**Niche Training for Principals Aims to Fill Skill Gaps**



Brandon Cardet-Hernandez, principal of the Bronx Academy of Letters in New York, sits in on a yoga and mediation session with students inside the “pass room.” The room is part of the school’s restorative-justice approach to dealing with students who misbehave.

—Mark Abramson for Education Week

**Specialized principal-training programs are part of a growing effort to prepare school leaders for real-world challenges**

**By** [**Arianna Prothero**](http://www.edweek.org/ew/contributors/arianna.prothero_7206329.html)January 24, 2017

For many principals and school leaders, learning how to grapple with some of the most vexing issues in schools only happens once they are on the job. And often, that can feel like too little, too late.

For example, fostering an equitable environment in schools where the students are overwhelmingly black and Latino and the teachers are mostly white is a major challenge that many modern principals must confront, but not a skill set that has typically been cultivated in traditional preparation programs.

That explains why specialized, or "niche" principal-training programs have been popping up across the country in recent years. They are part of a growing effort to close the gap between what principals learn in traditional degree-earning programs and the skills they find they actually need on the job.

Such niche training initiatives range widely in their focus—some emphasize equity issues, others focus on developing business skills. But their goals are the same: to train more-effective school leaders and increase the academic success of students.

"Those types of programs are in response to the sense that the field, by and large ...[is] not adequately preparing principals," said Ellen Goldring, a professor in Vanderbilt University's Peabody College of Education and Human Development.

Similar to the differences between what a degree in economics offers and that of a Master of Business Administration, many traditional education degree-earning programs deal more in theory than in practice, Goldring said.

**Becoming Specialists**

A range of niche principal-training programs have emerged, some of them created by universities, others developed by alternative programs that might work closely with school districts, charter school networks, universities or state departments of education.

Among the areas of specialized focus: social emotional learning, the science of improvement, and the early elementary grades.

Specialized training or microcredentialing for principals is still a relatively new idea, so there hasn't been much research done on the effectiveness of such programs, which can be both separate from certificate earning programs, or folded into them.

The NYC Leadership Academy is one such example. It has built its "aspiring principals program" around training principals on how to foster equitable environments in their schools at a time when students are becoming more diverse, teachers and principals remain largely white, and schools have become increasingly segregated.

"The reaction that we're getting is that principals are struggling to address issues of equity in their schools, and they're asking for help," said Irma Zardoya, the president and chief executive officer of the NYC Leadership Academy.

**Exposing Inequities**

The program places a heavy emphasis on teaching principals how to leverage data to identify equity issues in their schools. Although a principal may feel that there aren't large gaps in academic achievement among student groups in their school, the data may expose a different story, said Zardoya.

"When school leaders look at the data and see that their students of color are maybe not doing well, then the questions come up and are raised: Why is this happening? What can we do to address it? Is it an issue of the way we teach? Is it an issue of expectations?" she said.

That approach hit home with Brandon Cardet-Hernandez, an alumnus of the program who is now principal of the Bronx Academy of Letters in the South Bronx of New York City.

All of the school's students are black or Latino, and 90 percent of them qualify to receive free lunches, a common measure of poverty.

But the school's data around discipline showed some troublesome disparities, Cardet-Hernandez said, in particular for African-American boys who were struggling in math.

Seeing how certain students were being punished for wrongdoing prompted Cardet-Hernandez to embrace restorative justice—when students take charge of resolving conflicts and repairing the harm caused by one another by coming together to talk through problems and air grievances.

"We have taken on a huge push for restorative justice," he said. "This starts happening when you … break down the data: What is happening to our students, our students of color, and how are we disciplining, and are we disciplining fairly?"

As part of the school's restorative justice approach, Cardet-Hernandez created something he calls a "pass room," where students are sent instead of being suspended. In the pass room, they may talk with a therapist, do art, or even yoga—something the students themselves proposed.

The aspiring principals program, which started in New York City but has been adopted by school districts in several other states, also uses simulations and role playing to help train prospective principals on how to deal with the day-to-day issues that may arise, such as how to manage and interact with parents and students from different backgrounds.

In one particular exercise, participants in the program are interrupted during a simulated workday by an actor playing an irate parent, sometimes one who doesn't speak English. The interaction is videotaped, which the NYCLA staff reviews and discusses later with the aspiring principal.

