

# Answering the Call for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Instructional Leadership: A Case Study of a School District and University Job-Embedded Aspiring Leaders Partnership

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## Abstract

This case study examines pilot year implementation activities associated with an innovative school and university partnership effort to improve the instructional leadership competencies of aspiring assistant principals in an urban school district. This original study highlights the learning of multiple partners involved in a collaborative effort to create a Principal Fellows Partnership (PFP) Program, which provides aspiring school principals with one year of job-embedded and tuition-supported assistant principal internship experience in an elementary or secondary campus setting in the partnering school district. The focus of the program was on developing instructional coaching and leadership skills in administrative interns to challenge status quo practices that negated student learning mastery. Nationally recognized principal preparation programs and research findings on effective leadership along with contextual district partner needs drove the creation and goals of the program. Findings revealed that learning for both educational partners and stakeholders was crucial to reach instructional leadership goals. Mentor principals assigned to the administrative interns reflected on their own development as current school leaders, and university educational leadership faculty addressed curriculum innovation and flexibility in the professoriate to support learning in complex school environments. Recommendations for assistant principals who will be effective 21<sup>st</sup> century instructional leaders are provided in the conclusion of the study.

## Keywords

Aspiring Administrators, Instructional Leadership, School and University Partnerships

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## 1. Introduction

The role of the principal as an instructional leader continues to be at the heart of school, teacher, and student success. A major reason for the attention being paid to principals is the emergence of research that has found an empirical link between school leadership and student achievement (Mendels, 2012). The Wallace Foundation study, *How Principals Influence Student Learning*, examined evidence on school leadership. The Wallace study reported that leadership was second only to teaching among school influences on student success, and that its impact was greatest in schools with the greatest needs (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). Today, the field of educational leadership is driven by changing demographics and pressures of accountability to provide equitable education for all students. There is a compelling need for innovation from university preparation programs to cultivate future school leaders who are competent in leading instruction and who can meet accountability demands being made on schools.

In response to past criticisms, university programs have redesigned, revamped, and reformed leadership preparation. Discarding existing leadership practices and branding new ones for both schools and universities are not stress-free tasks. Redesign for the sake of compliance results in documents designed to illustrate programmatic changes, rather than actual systemic and sustainable change (Buskey & Topolka-Jorissen, 2010; Hackmann & Wanat, 2007; Hess & Kelly, 2007). Educational leadership faculty are part of the solution by continuously improving principal intern field experiences and collaborating with public schools as partners to realize genuine *turnaround leadership*. University and public school partnerships have developed grow-your-own models to meet the needs of 21<sup>st</sup> century schools with a focus on job-embedded competencies and skills.

The purpose of the study reported in this article was to investigate initial pilot year implementation activities associated with one school district and university partnership effort that centered on meeting the needs of 21<sup>st</sup> century principals as *instructional turnaround leaders* in schools. This program focused directly on building a “grow-your-own principals” program through a school-university partnership design that included intensive and job-embedded field experiences. The school district and university co-created *Principal Fellows Partnership (PFP) Program* provides selected interns with principal mentors, university faculty instructional coaches, and district leadership support to facilitate “on-the-job learning” of instructional leadership contexts and leading for school improvement. The view of the principalship—that it should center on instruction, not on building management or other administrative matters—is one that has gained currency in recent years (Mendels, 2012). Central to the current role of the school principal as instructional leader is the importance of principals focusing on critically analyzing and reflecting on their own instructional leadership practices, particularly concerning the unexpected difficulties instructional leaders face improving instruction and achieving student mastery. George & Doto (2001) also advocate immediate correction of errors and positive reinforcement to “cement correct performance” in developing skill mastery and subsequent autonomy. The assistant principal serves a vital role in schools through monitoring the instructional skill development of teachers and “cementing correct performance”.

This case study captures the groundwork program development efforts associated with a unique and long-term school district and university partnership that seeks to challenge status quo practices of assistant principals in a partnering school district. Included in this case study is a description and analysis of work completed thus far to build a contextually-based program to meet school district partner needs, the evolving collaborative learning of district partners and principal mentors, and the adaptations university faculty have made in a school principal preparation program. The goals of this evolving school district and university partnership are to develop highly effective leaders who can: 1) advocate for and increase student achievement through connectivity with authentic campus experiences; 2) coach teachers to improve content and instruction; and 3) learn how to successfully apply instructional leadership knowledge and utilize best practice strategies from principal mentors to enhance meaningful results-driven collaborations with campus educators.

## 2. Improving Principal Preparation

The past three decades have produced substantial education reform research focused on the work of improving school leaders and the field of educational leadership. The reforms prompted national initiatives, like the U.S. Department of Education’s Leadership in Educational Administration Development (LEAD) Program (1987-1993) and the Danforth Foundation’s Principals Preparation Program which achieved rather limited success (Hale & Moorman, 2003). The field of educational leadership in the 1990’s saw a change in the conception of

the school principal from being a campus “middle manager” who was in charge of a budget, discipline, and schedules to the added, more focused role of the school principal as the campus “instructional leader”. Research has demonstrated that school leaders are crucial to improving instruction and increasing student learning (Young et al., 2013). Today more than ever, principals and teachers in elementary and secondary schools are being evaluated directly on their school’s student learning performance. Moreover, principals and teachers are being scrutinized on their ability to close the achievement gap within their schools, and are being charged with the responsibility to change under high-stakes accountability measures (Cooley & Shen, 2003; Hess & Kelly, 2007). In this new era of educational accountability, in which school leaders are expected to demonstrate bottom-line results and use data to drive decisions, the skill and knowledge of principals matter more than ever (Hess & Kelly, 2007).

