

SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT GRANT (SIG) PRACTICE: DEVELOPING PRINCIPAL PIPELINES

DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA PUBLIC SCHOOLS, WASHINGTON, D.C.

In 2009, the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) faced a major challenge to improving student outcomes in its low-performing schools: DCPS did not have enough principals with the necessary leadership skills to implement comprehensive turnaround efforts. To deal with the issue, DCPS developed a strategy not only to increase the skills of its current turnaround school principals but also to build the skills of a new generation of principals. Although the effort was sparked by the need to turn around 16 SIG schools, it is now the overarching strategy for DCPS's 99 high-need schools.¹

THE STRATEGY: Increasing the Number and Skills of Turnaround School Leaders

DCPS's school leadership strategy has three elements:

- A Leadership Framework, with standards that define DCPS's vision of effective school leadership for low-performing schools
- Professional training and support, aligned to the Leadership Framework, for current DCPS principals
- A principal pipeline that builds leadership skills in teachers, coaches, and central office staff

Leadership Framework. As the centerpiece of DCPS's leadership development strategy, the Leadership Framework creates common expectations for its school principals. The framework draws from DCPS's leadership expectations developed from analyses of student and school performance data, principal evaluations, research, and a review of resources. The Leadership Framework identifies six broad standards for principal leadership: instruction, family and community, operations, personal leadership, talent, and school culture.² It also identifies leadership competencies. Its standards guide DCPS's decisions about principals' professional development, targeted principal support, and hiring new principals.

Development of the Framework. The Leadership Framework was developed after several years of strategic planning and reviews of principal performance data and school leadership research. In 2009, as a short-term strategy for attracting and placing more effective principals, DCPS focused the first year of its principal initiative on principal recruitment and selection. In 2010, DCPS developed new leadership standards.

District of Columbia Public Schools at a Glance

Start of SIG Implementation: 2010–11

Locale: City, Large

Enrollment: 44,618

Free or Reduced-Price Lunch: 53%

Racial/Ethnic Composition: 71% Black, 15% Hispanic, 11% White, 2% Asian, 2% Other, <1% American Indian

English Learners: 8%

Students With Disabilities: 20%

Cohorts 1 and 2 SIG Schools in District of Columbia

SIG Model	# of Schools	School Level	# of Schools
Transformation	5	Elementary	7
Turnaround	7	Middle	3
Restart	4	High	5
Closure	0	Nonstandard	1

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These new standards were based on data from its principal evaluation system (called the School Leader IMPACT system³); research on educational leadership; national standards from the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium; resources from other states, districts, and national organizations⁴; and multiple focus groups with principals, assistant principals, and instructional superintendents. With the leadership standards in place, DCPS created the Leadership Framework to guide integral aspects of the work, including the IMPACT evaluation system of principals and assistant principals.

Continuous Improvement. DCPS collects data about principal performance using measures defined by the Leadership Framework standards and uses these data to inform personnel decisions on professional development, promotions, bonuses, and (when needed) removals. After collecting feedback on the standards through focus groups with principals, assistant principals, senior DCPS leaders, and instructional superintendents, DCPS revised the Leadership Framework. To maintain alignment, DCPS also revised the evaluation system and other DCPS systems built around the Framework.

Professional Training and Support. Leadership Framework standards and data from the principal evaluation system guide DCPS's decisions about the professional development and training of all principals as well as targeted support for the specific needs of individual principals or groups of principals. Support and training are provided by instructional superintendents and principal partners and through a leadership development series.

Instructional Superintendent Support. As part of DCPS's senior leadership structure, instructional superintendents manage, evaluate, and support principals to build leadership skills and improve student outcomes in clusters of schools. In part, their role is to model effective instructional leadership. During school visits, they give individualized support and guidance to principals or school staff as needed. They conduct classroom walk-throughs to gather information about instruction. They also meet with principals to discuss Leadership Framework standards, areas that need improvement, and strategies to make those improvements.

In the 2011–12 school year, DCPS hired additional instructional superintendents so that each one could spend more one-on-one time with principals. The new hires reduced each instructional superintendent's caseload from 25–30 schools to 8–12 schools. This strategy allowed more frequent school visits and more targeted support to principals most in need of assistance.

Principal Partner Support. In addition to help from the instructional superintendent, an experienced principal partner provides principals of SIG and other low-performing schools with daily coaching and guidance. Principal partners have a caseload of up to three schools and are responsible for providing coaching and guidance based on their own experiences as turnaround principals. They also maintain the operations of the building when the principal attends professional activities, familiarize the principal with DCPS priorities and practices, and aid the principal in overseeing key initiatives in the school. Principals of SIG and other low-performing schools also receive central office support to help them analyze and use data in the goal-setting process.

Leadership Development Series. In the 2012–13 school year, DCPS introduced a new leadership development series aligned with the Leadership Framework standards. Sessions focus on individual standards. Principals are encouraged to attend the sessions, particularly in those areas where IMPACT performance data suggest that more training is needed. Some of the leadership development series events convene monthly, but others involve two to three days of intensive training with small-group follow-up sessions. DCPS created the leadership development series to tailor and differentiate professional development to each principal's specific needs. The series is intended to supplement the support that principals receive from their instructional superintendents or to offer support in areas in which their instructional superintendents may not have deep expertise.

