

# DEVELOPING HIGH QUALITY SCHOOL LEADERS IN EVERY SETTING

*Alternative Education Lessons  
from Garden Grove Unified School District*



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A principal's job is complex, demanding, and multi-faceted. Effective principals shape a school's academic vision and foster a climate for learning. In addition, they develop leadership capacity in teachers and staff, promote sound instructional practices, and use resources and data to drive school improvement (Mendels, 2012). Given these significant responsibilities, it is unsurprising that abundant research indicates that the quality of school leadership is correlated with school effectiveness. Principals and school leaders can impact student achievement, graduation rates, and the attraction and retention of qualified teachers (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). School leaders clearly play an important role in school systems. As such, the way leaders are identified, prepared, hired, and supported is critical to high quality teaching and learning in schools.

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INSIGHTS FROM  
ORANGE COUNTY



## INTRODUCTION

Garden Grove Unified School District (USD) in Garden Grove, California, has developed a strong pipeline for human capital development, including the selection and support of school leaders. In the report, *You'll Never Be Better Than Your Teachers: The Garden Grove Approach to Human Capital Development*, Joel Knudson of the American Institutes for Research documents this pipeline, describing how the district selects and develops teachers and administrators to work in its traditional schools (2013).

This case study builds on this work by examining how the district's leadership pipeline supports its continuation school by identifying high quality leaders and facilitating their development. In particular, district administrators at Garden Grove articulate and practice a unique approach to developing school leadership: they treat continuation and comprehensive school staff as equal in the leadership pipeline.

This is notable for several reasons. Previous research by the John W. Gardner Center for Youth and their Communities has shown that continuation school leaders and teachers can feel professionally isolated from their comprehensive school peers (Ruiz de Velasco & McLaughlin, 2012). Moreover, leaders and teachers in continuation schools report feeling "excluded from reform initiatives and improvement programs and resources made available to comprehensive

high school staffs" (Ruiz de Velasco & McLaughlin, 2012, p. 19). Clearly, in many districts, continuation school staff and administrators may not have the same access to resources and learning opportunities as their comprehensive school counterparts.

Furthermore, students in alternative schools have a unique set of needs. Continuation schools exist to serve students who are credit deficient and at risk of not graduating on time by providing an accelerated academic program to help them get back on track. These students, however, tend to be at higher risk of dropping out and more likely to disengage in school. In California, alternative schools also tend to enroll higher rates of English Language Learners, as well as students who are involved with the juvenile justice system or the foster care system (Ruiz de Velasco et al., 2008).

Given this student population, continuation schools must be staffed with highly skilled teachers and leaders who can meet the unique academic and social-emotional needs of the alternative school student population.

Yet despite this student population and their unique needs, a review of state policies on alternative education showed that while many states have policies in place governing staffing patterns and certification, none require that alternative education teachers and leaders be adequately prepared with the skills and professional supports to be effective (Almeida, Le, Steinberg, & Cervantes, 2010).

Specifically, no states provided incentives for high-performing leaders and teachers to staff alternative schools and only four states had policies in place that mandated ongoing professional development for alternative school staff. Other research has shown that alternative education staff bemoan the lack of professional development opportunities afforded to them (Ruiz de Velasco et al., 2008). Given this backdrop, Garden Grove USD's articulated and practiced approach stands out.

This profile explicates Garden Grove's equal treatment of their comprehensive and continuation schools throughout the district's leadership pipeline, including:

- early identification of school leaders
- placement of principals and assistant principals
- the district's support for principals, and
- the continuous development of school leaders' capacity once in the role.

## CONTEXT

Garden Grove USD is a large urban school district in Orange County, California. While the district serves around 40,000 students as of the 2020-21 school year, enrollment has continued to decline in the district over the past decade (Education Data Partnership, 2022).

The student population is diverse. Around 53 percent of students are Latinx, around 35 percent are Asian, and just under 7 percent are white.

A significant proportion of the student body, 72 percent, qualifies for free or reduced-price meals, and 33 percent of students are identified as English Language Learners.

Important to this profile, the district is home to seven comprehensive high schools and one continuation high school. Hare High School has been recognized as a Model Continuation High School by the California Department of Education, most recently in 2019.

## METHODS

This profile was drawn from interviews with district administrators and former and current principals of the continuation school. Each participant has spent a significant part of their career in Garden Grove, and all have served in multiple school leadership capacities throughout their tenure.



