expectations and capacity for systemic reform work.

Building Partnerships for Long-Term Improvement

The USLF partners invested in building collective ownership so that all partners felt responsibility for the success of the entire program. This investment required significant time and planning.

The partners also found that utilizing comparative advantages required explicit conversations about how each organization and individual could best contribute, working under the explicit assumption that differentiated contributions may produce the most desirable result. As differentiation increased, so did the need for coordination. It took ongoing collaboration and communication across organizations to knit together the various aspects of the work into a coherent whole.

Finally, improving the program required ongoing reflection about practice based upon real data. Some of the most significant modifications to the program were direct responses to evaluation findings. The partners created opportunities to meet as a team and learn from and examine results of the program evaluators' data gathering. This enabled the team to continuously improve the program and to re-engineer the curriculum and structural components to better meet the needs of the fellows and the districts.

The USLF partnership model is not a silver bullet for remedying all urban leadership problems. It is not a simple, packaged program that can be bought off the shelf and easily inserted into schools and districts. USLF is a complex initiative woven into the complicated work of four urban districts. It is a strategic and systemic effort intended to have a lasting impact upon the leadership capacity of the districts. The identification, development, and support of aspiring leaders within these four districts are being accomplished through a unique, effective, inter-organizational partnership.

As other districts across the nation struggle with developing a deep pool of building leaders who have the skills and knowledge to improve teaching and learning, they should ask: What is our comparative advantage relative to solving this problem? How can we strategically ally with organizations that offer different and complementary assets and strengths? How can we invest in the collaborative to produce a high-functioning partnership?

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