

Stories From the Field

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CHOCK FULL OF DATA:

HOW SCHOOL DISTRICTS ARE BUILDING LEADER TRACKING SYSTEMS TO SUPPORT PRINCIPAL PIPELINES

Jennifer Gill

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Written by Jennifer Gill

Cover: Jillian Near (seated at center), a human resources information systems specialist at Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, served as project manager for development of the district's leader tracking system. Other members of the team included (from left): Billy Jackson, senior solutions analyst; Jay Parker, director of student applications; Jevelyn Bonner-Reed, project director for the Principal Pipeline Initiative; Crystal Shue, curriculum coordinator, formerly the Principal Pipeline Initiative project manager; and Willis Young, human resources information system specialist.

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Design by José Moreno

A photograph of three school principals in a hallway. One man stands in the background, while two women sit on a wooden bench in the foreground. The hallway has a tiled wall and a sign that says 'Upcoming Events'.

CHOCK FULL OF DATA

By Jennifer Gill

How does a school district make informed decisions when it comes to hiring and supporting principals? Data can help.

Principal Emily El Moudaffar (seated, left) joins Lee Cooper and Sara Butler at Denver's Smith Renaissance Elementary school.

In April, Sara Butler and Lee Cooper gathered around a table with Emily El Moudaffar, the principal of Smith Renaissance Elementary on Denver's Northeast side. Butler helps coordinate recruiting of principals and assistant principals for Denver Public Schools, while Cooper is a principal supervisor, charged with supporting 14 principals, including El Moudaffar. Their discussion: the search for Smith Renaissance's next assistant principal. Cooper recalls sifting through a "gajillion résumés" when he was a principal, scanning for key words that might signal a potential match. The effort took hours, and he's sure some qualified candidates slipped through the cracks because their résumés lacked enough detail to make it past his first cut.

There was no towering stack of résumés on the table at this meeting. Instead, the trio fired up their laptops and logged onto the Vacancy Matching Tool, a searchable online database of roughly 140 aspiring school leaders who met leadership standards and had successfully

been screened into the district's talent pool. El Moudaffar wanted her next assistant principal to be skilled at nurturing an inclusive school culture and forming closer ties with families. Butler and Cooper listened closely, then used one of the tool's filters to identify candidates whose performance evaluations indicated a strength in school culture and family engagement. They overlaid another filter to pinpoint individuals who had graduated from a pre-service training program run by one of the district's university partners. That shrank the pool to a manageable list of about 30 candidates, which Butler, Cooper and El Moudaffar reviewed together. They drilled into each person's online profile, scrutinizing the candidate's educational background, work experience and performance. They pored over the electronic notes of committee members who had interviewed each person as part of the selection process into the talent pool. By the end of the meeting, El Moudaffar had 10 promising candidates for phone interviews.



Jay Parker, who heads a unit that helps manage technology for the district, is seen here with Jillian Near, project manager for the leader tracking system effort in Charlotte-Mecklenburg.

Denver isn't the only school district harnessing the power of data to make better-informed decisions about the people the school system hires, promotes, trains and develops to lead schools and improve teaching and learning. Since 2011, Denver and five other urban school districts—Charlotte-Mecklenburg, N.C.; Gwinnett County, Ga. (outside Atlanta); Hillsborough County (Tampa), Fla.; New York City; and Prince George's County, Md. (outside of Washington, D.C.)—have been part of The Wallace Foundation's Principal Pipeline Initiative, a six-year, \$84-million effort to establish systems that produce a steady supply of effective school leaders. As part of that endeavor, the districts have built innovative databases to collect and store longitudinal information about the training, qualifications and performance of their principals and aspiring principals. Gone are the days of solely relying on personal recommendations or "going with your gut" when making critical people decisions. Today the districts are tapping these "leader tracking systems," as they've come to be known, to

help with a range of pipeline activities, such as matching qualified principals to the schools that most need them, identifying potential mentors for newly minted principals and tailoring training to a leader's specific needs. In an informal survey, 90 percent of respondents from the six districts said their leader tracking systems were worthwhile or very worthwhile.¹