Davis & Darling-Hammond (2012) further argue that principal preparation program effectiveness rarely includes measurable evidence of a principal’s impact on important organizational outcomes, such as teaching practices and student performance. A longstanding concern among scholars, policymakers, practitioners, and programs that prepare school principals is that claims of program effectiveness rest upon a fragile empirical foundation (Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2012). Educational policy leaders of the University Council for Educational Administration (UCEA) assert that “in order to build programs that support leadership for learning, we must rethink and revise our practice in several areas” (Young & Kochan, 2004: p. 121). The conscious or unconscious reluctance by stereotypically intransigent higher education faculty to engage in the process of change may be a greater cause of the lack of change in the field of educational leadership than knowledge of the changes that are needed (Buskey & Topolka-Jorissen, 2010).

There are a number of ongoing challenges in education and instructional leadership. These challenges include: 1) adjusting to school context; 2) keeping and developing human capital; and 3) maintaining instructionally sound partnerships. Although this mindset and work present a challenge for faculty and researchers to persistently adapt, there are ongoing nationwide research efforts to improve educational leader preparation to address these ongoing challenges. Young and colleagues (2013) emphasize that principals and superintendents are expected to be effective leaders of instruction, human capital, organizations, and communities; they must inspire others and make wise, ethical, and evidence-based decisions. To that end, in the report *Leveraging What Works in Preparing Educational Leaders* (Young et al., 2013) scholars examined standards for educational leadership preparation, how they are used to improve program quality and summarized recommendations for strengthening educational leadership preparation. Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson (2010) found in a six-year study that, although school leadership does not make its impact directly, its indirect workings have a statistically significant effect on student achievement (Louis et al., 2010: p. 37). Their research also found that consistent, well-informed support from principals makes a difference, and that principals, accordingly, face increasing pressure to deliver (or at least promote) better support for instruction (Louis et al., 2010).

## 2.1. Meeting 21<sup>st</sup> Century Instructional Leadership Challenges

Drawing on the research in educational leadership and coupled with increasing demands in education, stakeholders have ushered in a reconceptualization of the work of both school- and district-level leaders (Young et al., 2013). This reconceptualization includes university and school district leaders capitalizing on innovative, grow-your-own partnerships that focus on enhanced student learning in the classroom through instructional coaching of teachers by assistant principal interns. It is the combination of highly effective teaching with highly capable school leadership that will change outcomes for children in our schools—not one or the other but both (Cheney, Davis, Garrett, & Holleran, 2010). To develop and grow highly effective teachers and school leaders, Davis & Darling-Hammond (2012) highlight research from five university-based principal preparation programs that contain design elements which align with seven key features of effective leadership preparation programs (Davis, Darling-Hammond, Meyerson, & LaPointe, 2005: pp. 8-15). These features include: 1) clear focus and values about leadership and learning around which the program is coherently organized; 2) standards-based curriculum emphasizing instructional leadership, organizational development, and change management; 3) field-based internships with skilled supervision; 4) cohort groups that create opportunities for collaboration and teamwork in practice-oriented situations; 5) active instructional strategies that link theory and practice, such as problem-based learning; 6) rigorous recruitment and selection of both candidates and faculty; and 7) strong partnerships with schools and districts to support quality field-based learning (Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, Orr, & Cohen, 2007; Davis, Darling-Hammond, Meyerson, & LaPointe, 2005; Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2012). To

further meet 21<sup>st</sup> century needs for quality field-based learning of future assistant principal interns, the school-university partnership examined models by Callahan & Martin (2007) which provide four continua for partnerships: 1) patterns of geographical participation; 2) the frequency of engagement in learning; 3) participative levels in decision making; and 4) the ability to adapt and respond to changes. This research concedes that not all models represent successful partnerships and emphasizes that the complexity of the model demonstrates explicitly that an “enduring partnership” needs to satisfy a framework of qualities rather than a prescription of formulae (Callahan & Martin, 2007).

A study by Bastian & Henry (2014) suggests that the effectiveness of early-career principals may be affected by the environment where they served as assistant principals and that further research is needed to understand better the attributes of meaningful assistant principal experiences. District leadership programs that include a “partnership with universities” have been touted as a solution for preparing principals and potentially the best method for solving the shortage of qualified school administrators (Miracle, 2006). By producing a co-constructed administrative intern experience, school and university stakeholders within the partnership can create learning spaces that nurture instruction, advocate for student mastery, and use data to drive decisions past status quo practices.

## 2.2. A Framework for Preparing Aspiring Administrators

To address the complexities of instructional leadership preparation, the authors use a tripartite frame in principal preparation to meet the multifaceted leadership and instructional responsibilities of school leaders called a *trans-distributed mindset for leadership*. Applying this trans-distributed leadership mindset to the work of leading schools, school principals must be able to implement tenets of transformative learning, and have a growth mindset as a school leader to distribute instructional leadership within and across learning networks to meet challenges in schools (Mezirow, 1991). Transformative Learning Theory (TLT) in this frame serves to emphasize the fundamental and essential role that critical reflection on established perspectives of learning plays in cultivating reflective principals as transformative leaders. School leaders must also possess a “growth mindset” versus a “closed mindset” (Dweck, 2006) to improve and cultivate teachers and students. What may be harder to capture are the beliefs that administrators, teachers, and students hold—beliefs that can have a striking impact on students’ achievement (Dweck, 2010). For example, as a proponent of social change, reform, and progressivism, John Dewey’s historical conceptualization of educative experiences as both necessary and valuable components for a learner (Dewey, 1933, 1938) are still relevant for school principals, teachers, and students today. Lastly, educational stakeholder beliefs can become significant roadblocks or barriers to enacting meaningful organizational and cultural change in schools, particularly for school leaders focused on trying to work collaboratively with colleagues to create, nurture, and sustain high-quality distributed leadership environments in their school communities to address their substantive learning improvement dilemma challenges (Claudet, 2014).

