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Aspiring Administrators Program: 
An Urban University and Urban School District Partner 
to Recruit School Leaders

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Abstract
The accountability pressures felt today by school administrators make the recruitment of candidates for urban university leadership preparation programs and for urban school district leadership positions even more complex. In order to help address these pressures, a partnership between a large urban school district and an urban university was formed in order to bring more aspiring administrators into the pipeline for the school district. The district found that there was a real need to grow their own school leaders, and they saw the collaboration as a way to raise capacity for the development of school leaders. 
This paper will describe the program; offer a short, quick review of the literature in this area; and then examine data from the first three years of the program.

Introduction
The accountability pressures felt today by school administrators make the recruitment of candidates for urban university leadership preparation programs and for urban school district leadership positions ever more complex. According to a study by Winter and Morgenthal (2002),

If a low achieving school is trying to recruit a principal, the school’s low achievement is likely to impede the recruitment effort. High achieving schools should be better able to attract candidates for principal vacancies. 
From a practical perspective district recruitment officials will have to
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invest more time and resources to recruit principals to a low-performing school (p. 334).

Most candidates for administrator preparation programs self-select, leaving both the school district and the university preparation program working with people who may or may not become successful school leaders. This paper describes a partnership developed between an urban school district and an urban university’s department of educational leadership to improve the recruitment and selection of candidates going into the preparation program. The partnership hopes to identify, mentor, and prepare stronger candidates for school leadership positions in the school district.

Both parts of the university-school district partnership were looking to make gains by putting their resources together. The school district found that many outside administrator candidates either were not successful or they did not stay in the district. It became essential for the school district to grow its own administrators. The urban university wanted a stronger, better relationship with the urban public school district, and the educational leadership program wanted to increase the number of strong candidates. The university and the school district needed each other.

The Aspiring Administrators Program (AAP) is an attempt to recruit teachers interested in school leadership directly from the ranks of the urban school district. The university preparation program (for master’s and licensure) would ensure that a number of positions would be available for such candidates each year in the licensure/master's program.

The initial connections were made by a university faculty member and an assistant superintendent of the school district. Both understood that they could help each other, and discussions moved to include the superintendent. The idea progressed to that of creating a comprehensive, cohesive leadership development program as a partnership with the University of Cincinnati and the Cincinnati Public Schools. Recruitment and selection of candidates for school leadership was the initial piece, and this included the Aspiring Administrators Program.

The AAP, after year one, became a part of a stronger, better connected leadership development partnership between the university and the school district, and was funded with a Wallace Foundation grant from the Ohio Department of Education (ODE). This complete school leadership partnership for administrator recruitment, selection, licensure, induction, and development based on career stages, was now more cohesive and coherent between the two parties involved.

The following details the content of the Aspiring Administrator Program, the findings after three years of the partnership’s recruiting and selection process, and implications for the future.
It is important for urban universities and urban school districts to work together for school reform, and often that reform starts with the school leaders. Many studies have examined the strengths of university-school district partnerships; the literature on recruitment of administrators is, however, very limited.

Pounder and Crow (2005) recommend establishing a partnership between administrative preparation programs and K–12 personnel to tighten links between skill and knowledge development. MacDonald and Shirley (2006) tell us that “partnership work is demanding. There is, rather, a domain of practice…that exists worlds apart from the university classroom or the academic conference” (p. 138). Garza, Barnett, Merchant, Shoho, and Smith (2006) point out three main ideas that must be present for successful university-school district partnerships: first, organizational support structures; second, support from top leaders in both organizations; and third, the development of trust between the organizations.

Cunningham and Hardman (1999) describe the relationship between Kanawha County Schools and Marshall University’s Graduate College. From money to time, these two education organizations are able to share resources including staff. The main difficulty in the relationship is in maintaining the clarity of purpose and focus.

Laing and Bradshaw (2003) report that “the use of cohorts within educational leadership preparation programs appeared to have had a positive effect on university students throughout the United States” (p. 270). They suggest that further research can help us ensure that graduates of educational leadership programs become leaders who promote the success of all students.

Barnett, Aagaard, and Stanley (2003) discuss the Professors program initiated at Morehead University in Kentucky. The Kentucky Education Reform Act helped create a P–16 movement in which professors enter schools to work with educators in order to better meet the professional development needs in schools. “The ivory tower image so often attributed to university faculty has been changed” (Barnett, Aagaard, & Stanley, 2003, p. 387). University professors gained working knowledge of the issues faced by public school educators, and the public school educators gained increased access to research and best practices.