At the same time, school officials emphasize that even the best system is no more than a tool. "The leader tracking system is an important foundational piece," says Tom Boasberg, superintendent of Denver Public

¹ The survey was conducted online by Wallace in February 2016. Its purpose was to get a general idea of how the districts in the Principal Pipeline Initiative had developed and were using the tracking systems. Wallace used the survey results to help shape the areas of inquiry and the interview questions for this publication. The survey was fielded through SurveyMonkey. It went to 52 school district officials in the six Pipeline districts who helped develop the systems or were frequent users of it. Some 34 people returned the survey, for an overall response rate of 65 percent, but the number and percentage of respondents varied district to district.

“It’s essential to have someone who understands both the IT side and the schoolhouse side.”

Schools. “But what’s much more important is spending time with the information you have to craft individual development plans for leaders and to match individuals with the right leadership opportunities.”

Human resources experts call this work “people analytics,” using HR data strategically to better hire, manage and develop people. It’s a relatively new concept for most organizations, which historically have been more data-driven in areas like sales and finance, says Josh Bersin, principal of Bersin by Deloitte, a human resources consulting firm. In fact, the idea is so new that “the data you find online about who works at a particular company is often more accurate than the company’s own HR system,” he says. That’s changing, but building a clean, comprehensive and reliable set of HR data suitable for analysis is a heavy lift. Bersin es-

timates that 75 percent of the effort in people analytics is at the front-end—finding all your data sources, resolving data quality issues and aggregating it into a user-friendly system. That can take years even with a team dedicated to the work, as the Pipeline districts can attest. While each one created a leader tracking system specific to its needs, all the districts faced common challenges in establishing the system and getting people to use it. Their experiences illuminate some key considerations for other districts looking to develop their own leader tracking systems.

IT ALL STARTS WITH A TEAM.

Early on, the Pipeline districts established cross-departmental teams to steer the development of their leader tracking system. That decision turned out to be critical for several reasons. First, it ensured that the project stayed on track. Many of the teams had standing weekly meetings to assess progress and tackle unexpected problems. It also fostered shared ownership of the leader tracking system, as all of the departments, from technology to human resources, worked together to create something that would benefit the district, its school leaders and, in turn, the students in their care. The teams also received support and guidance from their superintendents and other senior district officials about the types of information to include in the systems.



The home page/dashboard for Gwinnett County’s leader tracking system provides users with a snapshot of principal employment in the district. The at-a-glance data include the total number of principals, broken down by the school level at which they work; the projected vacancies for a five-year period; and the rate of hiring of graduates from the district’s aspiring principal training program.

Some teams experienced culture shock at first. Charlotte-Mecklenburg’s core team, like those in the other Pipeline districts, included members from leadership development, human resources information systems, talent management, business systems and “student applications,” a unit that helps manage technology for the district. Jay Parker, director of student applications, says it was the first time in his 18 years with the district that his department and human resources collaborated on a project. He laughs when recalling the first team meetings. “A lot of my



In Hillsborough County, Fla., principals and assistant principals take part in a two-day program to learn more about race and equity in education, a professional development topic that emerged from analysis of data in the district's leader tracking system.

technical people are introverts; they'd sit quietly and try to process what they were hearing before giving a response, while the HR people are extroverts, they like to talk," he explains. "I had to overcome some misperceptions by HR that the tech team was ignoring them." Technical people also tend to talk in terms of "truncated tables" and "SQL coding," phrases that flew over the heads of people like Damaris Blondonville, Wallace project manager for Prince George's County Public Schools. The district's data warehouse officer, Benjamin Levinger, became an essential go-between because he could translate database lingo into non-technical terms that end users like Blondonville could follow. "He was the bridge that let us build our LTS," she says, using the initials for leader tracking system. "It's essential to have someone who understands both the IT side and the schoolhouse side."

Outside consultants had a seat at the table in some districts. Many survey respondents said that building the system required extensive or very extensive technical assistance from hired contractors, their own IT departments, or both. Districts were cautious not to rely too

heavily on outside help, however, recognizing that if they outsourced all of the development work, their own technical staffs wouldn't understand how the systems were built or how to sustain them. Charlotte-Mecklenburg brought in two database software experts to help create the initial reports for the leader tracking system, but at the same time trained two members of its human resources information systems team on the software so that they can now continue the work in-house.