Connecting the three-pronged approach, Mayrowetz (2008) asserts that, as a means to further link distributed leadership to the primary goals of school improvement and leadership development, the educational leadership field should: 1) catalyze discussions; and 2) keep research centered around distributed leadership and theoretically anchored and connected to problems of practice central to the field. A distributed model of leadership focuses upon the “interactions” rather than the “actions”, and is primarily concerned with leadership practice and how leadership influences organizational and instructional improvement (Harris & Spillane, 2008; Spillane, 2006). Principals leading today’s schools must be transformative instructional leaders reaching across vast data and human capital spheres to inform innovative practice and pedagogy. This study attempts to answer the current call for action to improve principal preparation through: 1) fostering collaboration within a school district and university partnership; and 2) engaging in job-embedded inquiry focused directly on enhancing principal interns’ instructional leadership learning.

## 3. Research Methods

A case study was the data analysis method of choice for this research partnership project involving university educational leadership faculty (authors of the present case study report) and educational leaders in one urban school district. The case study method was selected because “the decision to focus on qualitative case studies stems from the fact that this design [was] chosen precisely because the researchers [were] interested in insight, discovery, and interpretations rather than hypothesis testing” (Merriam, 1998: pp. 28-29). Stake (2000) defined

the case study as an interest in studying an individual case. Yin's (2003) focus was more on the case study as a research process. Credibility for the present case study was met through prolonged engagement and persistent observations in the field.

Data collection provided insights from the planning stages of the school district and university partnership, through selection and placement of principal interns, to ultimately the hiring of intern participants. One glaring omission in many qualitative research studies of educational leadership is a lack of attention to the relational power and gatekeeper dynamics that influence the study (Brooks & Normore, 2015). Because leadership is a relational activity, it is important to be clear about the various relationships, not only between the researcher and participants, but also in regard to relationships between participants, between the organization and community, and any other relationship that may influence the work (Brooks & Normore, 2015). Administrative intern scheduled meetings with principal mentors, administrative intern conversations, phone calls, and interviews over a 15-month internship experience, along with video capture of instructional coaching with teachers and leadership presentations provided rich qualitative data for content analysis. Faculty directors met with principal fellows on a bi-weekly basis, along with monthly principal fellow meetings with university faculty and district central office staff, as a means to nurture and develop principal fellows. Documenting and gleaning insights from faculty experiences with restructuring leadership curriculum and teaching in a "flipped classroom" instructional design were also part of the case study.

Principal interns conducted observations in their assigned internship school settings, and developed and shared self-reflections on their ongoing internship experiences. Transformational learning emerged through discussions about leadership fears and nurturing best practice accomplishments. These interactions were beneficial for the purpose of triangulation. The partnership utilized comments from multiple sources, documents, and multiple meetings to address dependability. Participation in online discussions, internship experience logs, journals, and meetings with program faculty partners and artifacts collected throughout the year provided the backdrop for learning and findings. Although transferability to other contexts is up to the reader, the researchers developed thick rich descriptions in order to allow readers to experience the study vicariously (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) by using statements from personal observations, interviews, video captured professional development sessions, notes, and journals. For dependability, the study included principal fellows' comments taken from meetings, along with the researchers' journals and notes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To ensure opportunities for future confirmability, the case study data provides a clear path that can be easily built upon in future studies.

## 4. Case Study Overview

The following sections provide an overview of key design features and operational components of the school district and university *Principal Fellows Partnership (PFP) Program* along with a description of the PFP program's 2014-15 pilot year implementation activities which served as the specific focus of the present case study.

### 4.1. Design of the School and University Partnership

The Principal Fellows Partnership (PFP) Program for aspiring principals reported in this case study was inspired by several nationally recognized efforts. Central among these national efforts is the work of Susan Korach and her team at the University of Denver involved in the development of aspiring leadership pioneers known as the Ritchie Fellows in Denver public schools. The research from five university-based principal preparation programs with design elements which align with seven key features of effective leadership preparation programs including rigorous recruitment and selection of both candidates and faculty (Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2012) was used to guide the development of the Principal Fellows Partnership (PFP) Program. Bringing together field expertise, research and practice knowledge of faculty, and the needs of the partner district, the Principal Fellows Partnership (PFP) Program centered on developing the *instructional leadership skill-sets* of aspiring assistant principal interns participating in the program through providing these assistant principal interns with substantive cognitive and instructional coaching strategies to: 1) enhance interns' teacher coaching abilities; 2) develop teachers' instructional capacities; and 3) impact student mastery.

### 4.2. District and University Partners

The urban school district participating in the Principal Fellows Partnership (PFP) Program serves close to 30,000

students, with 66% of this total student population being economically disadvantaged, and 72% comprised of Hispanic and African American students. With over 50 campuses throughout the school district, the need for leadership both within individual campuses and throughout the district presents an ongoing demand for instructional experts to guide campuses toward growth in learning achievement. The district leadership includes multiple assistant superintendents of schools and curriculum working collaboratively with content directors to supervise and lead campus principals. Ongoing school improvement conversations between the urban school district and local university partners have resulted in creating multiple partnership programs that focus directly on improving educational outcomes in the participating school district. As one of these programs, the Principal Fellows Partnership (PFP) Program is a two-year pilot partnership effort between the urban school district and the local university's College of Education Educational Leadership program. The purpose of the Principal Fellows Partnership Program is to establish a pipeline of assistant principals in the school district with highly developed skills in: 1) understanding data to inform practice; 2) leading campus-based professional learning communities; 3) using rubric knowledge to grow teaching; and 4) instructionally coaching teachers using video capture and detailed feedback of classroom observations on content and pedagogy. Key university educational leadership faculty blending theoretical and practical school application of instructional leadership served as leadership liaisons to the school district partner and to the aspiring assistant principal leaders as the program unfolded.

