The Power to Perform

Attracting nontraditional leaders to education will require increasing their authority and compensation, conditioned on getting results

by the THOMAS B. FORDHAM INSTITUTE & the BROAD FOUNDATION

The traditional way of finding candidates for school leadership positions is not a promising path to finding new talent or fostering needed changes in schools and school systems. The best way is to spread the word that public education seeks, employs, and rewards great leaders. Something of this sort has begun to occur in urban school systems such as New York, Los Angeles, Seattle, San Diego, Jacksonville, and Benton Harbor, Michigan. But it must happen in many more places. This “marketplace” needs to become as vigorous and visible as the competition for corporate executives.

Recruitment, however, is only the beginning. Once identified as plausible candidates, how should inexperienced people be prepared for the responsibilities of public school principals—and how can people with solid experience in one kind of setting get the additional training they may need to do a first-rate job in another setting? In our view, school systems themselves should determine what training their new recruits need and the best places for them to get it.

School systems may find suitably trained leaders emerging from national programs, or they may design their own. School systems could opt for an apprenticeship, mentoring, or residency program. Others may launch leadership training academies or contract with a school of education, a corporate training center, a business school, another school system, or a specialized nonprofit group to provide training tailored to the school system’s unique needs. The best way to ensure relevance, flexibility, and quality is to eliminate monopoly control over training.

Putting all this effort into recruitment and training will be for naught, however, unless steps are taken to ensure that principals and superintendents have the authority to lead their schools effectively. In particular:

✦ Principals need the tools to do their jobs. They are being held to account for their schools’ performance. If they are to succeed in boosting that performance, they must be free to make essential decisions about how their schools will operate. They must be able to hire (and discharge) faculty, to deploy staff members when and where needed, and to reward exceptional performance. To be sure, they must not indulge in caprice, patronage, or corruption—but at the end of the day, they must also be in charge of those who belong to their team.

Authority over personnel, however, is only part of the answer. Principals also need greater control over scheduling, discipline, budgeting, use of technology, and instruction.

Results-based education means holding principals to a high standard for their schools’ academic results; installing clear indicators to measure a school’s progress toward those results; and equipping the school’s leader with the flexibility to pursue those results as he or she thinks best. Those who succeed should be renewed and rewarded. Those who fail to measure up after a reasonable period (which should be negotiated in their initial contract) should not be retained.

✦ Superintendents report to school boards that are sometimes elected, sometimes appointed. Regardless of the school board’s origin, superintendents should be in harmony with the board’s vision for change, should be clear about the district’s goals for student performance, and should be given a reasonable period of time in which to attain those goals. Their employment contract should be tied to producing such results. But it’s unreasonable to hold executives accountable for results if they aren’t able to select their own teams and deploy resources as they think best. Too often superintendents are faced with the school board’s interfering in the hiring and firing of central-office staff and principals. School boards should be considered to have one, and only one, employee—the superintendent—whom they hold accountable for meeting broad district-wide goals. Superintendents, for their part, must be given authority to select their staffs and school principals. The superintendent, in turn, must hold them accountable.
Jennifer Henry, Executive Director, Academy for Urban School Leadership. Chicago, Illinois

by LAWRENCE MEYER

At 29, Jennifer Henry may well be one of the youngest school administrators in the country. Still, she has more than ten years’ experience working in education.

In high school, Henry had worked in “Making Waves,” an after-school tutoring program in her native Marin County, California. After college, Henry was hired to run the program. Her job involved raising $500,000, hiring faculty, running a summer school, designing and implementing the curriculum, and worrying “about the facilities, and communicating with the parents, and making sure the buses ran on time…. It was very much like the job of a principal.” Her summer staff consisted of 60 full-time people.

During the school year, she managed a staff of 4 and more than 100 volunteers.

After running Making Waves for four years, Henry realized that she needed to learn more about leadership and how to run an organization, so she decided to enter Northwestern University’s business school. While there she interned at Procter & Gamble. Henry could have gone to work for P&G after earning her degree—“marketing salty snacks to teenagers,” she says with a chuckle. But that wasn’t what she wanted. Henry wanted to return to education. How would she steer me to their books.”

Then she heard about New Leaders for New Schools, a program that would help her earn her certificate in educational administration by working hand-in-glove with a school principal for a year. Shortly into her fellowship with New Leaders, the nonprofit put her in touch with the Chicago Academy, the city’s first “contract school,” serving grades pre-K through 7, with 450 students chosen from the surrounding neighborhood. Its teachers are from the Chicago school system and are paid directly by the city’s Board of Education. The board also handles its purchasing and other financial transactions, but it is governed by the Academy for Urban School Leadership under contract with the board.

In October 2001, Henry became the new executive director of the Academy for Urban School Leadership, working with Chicago Academy’s principal, Donald Feinstein, then in his 18th year in the Chicago school system. “This is what I always dreamed of doing,” Henry says.

Chicago Academy serves as both a neighborhood school and a training institution for teachers. Its 18 certified “mentor teachers” are assisted by 32 “residents,” all of whom lack teaching certificates. After a one-year residency, they earn a certificate and a master of arts in teaching. They are then placed in teams of four or five in carefully selected underperforming schools, where the academy supports them with five years of further training.

What Henry brings to the table, she says, includes the ability to supplement the school’s public funds by raising money. She recently won a $1.5 million federal grant for urban school leadership, to be spent over five years.

In public, Henry says, her training and experience give her an “ability to communicate the vision of our academy…. I’m very focused on outcomes. I’m really into backward mapping [deciding on a goal and then figuring how to accomplish it], which is what successful educators do. That’s what great teachers do in their classrooms. That’s also what successful businesses do.”