THINK BIG, THEN HUNT FOR THE DATA.

The six districts quickly recognized that compiling all their information about their principals—and in some cases, assistant principals and other school leaders, too—into a single, searchable system could have widespread application. When surveyed about the current uses of their leader tracking system, 90 percent of district respondents said it helps develop a pool of qualified principal candidates for hiring, and 84 percent said it assists with matching the right candidate to the right school. That's only the starting point. Gwinnett County Public Schools also saw potential with succession plan-

TYPES OF INFORMATION THE PIPELINE DISTRICTS ARE COLLECTING ON CURRENT SCHOOL PRINCIPALS*

- Educational background
- Employment history within the district
- Employment history outside the district
- Ratings by teachers
- Ratings by supervisors
- Specialized skills (ELL, turnaround, etc.)
- Standardized test scores of students at their current school
- Standardized test scores of students at previous schools they have led
- Other: mentoring and residency, completion of leadership professional development, ratings from principal screening process, teacher/student/parent survey results of schools where principals worked, student absenteeism rate.

** From Wallace's informal survey of the six Principal Pipeline districts. To be included on the list, an item had to have been reported by at least one district.*

ning. By analyzing historical data and the age and years of service of its current principals, for instance, it could better anticipate principal retirements and recruit candidates with the right experience into its district-run preparation programs who could step into those roles. Charlotte-Mecklenburg realized that by linking a principal's performance evaluation data with information about the principal's school and students, principal supervisors could better coach and support principals in areas they needed to sharpen. Denver, meanwhile, saw an opportunity to better track its diversity efforts by monitoring aggregate data on who was applying and getting into its principal and assistant principal talent pools.

Thinking big about the possible uses of their leader tracking system helped the districts identify the types of information they needed to corral. *[See list above for the information they commonly collect.]* Charlotte-Mecklenburg, for example, wanted to create a profile of every school leader that included personal information, such as certifications, work history and evaluations, as well as relevant data about the principal's current school, including staff and student demographics, graduation rate, and teacher turnover. That meant pulling data from several different databases, and not all of them stored information the same way—which posed

challenges. It took six months for Crystal Shue, then a member of the human resources information systems team, to identify and fix problems with the data before it all flowed into the leader tracking system. "I was usually the bearer of bad news," she says. Duplicate entries had to be purged, data sets had to be consistently named. Employee identification numbers, for instance, went by "Employee ID" in one system and "Emp ID" in another, an inconsistency that would trip up the leader tracking system if not corrected.

Indeed, an assortment of information-gathering difficulties faced the districts. Some found gaps in the data they collected, others discovered data sitting in spreadsheets on someone's computer instead of being automated. Locating all the data "pulled back the curtain" on how information has traditionally been gathered and classified in Prince George's County, says Blondonville. The district, for example, wants its system to include teacher-leaders so it can groom promising future principals earlier in their careers. Problem is, the district has various types of teacher-leaders—mentors, instructional leads, professional development leads—and some of them are not identified as such in HR records. Officially, they're considered teachers, despite their additional duties. That didn't matter much in the past—as

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MAKING THE GRADE

DISTRICTS SHARE DATA WITH TRAINING PROGRAMS SO THEY CAN BETTER PREPARE FUTURE SCHOOL LEADERS

When Hillsborough County Public Schools meets each year with its university partners that train aspiring school leaders, the district has potent information to share: the on-the-job performance of first-year assistant principals. The aggregated data help the five universities identify areas where novice leaders appear to be struggling and brainstorm among themselves and with the

ry. Denver Public Schools, for instance, plans to test the idea with one partner, the University of Denver's Ritchie Program for School Leaders, to learn what works and what doesn't. The partners are finalizing a legal agreement that calls for the district to share yearly evaluation scores and overall performance ratings for consenting Ritchie alumni for seven years after they graduate. The university can only use the data in aggregated form for reports or studies, and it must notify the district when doing so.