Principal Pipeline. In January 2013, DCPS launched the Mary Jane Patterson Fellowship to identify and develop current DCPS staff for principal positions. The 18-month program is a departure from past initiatives to recruit

principals from outside the system. DCPS's new teacher and principal evaluation systems helped identify strong current staff, and the Patterson Fellowship was developed to recruit these strong educators and develop their capacity to become principals. The program also recognizes DCPS's highest performing principals by tapping them to provide training, host Patterson Fellows during the school year, and serve as mentor principals. Funding for the Patterson Fellowship is provided through a combination of private, nonprofit grants and the federal Teacher Incentive Fund.⁵

The Patterson Fellowship uses the Leadership Framework components to build the skills of high-performing DCPS current staff in two ways:

- DCPS uses a rigorous selection process to identify eligible staff. Candidates must have track records of high performance, as determined through the evaluation system. Through activities and interviews, they must demonstrate that they are ready to benefit from the Fellowship.
- DCPS aligns the program's curriculum with the Leadership Framework standards and gives Patterson Fellows hands-on experience and mentoring.

Selection of Fellows. Fellowship applicants must be current employees, hold a master's degree, and have at least two years of teaching experience. Ninety-three teachers, coaches, and central office staff met these criteria and applied for the Patterson Fellowship. They began a multistage selection process that included performance-based activities and a series of interviews with senior DCPS leaders. For example, in one activity, applicants were asked to watch a video of a teacher's instruction, discuss the strengths of the lesson, and provide advice for improvement. In a role-playing exercise, the "teacher" pushed back on this advice. Applicants' responses allowed reviewers to rate each applicant's mentoring skills.

DCPS selected 12 Fellows, a number based on projected vacancies for the 2013–14 school year. Securing a principal position is contingent on the candidate's performance during the Patterson Fellowship and on passing the School Leaders Licensure Assessment. After completing the program, Patterson Fellows are asked to make a three-year commitment to DCPS.

Fellowship Curriculum. The 18-month Patterson Fellowship program offers a combination of training on the Leadership Framework, college courses, coaching, principal mentors, and on-the-job experience. The program's curriculum emphasizes turnaround skills—including managing the change process, adapting leadership styles to the situation, ensuring resilience, and providing strategies to support and maintain effective teachers (talent management). In addition to Patterson Fellowship staff and current principals, DCPS has engaged external organizations to help develop and implement the Fellowship curriculum. For example, a local university's business school provides content on change management, leadership communications, and talent management in the education environment.

The first six months of the Fellowship (January through June) focus on three of the six Leadership Framework standards: (1) personal leadership, (2) instruction, and (3) talent. Fellows remain in their current work placements and engage in weekly cohort development sessions, learn from mentor principals⁶ and system leaders, receive executive coaching, and lead a job-embedded growth project.⁷ Mentor principals assign projects, based on input from the Patterson Fellowship staff and feedback from DCPS as well as each Fellow's self-reported strengths and growth areas. Key objectives and performance expectations related to the three additional Leadership Framework standards—(4) school culture, (5) family and community, and (6) operational leadership—are introduced in subsequent phases of the Fellowship. In the first week of the Fellowship, Fellows meet three times on weekdays and twice over the weekend; then they typically meet twice a week.

Fellows work with executive coaches and DCPS experts many times during the Fellowship's first phase as they observe, practice, and discuss the strategies and ideas to which they are being introduced. They visit DCPS elementary, middle, and high schools to practice instructional observations—for example, using DCPS instructional observation protocols related to the DCPS Teaching and Learning Framework. The first phase culminates with a job-embedded project led by the Fellows that is designed to improve student achievement. Coaches assess the Fellows' project work based on the key learning objectives of personal leadership, instruction, and talent (which were used to design the project) as well as on the presentation skills demonstrated as they outline their results to a group of their peers, supervisors, and other DCPS leaders.

During the first six months, Fellows remain in their current positions and attend classes at night and on weekends. During the summer months, they take on leadership roles in summer school and transition into assistant principal residency positions while completing university courses. During the following academic school year, the Fellows are placed into two different schools, one each semester, at least one of which will be a low-performing school. This split-semester residency allows Fellows to learn from two different mentor principals and observe a variety of leadership styles. They do not "shadow" mentoring principals. Rather, mentor principals assign responsibilities to the Fellows as well as manage and support their performance during the residency. Each Fellow bears responsibility for leading projects and staff while also being a full-time member of the school's leadership team. Each Fellow's specific leadership responsibilities are determined collaboratively by the Fellow, the mentor principal, and the Patterson Fellowship program staff.

CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNED

DCPS encountered numerous challenges in introducing its new system for recruiting, identifying, measuring, evaluating, and supporting principals. During the first year (2010–11), administrators gave both positive and negative feedback. In response, DCPS collected additional feedback through face-to-face conversations, surveys, and focus group meetings with instructional superintendents and principals. DCPS used this feedback to revisit these tools and create a modified version of the Leadership Framework and the School Leader IMPACT system.