### 4.3. Aspiring Leader Selection

The school district and university Principal Fellows Partnership (PFP) Program intern selection process began with a call to elementary and secondary principals for recommendations of recognized teacher leaders with strong records of teaching and campus leadership success and a focus on instructional coaching. Campus principals and district central administration leaders sent invitations to teachers across the district for an informational meeting with a team of both school personnel and university faculty about the PFP program opportunity. The orientation provided principal fellow program prospects with expectations for participation. Interested applicants were required to submit an application with a written narrative describing why they had an interest in student achievement and school leadership, a resume, letters of recommendation, and questionnaires completed from the Haberman Educational Foundation. The 2014-15 Principal Fellows Program Cohort 1 interns were selected from teacher applicants across elementary, middle, and high school levels within the district. The three teachers selected as PFP Cohort 1 interns consisted of two females and one male. Two of these teachers were white, one was Hispanic. While all three of these teachers were teacher leaders in some capacity, two were instructional coaches. One of the three teachers selected for the PFP internship program had been teaching students in the classroom. The second intern was a classroom teacher but was also the AVID ("Advancement Via Individual Determination" program) campus leader. The third fellow was a full-time middle school math instructional coach. The PFP Cohort 1 experience included a 15-month, job-embedded internship experience involving a project-based "flipped curriculum" with course work focused directly on applied instructional leadership learning and development at each intern's assigned internship campus. Faculty liaisons and principal mentors worked collaboratively to instruct PFP interns in bi-weekly sessions and seminars held on location at the participating internship campus sites. The school district supported the move financially by securing the PFP interns' teaching positions for the PFP internship year. A scholarship for the master's degree in Educational Leadership was provided by the partnering university. In return, the PFP interns agreed to stay with the district for at least two years as they were groomed for possible future assistant principal positions within the school district.

### 4.4. Selecting Principal Mentors

One of the core elements of the PFP partnership was the selection and role of the Mentor Principal (MP). Top-performing campuses across the district and their school leaders were invited to represent their school as a possible MP for a district- and university-supported administrative intern. The call produced multiple elementary, middle, and high school campus principals interested in serving as a mentor to a PFP intern during the 15-month, co-constructed internship experience. The selection of mentors came from the school district as the interested principals were interviewed and rigorously reviewed to find suitable elementary, middle, and high school leaders to participate in the PFP program and mentor the new PFP Cohort 1 interns.

Once the mentors and interns were selected, meetings were scheduled to discuss program content, curriculum alignment, and learning goals associated with the PFP program's job-embedded and integrated coursework. Dis-

district office administrators scheduled leadership and campus meetings throughout the year, setting the tone for the communication and partnership ahead. Bi-weekly meetings were scheduled with the PFP interns to provide support concerning on-the-job training, working with teachers, and fulfilling graduate program learning requirements with portfolios, artifacts, and multiple forms of evidence from the job-embedded experiences. Monthly meetings involving university educational leadership faculty, mentor principals, and district administrative personnel were also scheduled at the internship campus sites to discuss PFP internship learning objectives and alignment of PFP program curriculum. PFP interns' ongoing experiences were used to inform reflective conversations with school district leaders and campus principal internship mentors and as a means to gauge interns' developmental progress. Mentor principals' attendance and leadership were vital to the partnership process as the mentor principals provided feedback and additional collaboration opportunities with university faculty for PFP program adjustments and continuous learning.

#### 4.5. A Focus on Leadership and Learning

The district partner funded three PFP administrative interns supporting their position for the year as they grew in their new roles, and the university partner provided a full scholarship for each of the interns for a master's degree in educational leadership. The interns boxed up their classrooms at the end of May 2014, finished their previous school year, and during the first week of June 2014 reported to their respective assigned principal mentors for leadership duty at their new internship school site. University Educational Leadership faculty held focused meetings and discussions on the skill development and knowledge to be acquired by the PFP Cohort 1 interns and used the PFP interns' initial summer 2014 PFP program orientation experience (the first three months of the 15-month internship program) as an opportunity to expand data disaggregation, professional development, and work closely with their newly assigned mentor principals on processes for closing out the previous school year and learning how to open and prepare for the next school year. The summer PFP program orientation experience was the catalyst for leveraging instructional leadership to focus on the improvement of school, department, and teachers. During this initial summer orientation, the district and campus support of PFP interns as they engaged in data analysis action plan presentations with mentor principals over focused learning objectives provided a solid problem-based environment within which PFP interns could address school contexts and problems of practice and fulfill graduate course work goals and credit. In the fall semester following this initial summer orientation period, the PFP interns became immersed in multiple job-embedded, instructional leadership learning and development activities, including: 1) weaving together instructional leadership issues and graduate course objectives; 2) focusing on classroom instructional support; and 3) actively coaching two teachers identified as needing instructional improvement for the year. Throughout these PFP internship activities, PFP interns were challenged by their campus principal mentors to walk the daily walk of an administrator as a means to breathe life into their internship practices. PFP interns were required to attend campus- and district-level meetings and trainings with their mentor principals. PFP interns also attended meetings and trainings with assistant principals and monthly leadership meetings with the district's own Aspiring Administrators Academy. Finally, to ensure state principal certification requirements would be completed during the intern year, mock exams were scheduled multiple times during the year to assess PFP interns' areas of strength and improvement. PFP interns would take a final state principal certification exam in March of the PFP program spring 2015 semester to ensure that PFP interns met both state and district requirements for employment as campus administrators.

#### 4.6. Improving Instructional Leadership Skills

Part of the instructional leadership learning involved accessing district-level resources to facilitate the use of multiple forms of data on campus. Orientation and presentation meetings were scheduled with district offices to prepare PFP interns for deep data disaggregation. Skrla, Bell-Mckenzie, and Sheurich's (2009) book *Using Equity Audits to Create Equitable and Excellent Schools* was used as a framework to ensure an equity lens was part of the plan of action for teacher and student interventions. Multiple school district offices expanded data access opportunities to PFP interns to provide PFP interns with macro views of leadership and to improve their internship work with campus-level student populations. These school district offices included Bilingual/ESL, Title I, Migrant, Data Research Office, Technology Director Office, Content Directors, Transportation Services, Human Resources, AVID Office, and Special Education.