“Sharing data about novice principals has helped the Hillsborough school system strengthen its partnership with university principal training programs.”

New York City's Department of Education, meanwhile, is following the outcomes of a sub-set of candidates who are pursuing certification with one of the district's six university partners through support from The Wallace Foundation. The department's Office of Leadership provides these partners with aggregate information on how their candidates fare on the district's selective hiring assessments. Because the assessments provide insight into how a candidate will perform aligned to the skills and traits that the department expects in its principals, the department believes this information can be useful to its university partners in adjusting their curriculum as necessary.

district how their preparation programs can address them. At the meeting last summer, for instance, the district and the universities discussed how their programs could better develop the “soft skills” of leadership so new assistant principals are more adept at relationship-building, a competency many need to improve. Having performance data readily available through the district's leader tracking system makes such collaboration possible, says Tricia McManus, Hillsborough's executive director of leadership development. “It's really allowed us to strengthen our partnership with them.”

The leader tracking system can help inform the improvement of district-run preparation programs, too, in everything from admission of candidates to program design. Gwinnett County Public Schools discovered by analyzing evaluation data on assistant principals that its Aspiring Leader Program, its main recruiting source for assistant principals, could do a better job screening for candidates with collaborative work-styles. As part of its selection process into the program, it now puts candidates into six-person leaderless teams to complete a task. The objective: to gauge which candidates seek input from others in the group and which just take charge. As the district follows the career paths of school leaders over time, it could glean insights to enhance the training provided. “Is a 180-day residency better than a 90-day one?” posits Glenn Pethel, Gwinnett's assistant superintendent of leadership development. “Through a tracking system and analysis of the data, we'll be better able to predict which aspects of a preparation program yield a greater return.”

School districts have long given anecdotal feedback to principal training programs about how their graduates fare in job interviews or even once they're hired. Now with the leader tracking system, they can support those personal stories with hard facts. They're proceeding cautiously, however, given that data sharing with external partners is uncharted territo-

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long as a principal knew who his or her professional development lead was, that was good enough. But if district talent-groomers rely solely on HR records to pull teacher-leaders into the leader tracking system, they could miss some who qualify. Blondonville remains optimistic that the district will find a solution. “We never had to think about this because we didn’t have a leader tracking system,” she adds. “It’s triggered robust conversations about how we can improve, and that’s a positive.”

LISTEN AND LEARN.

The districts sought input into the design of their systems from the people who would actually use them, including principal supervisors, HR personnel in charge of recruiting and hiring principals, senior district leaders and members of the leadership development team. “The functionality of our LTS reflects what our HR personnel and principal supervisors need to have at their fingertips,” says Ann Clark, superintendent of Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools. “They’ll only use what they believe is valuable.” Sometimes, they got more than they bargained for. In Charlotte-Mecklenburg, principal supervisors and HR staff members suggested the types of information they’d like to see in the school leader profiles, but when they saw the finished product, some balked. The typical profile on a high school principal ran 20 pages long. Based on their feedback, the district added new functionality so users can pull up an entire profile or specific sections, which are organized according to the district’s leadership standards to aid principal supervisors when doing evaluations.

Principal supervisors also helped design Denver’s Vacancy Matching Tool. They wished, for example, that they could use the tool to quickly find candidates proficient in Spanish or with specialized skills, like special-education experience. Now that information is captured when a candidate applies online to the district’s talent pool.

Not everything won kudos from end users. Denver built another tool so users could review and compare the evaluation scores of principals across the district to help identify trends and target support. One problem was that the tool provided no analysis of the scores—and principal supervisors and other district leaders who tested an early version said they didn’t have time to synthesize the data themselves to determine what actions they should take. The district scrapped the tool, and HR now prepares a data analysis for district leaders. “It’s hard to get buy-in for new systems, so we’re

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It can take several years for
people to make full use of leader
tracking systems.

cautious about making sure that what’s in the leader tracking system is useful,” says Mikel Royal, Wallace project director in Denver. “The more feedback we get, the more useful it will be.”

BE MINDFUL ABOUT ACCESS.

