



Bronx, NY and Fairfax, VA County Schools

Two very different school districts

One shared leadership challenge



Center for
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Leadership

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At first glance, the school systems in Bronx County, NY, and Fairfax County, VA, have little in common. Bronx County is home to a large, urban population where nearly four out of every 10 children live at or below the poverty level. By contrast, Fairfax County schools serve a largely affluent urban/suburban community. But in 2002, the two districts¹ discovered they have one significant issue in common. Both are struggling to find effective ways to prepare up-and-coming leaders to step into the role of principal.

“We met during a national meeting sponsored by The Wallace Foundation, which had awarded both districts substantial five-year grants to build powerful leadership development systems,” said Laura Dukess, then director of the New York City Schools Tomorrow’s Principals Program and now an educational consultant. “As we talked, we recognized we shared a common dilemma. **We both needed assistant principals who were prepared to hit the ground running when they were promoted.**”

Bronx County and Fairfax County administrators had been working on the problem independently with initiatives to build business and instructional skills. They decided to collaborate, though, on what they felt was the missing link: a program devoted to the art of leadership.

“School principals are ringmasters and motivators,” says Mike Renn, a former school system executive and now manager of the Education Sector at the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL®). “That means they need to be strong not only in instruction and business management skills, but also in the leadership skills they need to build effective relationships.”

Administrators from the Bronx and Fairfax schools decided to work with CCL to **teach aspiring principals how to lead in order to make a positive impact on student performance.** Together they designed a Multi-District Leadership Institute (MDLI) that has proved to be transformational for the educators it serves. In addition to the Wallace Foundation’s support, the New York piece of the program after the first few years was heavily funded by a U.S. Department of Education school leadership grant.

Engaging and Challenging Aspiring Leaders

The three-day program the Institute delivers brings educators from both Bronx and Fairfax counties together in a symposium-like setting on the CCL campus. They **learn what it means to lead in a variety of challenging cultures and situations**, and they begin to build the skills, abilities and behaviors they will need as new principals – from giving effective feedback to nurturing innovation.

Each educator also completes a variety of assessment tests that help them learn about themselves and how their view of the world impacts their leadership style.

“Everyone comes out with a good idea about their strengths and where their challenges are,” says Andy Cole, director of leadership development for Fairfax County Schools.

“That provides our aspiring principals a context for the work they do during the Institute and for the experiences they encounter when they return to the workplace.”

Faculty members deliver a curriculum grounded in well-established leadership principles and in the unique challenges of an educational environment.

1

Day One focuses on core values, how to develop a teachable point of view and how to lead through relationships and across cultural differences.

2

Day Two focuses on building support systems, mentoring, team dysfunctions and the factors that can derail a career.

3

Day Three focuses on individual feedback, decision-making skills and a group exercise to drive home key learnings about leadership and collaboration.

“The intellectual engagement is so high that it ratchets up the level of expectation to a new level,” Dukess says. “It’s both powerful and empowering.”

The Power of Differences

In Bronx County, NY, school administrators deal with a wide range of issues that are foreign to their counterparts in Fairfax County, VA – from unions and staff parking issues to institutional poverty. But those differences have proven to be a bonus to participants in the Multi-District Leadership Institute.

“The context for leadership in the Bronx is very different from our experiences in Fairfax,” says Andy Cole of the Fairfax County Schools. “Exploring that difference is very helpful for those who are just beginning to develop their leadership story. They learn a lot by being exposed to a broad diversity of situations and to different ways of looking at issues. That’s part of the beauty of the program. It helps participants figure out how to adapt to a variety of challenges and to lead in very different situations.”

New York’s Laura Dukess concurs. “When participants first meet, they think they and the kids they serve have nothing in common,” she said. “One of our first objectives is to make a cohort out of this diverse group and to help them understand that underneath it all, they face similar issues, concerns and challenges.”

As Institute participants learn about themselves, share their stories and work together on class assignments, they begin to understand that they share a set of core values. Regardless of the differences in their work environment, each is motivated by the needs of their students, teachers and staff.

