# Growing Your Own Leadership Pipeline: The Case of an Urban School Leadership Residency

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# Introduction

Rather than hiring from a pool of school principal candidates prepared by local universities, school districts may choose to play a more hands-on role in preparing their own future principals (Corcoran, Schwartz, & Weinstein, 2012; Gates, Baird, Doss, et al., 2019; Gates, Baird, Master, & Chavez-Herrerias, 2019; Korach & Cosner, 2017). Districts may be especially likely to eschew candidates from traditional preparation routes if they face urgent pressure to change business as usual (including accountability pressure to raise student achievement), or if they face a local labor market shortage of licensed principals who have the skills their schools require (Lindsay, 2008; Scott, 2018; Versland, 2013). This case study focuses on a small city that found itself in the former category. Intent on reversing a history of low student achievement via improved instructional leadership and school climate, the city adopted a grow-your-own-leader partnership that would prepare current teachers and junior administrators for future positions as school principals. It did this through a residency model in which educators were employed full-time by public schools in the city, while also participating in intensive professional development aimed at preparing them to lead school improvement. Over a four-year period, the partnership prepared 42 residents, who described the program’s professional development workshops and leadership coaching as high-quality, equipping them to coach teachers and advocate equitable policies in their schools. But because the city faced declining student enrollments and a shrinking economy, these residents developed these skills in a context that offered few paid school leadership roles at either the principal or junior administrative levels. Meanwhile, residents found it difficult to leverage their newfound leadership skills when they were working in non-principal positions, and especially in unofficial teacher leadership positions. The case study emphasizes the need for a labor market analysis before undertaking a grow-your-own program. It also suggests that the success of a grow-your-own model may depend on district-wide endorsement of a distributed approach to leadership.

# The Promise of Distributed Leadership

For school systems, building a pipeline of future school leaders means equipping promising educators with a broad array of leadership skills. Surveying the leadership literature across many fields, Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, and Wahlstrom (2004) identified the “basic core of successful leadership practices” as setting directions, developing people, and redesigning the organization. These are distinct from the core tasks of teaching, which involve the scaffolding of academic content to facilitate student learning (Ball & Forzani, 2009). As such, school systems wishing to cultivate leadership potential among teachers must consider how to gradually prepare them. Opportunities for on-the-job learning may play an important role.

The concept of distributed leadership provides a framework for conceptualizing an on-the-job learning approach. Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond (2001) define distributed leadership as being “stretched over the work of a number of individuals” and grounded in “the interaction of multiple leaders” (p. 20). Leithwood and Jantzi (2000) found a positive association between the distribution of leadership tasks across teaching staff and student engagement, while Harris and Muijs (2002) detected a positive relationship between teachers’ involvement in leadership activities and students’ motivation and confidence.

More recent studies have sought to examine the conditions that facilitate leadership distribution within schools. In a study of eight schools in a large Canadian district, Leithwood, Mascall, Strauss, Sacks, Memon, & Yashkina (2007) interviewed informal teacher leaders and their principals and teaching peers to understand factors that inhibited and supported distributed leadership. They found that the distribution of leadership responsibilities worked best when principals, and even district office leaders, created structured opportunities for teachers and other staff to take on responsibility for key initiatives. It also depended on teachers having the skills to implement the principals’ leadership vision.

The sharing of leadership tasks may, in turn, improve school effectiveness if it extends the reach of formal leaders by expanding teachers’ access to instructional support (Akiba & Liang, 2016; Goddard, Goddard, & Tschannen-Moran, 2007; Kraft, Blazar, & Hogan, 2018; Moolenaar, Sleegers, & Daly, 2012; Ronfeldt, Farmer, McQueen, & Grissom, 2015). In addition, the distribution of leadership responsibilities may encourage employee retention among teachers seeking professional advancement (Firestone & Pennell, 1993; Grissom, 2011). This is important because the path from administrative licensure to the principalship is often lengthy and uncertain. Tracking Texas teachers from administrative licensure forward, Davis, Gooden, & Bowers (2017) found that only 20% became principals within six years, and that fewer than half became principals within the sixteen years observed in the data. Bastian and Henry (2015) found an average time of 5.12 years between licensure and the principalship among North Carolina educators who did eventually become principals. Grissom, Mitani, and Woo (2018) tracked graduates from twelve principal preparation programs in Tennessee, finding that between 28% and 52% were hired as assistant principals within five years, and that only 6% to 17% were hired as principals within five years. How well schools are capitalizing on the leadership training of these educators is not clear in the literature, and it is an issue we consider in the context of this case study.

