Academy in N.Y.C. Prepares Principals for Toughest Jobs

By Lynn Olson

The outcome of New York City’s gambit to give schools greater autonomy over their budgets and curriculum in exchange for heightened accountability for results will arguably rise or fall based on the skills of its principals. So the role of the New York City Leadership Academy—created by Schools Chancellor Joel I. Klein to recruit, train, and support new principals for the city’s toughest schools—has never been more central.

The nonprofit organization, launched nearly five years ago and independent of the city’s education department, was modeled after successful private-sector initiatives. Unlike the highly theoretical curriculum offered in many university based training programs, the academy’s Aspiring Principals Program is deeply rooted in practice and in the 1.1 million-student district’s efforts to improve its schools.

“It’s a very different approach from pulling out last year’s syllabus,” said Sandra J. Stein, the chief executive officer of the academy. “We always talk about being rigorous, relevant, and responsive.” Aspiring principals are selected through a stringent screening process. Of the 451 applicants this past school year, only 68 were admitted. More than half of them are members of racial or ethnic minorities.

Since January 2003, the academy has prepared more than 60 aspiring principals a year, putting them through an intensive, 14-month program that includes a six-week summer school, a 10-month residency under the mentorship of a practicing principal, and a second summer of planning to assume leadership of their own schools.

The Leadership Academy also offers voluntary, continuing support to all new principals citywide, including site-based, one-on-one coaching during their first three years on the job, small-group sessions, retreats, and opportunities to network with their peers.

Rooted in Practice

The close marriage between the preparation program and the New York City Department of Education’s Children First strategy was evident this past summer, when principals-in-training gathered at Information Technology High School in Long Island City for their six-week summer “intensive.”

Aspiring principals work in teams to solve the problems of a simulated school that reflects the realities of the schools they are likely to lead. Weekly group assignments require participants to show their proficiency in key dimensions of leadership, ranging from a focus on student performance to time, task, and project management.

During the summer session, candidates were given the same types of information about their fictional school that principals in the city are now receiving: the results of a quality review by an external inspection team, a progress report that grades the school from A to F, and student-achievement data over time. They also heard presentations from all of the school support organizations from which schools can choose to receive services."More Power to Schools," Nov. 28, 2007.)

For one of the participants’ first assignments, they had to review the different data pieces to identify the strengths and weaknesses of their team’s school. But, as is true in the real world, some information arrives in unpredictable ways, including documents that show up unexpectedly in participants’ “in boxes” throughout each week.

In one room, candidates preparing to lead middle and high schools were reviewing samples from the school climate surveys given to parents in all New York City schools last spring. Their assignment was to look for emerging patterns in order to prepare a presentation for parents about their school’s progress report the following Monday.

As the teams struggled with how to communicate better with parents about student achievement, the facilitator used a phrase heard repeatedly over the course of the summer session: “I’m going to push back on you a little bit.”

The phrase, said Ms. Stein, is meant to depersonalize any criticism and to encourage the candidates to be more reflective. One goal of the program is to encourage candidates to confront their core beliefs about teaching and learning.
‘Excited to Go’

Each weekly project is evaluated against a rubric based on a “leadership matrix.” If the work is judged satisfactory, it does not need to be redone. If the work doesn’t meet the standard, candidates are expected to revise and resubmit their work until it does.

“We always have a lot of redos,” Ms. Stein said. “If people ask what’s the single most important criterion for a principal, we always say “resilience.””

Leadership for each work assignment rotates among members of the project team, so that candidates get practice in consensus building and in exercising a leadership role. Candidates also receive 360-degree feedback from their fellow team members about their performance. In addition to the weekly assignments, candidates typically complete six to eight reading assignments a night and are videotaped regularly.

“The intensive is intense,” said Lucinda Mendez, who was preparing to lead a new transfer school for overage, undercredited students ages 16 and up. Her team regularly worked Friday nights until 9 or 10 to have projects ready for Monday.

“I’m excited to go at this point,” added Ms. Mendez, who taught in the South Bronx for 10 years before becoming a literacy coach. “Principals are going to be able to make decisions and be held accountable. I don’t just have to carry out what someone else is telling me to do.”

