At-a-Glance

The Aspiring Principals program (APP) was housed under the Dallas Leadership Academy and School Leadership and Administrative Services department within the Dallas Independent School district (Dallas ISD) and was funded for one year using $178,002 Title II, Part A funds. APP was a 14-month leadership development program designed to recruit, select and prepare assistant and associate principals and advanced teachers for principal positions in the district. The program began during the summer of 2010. The program used shadowing, teamwork, and a campus-based residency to prepare participants, called fellows, to lead instructional improvements and school operation efforts as principals on their own campuses at the end of the program. The stated goal of the program was that 100 percent of fellows would be selected for a Dallas ISD principalship within 24 months of completing the Aspiring Principals program. Fellows signed a three-year commitment to the district.

The program was designed to be implemented in four phases: a three week summer intensive training, year-long residency training sessions on identified strands of leadership, a side-by-side residency mentorship with principals, and a summer planning session preparing fellows for the principal application process. The summer planning session did not occur during the 2010-11 school year. The Aspiring Principals program added a summer internship component to the fellowship program following the summer training for the 2011-12 year.

Fellow and Mentor Principal Characteristics

The majority of the 21 fellows accepted into cohort one of the APP program were working as assistant or associate principals (71%) when they applied to the program while 29 percent were non-administrative staff such as teachers, program coordinators, or program specialists. One hundred percent of fellows were working as assistant or associate principals early on the residency year with the majority of those placed in elementary schools (81%). Fellows were mostly African American or Hispanic, female, and had a masters degree. Fellows had just under ten years of state experience, just under nine years of local experience and two years of experience in administrative positions. There were 21 mentor principals at the beginning of the 2010-11 school year; one mentor principal left the program during the second half of the year. Mentor principals had more experience with the district than fellows with an average of 23.10 years of state experience and 20.70 years of local experience. Of the 20 remaining mentor principals, the majority were White (40%) or African American (35%), female (75%), and had a masters degree (70%).

APP Mentorship Experience

During the residency mentorship fellows were expected to learn how to organize instructional improvement efforts, manage school operational issues, and navigate interpersonal and organizational relationships by working with their mentors. Mentor principals were expected to build capacity in their fellows by allowing them to take on the authority of the principal where possible, participate in important decision-making, do meaningful work, and solve complex problems. Overall, fellows and mentor principals were satisfied with the results of their mentor experiences. There was some confusion and frustration regarding the mentorship placement process among both fellows and mentor principals. The criteria for participation in the program had not been clearly laid out prior to beginning the program; this affected teachers entering the program most acutely. While the learning opportunities available to fellows during the mentorship were strengths of this component, both fellows and mentor principals reported that working as an assistant or associate principal while also learning the responsibilities of the principal position was a burden. Only when the mentor-mentee relationship was effectively utilized did the residency fully contribute to the development of the administrative skills the program aimed to build.

Program Management Staff Perceptions

The program experienced several successes according to program management staff: the number of fellows selected as principals throughout the year, the development of powerful and meaningful learning experiences, the provision of rigorous and relevant training for fellows, and the development of a strong network of contacts between fellows,
mentors, campus principals, central office personnel and other education staff throughout Dallas ISD and other school districts throughout the state. The program also faced some significant barriers to its success. The program faced increasing amounts of programmatic responsibilities which challenged the staff’s ability to plan and prepare for training sessions. In addition, the program faced difficulties with defining the roles and responsibilities of both fellows and mentor principals.

Residency Training Component

The Aspiring Principals program trained its fellows on both “hard” and “soft” skills. The “soft” skills focus was on communicating, listening, engaging in dialogue, giving feedback, solving problems, and resolving conflicts. Training on “hard” skills focused on technical or administrative procedures such as working with school budgets, conducting teacher evaluations, analyzing student achievement data, and planning and implementing campus change. The mentor principal training sessions focused on self-reflection and communication, specifically providing feedback to the fellows. Based on materials provided by the program, observations, and comments from fellows, the evaluator concluded the trainings focused specifically on those skills the fellows would need to master to become successful principals. Fellows commented that the training was an efficient use of their time and provided them with opportunities to practice applicable and relevant skills they actually could put to use on their campuses. While the mentor principals reported that for the most part they had heard or seen the material covered in the trainings before, they were actually able to practice the skills during training and felt that it was a useful refresher.

Summer Intensive Training

The three-week summer intensive training workshop engaged cohort II fellows in a series of comprehensive, simulated school projects that reflected the realities of leading Dallas ISD schools. Fellows completed a survey soliciting information about their summer intensive training experience. Fellows were very satisfied with the resources the program provided and agreed that they were relevant to preparing them to become effective leaders. They also reported that the facilitators presented material in a way that allowed them to translate knowledge to practice. Finally, fellows reported that the training helped them better understand the connection between data and student achievement.

Fewer fellows agreed that the training adequately prepared them to implement strategies that would improve student achievement. While fellows reported they better understood the connection between data and student achievement, fewer reported the training increased their knowledge of how to move data analysis to action.

Barriers

The Aspiring Principals program was built on a strong foundation of educational research and proven teaching techniques; however, as with any new program, APP experienced some significant barriers to its successful implementation. Those barriers included unclear program goals, mentor selection criteria and mentor placement, accountability and evaluation, organization and documentation, and training materials and replication. The program has already made many adjustments to their procedures for the 2011-12 school year which will result in greater success. The major impediment to this programs’ continued success is organization and developing concrete procedures and protocols that are in line with clearly stated goals. The program has already begun this important work and will continue to improve with time.

Recommendations

Some recommendations included: reviewing and aligning program goals and activities, identifying best practices for dealing with fellows who leave the program early, evaluating mentor selection procedures and creating selection criteria, providing program management staff autonomy when selecting mentor principals, funding fellows as full-time interns, evaluating fellows and mentor principals, exploring mentor principal stipend payment procedures and policies, finalizing the design of the program, providing program materials and information to program applicants and program participants in a more timely manner, tracking all program transitions, and developing training curricula that allows for replication.

Additional information may be obtained by consulting the Aspiring Principals Program Report, EA11-146-2, at http://www.dallasisd.org/inside_disd/depts/evalacct/index.htm.