# Focus of the Chapter

The current chapter focuses on Pathways to Leadership in Urban Schools (PLUS), a program launched by TNTP (formerly The New Teacher Project) for recruiting and training promising school leaders through in-service residencies. Since its inception in 2014, the program has operated partnerships with several cities across the U.S. Each partnership has featured its own local recruitment process, prioritizing skilled educators familiar with local schools and their needs.

Part of a larger evaluation study described in Steele, Steiner, and Hamilton (2018), this chapter describes the four-year implementation of one PLUS program in a small U.S. city. We focus here on the experiences and career trajectories of residents in the program. We first describe the strengths and challenges of the PLUS program as reported by residents and supervisory stakeholders. We then describe and discuss how residents’ career trajectories developed over time. We conclude with recommendations for other grow-your-own programs.

# The PLUS Program and its Context

Our analysis focuses on implementation of the PLUS program over a four-year period in a small U.S. city, whose schools faced low achievement and a shrinking enrollment base. The PLUS partnership was part of the city’s strategy to create a skilled pipeline of school leaders who had taught in the city and who expressed a long-term commitment to the community.

Due to a decline in the city’s manufacturing base, its population size had shrunk by nearly half, to fewer than 100,000 people, since the 1950s. Between 2003 and 2016, the average percentage of students qualifying for free and reduced-price lunches in the city’s public schools was about 90%, as compared to 36% for the remainder of the state. Students served by the district were mostly African American or Hispanic, at 44% and 54% of enrollments, respectively, in 2017-18. Between 2003 and 2016, schools’ academic proficiency on state accountability tests lagged the rest of the state by 18 to 30 percentage points.

In 2013, the city partnered with TNTP on a plan to recruit and train promising local educators to become licensed as school principals. The plan received five years of funding from a U.S. Department of Education School Leadership Program grant, allowing the program to launch in the summer of 2014.

## Program Components and Theory of Action

The PLUS program's theory of action is formalized in the logic model in Figure 1. It shows the key *inputs* of strategic recruitment, intensive coaching and professional development, and on-the-job training leading to transformations in school *processes* (improved student support and intensified instructional coaching), which were, in turn, expected to lead to improved *outcomes* in the form of student behavior, attendance, graduation rates, and achievement.

<Insert Figure 1 about here>

For each cohort, the program began with the summer institute. The institute ran for five weeks and included group work, simulations, and role-plays, focused on topics such as observing and evaluating teachers, providing "bite-sized,” actionable feedback to teachers, and "managing up" to work effectively with supervisors.

During their first residency year, residents also met in person about every two weeks with leadership coaches. The coaches helped residents address specific challenges such as time management, obtaining supervisors’ and teachers' support for instructional coaching, and balancing residency duties with other job responsibilities. Residents also participated in monthly, daylong professional development workshops. These provided hands-on practice and role-plays on topics such as instructional coaching of teachers, implementing new state academic standards, and using data to make decisions.

Altogether, the program provided at least 300 hours of professional development to each resident during the first residency year. During the second residency year, the program provided at least 70 hours of support in the form of monthly professional development workshops and periodic coaching.

## Residency Roles

Residents were initially hired into one of three types of roles in the city: Lead Educator, Apprentice School Leader (ASL), and Teacher Leader. The first two categories were administrator roles, and the third was a teaching role. Lead Educator positions were limited to district-run schools (i.e., not charter schools) and were similar to assistant principalships, with duties that included instructional leadership, test coordination, and miscellaneous administrative tasks. ASL positions were specific to charter schools and were junior-level administrator positions, typically emphasizing teacher observation and instructional coaching duties.

