Answering the Sustainability Question: A 3 Year Follow-up Report on a Wallace Foundation Training Grant Program and What Did Participants See as Important?

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In July 2008, Riverbend Public Schools (RPS) in Western Michigan and Grand Valley State University (GVSU) received a grant from the Wallace Foundation that supported the development of a specialized educational leadership program. The project was designed to customize an existing degree program in the university's College of Education, focusing on leadership skill sets for urban school leaders. The project, titled the "Aspiring Leaders Program," allowed 34 urban teachers and new principals to obtain a master's degree in educational leadership or an educational specialist degree in educational leadership with special expertise in urban schools. The program ran from November 2008 through the fall semester of 2009. In the late fall of 2009 and again in 2012, follow-up studies were conducted to determine if this customized program had benefited the participants and if they continued to use the skill sets they had been taught. This study describes the 2012 three-year follow-up study and discusses its results.
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BACKGROUND

The funding source for the original project was the Wallace Foundation. Based in New York City, the Wallace Foundation is a national philanthropy that seeks to improve education and enrichment for disadvantaged children. The foundation has an unusual approach: funding projects to test innovative ideas for solving important social problems, conducting research to find out what works and what doesn't, filling in key knowledge gaps, and then communicating the results to help others (Wallace Foundation, 2013). Hence, the foundation has a major interest in urban education initiatives.

RPS is the largest urban school district in West Michigan. Typically, 85.2% of its students qualify for free and reduced lunch status. Minority students make up 86% of its student body. The administration of RPS was an enthusiastic partner in this project. Their goal was to have a pool of highly trained principals they could place in leadership positions throughout their school district. GVSU has had a long history of partnering with RPS on a wide variety of training projects, and the university's commitment to urban education made it a logical choice for this project. Thus, the stars aligned and the Wallace Foundation, GVSU, and RPS formed a grant-funded partnership to train a cohort of specially chosen urban educators in educational leadership.

While some Wallace Foundation grant-funded training programs across the country have relied heavily on existing university coursework, GVSU took a different approach. As Angelle, Wilson, and Mink (2011) have noted, "With heightened emphasis on school leadership and the call for greater accountability, leadership preparation programs must evolve to meet the needs of today's principals" (p. 39). GVSU acknowledged this challenge to meet the needs of today's leaders, especially urban principals, and took a bold step in customizing a degree program for them.

The Program

As GVSU officials and RPS administrators began planning the program in the late summer and early fall of 2008, they felt it was important to select university professors who had administrative experience in large urban K-12 settings. It was also recommended that a team of three professors collaborate to develop classroom experiences that integrated theory and practice. The three professors chosen had significant urban leadership backgrounds. One was an experienced director of special education, one had served as a high school principal, and the third had been a principal in both elementary and middle schools. All three professors had doctoral degrees with a strong emphasis on integrating theory and practice into authentic work, and all were thoroughly trained in systems thinking and change processes.

The 34 program participants were selected in fall 2008 by RPS officials based on their demonstrated leadership ability and the likelihood that they would be chosen as a principal within the school district. While they were all urban educators, the 34 individuals had different backgrounds and held a wide variety of positions throughout the district. The cohort included four principals, five assistant principals, a dean of students, a math coach, a language coach, a curriculum coordinator, a school reform specialist, a public safety officer, a youth advocate, a physical therapist, and 17 classroom teachers. Sixteen of the 34 participants were female, and 18 were male. Their experience in education ranged from three to 27 years. Nearly all had spent the majority of their professional educational careers in the RPS school district. As a cohort, some of the participants knew other members of the group, but most had only a passing knowledge of the other members' professional assignments or personal lives. It was obvious to the team of professors that camaraderie needed to be developed for risk-free sharing of experiences to occur.

A customized degree program and accompanying planned program was developed for each participant in the Aspiring Leaders Program. This process began with individual interviews. Participants were asked questions such as, "What do you feel will be your biggest challenges as an urban principal new to the position?" The program development team then took each participant's input, correlated his/her needs with state standards and school district goals, and developed a degree program that contained the skill sets projected to be needed for career success (see page 9 for program overview and literature review).