In Madison, Wis., the University of Wisconsin-Madison combines university faculty and retired principals to conduct the Grow Our Own Principals program, which has had success with graduates becoming principals in the district (Peterson & Kelley, 2003). “Philadelphia’s Leadership in Education Apprentice Design Program prepares teachers who have shown leadership potential to be principals” (Groff, 2003, p. 33).

Partnerships between school districts and the university must be nurtured and developed to keep the pipeline filled with viable candidates.
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Administrators in the field occasionally will encourage talented teacher-leaders to consider school administration as their next career step, and some are very willing to mentor worthy candidates once they are admitted to preparation programs. Such positive advocacy depends on their past experiences with programs, as well as ongoing, regular, and productive contacts with university faculty (Milstein & Krueger, 1997, p.103).

Murphy (1999) continues the discussion by reporting that “a number of programs have entered into collaborative arrangements with school districts that help defray the costs of schooling for students (p.177). Garza, Barnett, Merchant, Shohe, and Smith (2006) study a university partnership between San Antonio Public Schools and the University of Texas at San Antonio, while Simmons, Preis, Grogan, Walls, Amthews, Smith-Anderson, and Jackson (2006) look at a collaborative program between the St. Louis Public Schools and the University of Missouri-Columbia.

There are very few quantitative studies on the results of some of the new aggressive recruiting efforts by university programs. According to Winter and Morgenthal (2002) “Finally, principal recruitment is also a concern for education researchers because despite the existence of empirical studies about teacher recruitment, the education literature is virtually devoid of empirical research about administrator recruitment (p. 321). “Nationally, principal recruitment is one of the most critical issues facing public schools today” (Winter & Morgenthal, 2002, p. 333).

University leadership programs have lacked recruitment programs in the past. The AACTE notes in 1988 that “The lack of sound recruitment programs may be the most serious problem of all” (p.12). The American Association of School Administrators states in 1960, “It seems completely fair to say that the procedures generally employed by colleges and universities are admission rather than selection procedures” (p.83). A study in 1990 finds that enrollment pressures trump selective recruitment: “For too many administrator preparation programs, anybody is better than nobody” (Jacobson, 1990, p. 35). Other studies find that most programs lack rigor, are self-selected, and few have leader recruitment programs (Murphy, 1992; Murphy & Forsyth, 1999).

Shakeshaft (1999) reports that there is little research illustrating how school administrator recruitment should be done in order to get the best candidates. “Although we say we want folks who think out of the box, we have no current assessments for determining which of the students who apply are creative, intelligent, confluent, and out of the box in addition to having skills and abilities more traditionally associated with effective leadership” (p. 241). It is necessary to tap practitioners in the field, in hopes that they will search for their next assistant or future replacement, identifying good possible candidates for the procreation programs. “Recruitment should include ongoing liaisons with practitioners” (Milstein & Kreuger, 1997, p. 103).

Pounder and Crow (2005) discuss tapping the talent from the teaching ranks by identifying and encouraging teachers to enter leadership programs. Harris (2001)
reports that Nevada’s Clark County School District (Las Vegas) encourages principals to nominate teachers for administrative training. Florida Miami-Dade County Public Schools created a “grow your own” program: a comprehensive two-year training to prepare teachers to be assistant principals (Harris, 2001). Peterson and Kelly (2001) suggest that a large pool of candidates with strong skills must be identified and prepared in order to meet the unique needs of districts.

Peebles (2000) and others write of the job today being much more complex, that it truly involves solid leadership and not just management skills. According to Peebles (2000): “…many teachers no longer aspire to be principals. From their classrooms they are daunted by the responsibilities thrust upon principals who are required to work longer hours and weeks and whose increased responsibilities and diminution of authority are often rewarded with minimum financial compensation” (p. 191).

The Wallace Foundation published a policy brief that describes the current labor market for principals. “These three reports all lead to one conclusion. It’s time to move beyond the pipeline, away from policies aimed solely at increasing the number of certified candidates, and focus more attention and resources on reforming policies and practices” (Mitgang, 2003, p. 11). The brief suggests adjusting incentives and working conditions to attract candidates, aligning recruitment and hiring practices with elevated principal performance expectations, and redefining the principal’s job to allow concentration on student learning above other demands.

Pounder and Crow (2005) also recommend redesigning principals’ roles. Fink and Brayman (2006) purport that redesigning the reform framework will allow principals to lead well and to lead with others. If school reform is essential, if school reform requires great leaders, and if there appears to be a shortage of those leaders, then programs of educational leadership must become active in their search for the best candidates. The children of America will depend on those school leaders.