Teacher Leader roles began in the program's second year. These were full-time classroom teaching positions in which residents were also expected to observe and coach a small caseload of fellow teachers. Definition of the Teacher Leader role varied widely among schools, with the leadership aspects of the role defined mainly by the PLUS program rather than by the district.

<Insert Table 1 about here>

Table 1 indicates the distribution of initial residency placements and first-year residency completions across program years. Because all members of the program's first entering cohort in 2014-15 already held administrative licenses, eight of nine were hired into Lead Educator roles, and one was hired as an ASL in a charter school. In subsequent years, Lead Educators constituted a smaller fraction of initial placements due to the scarcity of administrator job openings. Across the four cohorts, just over half (52%) of initial placements were into administrator roles.

## Program Selection and Advancement

In 2014, 134 individuals applied to be part of the first cohort. After several rounds of selection, including interviews and in-person role-plays, nine were selected and hired into residencies within the city, making the placement rate of initial applicants about 7%. Placement rates were reported to be similar in subsequent years. About 67% of initially placed residents were female. Approximately 57% of initially placed residents were black or African American, about 36% were white, and about 7% were Hispanic or other.

As shown in Table 1, seven of nine residents in the first cohort completed the first residency year, with similar rates in subsequent cohorts. Residents who completed the program, demonstrated proficiency in all program requirements, and did not already hold administrative licensure were able to receive the program's endorsement for a school administrator license from the state.

PLUS was developed with the idea that dynamic educators would be prepared for principal positions from which they could lead school improvement efforts. In practice, one obstacle to realizing this vision was the scarcity of principal positions—and even junior-level administrator positions—available in the district. From 2003 to 2016, the number of schools in the district declined from 33 to 21. Coupled with low turnover of school administrators, openings for principalships were scarce. As of the 2016-17 academic year, only one program resident had been hired into a principalship, and another was hired as principal of a charter school-within-a-school in 2017-18.

# Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis

To understand the experiences of PLUS residents and alumni, we conducted cross-sectional resident focus groups annually in the fall of 2014 through 2017, and longitudinal case study interviews annually in the spring of 2015 through 2018. We also spoke with a subset of mentor principals and district and CMO officials in the fall of 2017. Specifically, focus groups of about 60 minutes were held each fall for all residents in their first or second year in the program. We also invited three-to-four members of each cohort, selected for diversity of school and role placements, to be part of a *longitudinal case study subsample*, whom we interviewed annually by phone for 60 minutes from their program entry year through the spring of 2018 academic year. In the final study year, 2017-18, we also interviewed four mentor principals (three in a focus group setting), two district officials, and two central officials of a partner CMO.

We audio-recorded focus group proceedings and interviews with participants’ informed consent. Recordings were transcribed and coded by themes of interest, including prior job experience and training, experiences in the residency placement, professional goals, local context, and challenges and successes. We analyzed the transcripts using NVivo 10 qualitative data analysis software.

# Key Findings

In our discussion of findings from the qualitative data, we use the term ‘resident’ to include both current residents and program alumni except when the distinction between the two statuses at the time of data collection is relevant to the analysis.

## Strengths and Challenges of the Leadership Preparation Approach

In all four years of the study, PLUS participants reported that they valued the program, found the training to be relevant and applicable in their jobs, and believed that the training would position them for future success as school leaders. In particular, they reported finding value in the PLUS program’s job-embedded coaching, its hands-on summer institute and workshops, and the support they received from peers in the program. In the words of one resident in an administrator role, “One of the saving graces about the program is I know there are people who are like-minded, and I’m just not here alone in this district.”

Despite the sense of preparedness and camaraderie residents said they received from PLUS, they described numerous challenges. These involved imperfect alignment of program expectations with district priorities and limited support for the Teacher Leader role.

### Variation in School Support, Especially for the Teacher Leader Role

Across cohorts, residents’ experiences seemed to be shaped by how well their principals' visions aligned with the instructional leadership priorities of PLUS. Residents who reported strong alignment generally reported the highest levels of satisfaction with the program. Those who reported less alignment described greater frustration. In district-run schools, this was true for Lead Educators as well as Teacher Leaders.