As part of the customization process, the GVSU professors also created a classroom delivery system that integrated research with authentic applications. A typical class session would include a review of the literature with a case study. Students were asked several open ended questions about the problem presented in the case study and then worked on solutions in groups. This was followed by discussion, typically in Socratic style, with a lively interchange about solutions to the problem. Below is a sample planning matrix that the professors used as a road map to providing the information that the participants saw as

important. The matrix also provides direction on planning, classroom activities and assessment.

ASPIRING LEADERS INSTRUCTIONAL PLANNING
Prepared by Dr. Michael Stearns 3/4/09

Focus Area/Standard	What do we want candidates to know: Competencies	Resources	Activities	Time	Assessments	Ed. Spec. Research
Standard 1.4b Vision Stewardship use of data	Data collection methods, understanding student performance data, using data to assess progress toward the district's mission	Sample ACT chart paper GRPS mission statement The Data Wise Improvement Process— Article from *The Harvard Newsletter*	Discuss expectations for students Take sample ACT Process results Discuss how to use testing data to plan for instructional support	2 hrs.	Group plans Candidate reflection paper	Research Data Trends of a targeted school & design a long term intervention plan–refer to Effort Based Ed.
Standard 2.4a Designing comprehensive growth plans	Knowledge of adult learning strategies Use of authentic problems and tasks, to generate new problem solving skills	List of "high priority" issues currently faced by principals in GRPS NCREL— Balanced Leadership— Marzano et.al.	Article on adult learning— jigsaw Application of problem solving techniques to current challenges	2 hrs.	Individual growth plan highlighting learning PD needs	Explore the issues of adults as learners with a focus on generational issues. 10 pg. paper required

Classes began during winter semester 2009 and continued through the spring/summer and fall semesters that calendar year.

Follow-up Studies

In late fall 2009, when most of the participants had completed the majority of their core courses, they were interviewed as part of a formal research project analyzing the program.

Then a three-year follow-up survey was developed in 2012 and sent to all of the participants from the original Aspiring Leaders Program who were still employed by the school district.

To understand the importance of this 2012 follow-up study, one must consider the context in which the original cohort of participants worked. They were teachers or newly appointed administrators in an urban system. As urban educators, they faced many challenges. According to Voltz (1998), the challenges that have the greatest impact on the education of urban youth include poverty, violence, home-school communication, teacher preparedness, cultural incongruence (e.g., predominantly white faculty teaching predominantly students of color), relevant curricula, and diversity awareness. The original Aspiring Leaders Program sought to give the participants skill sets that would equip them to deal with these challenges.

The initial interviews in 2008 with the participants had indicated their concerns. These included, in order of perceived importance:

1. Implementing a vision
2. Conducting teacher evaluations
3. Conducting productive meetings
4. Understanding the dynamics of change
5. Resolving conflicts
6. Understanding generational differences in staff
7. Dealing with diversity issues (e.g., race, age)

Because the participants were degree-seeking students, the professors had to account for official state standards as they customized the participants' individual courses of study. With all of these competing requirements and perceptions, the first follow-up study in fall 2009 sought to determine whether the skill sets taught actually addressed the participants' primary concerns. The 2009 study also attempted to determine if they were beginning to use the administrative skill sets they had learned. The responses from the participants in the Aspiring Leaders' Program were overwhelming positive. The participants felt the program did indeed prepare them for roles as principals. Determining if this positive response continued and participants were indeed using the skills taught in the program in their current positions answers the question of sustainability in this training program. Thus, it was clear to the professors/researchers that the 2012 follow-up study must focus on the same areas to make a comparison possible and determine sustainability.

Purpose

The goals of the 2012 follow-up study were to: (a) determine which skill sets were most useful to the cohort members, (b) determine if the skill sets mastered in the 2008-2009 program were still being used by the participants in their current professional roles, and (c) provide examples of leadership strategies that could be utilized by current school leaders and professors of educational leadership who are training future urban school leaders.