Additionally, this profile builds on insights from prior research conducted on district-led reform in the Garden Grove USD conducted by the American Institutes for Research (Knudson, 2013) and by Michael Fullan (Fullan & Quinn, 2016).



## IDENTIFYING SCHOOL LEADERS EARLY

Identifying and recruiting future leaders are important parts of any talent pipeline. Long before openings arise, district and school leaders within Garden Grove work to develop a pool of talent through both formal and informal mechanisms. To identify staff members who hold potential for school leadership, Garden Grove uses the same formal structures—e.g., Teacher on Special Assignment (TOSA) program and candidate pools—and informal practices—e.g., emphasis on relationships and administrative visibility—for Hare High School, its continuation school, as it does for its comprehensive high schools.

In other words, while district leaders take the unique context and needs of individual school settings into account, the basic process for identifying and developing leaders is the same for alternative and comprehensive education settings.

### **Building Instructional Leadership: The Teacher on Special Assignment (TOSA) Program**

The formal development of instructional leadership is grounded in the district's TOSA program. District and school leaders actively recruit high quality, high performing teachers to apply to be TOSAs.

TOSAs are teacher leaders assigned to a school, where they:

- work outside the classroom
- are members of the school's instructional leadership team
- provide individual support to teachers, and
- develop and deliver professional learning for teachers.

Beyond its primary function—providing instructional support to teachers—this program is used by district and school leaders to develop instructional leadership capacity in promising talent.

Excellent teaching of students may not translate to excellent teaching and leading of adults. As such, one interviewee describes the program as a career ladder where teachers can hone their skills around working with and leading teachers.

The district does not have separate tracks for developing instructional leadership for its continuation school versus its traditional high schools. As such, Hare High School is included in the TOSA program alongside the comprehensive high schools in the district.

Thus, the expectation from the district is clear: sound instruction and instructional leadership looks the same in the comprehensive schools as it does in the continuation school.

## Developing Candidate Pools

While there are structural differences in the contracts of the district's continuation school and comprehensive schools—including differences in work calendar, evening expectations, and consequently, salary—district leaders elucidate that there is no separate pool for school leadership candidates for Hare High School. As one interviewee describes, *we don't differentiate or say, 'You're more of a fit for Hare, and... you're more of a fit for comprehensive.'*

In the eyes of Garden Grove administrators, a strong principal is a strong principal, regardless of school context.

This philosophy extends to placing high school teachers in Garden Grove USD. Interviewees describe the district's belief that good teaching is the same across contexts. The goal is to develop the highest quality teachers possible, regardless of setting. This outlook may be part of the reason that participants reported that the district does not have problems filling teaching or leadership openings at Hare when they arise. Instead, the school holds the reputation of being a “hidden gem” in the district, where teachers can enjoy smaller class sizes and deeper relationships with students.

While district leaders emphasize there were not two separate candidate pools for continuation and comprehensive education, they did add some nuance to interpersonal skills that school leaders may need to use more often in continuation settings.

Specifically, interviewees suggest that these leaders depend on their ability to develop trusting relationships with students and their families. While interpersonal skills are clearly important in any school, interviewees describe that in a continuation setting, they may be relied on more frequently due to the nature of the students' needs and experiences.

## Relationship Building in Garden Grove

In addition to formal mechanisms like the TOSA program, the leadership pipeline in Garden Grove is fostered through relationships. District leaders describe intentionally developing relationships between teachers and school leaders, or even between teachers and district administrators. An informal expectation of principals in Garden Grove is to identify and coach teachers with leadership potential. A district administrator relates,

*And I talk with my principals too like that, I say, 'so I know your [staff member] is in the credential program... How are you encouraging them?'*

Once identified, teachers are encouraged and supported to take on formal and informal leadership roles in the school, like delivering professional development or becoming a department chair or a TOSA. District administrators also emphasize coaching between principals and teachers to gauge interest in acquiring an administrative credential and setting and working toward career goals.



These coaching practices are not formally codified in a contract, but are baked into the expectations of principals as school leaders.

Garden Grove does not differentiate between comprehensive and continuation schools in these coaching expectations. Just as the leader of a comprehensive school is asked to identify and coach teachers with leadership potential, so too is that a request of the principal of Hare High School. In Garden Grove USD's view, future leaders can come from anywhere within the district, including the continuation high school.

## Visibility

The identification of teachers with leadership potential would not be possible without significant visibility into schools by district administration. As one interviewee relates, knowing school staff requires presence at school sites, not in a district office.