During the 10-month residency, the aspiring principals are placed at schools in pairs, so that they can critique each other’s performance and have a “thought partner” with whom they can share experiences. During the residency, candidates must complete a teacher observation a week, taking detailed notes. They have to do an instructional “walk-through” of the building with the principal at least once a month. And they must complete a project focused on instruction that addresses a particular school need. They also continue to meet with academy staff members one day and one evening a week.

All early-career principals in New York City attend a five-day leadership-development program the summer before they begin work. It focuses on such topics as planning for the first day of school, refining a vision, and engaging parents. Novice principals then receive one-to-one coaching from full-time coaches, trained by the academy, during their first three to four years, as well as additional all-day training sessions. Principals can also request coaching retreats, where they bring their teams from their school to work on particular issues.

“The cornerstone of the program is the coaching,” said Michelle Jarney, the senior director of the New Principal Support program. “We see the coach as a thought partner for the principal in the field. They ask a lot of open-ended, authentic, probing questions.”

Lucille A. Swarns, a coach who formerly was a regional superintendent for the school system, said, “It’s important to get to know the individual as a leader, to understand what that principal is struggling with.”

“It’s all personalized,” added Janice A. Medina, another coach who had been a local instructional superintendent. “The development and support is really geared to that principal as a learner.”

Coaches serve a purely developmental role; they are not involved in evaluating the principals.

John Barnes, who graduated in the first cohort of aspiring principals and now leads the Bronx School of Science Inquiry and Investigation, a 331-student middle school, described his coach as “awesome.”

“He was such a veteran in the system, and had been a principal for so long, he was the king of navigation,” Mr. Barnes said. “I had his cellphone number, his home phone number, his e-mail.”

“There are things that come, once you have the job,” he added, that can’t be simulated or roleplayed. But the academy provided enough ongoing support so that he wasn’t going in as “an army of one,” he said.

Cost Criticized

But the academy has been controversial, in part because it attracts some nontraditional recruits, and in part because of its cost.

An article in The New York Post, dated Nov. 11, critiqued “the pricey principals training program” for having only two-thirds of its graduates leading city schools, including a dozen schools that received F’s on the district’s new report cards. Data provided by the academy show that 71 percent of its graduates are school principals, and that 12 percent are assistant principals. Another 8 percent serve in a wide range of leadership roles in the district.
While the newspaper estimated the cost per program graduate last year at $146,000, the academy says the correct figure is $41,416. (The newspaper’s figures included salary and benefit costs, which are paid for by the city’s department of education.)

The article included report card grades for schools led by first-year principals from the Aspiring Principals Program who were placed during the 2006-07 school year, but Ms. Stein argued that APP graduates go into some of the city’s hardest-to staff schools by design. And the conventional wisdom, she said, is that elementary and middle schools take at least three years to turn around, and that high schools take at least six.

A longitudinal analysis conducted by the academy found that elementary and middle schools led by APP principals for two consecutive years improved their raw progress scores, which form a basis for the report card grades, 34 percent more than did elementary and middle schools led by non-APP principals who had served for a similar time.

Elementary and middle schools led by APP principals for three years in a row, it found, improved their scores 31 percent more than did elementary and middle schools led by non-APP principals with similar tenures.

Randi Weingarten, the president of the United Federation of Teachers, the local teachers’ union, said graduates of the program range from “terrible” to “terrific.” “I think they are trying to focus far more on communications, building a community, as opposed to one so-called leader being able to turn an entire school around,” she said.

During its first three years, the Leadership Academy raised some $69 million in private philanthropy, and it has another $15 million committed for fiscal years 2007 and 2008, including money from the New York City-based Wallace Foundation. (Wallace underwrites coverage of leadership issues in Education Week.)

“For me, I feel like the academy was a gift,” said Mr. Barnes. “I cannot think of any other training program that gives you 14 months to turn your weaknesses into strengths.”

Coverage of district-level improvement efforts is underwritten in part by grants from the Carnegie Corporation of New York and the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.