Theoretical Framework

The professors relied on 3 theoretical frameworks to ground their work with the Aspiring Leaders Program. They included: 1) change theory, 2) leadership theory, and 3) adult

learning theory. The work of Wagner (2006), Senge (1990), and Fullan (2001) was reviewed and shared with the participants. Participants designed a "preferred future" and assessed the current reality in a selected school. They discussed the issues of "mental models," "team learning," and "moral purpose." One of their final assignments was to create their own theory of change. In preparing the participants for leadership roles, they discussed the components of leadership theory (Northouse , 2007) including: transformation leadership and authentic leadership. The professors agreed they needed to have a deep understanding of adults as learners to be highly successful with the cohort group. Knowles, Holton III, and Swanson note that "Adults are interested in their learning when they perceive that it will increase their ability to deal with problems that they face in their work situations (2005)." Authentic situations and problems solving activities became the model of classroom work as the participants came to believe in their ability to solve problems.

METHODOLOGY

Survey and Respondents

To determine if the skill sets contained in the original customized training program were useful and still being used three years later, a qualitative survey was designed to gather input from the program participants. The survey was sent via mail or e-mail to 24 of the 34 original participants; 10 of the 34 had left the school district.

The survey included the following 10 open-ended questions:

1) Discuss how your knowledge of the dynamics of change has benefited you in your role as principal.
2) Describe the specific coaching and evaluation tools your have used with your staff.
3) How have you used your previous experience in developing a vision speech in your current work assignment?
4) What are the specific coaching and evaluation tools that you have used with your staff and how have they been helpful in improving teachers' classroom delivery?
5) What generational issues have your encountered?
6) Describe how you begin your staff meetings to ensure success.
7) How have you relied on the conflict resolution skills taught in the Aspiring Leader's Program?
8) What skills and knowledge that you learned have contributed to your ability to do your current assignment?
9) How and in what ways did the ongoing availability of the professors provide you with additional supports and skill development beyond the timeframe of the program?
10) What learning experiences did you count as most valuable from the Aspiring Leaders' Program that prepared you to be an urban school leader?

In essence, the survey was trying to ascertain the answers to some basic program questions. What aspects of the coursework and informational presentations were still being used by the participants as they moved into their professional leadership roles? Which of the skill sets, if any, had become integrated into their everyday leadership practices?

Responses were received from 12 of the surveyed participants (35%). Three of the respondents were male, and nine were female. One respondent was a fourth-grade teacher

with additional responsibilities as a building leader. Nine were principals, and two were assistant principals. Ten of the respondents had finished their degree; two were still in process. The respondents' demographics represented a fair sample of the original cohort. This made a comparison of the responses from the 2009 study and the follow-up (2012) study possible.

The researchers believe that the exceptionally positive rate of survey return (35%) was directly linked to ongoing support offered during the previous three years. The GVSU professors who taught in the program have maintained working relationships with the original program participants. Thus, they were able to encourage the participants to respond to the survey.

Analysis

A qualitative analysis of the returned surveys was completed by an independent research consultant hired by the university. This analysis led to a qualitative report that correlated the original cohort's data and the skill sets covered in the original program with the responding participants' current practices. Triangulation of data was possible through a review of original program documents, including a standards/class activity matrix and daily classroom feedback sheets. Below is an excerpt from the course evaluation with comments from the participants:
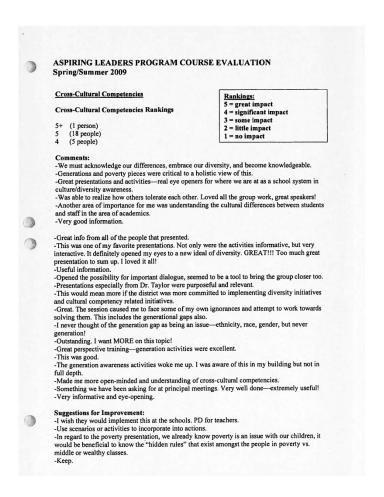
ASPIRING LEADERS PROGRAM COURSE EVALUATION
Spring/Summer 2009

Cross-Cultural Competencies

Cross-Cultural Competencies Rankings

Rankings:
5 = great impact
4 = significant impact
3 = some impact
2 = little impact
1 = no impact

5+ (1 person)
5 (18 people)
4 (5 people)

Comments:
-We must acknowledge our differences, embrace our diversity, and become knowledgeable.
-Generations and poverty pieces were critical to a holistic view of this.
-Great presentations and activities—real eye openers for where we are at as a school system in culture/diversity awareness.
-Was able to realize how others tolerate each other. Loved all the group work, great speakers!
-Another area of importance for me was understanding the cultural differences between students and staff in the area of academics.
-Very good information.