Curriculum Content of the Program

University faculty and practitioner instructors of the Administrator Development Academy (ADA) came together in the summer and fall of 2002 to begin planning the first iteration of the program for aspiring administrators in the Cincinnati Public Schools (CPS) system. Before deciding what specific activities to include, we recognized several things collectively.

Whatever the components of this program, each should be parallel with our current Administrator Development Academy (ADA) activities and engagements.

1. Faculty involved in the Aspiring Administrators Program (AAP) would intentionally and consistently model the behaviors, beliefs, and practices of the six-week ADA program.
As in the ADA, we would adhere to the tenets of adult learning theory and steer away from didactic methods with the exception of the discussion of the admissions process for the Educational Leadership Program at the University of Cincinnati.

As in the ADA, we would call attention to the broader thinking ADA participants are asked to engage in, thinking not only about the products of activities but also the process and the potential applications of the activities and exercises in their own work situations: product, process, and application.

As the delivery date drew closer, we decided on a series of exercises that would meet the above criteria and actively engage participants while giving them a taste of administrative tasks with the hope of stimulating serious reflection on administrative work and thinking. In brief, this included sessions for three consecutive Mondays of two hours each in January.

Session One
To open the first session, six ADA instructors and two CPS Central Office administrators (the assistant superintendent and the director of schools) were on hand. All introduced themselves and spoke briefly about their work experience. All ADA instructors are practicing school administrators, several from CPS. After introductions we engaged the cohort in a warm-up exercise, one we use daily in the six-week ADA program.

After all have shared, a faculty member explains the intention of the warm-up exercise, namely, a non-threatening way for a large or small group of individuals to get to know one another better, no matter how well acquainted they may be. Depending on the make-up of the group, warm ups are fun, easy, and effective in bringing a group closer together in preparation for whatever work they will be doing together. Questions from the cohort are encouraged before we move on to the next activity.

For the first major engagement of the AAP, we decided to ask the cohort to work together to identify, in their collective view, the “Characteristics of a Good Leader.” The cohort was divided into groups of six (approximately). Next, instructors explained the process of brainstorming and distributed the tools the groups would need: markers, chart paper, and masking tape. We have learned in the ADA that while most educators know what brainstorming is, when put into practice, most do not follow the simple rules of the process. After describing the process to the cohort, each group is asked to send one representative to meet with the instructor to receive special instructions. These representatives are charged with being gatekeepers during the brainstorming process including reminding all members of the group to abide by the rules of brainstorming.
blue sky, all input accepted, no discussion, no criticism, and accurate non-interpretive recording. The gatekeepers then return to the group and the process begins. ADA instructors circulate, monitoring the process and offering input as requested.

When the process is complete, groups are asked to prioritize their list of characteristics from most important to least. Next, one or two instructors act as recorders, using flipcharts and markers to collect and combine the list of characteristics for the cohort.

The next exercise for the evening begins with a leadership survey. Participants complete the survey and then divide themselves according to the results of the survey. Some discussion on skewed results is typical; faculty explains that this is just an exercise and not an exacting assessment and definition of any individual’s leadership style.

To close the evening’s activities participants are asked for reflections on the interactions in which they participated. Before opening the forum for reflections, a faculty member explains the process of reflection as practiced in the ADA. All reflections offered by participants stand alone. Like placing a log on a fire around which all are seated for warmth and reflection, the offering speaks for itself and must go unmolested by the rest of the cohort. Reflections include no responses (to other reflections), no discussion, no personal grievances, no “piggy-backing,” only stand-alone observations from individuals, thus preserving the openness and evenness of the activity as safe haven for group growth. Participants are reminded that they may want to pursue topics that come up during reflections with the individuals that offered them, but only afterward. Finally, participants are asked to write a brief statement of their personal philosophy of educational leadership to bring to the next week’s meeting.

The first night’s engagements are intended to draw participants into thinking about school leadership in terms of honest expectations for position leadership and then what each personally may bring to that set of expectations. At the same time, they get a taste of working with others with similar interests to address these issues. This is reflective of the ADA approach of layering experiences so that they fold into one another in a recursive manner.

