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Principals at the Center

The Pittsburgh school district believes cultivating effective instructional leaders is the key to school improvement

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Pittsburgh

For schools to improve in this district, it's not just the children who need to learn. Embracing the idea that strong principals are essential to academic success, top Pittsburgh administrators have launched several ambitious initiatives based on the philosophy that school leaders need to be cultivated as carefully as their students.

They hope the changes will mark a turning point for the 28,000-student district, which faces declining enrollment, a persistent achievement gap between black and white students, and a failure to meet federal academic standards for five years.

"We had to move on everything at once, because we weren't doing any of it," said Mark Roosevelt, a former Massachusetts state legislator who came to the district in 2005, two years after graduating from the **Broad Superintendents Academy**, a training program for urban school leaders. "Doing it a piece at a time would have been very slow, and not very effective."

A committee of principals has devised an evaluation system based on seven standards believed to be characteristic of good school leadership. This school year, Pittsburgh principals will be evaluated for the first time according to how well they meet those characteristics. They can receive up to \$12,000 in bonuses for meeting the standards and improving their students' test scores.

A newly flattened central-office structure encourages midlevel supervisors to get out of the office and spend most of the week walking school halls and sitting in classrooms alongside the principals as a part of the evaluation process.

An emerging leadership program, modeled after a medical residency, has plunged seven educators into the world of the principalship by placing them next to successful school leaders. The Pittsburgh Emerging Leadership Academy

“residents” are also given community mentors to help teach them how to reach for help outside the school building. District officials hope that at the end of the program, which began in November, the graduates will have the qualities needed to bring success to some of Pittsburgh’s neediest schools.

And, to keep all the initiatives on track, several outside organizations, including the Institute for Learning at the University of Pittsburgh and a private educational coaching firm, have been brought in to work closely with principals and central-office staff members. Everyone, from the superintendent to individual principals, gets coaching.

The aggressive array of changes all fit together under the umbrella of what the district calls the Pittsburgh Urban Leadership System for Excellence, or PULSE. Grants from the federal government and the Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation are providing the bulk of the funding for the initiatives. (The Broad Foundation also provides grant support to *Education Week*.)

The PULSE project was launched in April 2007, with the creation of the principal-evaluation standards. The central-office restructuring and emerging-leadership academy followed later that year. It’s too soon to see the full effects of all the work, administrators say, but they believe they’re on the right track.

Pittsburgh is trying to find the right “levers” to pull to affect student performance, said Judy Johnston, a fellow at the Institute for Learning, who is working extensively with the district on its professional-development programs. The institute works with several other districts, she said, and many share a similar sense of urgency.

“You’ve got to shake up what needs to be shaken,” said Ms. Johnston, a former high school principal in Pittsburgh.

What was also clear, said district leaders, is that



MARK ROOSEVELT Superintendent

Architect of school reform agenda that includes the Pittsburgh Urban Leadership System for Excellence, or PULSE



LINDA LANE Deputy Superintendent

Deputy superintendent for instruction, assessment, and accountability

- Oversees executive coaching program
- Managed creation and design of new principal evaluation tool and pay-for-performance plan



BARBARA RUDIAK Executive Director

- Executive director of K-5 schools
- Evaluates principals at 18 schools using new

all the changes needed to be knitted together in a tight web. A pay-for-performance plan couldn't work if principals were evaluated on old standards that tended to reward longevity rather than student performance. The emerging-leadership program, too, had to train people for success under a new system of principal evaluation. A clogged central-office staff that met with school principals only a few times a year could not be expected to guide principals and evaluate them fairly. Professional development had to be tightly tied to the standards that principals were expected to embrace. And everyone needed to be focused on the same goals.

"You have to make sure you're not trying to push and coach and cajole people into leadership principles that you yourself don't abide by," said Linda S. Lane, the deputy superintendent for instruction, assessment, and accountability.

The district started with the development of new standards for principals. As has been routine in this process, Pittsburgh reached outside the district for guidance. The foundation of its principal-evaluation standards was developed more than 10 years ago by a policy group organized by the Council of Chief State School Officers. The Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium outlined six standards for school leaders, covering everything from promoting a "vision" and "culture" of learning to fostering relationships with the broader community. Pittsburgh added a seventh, focusing on school leadership.

For four days in April of last year, committees of principals then worked on criteria that principals could show to prove that they were accomplished in each of the seven standards. For example, under one standard, "the culture of teaching and learning," principals can demonstrate their proficiency by visiting classrooms at least three times a week, providing effective professional-

evaluation system



JERRI LIPPERT Executive Director

- Executive director of curriculum, instruction, and professional development
- Oversees the Pittsburgh Emerging Leadership Academy (PELA), a principal-training program



RODNEY NECCIAI Principal

- Principal of Pittsburgh Phillips K-5
- Evaluated by Ms. Rudiak



WAYNE WALTERS Principal

- Principal of Pittsburgh Frick 6-8
- Serves as a mentor for Ms. Allen

development opportunities to teachers, and analyzing student-achievement data with teachers to improve instruction.