Philosophical misalignment was rarely cited by residents working in charter schools, perhaps because the local charter organizations shared PLUS’s emphasis on instructional improvement. Residents working in charter schools generally reported that their teacher coaching responsibilities were a central aspect of their jobs as ASLs.

In district schools, even residents in Lead Educator roles experienced tension around their instructional leadership responsibilities. The extent to which Lead Educators were permitted to focus on teacher coaching and feedback ranged, in residents' reports, from less than 20% of their time to a large majority of their time, depending on the extent to which their principals supported and protected that work. One Lead Educator in an early cohort explained that, “We are charged with getting the job done for the city who pays us. If there are choices about foregoing my job responsibilities so I can meet PLUS responsibilities, the choice is clear to me – I choose my job.”

But it was the Teacher Leadership role that seemed to garner the widest variation in principal support, and in which principal support seemed most essential to the functioning of the role. As noted, the Teacher Leader role was created from the second program year, 2015-16, onward. It provided a leadership pipeline pathway for full-time teachers who aspired to administration but did not yet hold an administrative credential in the state. The PLUS program viewed Teacher Leaders as instructional coaches and leaders-in-training, but the extent to which their schools—and even the district—recognized and supported their instructional coaching roles varied dramatically. As a Teacher Leader noted in the second year of the study: “It’s almost as though the principals have no idea what to do with us. And that has been stated by higher-ups…They have said, ‘[The district is] still trying to figure out how to handle you.’”

Only a small percentage of Teacher Leaders reported that they received a formal release period for coaching teachers. When asked about their coaching caseloads, Teacher Leaders generally reported that they coached three to five teachers each, many of whom they had to connect with through their own initiative, and they noted that they could observe teachers only during their own planning periods. This challenge, they said, was exacerbated by union rules that precluded teachers from meeting during their lunch or planning periods to debrief observations and receive feedback. Thus, the pool of teachers coached by Teacher Leaders was restricted to only those teachers who were willing to ignore contractual time-use restrictions or meet outside of the school day.

When asked about this conflict, a district official elaborated on the challenge of the Teacher Leader model, acknowledging that:

If the Teacher Leader is on the school leadership team, and at some point the school leader asks and the Teacher Leader answers about what a teacher [is] doing wrong...It’s couched in coaching and feedback, [but] it could be detrimental to the [teacher's] evaluation.

The official said that, for this reason, “to me, the Teacher Leader role is not super high-priority.”

Numerous Teacher Leaders across cohorts said that their principals and peers viewed them simply as teachers rather than instructional leaders. As one Teacher Leader noted, “[My principal] is like, ‘Oh, don’t worry about observing, we’re not going to do that.’ And I said, ‘Oh no, I’m doing it.’” A few residents in their first program year said that they perceived their instructional leadership roles as nonexistent: “As far as knowing what I’m trying to do [as a resident], the school leadership doesn’t. Nobody knows.”

### Strategic Use of the Teacher Leader Role

Still, we heard reports that administrators in a few schools were deploying Teacher Leaders strategically as part of their instructional improvement plans. Some Teacher Leaders described being given specific directives from their principals or Lead Educators about which teachers to coach and how best to do so. One Teacher Leader, for instance, said that her principal—who was not PLUS-affiliated—helped her plan how to continue coaching teachers when district budgetary changes restricted the time she could spend outside of the classroom. And some PLUS-trained administrators also described using Teacher Leaders strategically as coaches and leaders of school-based professional development. One Lead Educator, a PLUS alumnus, described deploying the school's Teacher Leaders in a variety of ways—coordinating testing, running data meetings, conducting classroom walk-throughs, and setting goals for teachers. When asked about the experience of having multiple PLUS residents in the building, the Lead Educator said, “I love it. You understand that person has the background knowledge, and you see with same lens, so it's very efficient.”

Another Lead Educator who was a PLUS alumnus described assigning a coaching caseload to the Teacher Leaders and helping the Teacher Leaders hone their coaching skills, noting: “I delegated to Teacher Leaders and put systems in place. Things got done.”