-Great info from all of the people that presented.
-This was one of my favorite presentations. Not only were the activities informative, but very interactive. It definitely opened my eyes to a new ideal of diversity. GREAT!!! Too much great presentation to sum up. I loved it all!
-Useful information.
-Opened the possibility for important dialogue, seemed to be a tool to bring the group closer too.
-Presentations especially from Dr. Taylor were purposeful and relevant.
-This would mean more if the district was more committed to implementing diversity initiatives and cultural competency related initiatives.
-Great. The session caused me to face some of my own ignorances and attempt to work towards solving them. This includes the generational gaps also.
-I never thought of the generation gap as being an issue—ethnicity, race, gender, but never generation!
-Outstanding. I want MORE on this topic!
-Great perspective training—generation activities were excellent.
-This was good.
-The generation awareness activities woke me up. I was aware of this in my building but not in full depth.
-Made me more open-minded and understanding of cross-cultural competencies.
-Something we have been asking for at principal meetings. Very well done—extremely useful!
-Very informative and eye-opening.

Suggestions for Improvement:
-I wish they would implement this at the schools. PD for teachers.
-Use scenarios or activities to incorporate into actions.
-In regard to the poverty presentation, we already know poverty is an issue with our children, it would be beneficial to know the "hidden rules" that exist amongst the people in poverty vs. middle or wealthy classes.
-Keep.

Table 1. Aspiring Leaders Program Overview/Literature Review

Skill Sets Taught and Mastered	Research / Theoretical Basis	Tasks
1. Developing, presenting, and implementing an effective vision for schools	Kouzes, J., & Posner, B. (2002, 2003)	Students were required to create and present a vision statement to their school staff
2. Using and analyzing data to improve student learning	Bernhardt, V. (2000)	Students were given hypothetical data sets of schools; they had to list goals related to the data
3. Coaching teachers for improved student achievement	DuFour, R., & Marzano, R. (2009)	Students were required to demonstrate an effective professional learning community (PLC) program implementation
4. Evaluating instruction and demonstrating effective teaching	Marzano, R., Pickering, D., & Pollack, J. (2001) Marzano, R. (2003) Marzano, R., Waters, T., & McNulty, B. (2005) Danielson, C. (2007)	Students reviewed several tapes of teachers teaching and discussed with colleagues the effectiveness of what they observed; the goal was to be consistent in their evaluations
5. Collaborating with others effectively	Kouzes, J., & Posner, B. (2002, 2003)	Students were given hypothetical problems most likely to be faced by urban principals; as part of a team, they were required to identify and suggest solutions
6. Leading effective meetings	Garmston, R., & Wellman, B. (2009)	Students role-played leading meetings, using information they had learned about leading productive groups
7. Understanding the dynamics of change within the school environment	Wagner, T., et al. (2006)	Students outlined a change initiative they would implement in a school and provided the communication pieces necessary for this change process to be successful
8. Managing conflict resolution through polarity management	Johnson, B. (1996)	Students created a polarity map related to diverse ways of managing an issue in their schools
9. Understanding generational differences	Zemke, R., Raines, C., & Filipczak, R. (2000)	Students discussed at length the generational differences they might encounter in leading a building and discussed how these differences might be a positive and a negative force in a school
10. Developing school improvement plans	Senge, P. (1990)	Students were required to develop a strategic plan for school improvement, goals/activities

During the analysis, to adequately compare skill sets mastered in 2008-2009 and those being used in 2012, it was necessary to list the skill sets presented by the professors in 2008-

2009. Table 1 summarizes the leadership skill taught in the original program, required tasks, and references for the theoretical models and literature review that supported these activities.

PARTICIPANT ACTIVITIES AND RESPONSES

In 2009, all of the participants interviewed for the original study were very enthusiastic about the Aspiring Leaders Program. They felt that all of the content was aligned with the work they would engage in as urban leaders. They were particularly grateful for the cohort group design that complemented their individual degree work, since this allowed them to network with other current and upcoming leaders — creating their own community of practice within the district. They also felt that the GVSU faculty members were very responsive to their needs, adjusting the customized curriculum to ensure it was a good fit for the challenges they faced.