“We help them uncover who they are as leaders and determine how they can become more effective, regardless of the cultural differences they encounter throughout their careers,” says Mike Renn, manager of the Education Sector at CCL. “They develop a feeling that they are all in this together, and they want to help each other get better.”

Assessing the Impact

There is both anecdotal and research-based evidence that the MDLI is making a significant impact on the dozens of aspiring leaders it has trained to date.

In Fairfax County

“All our data shows that Institute graduates are more effective at their current position and in moving into new positions,” Andy Cole says. “CCL definitely gives them an edge.”

The proof is in the numbers. Between 85 and 90 percent of up-and-coming educators participating in the Institute are promoted – more than double the promotion rate of other assistant principals. School climate surveys involving parents, teachers, staff members and fellow administrators show that [Institute graduates perform at a higher level than any other cohort and are viewed as effective leaders](#) who are establishing a positive culture.

Enhanced leadership skills also appear to be having an impact on student success.

“Preliminary data on student achievement shows the schools that our MDLI graduates lead exhibit a marked increase in positive learning outcomes,” Cole says. “Our graduates have a heightened awareness of how their personal leadership impacts student achievement.”

In Bronx County

Dukess reports that about half of the MDLI graduates from Bronx County have gone on to become principals, and the transition to their new role has been very successful.

“Before we launched the Institute, even the best assistant principals struggled when first appointed to head a school of their own,” she said. “But [program graduates are having a much more positive experience](#). They are outperforming their peers on each and every key accountability measure.”

“You can clearly see the difference between people who have been through the program and those who haven’t,” Cole added. “Program graduates are simply more curious and grounded as they pursue their development back on the job.”

Key Program Outcomes

- Higher promotion rates for Institute participants
- A smoother transition for those taking on new responsibilities
- Higher performance against key accountability measures
- Improved student outcomes

Expanding the Institute to Serve Accomplished Leaders

Based on the success of the Multi-District Leadership Institute, the program was expanded in 2007 to include sessions for accomplished leaders as well. Now, more seasoned educational executives can learn how to continuously improve and perform at a higher level.

The three-day curriculum is drawn from CCL's flagship Leadership Development Program (LDP), the most attended leader development program in the world. It is a feedback-intense learning experience especially designed for mid- to senior-level leaders who want to become more effective.

CCL has adapted the program to address the unique challenges of educators. One example: Each participant designs a project to promote student achievement.

"We ask them to develop a real-world initiative

that gives benefits back to their school system," says Andy Cole of the Fairfax County Schools. "The projects have run the gamut – from determining the best way to support students who are lagging academically...to finding ways to promote cooperation and knowledge transfer among faculty members."

Each session also includes a number of carefully planned group learning experiences that allow participants to practice purposeful leadership behaviors and examine their leadership style. They might be asked to work with a group to develop a consensus around an important topic or to work with fellow classmates to complete a complex task.

"We're giving them skills that they can take with them into their next leadership challenge," Cole said. "They experience what it is like to go somewhere and initiate something new when people don't know you."

For More Information

For more information on the Multi-District Leadership Institute and how CCL is helping educators achieve breakthrough results, e-mail us at info@ccl.org or phone our Client Services team at [336.545.2810](tel:336.545.2810).

Endnotes

¹ Since the launch of the MDLI, New York City has moved away from the district model in favor of a consolidated school system. The former Bronx County District is now part of the larger New York City Schools.



About CCL

The Center for Creative Leadership (CCL®) is a top-ranked, global provider of executive education that unlocks individual and organizational potential through its exclusive focus on leadership development and research. Founded in 1970 as a nonprofit, educational institution, CCL helps clients worldwide cultivate creative leadership – the capacity to achieve more than imagined by thinking and acting beyond boundaries – through an array of programs, products and other services. Ranked among the world’s top providers of executive education by *BusinessWeek* and the *Financial Times*, CCL is headquartered in Greensboro, NC, with locations in Colorado Springs, CO; San Diego, CA; Brussels, Belgium; Moscow, Russia; Singapore; Pune, India; and Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Its work is supported by more than 450 faculty members and staff.

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