PFP intern training during the initial orientation summer of the PFP program included deep instructional coach-

ing and building teacher competencies using the National Institute of Excellence in Teaching TAP™ (Teacher Advancement Program) rubric. The training focused on improving the capture and scripting of classroom evidence supporting the practice of conducting effective pre- and post-classroom observation coaching conferences with teachers. The leadership framework of a trans-distributed mindset provided the intersection for translating theoretical frames into practice through distributive leadership training, use of mindset psychology in the field, and examining the impact of an expert blind spot on campus. The PFP interns worked alongside their campus mentor principal during the PFP orientation summer to prepare for the opening of the school year (including creating teacher schedules, leading and attending curriculum trainings, and participating in the hiring of new staff). Once the school year commenced, previous year data at the PFP intern's school site were used to select teachers to coach and focus on for pedagogy and content improvement.

University graduate courses followed the public school calendar. The PFP interns' summer orientation emphasized learning about data analysis techniques, processes of change, school culture, and the implementation of a school equity audit. PFP interns were tasked to conduct an equity audit of their new school searching for trends in state test scores, multiple grade-level assessment data, student demographics, gender learning trends, attendance, discipline patterns, and examining the performance of the economically disadvantaged students. The PFP interns analyzed data using state test results for grades above third grade, and pre-kindergarten and kindergarten assessment data for the lower grades. In collaboration with their mentor principals and using their campus data, the PFP interns each selected two teachers at their respective internship school to coach and support for the entire school year. The PFP interns analyzed end-of-school year student achievement data, value-added data, previous teacher evaluations and performance, and presented findings and justification for teacher selection based on these data analyses. The PFP interns worked directly with teachers and principals to set goals for each teacher identified for PFP intern coaching support for the upcoming year. The parameters allowed the PFP interns to work within their content area of strength for only one teacher; the other teacher supported was outside of their teaching content expertise.

#### 4.7. Cohort Collaboration and Teamwork

The PFP interns regularly met with collaborating university and district partners during the 2014-15 school year. Each PFP intern grew into his/her role on his/her internship campus, engaging directly with the unique contextual issues at the assigned internship campus. The relationships of university faculty, mentor principal, and district leaders also grew to provide important school district-university team partnering opportunities. The power of the PFP cohort design was evidenced not only through the collaborative coursework and program development but also through the continuous leadership discourse among partner institution participants in support of each others' professional growth that occurred throughout the 2014-15 pilot year. During meeting sessions, discussions were held on the continuing progress of each PFP intern's two teachers identified for PFP intern-intensive instructional coaching support. In addition, as part of regular meeting sessions PFP interns' job-embedded learning and coursework concept application skills development were reviewed along with upcoming relevant leadership issues at each internship campus site. PFP interns' evolving growth in their roles as participants and leaders of their campus professional learning communities was a central part of PFP meeting conversations among PFP interns, principal mentors, and university faculty. Leading teacher teams was a new experience and a valuable one contributing to the uniqueness of PFP interns' job-embedded leadership training. PFP interns' ongoing experiences in their campus-based professional learning community and leadership development work, in turn, generated high interest and high levels of engagement and teamwork among participating university educational leadership faculty.

Important data-intensive, collaborative PFP intern presentations scheduled throughout the year brought the cohort closer as they shared data, skills, and applied learning in the field. The first PFP intern group presentation occurred at the end of summer 2014, at which time PFP interns presented a summary presentation to university leadership faculty and school district executive leadership staff on the learning that occurred during the orientation summer and the leadership preparations the interns were involved in for the coming school year. The PFP interns collaboratively presented their equity audit analyses, data on the two teachers identified for instructional coaching support at each internship campus, the justification for the teacher instructional support choices, and the goals for each intern's instructional coaching support project (including the instructional leadership focus/direction that would be used to guide each intern's two teachers in growing and improving student achieve-

ment throughout the coming year). The second presentation was held at the end of the fall 2014 semester in December to a larger audience of stakeholders including university educational leadership faculty, executive district leadership, mentor principals, and the district superintendent to demonstrate application of learning and the instructional coaching progress each intern had made with his/her two selected teachers. Presentations and trainings conducted by the PFP interns on content standards and lesson development and assessments across each campus were also presented. Other opportunities for display of interns' evolving leadership abilities were also provided throughout the program to showcase and review each intern's: 1) overall areas of strength and improvement; 2) incremental successes and challenge areas in working with teachers; and 3) instructional work with grade levels, school staff, professional learning community teams, and campus leadership.

A framework for ongoing leadership coursework development and refinement was also created through continuing conversations among university leadership faculty and mentor principals, in conjunction with multiple conversations with school district administrators who offered helpful advice and possible solutions to instructional leadership issues emerging at individual internship campus sites. Face-to-face meetings, online learning, and competency-based skill applications drove real-world learning and job-embedded projects that were presented and discussed during regular PFP internship meetings with principal mentors and university faculty. Leadership faculty gleaned new insights through interns' online postings and results of content application, reflections, and discussions and used these emerging insights to continue to discuss and refine curriculum and real-time instructional support for the current instructional and organizational leadership issues developing at the internship schools. What used to be taught in a university classroom—in "silos", was now part of an integrated educational leadership learning effort being applied on a weekly basis in real-world settings.

#### 4.8. Meeting State Standards and Accountability

The 2014-15 PFP Cohort 1 administrative interns were provided with opportunities to work with teachers in need of assistance, bring data and trends into the professional learning meetings, and work alongside the principal mentors as educators at each internship school prepared for the rigors of state standards and state accountability. PFP interns participated in state testing procedures, attended district mandated trainings for administering the state content area tests, helped campus principals prepare testing schedules, tested student groups, boxed test materials, and learned about the behind-the-scenes planning that needs to occur during student testing time. The instructional coaching exercised during the school year in conjunction with the content standards information provided PFP interns with multiple leadership opportunities to grow their principal skills through working closely with campus assistant principals and other faculty leaders in preparation for the assessment of students at each internship campus through the state-mandated exams. Finishing the work leading up to the state testing, the PFP interns also led many aspects of closing the school year guided by the campus principal mentors. During this time, the interns were able to bring in previous school leadership learning in having closed the previous academic year and opened the current academic year and then use this knowledge to assess the complete school year based on student mastery and growth. Guided by their mentor principal, the interns now had the practical knowledge to understand and execute the closing of a school year. The PFP interns gained new knowledge through working closely with teachers and school staff, with students and parents, and with community members—communicating teaching practices and the instructional work required to meet state standards. The overall impact the PFP interns' instructional leadership made on the organizational dynamics of each internship campus was experienced through the course of the one year of job-embedded learning. The PFP interns' culminating program experiences extended into the summer after the school year was over, with the interns receiving their master's degrees in August 2015. All of the participating PFP Cohort 1 interns took the state principal professional certification exam in late spring 2015 and successfully passed this state certification exam. This accommodated the district partner's hiring practices and made the interns eligible for assistant principal positions that became available for the following school year.