In the 2012 follow-up study, a similar pattern emerged. Only one respondent reported frustration with implementing the practices taught, and this individual was seen as an outlier in the data. All of the remaining respondents overwhelmingly reported positive use of the skill sets they had mastered in 2008-2009. Table 2 details the responses by skill set of the 12 participants who responded to the 2012 survey. "Yes response only" indicates that the participant had used the identified skill set. "Yes response with comments" indicates that the

Table 2. Survey Respondents' Replies by Skill Set Learned

Skill Set	"Yes" Response Only	"Yes" Response, With Comments	"No" Response Only	"No" Response, With Comments
1. Developing, presenting, and implementing an effective vision for schools	0	11	1	0
2. Using and analyzing data to improve student learning	3	8	1	0
3. Coaching teachers for improved student achievement	2	8	1	1
4. Evaluating instruction and demonstrating effective teaching	2	7	0	3
5. Collaborating with others effectively	1	9	2	0
6. Leading effective meetings	3	8	1	0
7. Understanding the dynamics of change within the school environment	0	10	2	0
8. Managing conflict resolution through polarity management	2	9	1	0
9. Understanding generational differences	4	6	1	1
10. Developing school improvement plans	2	7	3	0

participant had used the skill set and gave at least one specific example of how he/she utilized the skill. "No response only" indicates that the participant had not used the skill set in his/her position. "No response with comments" indicates that the participant had not used the skill and made at least one explanatory comment.

It is important to note that the responses to the 2012 survey correlate by title of skill set to the oral interview questions used in the 2009 research project. For example, in 2009 "developing and implementing a vision for their schools" was seen as important to the participants. In the 2012 survey the question was asked, "How have you used the components of your vision speech in your work with staff?" This mirrored set of questions allowed for a comparison of targeted skill sets taught in the program. As one reviews the survey questions, it is apparent that a core set of leadership skills emerges for use in authentic work. The program participants found these skill sets very helpful as the moved into their positions as school leaders. While this targeted list of skill sets noted in this program does not comprise a comprehensive list of the skills school leaders use, it validates the efficacy of the ones taught in the Aspiring Leaders' Program. They are skill sets being used in real time with principals facing real issues and doing so with success.

As can be seen in the raw overall totals shown in Table 2, the participant responses about the program in the 2012 survey were overwhelmingly positive. Specific information follows about some of the original activities participants undertook in relation to each of the 10 skill sets shown in Table 1. Typical participant reactions that emerged during the 2012 study are included for each skill. By reviewing the activities and responses in detail, conclusions can be reached about the value of the program.

Developing a Vision

The Aspiring Leaders Program devoted a great deal of time to the issue of creating an effective vision for schools. "Until educators can describe the ideal school they are trying to create, it is impossible to develop policies, procedures, or programs that will help make that ideal a reality" (DuFour & Eaker, 1998, p. 64). Making the connection between the creation and the implementation of a vision was a major focus for the group. As DuFour and Eaker (1998) note:

> The process that is used to develop a vision statement can foster the pervasive support and endorsement that make such a statement an effective instrument for change. The most important question to ask in guiding the process is, "Will this strategy foster widespread ownership?" (p. 66)

Based on the thinking of DuFour and others, participants were directed to assume the role of a principal presenting a vision speech to faculty members. These vision speeches were videotaped and reviewed by the group and the person presenting. In the survey results, the participants overwhelmingly felt this exercise had a great influence on their role as a school leader. One indicated, "I have used my vision speech to elicit and implement ideas and strategies to support students." Another participant noted, "It helped me to become specific about what we were going to work on as a staff throughout the school year to support student learning."

