

Building the Next Generation of Philadelphia's Leaders

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Introduction

The key to the future success of education reform in Philadelphia, as well as to the overall growth and vibrancy of the city as a whole, is our ability to retain and develop talent within our bounds. While there have been strong and successful attempts to keep talent by small pockets of the education community, we would argue that these efforts must be deepened and broadened in order to truly achieve the widespread impact that we all know must occur.

The charge of developing and retaining educational leadership is especially challenging given the characteristics and qualities of young professionals entering the teaching profession and education reform world today. Research on this generation (i.e., generation Y/millennials) indicates that, as a result of cultural changes, such as needing more education to survive in an information-based economy combined with fewer entry-level jobs even after years of college and graduate school, the twenties may be evolving into a new distinct life stage,

referred to as “emerging adulthood” (Hennig 2010). During emerging adulthood, twenty-somethings are waiting longer to make long-term commitments, both personal and professional. This is evidenced by the very slim likelihood that the current generation of young professionals will remain in the same job or field for the entirety, or even for large portions, of their careers. These sociological factors magnify the importance of retention and leadership development efforts in all fields, and especially in ours.

Given how hard we know that teaching and educational leadership are, we must also ensure that the individuals we recruit, and then retain, are of extremely high quality. Whereas only 23 percent of our current teaching force graduated in the top third of their undergraduate class (McKinsey 2010), programs such as Teach For America and Teaching Fellows now attract top students into the field. If we are attracting these individuals, who will undoubtedly have many career options, we must be strategic and thoughtful about how we engage them in long-term careers in education reform.

The Example of Teach for America Alumni

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The case study of Teach For America (TFA) alumni and their paths within this city demonstrates the results that

can arise from strategic leadership development efforts. Since TFA first began placing corps members in Philadelphia in 2003, there has been significant growth of high-achieving charter schools, in which TFA corps members and alumni play extremely significant roles. At Mastery, KIPP and Scholar Academies—three of the top-performing charter management organizations that serve low-income populations in the city—nine out of 13 of principals, or 70 percent, are TFA alumni. In addition, nearly 50 percent of their entire staffs are alumni of the organization.

There is no doubt that these organizations have been extremely successful at recruiting talent and encouraging future leaders to join their organizations. They do this by holding purposeful meetings focused on employees' futures, providing strong support and mentorship for their employees and showing talented individuals the prospects for career growth. They also create a work culture in which highly motivated individuals are surrounded by others who are as committed to the mission as they are.

At the same time, in the School District of Philadelphia itself, we have only just begun to see the rise of TFA alumni into positions of leadership. Whereas one year ago, there were no TFA alumni in positions of significant leadership, there are now two School District principals and three special assistants in the superintendent's office. This illustrates the contrast between arenas in which this

outreach has been happening and those in which it is just starting to occur. In addition, even those individuals who have reached leadership positions within the School District seemed to have done so more as a result of hard work and circumstance and less as a result of systematic outreach by the district itself.

We urge these efforts to grow further and deeper throughout the city, not only for TFA alumni and not only for jobs within charter management organizations or the School District. These efforts must include recruitment for high-quality educators of all backgrounds and into the fields of policy, advocacy, law, social services and the many other arenas that touch the lives of our students.

Three Strategies for Cultivating Leadership

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We believe efforts to cultivate new leadership within the education sector should be made in three key areas: visible career pathways, mentorship and strong community.

Visible Career Pathways

As is evidenced by the success of the charter management organizations discussed above, talented individuals must be shown what lies ahead for them if they

are successful. Young leaders will be more likely to commit to an organization where they see a path for growth in their future and especially if they have seen people before them take the same, or a similar, path.

According to Celine Coggins and Heather Peske (2011), founders of Teach Plus, an organization dedicated to creating conditions that keep teachers in the classroom, the same challenges affect current teachers nationwide. They state, “[t]he message to younger teachers continues to be: Wait your turn; accept the system as it is; and, in time, it will work for you.” This approach has not worked for keeping teachers in the classroom, and it will not work to keep future leaders in Philadelphia.

Indeed, to be most effective, a discussion about future career paths should be undertaken directly and early in an individual’s tenure—or even before an individual chooses to work at an organization. These career pathways can involve growth on a teaching level, as a school-based administrator or as a district or charter management organization leader. Examples of already established career pathways in high-performing charter organizations include a pathway to becoming a Master or Mentor Teacher after showing instructional excellence (Mastery Charter Schools) or a route to opening a new school as a school leader (The Miles and Fischer Fellowships at KIPP).

Mentorship

Those who have committed themselves to Philadelphia and to making change in our city must also take it upon themselves to provide mentorship to the new generation of leaders. While the formation of these relationships could be facilitated through formal mentoring programs, we believe that the most successful mentoring relationships are likely to develop more organically. That said, formal career exploration and exposure programs, such as job shadowing, networking events and career talks, may help to facilitate the organic growth of valued and sustainable mentoring relationships.

The central role of such a mentor is threefold: to help a mentee craft his or her desired career path; to identify the skills that are needed to travel down this path and a plan to develop them; and to help a mentee establish connections and relationships within the community.

Career path:

The mentor needs to help the mentee define his or her short- and long-term career goals, working with the mentee to identify the types of work that are of most interest, the types of organizations where the greatest impact can be made, and the skills possessed that will lead to career success and satisfaction. Career paths change over time, so the mentor's role is to continue to serve as a resource to the mentee as he or she grows professionally.

Skills analysis:

The mentor must help a mentee see and reflect upon his or her strengths as well as identify areas for growth. A young educator may excel at working in the classroom and zooming in on challenging issues facing our students but may not be able to see the “big picture” and understand the factors that increase the challenges or complicate the solutions. The mentor needs to help the mentee identify these blind spots and then create a plan to develop the skills necessary to transform them into strengths.

Relationship building:

It is the mentor’s responsibility to help the mentee build a network of colleagues to work with throughout his or her career. The mentee must understand the significant value of these relationships both personally and professionally. The most effective and efficient way to achieve growth in education in Philadelphia is for our talent to work together toward common goals.

A Strong Community

We must encourage the formation of civic and social organizations where future leaders can meet one another and work together. These organizations will illustrate to young talent that there are other like-minded individuals dedicated to the same causes. These groups will also

allow relationships to form so that collaboration across sector and across professional organization will flourish in the future. This collaboration will multiply the power of the reform efforts that we all advocate for.

Young Involved Philadelphia is a perfect example of such an organization. Young Involved Philadelphia builds relationships and increases civic engagement to empower and connect young Philadelphians by educating its members about civic affairs and advocacy issues, connecting young citizens with one another and representing the young demographic of the city.

One of the greatest benefits of a “small big city” like Philadelphia is the access that even young individuals have across sector and to people in leadership positions. This access should be capitalized upon in order to build larger and stronger relationships within and beyond this community.

Conclusion

We challenge the education community to work smarter and harder at developing and retaining the next generation of leaders in Philadelphia. Find a mentee—challenge her to define her goals, understand her strengths and weaknesses, and identify opportunities for growth and relationship building. This group of leaders brings a fresh perspective, energy, drive and determination that will inspire us all to continue to improve

the opportunities available to Philadelphia's children. These future leaders will also ensure that our current reform efforts continue for many years to come.

About the authors:

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