Session Two
The second week’s activities begin following the formula: a warm up, review of the previous week’s activities, and preview of the evening’s activities. The first (and sometimes only) activity is an introduction by a university faculty member of the admissions process for the Educational Leadership Program at the University of Cincinnati. For many prospective applicants this is a daunting task, requiring letters of recommendation, interviews, GRE testing, and other paperwork, substantially beyond what most traditional programs require.
Although participants in this group may self-select themselves into the Aspiring Administrators Program, many have been recommended/referred by ADA graduates now working as administrators in the Cincinnati Public Schools. The ADA network now reaches across our entire tri-state region. With hundreds of ADA graduates, many in a multitude of administrative positions, the network of graduates looking to employ other ADA graduates is extensive, touching almost every school district in the greater Cincinnati area.

Along with an explanation of the admissions process, the faculty member describes the ADA experience since it is the centerpiece of the program and a unique educational experience. In the syllabus for the academy the ADA is described as

…not a set of courses. It cannot be duplicated or made up in any way…everyone is relying on each person to do his/her part, and no one can survive by “doing one’s own thing.” The Academy is whole and interconnected. Students learn and refine skills and ideas the last day that were learned the first day. Every part of the Academy experience folds into and grows within every other part. The Academy is a learning community. It models the school of the future as a center of learning in an environment of changing demographics and accountability. It also becomes the basis of a network of professionals designed to provide ongoing support as these future leaders face the social, political, economic, and legal changes that affect public education. The Academy is a journey of personal learning and growth. Reflection and feedback make learning conscious. Thus, leadership for learning is a continuous action-and-reflection experience.

The academy runs six weeks, full time, all day, and many ADA graduates call it the best educational experience they’ve ever had.

Participants year-to-year have a host of questions for the faculty member as he or she explains the process for admission to the Educational Leadership Program. The ADA is the gateway experience for those entering the Educational Leadership Program to earn a master’s degree and Ohio, Kentucky, or Indiana state administration certification. The Aspiring Administrators Program is positioned in early January to plug directly into this application process. Participants receive continuing education credit for each Aspiring Administrators session with an eye toward discerning whether administrative work is for them, given their personal experience and the experiences and knowledge they are gaining through this program. Participants receive the names, phone numbers, and e-mail addresses of the professors in the Educational Leadership Program who will be best able to help them with the application process. All questions and discussion on the ADA
and admission to the Educational Leadership Program are entertained before moving on to the next activity for the evening.

The next activity is another simulation based on work accomplished in the preceding session. The small groups are given their task. Each small group plays the role of the selection committee for their school, charged with choosing a new principal. Using the list of characteristics of a good leader and taking into account their own philosophy of school leadership (which they were asked to write for this week’s work), each group must formulate the questions they want to ask candidates in the final interview before choosing one for the job. Next, groups are asked to prepare to conduct the interview and to choose one person from their group to send to another group to be interviewed.

Once interviews are complete, all are asked to offer reflections on the experience of fashioning questions, using the list of characteristics, conducting the interview, and being interviewed. This is always a high-energy experience with rich reflections on the products and outcomes, the experience of being interviewed, the process of hiring a new principal, and prospect of facing these experiences as a newly certified, prospective school leader looking for that first job. Before calling it a night, reflections are entertained and the final sessions are previewed.

**Session Three**

The third week’s activities begin as the others have with a warm up, a review of the previous week’s activities, and a preview of the evening’s activities. The first activity is a communications activity related to paraphrasing and reframing language. These simple exercises are conducted to illustrate the vital importance of the art and act of listening for successful school leadership. “Being a good listener” is always represented in the list of characteristics of a good leader generated by the cohort.

We point out that educators receive little or no training in the processes of communication and problem solving in their preparation as educators. As educators we spend almost all our working hours in face-to-face communications with our clients and colleagues and are expected to identify and solve problems, from informal social issues to complex professional considerations, all on the fly and beginning with the first day on the job. Faculty take pains to communicate that the ADA experience begins and ends with these conditions and considerations in mind.

The second activity of the night is a panel of four to six practicing administrators from the Cincinnati Public Schools. These are typically ADA and UC graduates working in various positions throughout the CPS. Panelists briefly introduce themselves and talk about their work and preparation experience before questions are invited from the cohort. The cohort members ask whatever they like of the panelists, regarding their work as principals.
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The panelists have come directly from their work and are still dressed as professionals. They are most often at varying levels of experience as educators and administrators, and we always make sure that there are some who are in their first or second year as administrators, so they are living the experiences that members of the cohort are likely most curious about. How does it feel to be a new administrator? What’s the hardest part? How much time do you put into the job? What’s the most rewarding thing? What do you like best? How do you manage problems — student misbehavior, unhappy parents, and disgruntled staff? Do you think the ADA experience helped you? What are your aspirations for the future?