Using and Analyzing Data

The program participants were given several exercises in data analysis. For example, they were directed to work in teams on a set of state testing data for a particular school. They had to comment on four forms of data: demographics, program, achievement, and perceptions. As Bernhardt (2000) points out:

> Analyses of demographics, perceptions, student learning, and school processes provide a powerful picture that will help us understand the school's impact on student achievement. When used together, these measures give schools the information they need to improve teaching and learning and to get positive results. (p. 14)

The teams were required to analyze all forms of data and to make recommendations to a mock school improvement team. This challenged their thinking on using data and broadened their view about the kinds of data that are necessary for accurate planning. As one participant noted in the survey, "The Aspiring Leaders Program helped me plan effectively, learn how to analyze data and utilize results, and, therefore, plan effectively and efficiently." Another participant commented, "With the use of data staff could more readily accept our current reality, begin to build trust with each other and set our eyes on our purpose."

Coaching Teachers

In the original program, the team of professors continually reinforced the notion that the answer to improved student achievement exists within the classroom — that teachers, when given the opportunity to coach each other, can find the answers for student achievement. In a prior study, Joyce and Showers (2002) maintained that coaching contributed to the transfer of staff learning: (a) that coached teachers used their newly learned strategies more appropriately than uncoached teachers in terms of their own instructional objectives and theories of specific models of teaching, and (b) that coached teachers exhibited greater long-term retention of knowledge about, and skill with, strategies in which they had been coached and increased the appropriateness of their use of new teaching models over time.

This focus on coaching teachers was validated in a statement by a participant who noted how this had become a reality in her leadership practice. "I have used paired teaching — teaching another's class and having them observe, giving ideas that will help them improve lessons — it has made a big impact on my staff." Another participant noted that mentoring, paired teaching, and observing other teachers' classes had helped teachers improve their lessons.

Evaluating Instruction

"Really knowing what the Danielson Rubric says has helped me a lot as I observe teachers." This comment from a program participant points to the importance of teacher evaluation as a skill set for school leaders. The program's professors provided practice in this area by showing video clips of teachers teaching various subjects. Participants used the Danielson Rubric (Danielson, 2007) to evaluate what they observed. As they had opportunities to practice using the rubric, the participants' confidence rose. Not only did their use of the rubric

improve, but they began to discuss the nature of quality teaching. These discussions added to their leadership skills as their role in evaluation became clearer. Participants also reported they were able to use the Danielson Rubric with more confidence in conjunction with classroom visits and walk-through checklists. One participant noted, "Building consensus on what 'quality teaching' really is has made a profound impact on the staff and their craftsmanship, which I have been able to document in their evaluations."

Collaborating With Others

"Collaboration fuels group development when individual members envision (a) the potential of the group as a collective force in the school, and (b) the expanding capacity of the group for accomplishing important work that individuals working in isolation would not be able to achieve" (Garmston & Wellman, 2009, p. 21).

The program's professors emphasized the important role school leaders play in developing collaborative teams throughout the school — that getting teachers to engage in collective inquiry to find the best way to teach a skill to students is the essence of quality leadership. The program participants studied the Learning Cycle, which includes five components: use knowledge, acquire knowledge, analyze knowledge, share/create knowledge, and employ professional conversations (Knowles, in Brayman, Gray, & Stearns, 2010).

This is just one example of the methods in a larger "tool kit" that the participants received relating to teacher collaboration. A participant reflected on his program experience with this skill set in his 2012 survey response: "The cooperative learning nature of the cohort helped to ground theory into practice through presentations and discussions." Another participant noted that ". . . trying to include all staff in decision-making has increased staff buy-in and ownership of our programs."

Leading Meetings

The original participants in the Aspiring Leaders Program indicated that they had trepidations about their skill in leading meetings. During the program, the dynamics of successful meetings were discussed. From setting the stage for risk-free dialogue to accomplishing important work, all components of a staff meeting were analyzed, including (a) how to distinguish the urgent from the important; (b) how to stay on track, on topic, and focused; (c) how to use conflict constructively; (d) how to orchestrate space and materials; and (e) how to make decisions that stay made (Garmston & Wellman, 2009).

In the 2012 survey, participants reported that the use of relationship builders at the beginning of each meeting created a positive climate in which teachers were able to communicate openly. As one participant noted, "In my staff meetings I've been clear that I'm not an expert in everything but I am committed to learning what we need to know to move forward." The participants also noted that the program's professors modeled effective meeting practices as part of their classroom delivery of information. This modeling led to the following comment: "Using staff meeting time for discussion and collaboration time has been very valuable."