The PFP interns' success in attaining their state principal professional certification was attributed to the sequencing of the curriculum, ongoing collaboration among faculty in facilitating integrative teaching, the PFP interns' continual referencing and application of the TExES Principal framework via logging of daily intern field activities, reflective writing, online postings and reflective discussions (using the Blackboard online teaching system), practice exams, and self-assessments (end-of-course rubrics) during the fall 2014 and spring 2015 semesters. The TExES Principal (068) framework (Educational Testing Service, 2010), which PFP interns refe-

renced and applied in their project-based work throughout their internship program, includes three domains, nine competencies, and 64 knowledge and skills statements. The domains center on school community leadership (Domain I), instructional leadership (Domain II), and administrative leadership (Domain III). Domain I consists of three competencies related to campus culture and vision, communicating with the school community, and always acting in an ethical and legal manner. Four competencies drive Domain II, which stresses curricula and strategic planning, facilitation of a campus culture that is contributive to student achievement and the professional advancement of faculty, evaluation and oversight of staff, and facilitating decision-making and problem-solving to assure a climate of learning. Safety, budgeting, allocation of resources, utilization of technology, and maintenance of the school plant encompass the two competencies in Domain III. The TExES Principal (068) framework is integrated through an underlying emphasis on instructional leadership in pursuit of achievement gains for all students (Wilmore, 2013).

The State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness (STAAR) program (Texas Education Agency, 2015), which was implemented in spring 2012, has heightened the stakes related to accountability for local school boards, superintendents, principals, teachers, students, and higher education preparation programs in Texas. Annual assessment areas included are reading, mathematics, writing, science, social studies, and end-of-course (EOC) exams. Student achievement is measured by four interrelated indices. Index 1 (Student Achievement) measures all students' performance. Index 2 (Student Progress) assesses the progress of various student groups (African American, Asian, Hispanic, White, etc.). Index 3 (Closing the Performance Gap) determines the performance gaps of all economically disadvantaged students compared to nondisadvantaged students. Index 4 (Postsecondary Readiness) measures students in relation to graduation rates, diploma plans, college-ready criteria, credit for advanced courses/dual credit courses, and technical education. The combined index scores determine whether a school district and/or individual school campuses receive a rating from the state Texas Education Agency (TEA) of "met expectations", "exceeded expectations with distinctions", or "improvement required". A significantly low accountability outcome on the STAAR assessments requires that school district leaders and teachers develop individualized student education progress plans with continuous monitoring of all students in order to meet the STAAR standards. This responsibility demands that school leaders maintain high skill levels in instructional leadership.

The 2014-15 PFP Cohort 1 interns received continuous professional development with the TExES Principal (068) framework and STAAR via their job-embedded internships. This "professional development/job-embedded internship" combination reinforces the significance of the partnership between the school district and university in the preparation of aspiring principals. Additionally, for the current 2015-2016 year the partnering school district had nine schools designated by the Texas Education Agency as Improvement Required (IR) campuses. One of the schools was reconstituted, which resulted in the replacement of the principal and a majority of the teachers. To remove the IR rating of all nine schools, this will require integrated collaborative efforts among the district superintendent, campus principals, other school leaders, and local education service centers. The 2014-15 pilot year implementation activities associated with the school and university Principal Fellows Partnership (PFP) program reported in the present case study represents a competency-based, job-embedded collaborative effort between one school district and a university-based educational leadership faculty to prepare new campus-level administrative leaders who have the needed instructional leadership skills to assist the school district partner in meeting its campus improvement needs.

## 5. PFP Program Pilot Year Implementation Results

Although the initial conversations between the university and the school district were to collaborate on the selection of the PFP Cohort 1 interns, the district, eager to move forward, rushed to make intern participant selections. The elementary and middle school interns were assigned to new schools and new principal mentors while the high school intern remained in the same school with the same principal. The decision was also a reaction to the realities of district political pressures, accountability needs, and local school politics. The university educational leadership faculty partners were not in agreement with the district's decision to keep the high school intern on the same campus. The significant skill of creating new relationships as a leader in a new school would be absent staying on the same campus. There were concerns that the intern, who would now be leading teachers he worked with a few months ago, would create conflict. The principal fought to keep his intern and summer training plans that superseded the PFP program. The new principal fellow intern remained at the same school where

he taught, and the principal became his mentor.

This exception could have created a divide within the partnership by flexing power, but instead the university leadership faculty used it to frame leadership practice in schools and were transparent with the interns about the realities of working and leading public schools in local contexts. Also, the district's executive leadership made initial decisions on selecting the mentor principals using the criteria of "the best" principals in the district. Academically high performing campuses were the criteria, along with a proven track record of leadership and a model leader. Omitted were the principal relational skills or temperament to be a model mentor. The conversation between placing interns in the neediest of schools in the district and/or in struggling schools was the true need of the partnership. The principal mentors leading high-performing schools became the leadership learning context for principal interns. As a result, the work of university faculty during the 2014-15 PFP program pilot year became that of bringing the various school district contexts *to the intern experience* to truly prepare the interns to be able to understand the organizational dynamics of both high- and low-performing school contexts.