Paula M. Bevan, formerly an executive with the Princeton, N.J.-based Educational Testing Service and now a private consultant, helped guide district leaders in the standards process. Allowing principals a say in the way they would be evaluated has helped “reduce, not eliminate, push-back,” Ms. Bevan said. Still, the new standards are rigorous enough that some principals may not meet them. Others may choose to retire, she said.



TAMARA ALLEN Principal Trainee

- PELA resident at Pittsburgh Frick 6-8
- Former mathematics coach

—Photographs by Jason Cohn for *Education Week*

After developing the standards for principals, the district restructured its central office, allowing “executive directors”—midlevel administrators who supervise principals at groups of schools—time to be at schools more often.

Barbara A. Rudiak, an executive director who oversees principals at 18 elementary schools, said that her previous visits to schools, without the guidance of the standards, were superficial. Now, the former Pittsburgh elementary school principal tries to visit each school once a month, using one of the standards as guidance for discussion.

The standards “changed my visits, because it framed my visits,” said Ms. Rudiak. “We’re still in our first year, and we’re working through it. The questions help make the answers clear.”

Rodney Necciai, the principal of Pittsburgh Phillips K-5, a neighborhood school that Ms. Rudiak oversees on the city’s south side, said the new guidelines have helped raise his level of awareness of good practice. “This forces you to be more actively reflecting. You’re really thinking about things on a deeper level,” he said.

The standards are also part of the pay-for-performance option that is replacing annual raises for the principals this school year. Principals will be evaluated on students’ test scores and could receive bonuses of up to \$10,000. Another \$2,000 could be earned for meeting the evaluation standards. A federal Teacher Incentive Fund grant for \$7.4 million is paying for the bonuses, as well as professional development and leadership support for the program.

Ms. Lane, the deputy superintendent, said the district tried to make the program fair, and free of perverse incentives that might prompt principals to focus on children “on the bubble,” as opposed to very high-scoring or very low-scoring students.

“Whatever child in that school that moves [up]—that matters,” Ms. Lane said. And the days of evaluating school leaders as merely satisfactory or unsatisfactory are ending, she said. “If the goal is to get better every single year, we have to be honest with ourselves about what’s working, what’s not working,” she said. “You have to be engaged in this continuing cycle of

improvement.”

Another part of PULSE is the Pittsburgh Emerging Leadership Academy, financed by a \$1.9 million grant from the Los Angeles-based Broad Foundation. The plan is for the academy to be a yearlong residency for aspiring principals, but because of the funding calendar, this year’s set of residents started late last November, instead of over the summer as future groups will do.

Like principals, they’re also being trained according to the new standards. The demands of the program are intentional, said Jerri Lippert, the district’s executive director for curriculum, instruction, and professional development. The academy graduates have to know what good instruction and good school management look like, so that they can bring those qualities to schools that may be struggling.

Tamara Allen, a former math-curriculum coach placed with Wayne Walters at the 700-student Pittsburgh Frick 6-8, is one of those principals-in-training.

Mr. Walters said he sees himself serving as “a guide, a resource, and a piece of reality” to Ms. Allen. She said that he’s “truthful and honest—even when it hurts.” But the program has helped her learn the skills good school leaders need.

“Now, I’m truly seeing the principal as an instructional leader. You have to model those expectations,” Ms. Allen said.

The underpinning of all the PULSE work is coaching. Coaches work with the executive directors, to make sure their visits to schools are meaningful. Coaches work with top-level administrators, to ensure they keep their focus on schools and not the central bureaucracy. Coaches work with the mentor principals in the emerging-leadership academy, so that they are effective in sharing their skills with the principals-in-training.

That part of Pittsburgh’s program is distinctive, said Jan Leight, a senior executive with Focus on Results, a school improvement consulting firm with offices in Boston and Huntington Beach, Calif. Ms. Leight and other Focus on Results executives visit the district monthly to work with district staff members and school-level administrators.

“The concept of executive coaching for all of their leaders is not something that most districts are doing,” Ms. Leight said. “They’re very willing in Pittsburgh to seek outside support.”

The goal, however, is to build internal capacity to maintain the changes. “We know they don’t want to be reliant on outside help indefinitely,” Ms. Leight said.

James P. Spillane, a professor of education and social policy at Northwestern University, in Evanston, Ill., and an expert in school organization and reform, observed that the programs in Pittsburgh reflect the strong interest in school leadership evident nationwide. But, he cautioned, it’s possible that focus could be too narrow.

“The principal is the key player, but principals do not go it alone,” said Mr. Spillane, who has not worked with Pittsburgh on its efforts. “This is a big issue in the field: Are we really

tapping into the wealth of leadership potential we have in schools?" Curriculum specialists and lead teachers are among the leaders who contribute to school success, he noted.

John Tarka, the president of the Pittsburgh Federation of Teachers, said many of the initiatives have been started without teachers' input. However, he said, his organization, which represents 2,700 teachers, supports strengthening school leadership. A committee of members has already met with district officials to talk about the principals that union members believe are good, and the ones that are ineffective. The city's principals are not unionized.

Mr. Roosevelt said future plans may include a new way of measuring teacher performance. But for now, the focus will remain squarely on principals.

"Developing a school leader who is an effective instructional leader," the superintendent said, "needs to be at the center of any reform effort."

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