Given the sensitive information kept in their leader tracking systems, the districts took care to limit access to staff members who directly hire and support principals. HR hiring managers and principal supervisors are the most common users, according to the survey, followed by senior district leaders, members of the leadership development team, and in some cases, superintendents themselves. In Charlotte-Mecklenburg, principal supervisors can see the profiles only of the school leaders whom they oversee. Their support staff members do not have access at all. District principal supervisors can also use another tool to filter candidates for school leadership positions, including principal, assistant principal and other roles such as dean of students, based on such criteria as length of tenure and characteristics of their current school, but only HR personnel can see candidates’ evaluation scores and ethnicity.

CONSIDER IT A WORK IN PROGRESS.

Like the other districts, Charlotte-Mecklenburg has faced challenges getting principal supervisors to use the tool. “I think it gets lost in the sea of systems and tools that are available to them,” explains Jillian Near, a member of the district’s human resources information systems team who served as the leader tracking system project director. She tries to pique their interest by showing how the system can save them time when looking for candidates to nominate for principal preparation programs or familiarizing themselves with a new principal or school they oversee. She and the team also email friendly reminders about the tools at strategic times of the year when they would be most useful, such as the fall when principal supervisors are helping principals set professional goals. “As people start to see the benefits, usage will go up,” says Jelyvn Bonner-Reed,



Tricia McManus (standing), assistant superintendent of educational leadership and professional development for Hillsborough County (Fla.) Public Schools, helps local school officials learn how to use the district's leader selection tool, part of its tracking system, to search for assistant principal candidates with strengths in specific areas.

Charlotte-Mecklenburg's director of strategic initiatives and principal pipeline initiatives.

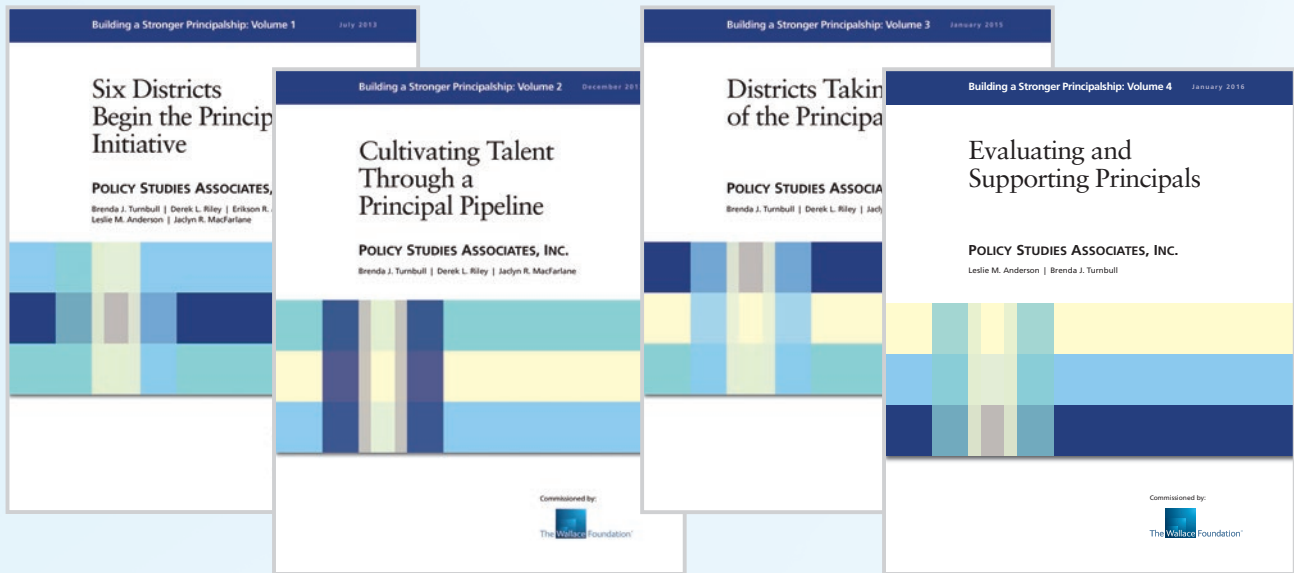
That time is required for people to take full advantage of the system is hardly surprising. Josh Bersin at Deloitte notes that it can take several years for an organization to sharpen its data know-how to inform critical decisions about people. The dedicated ones stick with it, steadily building their system, celebrating milestones along the way and continuously trying to improve it. In the survey, respondents from the Pipeline districts indicated plans to add more data and use their systems in new ways, such as sharing some data with university partners about the collective on-the-job performance of their graduates. *[See story on p. 6 to learn how some are already doing so.]*