The interns were prepared for the beginning of the school year to meet the new school staff, students, and parents. Questions arose on mentor campuses as to how and why district supported job-embedded interns were selected and placed, especially as the campuses and district were saturated with seasoned teachers with master's degrees in educational leadership. Why were these particular teachers chosen? The innovation behind instructional leadership also meant a deeper skill set in instructional leadership to meet school and student needs. Jealousy and resentment emerged from many status quo teachers in the three mentor schools who not only had master's degrees in educational leadership but had also been waiting patiently for "their turn" for a leadership position. By contrast, the PFP interns did not follow the traditional route to campus leadership as they were privileged to practice school leadership for a year as an intern before the official hiring. These were discussions during meetings that not only changed the future view of an instructionally solid assistant principal but also began to change the hiring practices of the partnering district.

### 5.1. Leveraging All Parts of School Data

The PFP Cohort 1 interns were tasked to collect different levels and forms of student and school data that allowed for the construction of the equity audit. The interns were tasked to challenge the norm, the status quo practices that produced the same results. The mindset was to access multiple forms of data and understand their teachers, students, and community. As they grew in their administrative roles, the PFP interns' access to data also expanded. The PFP interns dug deep into their respective school data in ways that were outside of "normal" principal practices, and at times the principal mentors, supportive and guiding, were intrigued as to why the interns needed particular data. The PFP interns' initial instructional coaching project directives were to select two teachers to set yearly goals, coach, and mentor these two teachers with guidance from the principal. The two teachers were selected at each mentor campus for various reasons, some solely on data, while one teacher was chosen at each intern campus to allow the intern to gain access to team meetings where problems with other teachers existed and could be addressed.

The principal intern fellows delivered coaching to two teachers using the TAP™ (Teacher Advancement Program) rubric. The goal was to help the identified teacher within a coaching space with content, pedagogy, and student issues. The use of video to capture pre- and post-observation conference data advanced reflection with the teacher and intern as they planned and improved instructional leadership discourse while focusing on teaching skills. As the 2015 spring semester began, PFP interns continued to coach their selected teachers, and as they developed leadership skills, their roles and list of instructional duties grew. More teachers were added for the interns to coach and to help with data analysis and disaggregation. The problem- and project-based course work allowed the PFP interns to speak about content standards, student performance, assessments, and specific student and teacher growth. As these skills were enhanced, the PFP interns began to lead Professional Learning Communities at their mentor campuses in multiple content areas and grade levels.

### 5.2. Innovative Faculty Are Flexible

University educational leadership faculty served as leadership coaches, instructors, and mentors during the intern partnership. The learning that followed was a departure from a "silo approach" to teaching graduate course content and required a conscious move toward adopting more collaborative efforts to plan and prepare to meet the on-the-job needs of the interns. PFP interns participated in face-to-face intensive course meetings in hybrid

settings, and participated in online learning during the 2014-15 school year semesters. The project-based and flipped curriculum established for the PFP program was new to many faculty members, and the difficulty in adjusting to new methods of instruction and delivering just-in-time learning tested the flexibility and innovation capacities of these seasoned university educators. Face-to-face instruction was only delivered monthly, and it was at the school site. This more malleable approach to developing course objectives and guiding learning aligned to daily administrative duties and instructional leadership was supported by readings, face-to-face conversations, and online learning, and these were added only to support necessary field-based internship work relating directly to the interns' mentor schools and students.

Gaps in learning did occur as the university faculty wove course work learning as it was needed instead of in a traditional graduate course sequence. The ever changing experience of the school administrator presented instructional and leadership situations where the administrative interns needed knowledge that could not wait for a traditional course sequence. During these situations, the leadership faculty filled in the gaps during bi-weekly meetings. Two examples were the broad knowledge administrative interns needed to know about special education and school law and policies. Although unable to officially sign off as the campus administrator, the interns were assigned to make immediate decisions that fell under school policy and special education needs of students and teachers. The typical course sequence for these leadership topics occurred in later semesters. Therefore, the faculty made adjustments for applied concepts and learning to accommodate the rapid pace of the interns' experiences. The learning objectives were disbursed and layered as the PFP interns' learning and experiences could not wait for direction and/or knowledge within a traditional semester. University program faculty began teaching and directing PFP instructional leadership learning on a just-in-time basis to respond to the contingent emergence of complex and changing school situations.

## 6. Discussion

This section presents a discussion of key research findings emerging from the Principal Fellows Program 2014-15 pilot year implementation case study. Findings from this pilot year case study coalesced within three important program design areas: 1) leadership trust and rapport; 2) mentor principal learning reflections; and 3) coaching aspiring principal interns.

### 6.1. Leadership Trust and Rapport

During bi-weekly meetings between the interns and the university faculty, relationships flourished and trust was built engaging in difficult and perplexing situations with stakeholders. Meetings became a safe place to discuss important confidential topics arising during the interns' experience. The PFP interns were able to seek advice from each other and lead teachers with specific teacher issues and ongoing problems. Throughout their 15-month internship experience, PFP interns also focused on improving instructional content, leading and working in Professional Learning Communities, developing professional relationships with their mentor principals, communicating with university faculty, and addressing topics specific to discipline, parent communication, and school functions. Trusting in the process, university faculty members adjusted to problems of practice and the flipped leadership curriculum. Educational leadership faculty members attended monthly principal fellow meetings held at school sites, developed rapport with interns, and adjusted their pedagogy practices to help build and support the interns' learning experiences.

### 6.2. Mentor Principal Learning Reflections

One of the intriguing relationships that also developed during the 2014-15 PFP pilot implementation year was the relationship between mentor principals and university educational leadership faculty. The mentor principals shared their campus strategies, their vision for school leadership, and strategies to approach instructional leadership. Reflections from mentor principals included bringing their "A" game to the mentoring task and talking through their decision-making processes. Decisions made intuitively were now deconstructed and shared with the principal intern in meetings and during daily campus work. Talking through problems of practice and explaining the choice of strategies and approaches to work with teachers gave mentor principals time to reflect on their own practices and update many approaches. Working towards becoming effective instructional leaders, the interns asked the tough questions and worked on challenging campus instructional projects. They often left principal mentors reflecting and thinking about their own instructional approaches as the real-time cohort learning

brought issues and challenges of instructional leadership “best practices” to the school’s daily conversations.