Participants continue working as teachers, teacher leaders, or assistant principals while going through the aspiring leaders program. They are required to identify an issue or challenge that they want to tackle in their current school, and develop a plan to address it.

This kind of practical, hands-on training in equity issues is essential to closing persistent achievement gaps between racial groups, said Zardoya.

**Filling Knowledge Gaps**

Not only are principals being required to oversee more-diverse student populations, there's also a shift in many school districts to give principals more autonomy over the schools they run. In those situations, principals may find they need more of the kind of business and leadership skills taught in an MBA program.

That's the knowledge gap the Woodrow Wilson MBA Fellowship in Educational Leadership, which launched three years ago, is attempting to close. The program was developed by Princeton University, but it is run by three participating universities in Indiana and two in New Mexico.



Brandon Cardet-Hernandez, of the Bronx Academy of Letters, talks to 8th grader Ali Ibrahim in the school’s “pass room,” where students who misbehave spend time in mediation talks, yoga, therapy, and other alternatives to out-of-school suspension.

—Mark Abramson for Education Week

The impetus for creating the MBA educational fellowship came from a 2005 report by Arthur Levine, the former president of Teachers College, Columbia University, and the current head of the Woodrow Wilson Foundation. Levine has been one of the most prominent critics of how school leaders and teachers are prepared for their professions.

His report noted that while universities often use such programs as cash cows, many enrollees use them simply to get a boost in pay in their current positions. The programs themselves had low standards for admission and graduation, while doing little to prepare principals for the actual demands of the job, the report said.

In the Woodrow Wilson Fellowship, participants study many of the subjects they would in an MBA program, with an emphasis on how these topics relate to running a school, such as team building, talent recruitment, budgeting, and even marketing, said LeAnn Buntrock, the fellowship's program director.

"Marketing is becoming increasingly important," she said. "There are charter schools, and private schools, and people need to be able to define who they are and what they do, and why their school is a good option for kids."

Although principals aren't looking to increase profits at a school, there are many similarities between running a successful business and running a successful school, such as understanding everything from finance to building a high-performing team.

"The education context is different, there are special challenges, but at the end of the day, good leadership is good leadership," Buntrock said.

**Early-Childhood Focus**

Meanwhile, as cities and states have started to invest more in early-childhood education and prekindergarten programs, there is now a parallel drive to better prepare principals to lead elementary schools.

The University of Washington offers a special certificate in its executive leadership program that is aimed at principals who lead schools serving the early grades, particularly pre-K through 3rd grade. Its participants can opt to earn credits toward a master's degree.



Brandon Cardet-Hernandez completed a program that trained him in how to spot inequities and find solutions to address them. Here, Cardet-Hernandez talks to 8th grader Matthew Paynes.

—Mark Abramson for Education Week

The program is teaching principals skills to make them better at leading schools with the youngest students.

Among the areas these would-be school leaders focus on is how to effectively partner with the local preschools and Head Start programs to ensure they are preparing students for kindergarten, how best to engage the families of young children, and how to be strong instructional leaders for prekindergarten through 3rd grade teachers.

It also trains participants on how to properly assess teachers and students in the early grades—a process that's far more fluid and observation-based than it is in the later grades, said Kristie Kauerz, an assistant professor of P-3 policy and leadership at the University of Washington.

Those early grades are a critical time for both student development and state accountability measures, said Kauerz, who also runs the P-3 executive leadership certificate program.

"The standards-based environment in the K-12 world is putting so many pressures on principals around closing the achievement gap and reading by 3rd grade," she said. "If principals understand … that those gaps appear by toddlerhood and they are addressed long before 3rd grade, it helps alleviate some of the standards pressures that principals are feeling."

Supporting young students and their teachers requires a set of skills beyond what is taught in most traditional education programs, Krauez said, and programs like hers are one way to fill the gaps, albeit even if it's a little ad-hoc.

"Higher ed is really hard and slow to change," she said. "Going to all the principal-training programs and telling them they are wrong won't get us very far. So, how do we engage principals at scale in things that are not yet mandated?"

But to Goldring, the Vanderbilt professor, specialized training gives school leaders the opportunity to personalize the education they get from a traditional degree-earning program.

"If I'm in a system where I have no budgeting responsibilities, it would make no sense for me to focus on that particular microcredentialing," she said.

"But maybe I'm in a diverse school system, and I want to focus on that as part of my preparation—I like that idea of having that flexibility to match needs to the context of the leader."

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