Garden Grove district administrators describe an intentional effort to visit all schools, including the continuation school, to build relationships. Their presence in classrooms, during staff meetings, and at after school professional development enables them to identify talent for the pipeline and to establish a norm of professional collaboration across district and school boundaries.

Consequently, this presence normalizes interactions with central office administrators—a visit from an assistant superintendent is not seen as punitive.

Through the various mechanisms that reinforce the district's talent pipeline—the TOSA program, the district's candidate pools, the emphasis on collaborative relationships, and visibility of administrators—Hare High School experiences the same treatment as the district's comprehensive schools.





## PLACING PRINCIPALS & ASSISTANT PRINCIPALS

When principal and assistant principal openings arise, Garden Grove has a well-vetted pool of leadership candidates to draw from due to its approach to human capital development. The district's philosophy of equal treatment of comprehensive and continuation schools extends to the placement of principals in alternative settings.

Specifically, district leaders treat the schools similarly in:

- the way that principals and assistant principals are placed,
- the leadership qualities they emphasize, and
- in their expectations for principals in each setting.

### A Centralized Hiring Process

Garden Grove uses a centralized application and hiring process to place principals and assistant principals. As previously discussed, the pipeline is in use to develop leadership capacity at multiple levels, with the goal of promoting a healthy pool of potential leaders.

When assistant principal openings arise, senior district administrators examine the pool of candidates and the needs of the school to determine who might be the best fit. Because the district has invested in building leadership capacity in these candidates, administrators have established relationships with staff in the pipeline. As such, each candidate is a known quantity.

These relationships, then, allow the district to determine who would be best suited for each school, whose skills might complement others on a school leadership team, and so on. One interviewee describes approaching vacancies with this philosophy, saying, "Okay, we have an opening coming up who's the best fit?"

The district's assistant principals, then, make up the candidate pool for principal openings when they arise. Similarly, district administrators' relationships with assistant principals allow them to understand who is ready to become a principal and who may need more time to develop.

### Qualities for Leadership of a Continuation High School

Continuation high schools serve a unique subset of students who face significant academic and nonacademic challenges. They also tend to serve far fewer students and have a smaller staff count than most comprehensive high schools. Given these factors, does a principal of an alternative school need a specialized skillset? In the eyes of interviewees at Garden Grove: no.

Interviewees emphasize that the same basic skillset was needed to be a successful leader in both continuation schools and comprehensive schools.

However, interviewees stress that certain skills—while required in both contexts—were used more in continuation schools. For example, continuation school leadership requires a more acute awareness of their students' social and emotional needs. As one interviewee suggests,

*I feel like a lot of the social emotional aspect is a huge component at alternative school, largely because you're going to have to gain the kids' trust before they're going to go on an academic journey with you.*

Similarly, interviewees note that, because continuation schools are aimed at helping students recover credits, leaders need a more intimate knowledge of the academic needs and barriers to learning that students in alternative school settings may experience.

Even though certain skills may be used more in alternative education, from the district's vantage, the basic set of skills for school leadership remains the same. This view aligns with the district's singular pipeline for school leadership—again, there is no separate track for alternative school leadership in Garden Grove.

### **Hare High School Principal Placement**

Hare High School is included in Garden Grove's leadership pipeline and the district views the skills necessary for school leadership at Hare as the same as the district's other high schools.

It is unsurprising, then, that district administrators believe that Hare High School requires a strong principal. One interviewee comments that Hare needs “superstar leaders” who are placed there with intention.

This mindset reinforces the district's belief about leadership within secondary education: there are not particular schools where weaker leaders are moved to. Rather, all schools are held to the same set of high standards and expectations. One interviewee describes this approach,

*It starts with quality people, with high expectations, with a clear vision, and not making [Hare] a side product.*

District administrators maintain the view that Hare is an equal player within the secondary system in Garden Grove and, therefore, deserves the same high-quality leadership as the other schools. This philosophy stems from the understanding that the success of the district's secondary schools is tied to the success of Hare High School.

The objective of the district's continuation school is to help students graduate on time. Students who recover credits typically return to a comprehensive high school in the district. As such, if Hare is successful in helping students catch up, it improves graduation rates within the other schools and the entire district.



## An Open Pathway

A noteworthy feature of Garden Grove's leadership pipeline is the open pathway between school leadership positions within its comprehensive and continuation high schools. It is not uncommon for an assistant principal at a comprehensive high school to become principal at Hare.

One interviewee notes that having assistant principal experience at a comprehensive high school was helpful preparation for being the principal at Hare. Specifically, having this experience allows a leader to deeply understand transcripts—a necessary skill given Hare's credit-recovery objectives.

