

Casting Call!**The Aspiring Principal Program: A Partnership Initiative Filling the Need for Leadership**

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ABSTRACT

This article details the creation and features of the Aspiring Principals Program, an intentional, mutually beneficial partnership between the University of North Carolina at Charlotte and Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools.

NAPDS NINE ESSENTIALS (2nd Edition) ADDRESSED IN THIS ARTICLE:

1. A professional development school (PDS) is a learning community guided by a comprehensive, articulated mission that is broader than the goals of any single partner, and that aims to advance equity, antiracism, and social justice within and among schools, colleges/universities, and their respective community and professional partners.
3. A PDS is a context for continuous professional learning and leading for all participants, guided by need and a spirit and practice of inquiry.

Finding the right candidate for the main role of a Broadway show is key to a successful production. Casting directors rely on a vast pool of aspiring actors to find the perfect candidate that will bring a character to life. The “Casting Call” announces the search, and aspiring actors put forth their names for consideration. In education, school districts rely on the applicant pool of aspiring leaders in order to fill the “main role” of the principalship. School leadership is documented to have a high impact on student learning, second only to classroom instruction in school-related impact (Leithwood, et al., 2004). Thus, it is imperative that districts have a strong pool of applicants to fill vital leadership positions. With a growing population and pending retirements, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (CMS) discovered that the applicant pool for high school principalships was not sufficient to meet the needs of the district in coming years. After reviewing the history and context of CMS, this article documents the collaborative efforts between CMS and the University of North Carolina at Charlotte to build a program that would train aspiring high school principals to answer the “Casting Call” when the district has a vacant school leadership position. In this way, we are working towards systemic change and meeting the first 4 of the NAPDS 9 Essentials.

CMS is a large school district in North Carolina with a long and, at times, tumultuous history. CMS began as a single school in 1882 and grew rapidly as the population in the region exploded during the Industrial Revolution. “Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools” (n.d.) describes the expansion of the school district, noting that by 1913, CMS was named the “largest public school system south of Baltimore.” By 1964, ten years after the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), the system had 88 total schools, but they remained segregated – 57 white and 31 black schools (Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, n.d.). In 1965, a significant court case challenged the district’s policies: *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education* (1971). As a result, the CMS Board of Education permitted transfers of students out of integrated schools, but discouraged transfers into the predominantly white schools, causing most school facilities to remain completely segregated.

The decades that followed saw new student assignment plans emerge in attempts to remedy the segregation situation. A second lawsuit over student assignment was brought forth by the Cappachione family that argued the district’s student transfer policies were still unfair (1999). The *Swann* case and the *Cappachione* case were ultimately combined and not fully resolved until the early 2000’s. It was April of 2002 when the United States Supreme Court announced that it would not revisit the *Swann/Cappachione* cases and their related petitions, consequently letting a Fourth Circuit Court’s decision approving the district’s student-assignment plan stand.

While this and related cases had slowly worked their way through the country’s court system, CMS maintained a focus on teaching and learning and consequently made significant academic gains. As an urban school system making academic gain, they began to be recognized, particularly for their reading and math scores. In 2001, the district was recognized by the Council of the Great City Schools as one of four top urban school districts in the nation (Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, n.d.). At the same time, the National College Board awarded CMS students the first Advanced Placement diploma in the country. In September 2011, the district won the coveted Broad Prize for Urban Education, the largest award of its kind, recognizing districts that are able to simultaneously increase achievement and close gaps amongst their urban student population (The Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation, n.d.).

Meanwhile, the student population continued to grow in diversity. The district continued to focus on learning for all students, and recognition for their accomplishments continued to accumulate. In 2013, the Council for Urban Boards of Education recognized CMS with the CUBE Award, an honor given to a school district that demonstrates excellence in school board performance, academic improvement, educational equity, and community engagement (Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, 2013). In 2014, CMS was once again honored by the Council of Great City Schools. CMS's laser focus on teaching and learning, academic excellence, and educational equity was evident.

Today, CMS is home to over 147,000 PK-12 students, housed in 176 schools. Since the awarding of the Board Prize in 2013, these last few years have seen even more population growth. In 2017, the U.S. Census Bureau estimated that "Mecklenburg County was the eighth fastest growing large population county [i.e. counties with populations of at least 500,000] in the United States." There are presently 32 high schools and 47 middle schools in CMS with the remaining number comprised of elementary and PK-8 schools. The district student population has continued to become increasingly diverse, with the 2020-2021 enrollment reported as 37% Black, 27% Hispanic, 26% White, 7% Asian, and 3% of students having two or more racial backgrounds.

A school district with 176 schools needs 176 principals every year! And while CMS was growing in size, its school leaders were growing older. By 2012, the district was anticipating crisis level shortages in their principal positions largely due to pending retirements. This shortage was particularly acute at the high school level, where neither the diversity of principals in place nor the existing assistant principal pool was considered either deep enough or wide enough by district leadership. Nor was the candidate pool diverse enough to reflect the student population. Action was needed immediately to avoid lapses in leadership for the large district. These considerations resulted in the beginnings of a multi-dimensional pipeline partnership, which began to bubble up. The thirty-two high school principals communicated during a principal meeting, and then with the other CMS principals. The district principals then communicated with the district office, and the pending leadership problem was identified and recognized.