Understanding Change

Understanding the dynamics of change and leading a change process were important instructional components in the Aspiring Leaders Program. The five disciplines of Senge's (1990) change model were shared with the group: (a) team learning, (b) systems thinking, (c) personal mastery, (d) mental models, and (e) building a shared vision. Each of these disciplines was discussed with the participants, and they were required to apply the disciplines to an authentic school situation. The participants also studied the components of Fullan's (2001) change model: (a) moral purpose, (b) understanding the process of change, (c) knowledge creation, (d) relationships, and (e) coherence making. Two of the participants shared the following responses to this focus on change:

> I have spent a lot of time talking about change with my staff. We have had staff reductions, a new reading series, and changes in staff and student demographics to name just a few. I have used the presentations from the class and all of the information.

> I think the ideas we learned about starting the change process with a few key players have helped me bring about successful changes within my school. Also the dialogue about being a positive change agent with regards to attitude has helped.

Managing Conflict

The program participants were taught a method for managing conflict called Polarity Management (Johnson, 1996). This process helped the future leaders understand how to move from concentrating on the problem to developing an acceptable solution that all staff members can accept. As Johnson (1996) indicates, leaders become more effective by using Polarity Management because they are able to (a) save time and energy by not trying to solve difficulties that are unsolvable, (b) anticipate and minimize problems that occur when workplace dilemmas are not managed well, and (c) improve their decision making.

In the 2012 survey, participants noted that the use of Polarity Management had helped them significantly in dealing with conflict resolution in their schools. One said, "Being more assured that I can manage conflict, I am comfortable trying to include staff in decision-making and increase their ownership of the issues at hand." Another participant stated, "Holy cow! I am currently in a position which had been held by one principal for 25 years. I had to lean heavily on the class information on managing conflict to guide and support me."

Understanding Generational Differences

As Lovely (2005) points out, "A significant and potentially problematic result of the changing dynamics of the American work force is the growing infusion that brings young, old, and in-betweens together into the same employment mix. . . . Recognizing the portrait of each generation enables superintendents and other managers (principals) to hone in on employee strengths, make weaknesses irrelevant and foster a greater appreciation for diversity" (pp. 30-31).

An important skill set presented to the participants in the original program was dealing with generational differences in school staffs. One participant reported on the importance of learning about generational differences by saying, "I have staff who have 35 plus years of experience and new staff as well. The information taught has been very useful working through communication issues." Another participant stated, "I have staff who say, 'these kids,' so I have used the information to create a dialogue to change this attitude." And a third participant noted in the survey, "There is a generational gap between me and my staff; I have used the information to help me work better with them."

Developing School Improvement Plans

The process for developing school improvement plans was the area of study that brought all of the other skill sets together, enabling the participants to see how to move a district forward. The other skill sets all came into play as the participants worked with their colleagues and staff to develop school improvement plans. The participants collected school improvement plans from various districts and analyzed them. They discussed among themselves the strategies they identified in each plan and asked themselves if these plans would work in their school. With the opportunity to learn from other participants' experiences and leadership challenges, they were able to crystallize their own vision of themselves as leaders as they worked with staff to implement a school improvement plan.

The participants read the work of Tony Wagner and his Harvard Change Leadership Group. Using the school evaluation tool provided in the text "Change Leadership" (2006), the participants had an opportunity to evaluate a hypothetical school's readiness for change and the implementation of a new school improvement plan. In the 2012 follow-up survey, one participant stated:

> Well I've tried and failed a few times but I was so happy to have that knowledge under my belt. It gave me a great place to start, and now it's a matter of really understanding the people I work with so that I can match it with best practices in terms of change.

Another participant said, "Discussion on cultural competency, generational differences, evaluations, and leading adaptive change have been the most valuable parts of the program for me. The professors instilled confidence in me to take the next step which I will never forget."