The DCPS deputy chief for principal effectiveness noted the importance of sequencing the leadership development strategies—rather than changing the entire system at once. Establishing consensus on the needed skills for leadership first (as DCPS aimed to do with its Leadership Framework) can set parameters for other principal training and support initiatives.

SUSTAINABILITY

DCPS hopes that the Patterson Fellowship will produce well-trained DCPS leaders who will continue to work at DCPS after they meet the requirements of the Fellowship. Grant programs such as the Teacher Incentive Fund support the Fellows' salaries during their residency year. Private, nonprofit grants also support elements of the Fellowship program. Although the Patterson Fellowship is funded through a mix of internal and external resources, DCPS's goal is to self-fund the initiative through local funds and resources during the next five years.

CONCLUSION

Rather than continually react to DCPS's short-term needs for turnaround school principals by recruiting from outside the system, DCPS allowed time to develop and continually refine a strategy that builds these skills in staff from within. Central to this effort was the creation of the Leadership Framework, from which stemmed the expectations, processes, and data reviews. Based on the information gained through the Leadership Framework and the alignment with the principal evaluation system, DCPS now provides a common set of expectations for school principals and their coaches (supervisors), which results in professional development tied to the Leadership Framework and training targeted to principals in need of additional support. DCPS also sought to reward high-performing teachers through the

18-month Patterson Fellowship, which ensures that future school leaders from DCPS will have knowledge of the needs of DCPS schools and students as well as a deep understanding of the Leadership Framework standards.

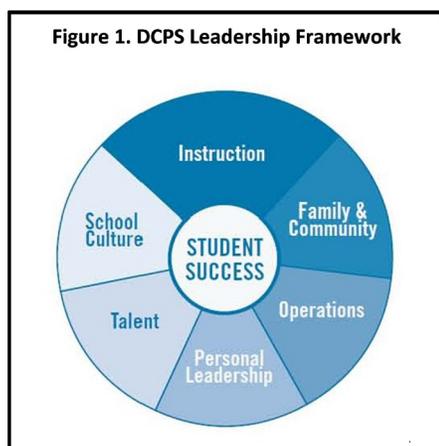
SOURCES

Data for the tables on page 1 are from the following sources: District at-a-glance data are from the NCES Common Core of Data (2011–12); and SIG school data are from SIG-Awarded Schools (2010–11, 2011–12, 2012–13) located at <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/sif/index.html>.

IMPLEMENTATION DETAILS

¹ DCPS uses the term “high-need school” to refer to a school that is identified as a Tier 1, Tier 2, or Tier 3 SIG-eligible school.

² Figure 1 shows the Leadership Framework graphic.



³ The IMPACT evaluation system is used for all school-based personnel across DCPS. The evaluation system uses student achievement data and trained personnel to evaluate performance. Information from IMPACT establishes expectations for staff and leaders, targets staff and leaders in need of additional support, and identifies staff and leaders who may be dismissed because they are unable to meet the IMPACT expectations.

⁴ The resources highlighted by DCPS include the following: *Assessing Educational Leaders* by Douglas Reeves, *Balanced Leadership* by Robert Marzano et al., *Excellent Teachers Deserve Excellent Leaders* by Linda Darling-Hammond, Georgia Leadership Institute for Instructional Improvement’s *The 8 Roles of School Leaders*, National Association of Elementary School Principals’ *Standards for What Principals Should Know and Be Able to Do*, National Association of Secondary School Principals’ *Leadership Skills Assessment*, National Board for Professional Teaching Standards’ *Core Propositions for Accomplished Educational Leaders*, New Leaders for New Schools’ NYC Leadership Academy, and Pittsburgh Public Schools’ *Pittsburgh Urban Leadership System for Excellence (PULSE)*.

⁵ The Teacher Incentive Fund is a federal grant program that supports efforts to develop and implement performance-based teacher and principal compensation systems in high-need schools.

⁶ Mentor principals are identified through a multistep selection process. Principals may indicate interest on their own or may be recommended by their instructional superintendents. DCPS examines the history of the mentor principal’s school performance—including student achievement data, metrics on school culture, and other measures—to determine if the mentor and school are an appropriate fit for the Patterson Fellowship program. DCPS also reviews data on the proposed mentor principal’s performance on the School Leader IMPACT tool. Mentors conduct a self-assessment aligned to the learning objectives for the Fellowship and the competencies that they believe they can support in another leader.

IMPLEMENTATION DETAILS (continued)

⁷ For example, during the first week of the program, Fellows are introduced to the personal leadership standard. They read several articles and case studies, such as Chris Argyris’s “Teaching Smart People How to Learn,” “Why Teams Don’t Work,” and “The 1996 Mt. Everest Climbing Disaster,” and they complete and discuss the aggregated results of an online self-assessment of their own leadership skills. On the second day of the first week, they participate in an executive coaching workshop, which includes practice on asking powerful questions, body language, and more. The Fellows also attend a weekend retreat at a local university to learn about inspirational leadership.