It was then that representatives from the CMS district office approached the Department of Educational Leadership at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte and initiated talks to consider a specialized program that would fast-track leaders to fill imminent voids. UNC Charlotte's school administration programs were approved by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction and have been accredited since 2013. Regardless, faculty were willing to consider changes to meet the needs of CMS and a new approach to the program design. CMS personnel had already researched a rather unique program designed by the non-profit New York City Leadership Academy (NYCLA), and staff from NYCLA was willing to partner with UNC Charlotte and CMS for the development of the specialized program. In 2013, the partnership was formed to begin development of a robust principal pipeline program administered by UNC Charlotte and tailored to the secondary schools of CMS. The key features of the program are outlined in Table 1.

Table 1

Key Features of the Aspiring High School Principals Program: A collaborate venture between CMS and UNC Charlotte

The program simulates actual challenges and rewards that CMS public high school principals face by immersing participants in authentic, problem-solving exercises that build leadership capacity.

Support is tailored to address each participant's unique learning style and leadership development needs.

Participants become part of a vibrant learning community of fellow aspiring principal participants, mentor principals, and other leadership development practitioners.

The program is a carefully crafted set of experiences that challenges participants in profound ways and prepares them to successfully lead a CMS public high school.

UNC Charlotte already offered a 39-hour Master of School Administration degree and a 21-hour School Administration Certificate for K-12 principal licensure for candidates who held master's degrees in other areas. This new district-specific program would include a 5-week mandatory summer intensive experience which simulated the experience of being a high school principal. This summer simulation format set the *Aspiring High School Principal Program* apart from the other principal preparation programs in the region as well as the university's existing leadership program. It included an attendance requirement of five days a week, eight hours a day (not counting planning time and "homework"), and was action-oriented, involving many hands-on problems frequently faced by principals. The summer simulation experience included everything from surprise meetings with an angry parent (which were videotaped for later reflections and debriefing), to providing emergency assistance with struggling teachers in classrooms, to hiring personnel for various staff positions.

From day one of the program, administrative candidates were placed on racially diverse administrative teams with each candidate taking a turn as the principal for a week. Teams were responsible for completing a major work product each week that involved analysis of qualitative and quantitative data generated from the simulation school. Team members provided their weekly leaders with low inference feedback at the end of each week on how the "principal" performed as a leader. Low inference feedback describes what is happening in a setting without drawing conclusions, making judgments, or expressing opinions. For admission to the program, candidates were first nominated by their principals or other district leaders. All candidates had to demonstrate commitment to closing the historical achievement gaps in urban schools. They also went through a two-hour interview process, during which they analyzed and discussed school data, role-played coaching a teacher after watching a teacher instruct students on video, answered behavioral interview questions, and described in writing how they would handle multiple and synchronous school situations.

Figure 1*Aspiring High School Principal Program Candidates, 2018*

The initial portion of the summer program was designed as a 5-week series of role-played scenarios, through which the students earned university credit for completing three courses which was a total of nine credit hours towards licensure. The courses included Fundamentals of Educational Leadership, School Leadership and Management, and Instructional. These versions of the three courses were, by design, entirely rooted in CMS policy and procedures. CMS helped provide the simulation school data for the activities with the prototype high school in play. This involved compiling a large 3-ring binder with all of the pertinent simulation school information such as demographics of students, qualifications and experience of teachers, and so on, to each student. Design features ensured that district leaders had confidence in the learning that the students would gain and trusted that they would be prepared for school leadership at CMS upon completion of the program. Faith in the program was apparent in the willingness of CMS to commit \$1500 per student toward tuition for the first three courses of the summer intensive program and have continued doing so each year. In short, they have put their money where their trust was. This trust emerged through a collaborative and a reciprocal approach of give and take

from all participants, CMS and UNC Charlotte personnel, as well as the leadership and flexibility needed to launch this innovative program.

Figure 2

Aspiring High School Principal Program, 2019



The first cohort of the *Aspiring High School Principal Program* was launched in 2014 with what was considered the minimum of 15 participants. Since then, the program has grown and expanded to 25 candidates each year. Due to increased demand and resulting competitiveness, many applicants are now turned away, although several traditional options remain available across UNCC programs. After the 5-week summer intensive sessions, the students progress through the remainder of the program courses together as a cohort, continuing to develop strong working relationships and professional learning communities as they prepare for their roles as principals.

The new program was accredited by the North Carolina Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) and was reviewed in Fall 2020 by the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP). No areas of improvement or stipulation were identified for the *Aspiring High School Principal Program*. Considering the innovative approach and risk taken in creating the new program, this was a particularly celebrated success. Since then, the *Aspiring High School Principal Program* has brought accolades to both CMS and UNC Charlotte. The district and university now have a strong cast of candidate understudies waiting in the wings for upcoming principal openings. While CMS and the Department of Educational Leadership at UNC Charlotte had existed independently in the same city for decades, by forming a multi-dimensional partnership to tackle a tough leadership staffing problem head-on, both became better. Once the curtain rises following the recent Covid-19 inspired hiatus, the *Aspiring High School Principal Program* will continue to reduce prior leadership shortages for CMS schools

and strengthen the professional learning communities, programs, and partnerships for both organizations. It is our goal that our graduates will receive rave reviews on their performance as effective school leaders.

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