In general, Teacher Leaders who had more-experienced PLUS residents or alumni in their buildings reported receiving greater support for their roles and more opportunities to coach teachers. One Teacher Leader in her first residency year explained that, “Three of us aren’t in buildings with PLUS residents, and we’re the ones who are getting the most resistance.”

Still, a few Teacher Leaders without resident-peers in their buildings described building relationships successfully, especially if they were placed in schools where they had already worked. One Teacher Leader, working in her longtime school site, said that her teaching peers were responsive to feedback “because it’s low-stakes… I say it’s for my program, and through the process, hopefully I’ll be able to tell [them] something beneficial, but I’ll also be learning. That’s my conversation with them.”

And though it was described as helpful by many residents, having a PLUS-trained administrator in the building did not guarantee a smooth Teacher Leadership experience. A few Teacher Leaders with administrators who had been trained by PLUS still reported struggling to find time or authority to coach teachers.

### Potential to Enhance Principal Role, School Operations, and Cultural Considerations

The wide variation in schools' support for residents' roles may have been at least partly driven by principals' limited understanding of the PLUS philosophy. One mentor principal who was working with residents for the first time said, “There should be some orientation for us before [residents] came into our building.” When PLUS launched in the fall of 2014, residents noted that the program's efforts to engage principals in formal meetings had not been successful, largely due to principals' busy schedules. The result, they said, was that “Nobody told the principals what our job was supposed to be.”

Principals’ concerns arose alongside questions about how the program valued their expertise. As one principal explained, “I have 14 years of experience. I [understand] all the coaching the residents are getting, but if they are in our school[s], why couldn’t we be the coaches?” Another mentor principal said, “If their aspiration is to become a principal, they have to do what I do.…If [my PLUS resident] were to go to another district, they might not have a [separate] operational manager, so my responsibility is to make sure she learns how to manage a building.”

A few residents, too, acknowledged that they would have liked more training in areas beyond instructional leadership and school climate, including school operations, law, charter school creation, and culturally relevant professional development. On the topic of cultural relevance, one resident commented that:

Yes, we work in [this city] with underserved populations and minorities and low SES populations, but I think there’s a piece about us developing teachers who, some are coming from that same population and some are coming from completely different places… I think it’s specifically about being a leader of color managing and directly supervising people that are not women of color or people of color period. It’s been something I want more from PLUS.

In short, both residents and mentor principals expressed concern that the program underemphasized operational and cross-cultural skills that did not directly involve instructional practice but had a clear bearing on it. Having led schools for some time, mentor principals said they would have liked to see the program make greater use of their skills and experiences.

## Residents' Career Path Divergence

PLUS residents’ career trajectories diverged notably over time. Figure 2 tracks the career progressions of the four cohorts from the first through fourth implementation years, 2014-15 through 2017-18. The top panel represents the fraction of initially placed residents who persisted in both the program and the city in each year. As anticipated in the program design, a small fraction of residents did not complete the first program year due to issues of workload or fit, but after that initial attrition, persistence rates held relatively steady.

<Insert Figure 2 about here>

The second panel of Figure 2 illustrates the share of residents in each cohort who held an administrator role by the end of each academic year. The first-year fraction for Cohort 1 is only 78% due to program attrition, even though all Cohort 1 placements began as, and continued to be, administrative. The fraction of Cohort 2 residents in administrator roles held steady over time at 46%, even as a few residents changed positions or left. For Cohort 3, most of whom began in Teacher Leader roles, the share holding administrator roles nearly doubled between the third and fourth years.

The third panel of Figure 2 represents the fraction of residents in each cohort who were promoted from their initial placement levels over time. We define a promotion as moving from a Teacher Leader role to an administrator role, or from an assistant-level administrator role (Lead Educator, Apprentice School Leader) to a principal or acting principal role, or moving from a school-level to a central office role. Among the first three cohorts, about a third of initially placed residents had received promotions as of the 2017-18 academic year: 22% for Cohort 1, 31% for Cohort 2, and 38% for Cohort 3. All Cohort 4 residents were still in their first program year in 2017-18.

The reasons that some residents were promoted and others were not was not always clear. School leadership positions are usually competitive, and this is especially true in a district with shrinking enrollments and few open positions. African American and white males were promoted at slightly higher rates (about 33% and 25%, respectively) than African American and white females (about 18% for both groups), but in such a small sample, these differences are modest.