Moreover, this assistant principal experience lends to an understanding of the comprehensive school context, including what types of support are available to students. This knowledge may help administrators make more informed decisions about whether a student is ready to return to a comprehensive high school.

The district's open pathway between continuation and comprehensive education extends to other examples as well. In several recent instances, the principal of Hare moved on to be a principal at a different high school in the district or even a district-level administrator. This reiterates the notion that Hare High School is fully included in the district's leadership pipeline.

Given its smaller size relative to the comprehensive schools in the district, being principal at Hare gives school leaders a unique opportunity to hone their administrative skills. One interviewee suggests,

*The staff is so small and the PD and the instruction and the support and all the things that you're doing is so concentrated, it is like bootcamp, in my opinion, for a comprehensive high school.*

Because the principal at Hare is using administrative skills in a smaller context, this position uniquely prepares them for leadership elsewhere in the district.

Moreover, working as principal at Hare may give a leader a deeper understanding of at-risk students, one interviewee suggests. The capacity that leaders build as principal of Hare is then leveraged elsewhere in the district—in other schools and within the district office.





## SUPPORTING PRINCIPALS

Throughout any given school year, a principal will face no shortage of challenges and difficult situations. The way that school districts provide support for principals throughout the year can lessen the burden of these challenges.

In Garden Grove, formal mechanisms of support—administrative support and resourcing—are equally offered to principals of comprehensive and alternative education.

### Central Office Support

In Garden Grove, the secondary principals all participate equally in biweekly principal meetings designed to support the school leaders. These meetings are facilitated by the district's Assistant Superintendent of Secondary Education. Hare High School's principal is fully included in these offerings. Those interviewed suggest that the only meeting topics that were not relevant to Hare High School were those around athletics, as the school does not have an athletics program. Again, the district views Hare as simply another high school equal to the district's comprehensive schools.

The district believes so strongly in this philosophy of inclusion that it worked to change Hare High School's name. Previously referred to as Hare Continuation High School, the district no longer uses the term "continuation" in marketing and messaging.

Informally, interviewees note there are ample open lines of communication when support is needed. Due to the deep relationships between administrators at all levels, principals understand that support is only a phone call away.

For instance, if personnel issues arise, a principal can reach out to the Assistant Superintendent of Personnel to troubleshoot. As one interviewee describes,

*I can pick up the phone and I'm going to get that level of support that I need.*

### Resourcing

According to interviewees, the district extends the same resources in terms of staff, courses, and facilities to the continuation school. As one interviewee says,

*From a staffing perspective, from a course offering perspective, from providing strong counseling support, social workers support, facility... maintenance, it is a high school that those resources are equally considered, because those students are all of our students.*

This view—that students at Hare are Garden Grove students who deserve the same resources as those in comprehensive schools—drives the district's practice around equally resourcing the alternative school. As a result, principals feel supported in terms of resourcing from the district.



## BUILDING CAPACITY IN SCHOOL LEADERS

Building capacity in principals and assistant principals is a clear priority for district administrators at Garden Grove. This makes sense, as the district's pipeline for leadership emphasizes continuous learning at all levels. Principals and assistant principals at Hare High School experience the same professional learning as do leaders of other secondary schools in the district.

### Assistant Principals: Mentoring & Coaching

Assistant principals in Garden Grove USD comprise the leadership pool for principal openings. As such, there is a clear imperative to build capacity in these individuals, so the district emphasizes mentoring and on-the-job learning experiences at this level.

District administrators see mentorship as a primary avenue for capacity building. Assistant principals at the secondary level are coached by both a district administrator and the principal under whom they serve. While not a formal program, it is clear from interviews with district administrators that this type of mentoring is an expectation.

During coaching sessions, assistant principals discuss their goals, growth, and challenges with their principal or district administrator. They can also share their ambitions for future leadership. Mentorship, then, serves as a way for assistant principals to receive coaching and for Garden Grove to build talent in its leadership pipeline. It also reinforces the district's leadership pipeline which thrives on strong relationships and visibility. Without knowing their staff, a district leader would not be able to identify

who might hold greater leadership potential or which assistant principal might be a good fit to lead a particular school if a vacancy were to arise. As such, mentorship between district administrators and assistant principals builds visibility and deepens relationships that are leveraged to coach assistant principals into stronger leaders.