If the leader tracking system is an example of continuous improvement, it's a prod for it, too. By analyzing evaluation data, for example, Hillsborough County Public Schools realized that many of its principals struggle with leading change, so it added several professional development sessions about change management. Other districts have discovered through the data that some pipeline activities could be more efficient. By monitoring Denver's hiring and placement dashboard—an on-

line tool launched this year that tracks recruiting activity for principals and assistant principals—Sara Butler noticed that the district received a number of applications for its talent pools soon after they “opened” last fall. The district started interviewing candidates in December for the principal pool and January for the assistant principal pool. That delay caused a major backlog: Candidates who applied in February, the peak month according to the dashboard, waited several weeks for an interview. Armed with the data, Butler plans to propose that interviews start as soon as candidates apply so that the talent pools are fully stocked when hiring ramps up in the spring.

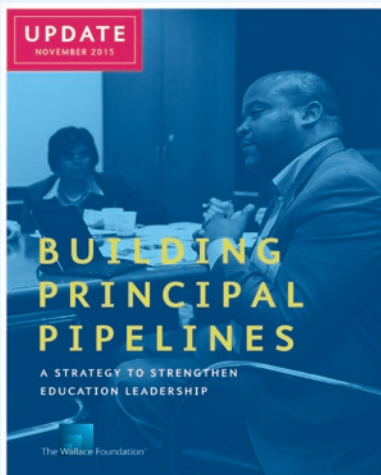
Speaking of hiring, Emily El Moudaffar, the principal at Smith Renaissance, did phone interviews with her 10 candidates for the assistant principal job, then invited eight to meet her and Cooper in person. “Our goal is to hire an assistant principal who could be a principal,” Cooper says. “Rather than just see a person as a high-potential candidate, we want to make sure their skills and strengths match the needs of the school.” After meeting everyone, he and El Moudaffar chose two individuals to move forward in the hiring process. Cooper is confident that either one will be a great fit.

Further Reading From The Wallace Foundation



***Building Principal Pipelines: A Strategy to Strengthen Education Leadership* (2016)**

The fourth in a series of reports about Wallace’s Principal Pipeline Initiative explores, among other things, the role of principal supervisors in principal support and evaluation.



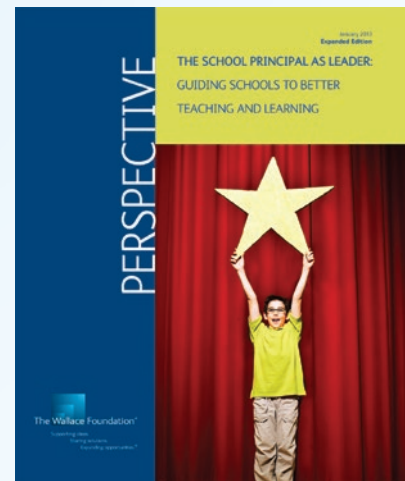
***Building Principal Pipelines: A Strategy to Strengthen Education Leadership* (2015)**

This Wallace Update describes Wallace-supported efforts by school districts to develop a large pool of highly effective principals through means including better principal training and on-the-job support.



***How Leadership Influences Student Learning* (2004)**

Leadership is second only to teaching among school influences on student success, and its impact is greatest in schools with the greatest needs, according to this landmark examination of the evidence on school leadership.



***The School Principal as Leader: Guiding Schools to Better Teaching and Learning, Expanded Edition* (2015)**

A set of voluntary national standards for principal supervisors suggests that these managers focus on developing the effectiveness of principals rather than overseeing their compliance with regulations.



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