DISCUSSION

The original cohort of participants gave overwhelmingly positive responses about the Aspiring Leaders Program when initial interviews were conducted in 2009. The researchers believed a more in-depth review of their responses would yield valuable insights into how the skill sets continued to be used, and this led to the 2012 study. The spirit of a qualitative study is to tell a story. As Miles and Huberman (1994) point out, "Qualitative studies take place in a real social world, and can have real consequences in people's lives . . . so we who render accounts of it must maintain standards worth striving for" (p. 2). Thus, it was very important that the 2012 survey capture the stories the respondents shared, not just data.

As shown by the quantitative and qualitative results of the 2012 survey, there was a strong element of sustainability in the participants' use of skills they learned in the original

program. Fullan (2005) defines sustainability as "the capacity of a system to engage in the complexities of continuous improvement consistent with deep values of human purpose" (p. ix). With this definition in mind, the 2012 follow-up study confirmed and validated the importance of this program to the participants. The goal of the original program was to improve the craftsmanship of the participants through mastery of a defined set of skills. This study's results verified that nearly all of the skills continue to be used by nearly all of the participants who responded to the survey. This result was reinforced by the significant level of congruence found in the participants' responses in the 2009 and 2012 studies.

It is important to note that the team of three professors quickly identified the need to utilize adult learning theory. Adults learn best when they can apply, within a short time frame, what they have learned (Lindeman, in Knowles, Holton III, & Swanson, 2005). Thus, the cohort structure was critically important to the success of this program. Participants were able, in working with their cohort partners, to take their learning from initial knowledge to behavior to usable skill. Having identifiable skill sets that could be immediately applied in the participants' professional lives became the goal of every lesson the professors presented.

This process was supported by the fact that all of the professors in the program had been long-time urban school leaders. Therefore, all of the key instructional content had been gleaned from and applied "in the field" by the professors in their previous jobs. The combination of a customized curriculum, a strong cohort structure, and instruction by seasoned practitioners resulted in a highly successful experience for the participants.

A final critical program element to note was the ongoing support and availability of the professors. In both 2009 and 2012, the participants considered this to be an important part of their success, as represented by the following comments:

- "The ongoing availability of the professors and the constant support went well beyond the time frame of the program and was outstanding."
- "I specifically consulted them about staff issues and was provided much support in the area of difficult conversations with staff."
- "The professors have always been available at any time during or after school hours. They have also made themselves available for professional development in our schools."

Lessons Learned

Some of the lessons that emerged from a comparison of the 2009 data with the 2012 data include the following:

- It was vitally important to listen to the needs of the participants. This was demonstrated in the professors' ability to provide relevant educational instruction and resources/materials.
- The Aspiring Leaders Program was successful is giving the participants a set of skills they could use in their leadership roles.
- The professors' willingness to provide a safe atmosphere in which to discuss current issues and challenges ultimately contributed to the program's perceived success and usefulness.

- It was important to maintain rigorous course requirements, which helped assure program quality.
- The professorial team teaching model that was utilized greatly enhanced the participants' engagement in the program.
- To generate the greatest value for the participants, the professors had to be willing to give of their own time and expertise on an ongoing basis long after the program concluded.

Recommendations for Future Study and Partnerships

In addition to the lessons learned, the following recommendations are offered for the consideration of any organization that might undertake a similar project:

- One area for future study is to ascertain what skills these participants were lacking in their ability to successfully do their jobs. Having this information could result in program adaptation that could inform future such training programs.
- In developing these partnerships, professors need to be willing to immerse themselves in the participating school district's system and any existing urban initiatives and issues.
- University personnel need to approach these partnerships with flexibility and an understanding that they will need to adapt existing curricula to meet the specific needs of the urban educators/participants involved.
- A successful partnership requires the consistent presence of professors who are willing to work with their urban educators/participants to build trusting relationships; this will support a safe learning environment.
- These partnerships require a team approach, which models for the participants how teamwork can move school improvement initiatives forward in their urban settings.

CONCLUSION

To a great extent, the successful future of our nation's public schools lies in the hands of school leaders. The 2008-2009 Aspiring Leaders Program sought to give future education leaders in one urban school district the skill sets necessary to enable them to be highly effective professionals. When the 2012 study was used to "check in" with the participants in the program, it confirmed the efficacy of that training. Such university/K-12 school partnerships should be encouraged across the country. They have the potential to positively transform the future for our children.

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