Although Henry says her management training serves her well, she does not discount the importance of classroom experience for school administrators. “I still believe … that the most important thing a school leader can be is the instructional leader,” being able to step into a classroom and make suggestions that will help a teacher become more effective.

Henry is satisfied, but this is not the end of her ambitions in education. “I want to be a superintendent,” she says.

—This is adapted from a profile Lawrence Meyer, a former editor and reporter at the Washington Post, wrote for the Better Leaders for America’s Schools report.

Paying the Price

If we want better school leaders, we must expect to pay them better. School principals typically work at least a 60-hour week and an 11-month year. Yet in many school systems senior teachers earn as much as or more than their principals. Much as we value and should reward fine teachers, those who lead them will need to be paid substantially more if we are serious about finding and keeping great principals. Principals’ base pay should be at least 150 percent of what their schools’ highest-paid teacher receives, with the possibility of an additional 50 percent in performance-related bonuses. Since senior teachers in some districts now earn as much as $90,000 a year, this means principals would be paid up to $180,000 annually, money well deserved by those who perform well.

Although we advocate increasing the pay and power of principals, principals have no right to continued employment in the absence of performance. Initial contracts for principals should be no longer than three years, with annual performance reviews during that period.

Successful superintendents should be well compensated, too, and this is beginning to happen. The average superintendent’s salary rose roughly 10 percent from 1997–98 ($101,519) to 1999–2000 ($112,158). Salaries in some of the nation’s major cities now exceed $300,000. Those cities are now attracting top talent.

The United States is approaching a crisis in school leadership. Nearly 40 percent of its 92,000 principals will become eligible to retire in the next four years. And those are the leaders we already have—which for many schools is not the same as the leaders we need.

Ominous as this crisis is, it also presents a chance to test new approaches to finding leaders for our public schools. It coincides
Profile in Nontraditional School Leadership

Paula Dawning
Superintendent, Benton Harbor Public Schools. Benton Harbor, Michigan
by LAWRENCE MEYER

Paula Dawning spent 23 years as an executive with AT&T, working in sales, marketing, engineering, and human resources, before becoming superintendent of the Benton Harbor schools.

She wasn’t sure of what she wanted to do when she left AT&T, until she received an e-mail advertising the Broad Foundation’s training program for school superintendents from backgrounds other than education. “As I researched that,” she says, “it became clear to me that that was a very effective way for me to do what I wanted to do next…. It made a lot of sense to me to apply business skills to the business of education.”

Dawning, who holds a master’s in education from Boston University and an M.B.A. from the University of Michigan, was accepted into the Broad program in the fall of 2001 and began the year of training, which was run for the foundation by the Michigan Leadership Institute. The institute was also handling the search for a superintendent for the Benton Harbor schools, and before completing the program she was asked to apply for the job.

With the job came some major headaches. According to a recent Standard & Poor’s report on the school system, “Benton Harbor Area Schools generate exceptionally below-average student results with exceptionally above-average spending per pupil.” The district struggles with low test scores and a high dropout rate.

In her first year, Dawning has found the political aspects of the superintendency “huge.” The system is facing growing deficits, and she must find ways to raise more money or cut costs. “I know I’m going to have to ask for a bond issue,” she said just after schools opened in late August 2002. “I’ve got to build a broad base of support and credibility. I’ve been on three radio shows in the past week; I’ve been on every television station that feeds this area. And I’ve only been here six weeks.”

As a result, she finds that she is never “off duty.” The job is “excruciatingly public. You are on twenty-four/seven.

“People want you to come to all kinds of events on the weekend…. They want you to visit their churches and speak to them; they want you to be keynote speaker [at] banquets where it is important for them to understand what is happening in the school district. As a school superintendent, you have a fairly unique position, particularly in a smaller community where you impact property values. And if you say ‘no’ too many times, people view that as you are not open.”

Dawning says that her business training helps her put benchmarks in place to measure performance, so that she can make mid-course corrections when necessary. She also has ready access to educational expertise. The school system has an assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction and also a director of curriculum. Dawning says she relies on them for guidance and works closely with them.

In business, she says, “You have a greater sense of urgency. And you have a systems approach to organizational structure and problem solving. That’s the way I look at things, programmatically.” Her approach is to build teams “that are empowered to get things done, versus the educational model that tends to allow more autonomy for lots of different people. When you need to move a system, you have to get teams in alignment with a shared purpose to move the whole team forward, which then moves the whole district forward to the benefit of the children.”

–This is adapted from a profile Lawrence Meyer wrote for Better Leaders for America’s Schools report.

with the greatest pressure we have ever seen for those schools to produce results—and for their leaders to be held to account for those results. This convergence creates the window for bold innovation.

For at least a generation, as American public education has stagnated, the conventional wisdom about leadership has focused on an old idea: certify educators to fix the problem. Today, we must face the fact that the conventional wisdom is wrong. It’s too inbred. It has relied on educators to decide the requirements for rising within the field of education—effectively barring the door to everyone else. Despite good intentions and honest effort, no evidence yet shows a correlation between the credentials required of school leaders and the results produced by their schools. In fact, a surplus of candidates with the credentials to be principals is being produced while schools flounder without effective captains at their helms.

Too many of our schools turn out students who are ill-equipped for the world in which they will work and live. The shortage of truly qualified school leaders is worsening. The solution is not to impose yet more requirements but to enlarge the talent pool, to welcome into leadership posts the best men and women who can be found wherever they are today, to provide relevant training, to offer them attractive and workable terms of employment, and to hold them to account for their school’s results.

–This essay is adapted from Better Leaders for America’s Schools, a report released in May 2003 by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute and the Broad Foundation. To view the full report, log on to www.edexcellence.net/manifesto.