This partnership proceeds with the hope that an urban university program joined with an urban school district may begin to find new ways to help grow well-prepared candidates for the challenging tasks of school leadership. Working collaboratively we can move toward helping schools improve continuously under capable leadership.

Findings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total in Program</th>
<th>Into Preparation Program</th>
<th>Graduated/Licensed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>9 (26% of total)</td>
<td>7 (78% from program)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(23% male, 77% female)</td>
<td>(57% African American)</td>
<td>(43% Caucasian)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(57% African American)</td>
<td>(89% African American)</td>
<td>(11% Caucasian)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0% Hispanic, Asian)</td>
<td>(0% Hispanic, Asian)</td>
<td>(0% Hispanic, Asian)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>7 (26% of total)</td>
<td>6 (86% from program)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(29% male, 71% female)</td>
<td>(59% African American)</td>
<td>(41% Caucasian)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(59% African American)</td>
<td>(57% African American)</td>
<td>(43% Caucasian)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0% Hispanic, Asian)</td>
<td>(0% Hispanic, Asian)</td>
<td>(0% Hispanic, Asian)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>6 (17% of total)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(34% male, 66% female)</td>
<td>(54% African American)</td>
<td>(46% Caucasian)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(54% African American)</td>
<td>(50% African American)</td>
<td>(50% Caucasian)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(0% Hispanic, Asian)</td>
<td>(0% Hispanic, Asian)</td>
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</tr>
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</table>

One of the goals of the program was to actively recruit African American leaders, and African American males, in particular. It was felt that these two groups must be represented in order to move forward in finding and selecting strong candidates that were representative of the community and the student body of the urban school district. The attempt to recruit male students and students of color appears to be successful, when
looking at the numbers going into the Aspiring Administrators Program. Male students ranged from 23 to 34 percent of the cohort in the three years of the program. The total number of African American candidates for the three years ranged from 54 to 59 percent.

The preparation program has a selection criteria matrix that includes GRE scores, three current letters of recommendations, goal statement, writing sample, written solution to a school situation, and an interview with faculty and practitioners. No single factor of the matrix is determinative. The candidates appear to be strong candidates as a high percentage of those admitted into the university preparation program did complete the program and obtain a master's degree plus licensure. Licensure includes passing a state competency test. The rate of graduation/licensure was 78 (7/9) percent in the first year and 86 (6/7) percent in the second year. This high completion rate may also attest to the support of the faculty at the university and of the candidates' mentors and principals. It is too soon in 2006 to know, as those students have just started the university preparation program in August 2006.

As of summer 2006, 4 of the 13 graduates that started in the Aspiring Administrators Program have been placed in administrative positions (4/13 = 31 percent) and two more are now in lead teacher positions [(4+2)/13 = 46 percent]. There are a number of openings for administrators as assistant principals in the Cincinnati Public Schools, and they will be filled shortly. Our numbers may change as a result of any new hiring.

Implications for the Future
Both the University of Cincinnati and the Cincinnati Public Schools have gained from this partnership, resulting in more and better qualified students for educational leadership classes and more candidates for administrative positions for the urban school district. Those who are selected into the preparation program do quite well regarding program completion. The university and the school district are watching to see if this is an indicator of better recruitment and selection.

The difference seems to be in recruitment and selection, as many students that are “somewhat interested” either do not make the cut in the application and selection process, or they decide after the Administrator Development Academy, an intense six-week introductory experience, that they do not want to be a school leader. This does away with self-selection, which is often the way students find their way into principal preparation programs. The introductory experience of the academy also gives them a strong sense of the job of the principal in a school, and gives the university instructors a chance to watch candidates in action. Sometimes candidates are then advised that this program is not a good fit for them. Again, the bar is raised in the selection of candidates for school leadership.

It may be too early to know the extent of the impact on the urban school district, as only 4 of the 13 program completers have been placed in administrative positions with
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the district. But the results are encouraging regarding the number of minority candidates that are coming into the district’s administrative pipeline and the number of minority male candidates entering as well.

It is important that urban school districts and universities develop partnerships to recruit, select, and prepare good school leaders. Focused, rigorous recruitment efforts, like the Aspiring Administrator Program, can identify and encourage local urban educators with leadership talent to develop it and give back to the district in new ways. Now, more than ever, it is important for urban districts to “grow their own” school leaders.

References
Mitgang, L. (2003). Beyond the pipeline: Getting the principals we need, where they are needed most. (Policy Brief) New York: Wallace Foundation.