### 6.3. Coaching Aspiring Principal Interns

The district’s norm for hiring assistant principals starts in April as resignations and retirements are announced. The work of university leadership faculty to prepare the PFP interns for this opportunity started the first week of June of the previous year (spring 2014) when the interns left their schools and began as Principal Program Fellows. Leading instruction requires multiple intelligences and understanding of leading content. The work of the PFP interns was constant on campus and with faculty as the partnership deconstructed school situations and applied leadership learning. University faculty worked in executive coaching roles to grow the interns’ skills and confidence to lead instruction across various school spaces. As the interviews and selection of new campus principals occurred across the district in spring 2015, assistant principal positions opened. To prepare the PFP interns for available leadership positions, university leadership faculty organized mock interviews. During these mock conversations, the interns were questioned by both university faculty and district leaders. As campus administrative positions in the district became available, PFP interns applied and interviewed for campus positions. The administrative and instructional duties PFP interns were assigned daily in their internship schools provided them with opportunities to acquire knowledge and skills that were more advanced than other position candidates and other aspiring administrators who were classroom teachers.

Administrative positions are very competitive and usually bring many applicants. The principal fellows were competing with individuals who had regularly been interviewing for available positions, as well as math and literacy coaches from within the school district. Each school district community and human resource office develops practices and norms for hiring administrators. The PFP interns were instructionally prepared with plenty of practical experience and knowledge equivalent to a second-year assistant principal. They all passed the state principal professional certification examination during the first attempt and were the product of the school and university partnership program—instructionally sound assistant principals who were truly ready for an assistant principal position. As the PFP Cohort 1 interns closed their academic year learning with their mentor principal, they looked forward to the last university leadership meetings and their August 2015 graduation. This time around the principal intern fellows had more knowledge and experience to help their mentors close the school year and also to attend all summer administrative trainings. The interns were eager to move to new schools with the hope of new assistant principal assignments. Two of the PFP Cohort 1 interns were hired by the district in July 2015 as new assistant principals. Both of these intern graduates became welcomed additions at two of the district’s middle schools, both of which are struggling schools that could now reap the benefits of a well-prepared instructional leader. The new principals eagerly praised the intern program graduates’ work ethic, enthusiasm, and level of knowledge. Both PFP intern graduates felt prepared and ready to take on their new assistant principal assignments. The third intern graduate is still searching for an assistant principal position and is currently a literacy coach at an elementary school. Her enthusiasm is high as she begins to use her knowledge of coaching with teachers at her new school. The central district administration and executive leadership took a cautious step and chose not to overly promote or praise the hiring of any of the interns from the partnership. Many sitting school administrators across the district did not know or understand the rigor of the Principal Fellows Partnership (PFP) Program. The school district and university PFP partnership has continued, and the job-embedded learning continues to flourish as the second cohort of PFP interns has been selected and placed in schools for the 2015-16 school year. All three 2014-15 Cohort 1 pilot year intern fellows participated in university August 2015 graduation ceremonies and were praised by the university faculty for their diligence and commitment throughout the rigorous and intensive 15-month program. Each one of the fellows was thankful for the unique professional learning opportunity and emphasized the value of having one year of experience before becoming a certified assistant principal.

## 7. Conclusion

### Job-Embedded Learning Meets the Needs of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Instructional Leaders

A 21<sup>st</sup> century instructional leader purposely develops human capital to mentor and grow campus teacher leaders. They lead by modeling instructional behavior and they lead the instructional discourse required to ensure that student mastery is being met. The 2014-15 Principal Fellows Partnership Program principal interns who worked in their “on-the-job” 15-month PFP internship had many advantages to reach the assistant principal position.

Most importantly, they exercised instructional leadership strategies and competencies working with teachers to improve student achievement. This job-embedded intern partnership was inspired by principal preparation programs that had been featured nationally as successful school and university collaborative pathways to prepare school leaders. With one successful cohort completed and a second PFP cohort placed in district mentor schools for the start of another school year, the Principal Fellows Program 2014-15 pilot year implementation case study gleaned insights regarding several skills that were essential to principal mentors and assistant principals who were effective 21<sup>st</sup> century instructional leaders. Effective 21<sup>st</sup> century instructional leaders: 1) lead with a mindset that is open to learning and is first to model instructional skills, develop assessments, and set the learning pace for teams across the campus; 2) collaborate and coach teachers instead of controlling and micro-managing their practices; 3) build learning and leading networks throughout a school, and distribute leadership instead of using existing school hierarchies; 4) are reflective practitioners who seek out and explain the “why” of instructional practices—that is, find the meaning and purpose of content standards, pedagogy, and instruction instead of managing fragmented alignment; and 5) use multiple intelligences and relational aptitudes to develop human capital and lead with instructional expertise.

The Principal Fellows Partnership Program interns, mentors, and leadership faculty were all part of the learning and growth that occurred during the program’s pilot year implementation. And, as both mentors and interns reported, the coaching, data discoveries, and job-embedded experiences improved instructional leadership skills because the partnership and goals were grounded in practical school leadership work. James-Wards (2013) defines leadership coaching as an on-going process between a principal and a non-district coach who assists principals with reaching desired school- and district-level goals as well as maximizing their leadership capacity. Part of the growth and development of the university leadership faculty through this partnership experience was in modeling and embodying leadership coaching skills with the principal interns. As this school and university partnership continues, the goal and focus of developing first-year instructional leaders will continue to ensure that program interns develop both the *principal leadership abilities* and *instructional coaching skills* needed to effectively engage and support teachers in their complex teaching and learning environments.

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