Residents who had received promotions, or who viewed promotions as forthcoming, expressed somewhat greater satisfaction with the program than those who had or did not. But residents reflected on the determinants of promotion in different ways. Some said that it seemed useful to have worked in a school of similar size and grade levels to those with leadership openings, though others noted the opacity with which promotions became available.

Some residents who had been promoted attributed their success to the leadership coaching they had received in the PLUS program. One said, ‘My coach…walked me through the entire [promotion] process from the application, to interviews, through lots of role playing, and what it would be like to be in the interview.’ Others said they had not received the same level of support:

The people in my cohort were told, “There’s an opening. You should put your name out there, and you should apply,” and that was it ... Yet, another resident I saw…was working with a PLUS coach, was doing mock interviews…and got the position.

But other residents said they would not have received promotions without their own initiative and persistence:

I reached out [to the principal] via [social media] and volunteered time over summer to work, which [the principal] was open to… When it comes to PLUS, the support I had was that I had done the program to get my principal cert[ification].

Another resident concurred, citing the importance of personal initiative in determining who gets promoted:

The more I'm working, I realize it's up to the individual to take what you learned, and not say ‘I'm from PLUS, I'm supposed to be…at a certain level.’ You as an individual need to take what you learned and go to it.

This range of perspectives suggests that professional development workshops about how to navigate the local hiring context might have increased the homogeneity and transparency of support that residents received.

# Discussion and Implications

Launched in 2014 in a small, urban district, PLUS offered a promising model for growing a pipeline of effective future principals. First, it was designed to build on strengths of experienced, local educators who were committed to improving education opportunities for the city’s youth, most of whom were students of color and from low-income backgrounds. Second, it provided hands-on professional development attuned to real-world challenges. Third, it placed junior administrators and Teacher Leaders in schools as change agents even as they were learning to take on leadership responsibilities. But residents perceived that their ability to effect change depended on their supervisors’ willingness to distribute leadership responsibilities, and that their opportunities to pursue their career goals were limited as a result of local economic conditions. Their experiences raise the question of how pipeline programs might promote a distributed leadership approach.

One clear finding is that school principals charged with mentoring the residents had a limited understanding of the PLUS program. A recommendation for similar residency programs is to frame the mentor principal's role as a core part of the program. Interviews from the first PLUS year suggested that the program attempted to do this at the beginning and found limited traction, and district officials acknowledged as much in interviews. Even so, the mentor principal's role could be framed from the outset as a type of residency in its own right—perhaps as a senior fellowship. Mentor principals could then receive support in cultivating residents’ organizational leadership skills, including not only operational issues but also culturally relevant leadership.

An additional takeaway lies in the variation in residents' career trajectories. Certainly, part of the reason for residents’ modest promotion rates was the small number of administrative openings. Bearing this in mind, cities considering leadership residency programs should first assess local labor market supply and demand. But even in a city with greater unmet demand for principals, a leadership pipeline program will give rise to career path variation.

The question is how districts can leverage the expanding skill set of residents who are promoted more slowly. A quarter-century ago, Firestone and Pennell (1993) noted that educators were more likely to feel committed to their work when they perceived that their expertise was valued and that they had opportunities for autonomy and growth. Indeed, Teacher Leaders whose instructional leadership roles were stymied reported feeling isolated and discouraged, and some PLUS alumni who did not see a clear pathway to the principalship began finding leadership opportunities outside the city.

Still, the study provides promising examples of strategic human capital use. In a few schools, the assignment of instructional coaching caseloads to Teacher Leaders reportedly lightened the caseloads of administrators, freeing up more of their time for whole-school responsibilities and allowing Teacher Leaders to hone their leadership expertise. In this way, strengthening districts’ support for distributed leadership may amplify the efficiency and impact of urban school leadership residencies.

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**Table 1.** Initial placements and first-year completers, by cohort and initial role



**Figure 1.** Logic model showing anticipated near-term and mid-term results of school leadership residency program



**Figure 2.** Within-city career paths of initially placed residents, by cohort