Beyond mentorship and coaching, Garden Grove builds capacity through on-the-job learning experiences. By taking on various components of school management, assistant principals learn important skills for school leadership. For instance, one interviewee describes being tasked with implementing PBIS when she was an assistant principal. Through this experience she built her skills in coordinating faculty, facilitating trainings to teachers, and working to communicate a vision. She relates how her leadership skills developed:

*I got that experience... bringing on an initiative and seeing it through and making sure we have accountability.*

Garden Grove uses these experiences to build capacity in assistant principals both in comprehensive and continuation schools.

## Principals: Mentorship & Coaching

In Garden Grove, not only are principals expected to be mentors, but they are also mentees of district administrators and colleagues. The principal of Hare High School, like the principal of other high schools, is coached by the district's Assistant Superintendent of Secondary Education.

This coaching is structured around two areas: the district strategic plan and the principal's personal leadership goals. These conversations are opportunities to receive feedback and support with the goal of building the leader's capacity.

When positions turn over, administrators expect the individual who was formerly in a certain role to mentor the new hire. This means that new principals are often able to check in with the former principal—someone who deeply knows the context and staff members at that school. One interviewee describes this mentorship, saying:

*[The former principal] knew exactly what I was dealing with or who I was working with. So I could just call and say, 'Hey, what about so-and-so and so-and-so? What's the history on that?'*

Because Hare High School principals are often promoted into other leadership positions around the district, the current principal of Hare can leverage relationships with several former Hare principals if challenges arise.

Importantly, relationships between new and former leaders of a school are not possible without a system that hires and promotes from within. If quality staff are not retained in this system, these relationships could not exist.

## Principals: Informal Professional Learning

Although, secondary principals in Garden Grove have access to biweekly meetings that the district organizes, they also build capacity through an informal professional learning community they assemble themselves. The principals meet every Friday afternoon via Zoom to regularly touch base and reflect on district initiatives, school challenges, and problems each leader is tackling. This learning community equally includes the principal of Hare High School.

One interviewee remarks that they were immediately accepted into this community after they were hired as principal:

*When the announcement went out, my high school colleagues all were like, 'Welcome. Here's the chat group.'*

The inclusion of the Hare principal into this learning community is notable because it makes clear that, in the eyes of the principals of the comprehensive high schools, the principal of Hare is their peer.

In addition to these meetings serving as a space where school leaders can bond and develop trusting relationships with their peers, they also function as a space where ideas are exchanged between the district's comprehensive and continuation schools, and leaders learn from one another.

For example, one interviewee mentions that Hare can learn from how the comprehensive schools approach master scheduling, and conversely, the comprehensive school leaders may take ideas from Hare on how they're approaching some unique academic challenges that their students present. One interviewee describes the relationship between the comprehensive and continuation school principals as "symbiotic." These meetings serve as an informal mechanism for capacity building and professional learning for principals in Garden Grove.

## SUMMARY

Whereas previous research has indicated that continuation school leaders and staff feel professionally isolated and excluded from district improvement efforts and resources, Garden Grove's approach stands out. The district uses the same mechanisms to identify promising candidates for leadership for both comprehensive and continuation schools, including its TOSA program, using the same candidate pools, and emphasizing relationships and visibility of administrators throughout the district's secondary schools.

In placing principals and assistant principals, the district does not use a separate track for alternative education. Instead, district administrators believe Hare High School requires a strong principal, and they have developed an open pathway into the Hare principalship as well as from the Hare principalship to roles elsewhere in the district. The district offers the same administrative support to principals and works to resource the schools in equal ways. And finally, principals at Hare High School access the same capacity building and professional learning as their comprehensive school peers, including an informal principal professional learning community. The district's inclusive approach to Hare High School is found throughout the leadership pipeline.

This unique philosophy of equal treatment emphasizes the high standards that the district holds for its continuation school leadership and staff, and by extension, how much the district values the students served by Hare High School. One interviewee sums it up well:

*Hare is important, and we value those students there. So their experiences should be the same.*





## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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## PROFILES IN CALIFORNIA ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION

*Kristin Geiser & Jorge Ruiz de Velasco, Series Editors*

This profile is part of a series created to highlight challenges, creative policy responses, and exemplary practices in California's legislatively created public alternative high schools. The series is a project of the John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities at Stanford University in support of the California Learning Collaborative on Alternative Education. It is intended to invite a new conversation among educators and policymakers about innovations to better support the success of youth enrolled in public alternative secondary schools across the nation. The series is funded by generous grants from the William & Flora Hewlett Foundation and the Stuart Foundation.

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