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## Chicago Schools Alliance for Innovation and Excellence

### **Leadership Development Case Study: Bronx Leadership Academy**

#### **OVERVIEW**

The Bronx Leadership Academy (BLA), started in 1993, was the first small school started in the Bronx. Because of the major problem of overcrowding in the Bronx, enrollment is up to 622. Optimum enrollment is 500. BLA uses the Educational Option (E.O.) method of admissions which is one of the most equitable methods available in NYC. All NYC students apply to the high schools of their choice. With E.O. half of the students are assigned to BLA according to a formula (all the assigned students applied to BLA ) and half are selected by the staff in accordance with the stipulations of E.O. formula. (The aim is to have a heterogeneous student body.) BLA is a Title One School; thirty-seven percent of the 9<sup>th</sup> grade entering class reads at grade level (close to the city-wide average).

Despite the serious overcrowding and a change in leadership, BLA has maintained its graduation rate of 80% in four years, of which 95% go to college.

The founding principal, Katherine Kelly, retired at the end of the 2001/02 school year and has been mentoring and training principals since then. In total she has mentored six principals, including the current principals of BLA and BLA II. She was recognized as Bronx Supervisor of the Year in 2002 and also works with the NYC Leadership Academy, which has instituted a comprehensive plan for recruiting, training, and mentoring principals.

New principals and other school leaders emerging from the ranks of BLA teachers and assistant principals during the 10-year period when Katherine Kelly was principal are:

- Two principals who were part of new small school start-ups (planning year, 2001; school opened 2002). One was a BLA classroom teacher, the other was the school librarian.
- One principal is Katherine Kelly's successor at BLA; previously he was the Assistant Principal (AP) for Administration at BLA.
- A former AP for Guidance at BLA is the principal of a vocational school, beginning in 2003).
- A former AP is now a part-time itinerant AP/consultant to several schools on curriculum development, teacher recruitment/observation/professional development. She writes curriculum for the NY Museum of Natural History.
- Four other teachers also pursued their principals' credentials. Two are currently assistant principals; another is on maternity leave and the last is completing his studies full time.

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The school leadership development culture also applies to school aides, secretaries, other personal, and to students and will be discussed below.

In some cases, the school was able to offer compensatory time for teachers who assumed leadership roles. In other cases, this was not possible (because of contract limitations). Sometimes the school was able to give overtime pay (per session money), but in other cases teachers used their preparation or administrative periods to do the work. In other words, the leadership development opportunity often outweighed the financial incentives. NYC Department of Education, now negotiating the new teachers contract, may implement a \$10,000 differential for mentor teachers. Like Chicago, NYC does have stepped pay increases for college graduate credits and degrees.

This case study comes from interviews with Katherine Kelly (hereafter referred to as KK) and my experience with BLA when I was the Lead Organizer for South Bronx Churches, the founding organization and long-term partner for the school. SBC is not a religious organization; it was formed as a social justice action organization for different congregations and housing organizations in the South Bronx and is affiliated with the Industrial Areas Foundation.

## **LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT BASICS**

1. Leadership development is done through one-to-one relationships. Too many principals do not put the time into relationship development with their staff and often try to delegate this to their APs.

The best way to know what is happening in the school, what is on the mind of the teachers and how to encourage staff to grow is to be constantly meeting with them one-on-one. She would find numerous “excuses” for meetings (short or long) to talk to teachers. Questions might be how is your class going, did you solve your dilemma with so-and-so, how is your new position as dean going?

2. Leadership development is a constant, ongoing activity –incorporated into to the principal’s regular routine. KK would walk around the school and visit classes 3-4 times a day, varying the times so teachers and students couldn’t expect a set pattern. However, special one-to-one appointments were also made for more focused, in-depth, sensitive meetings.

KK was very accessible. BLA has an explicit “open door” policy that applied to staff, students and parents. KK’s office door was most often open. I often observed groups of students or faculty meeting around her office’s conference table!

3. Leadership development means taking intentional risks by both the principal and the staff person in order to grown and change. It is incumbent on the principal/leader to create a safe, yet challenging, relationship so that the staff person can work through his or her discomfort and the initial learning curve. “It is vital that the person see the genuineness in you,” says KK.

## **TEACHERS**

### **1. Talent Identification/ Encouragement to Take on Leadership Role**

For the first two years, teachers are encouraged to concentrate on their teaching. New teachers are linked with a mentor teacher.

After two years of teaching, typically during the post-observation conference in October, KK would encourage the excellent teacher to:

- ❑ Think about getting a masters degree in the area of supervision because KK thought that the teacher could potentially be a good principal or AP.
- ❑ Take a small role as a department assistant or volunteer for tasks like rewriting curriculum or chairing a committee such as the faculty safety committee or even the Sunshine Fund. Gradually the teacher could advance to more responsibility and take on new roles.
- ❑ Become more visible, e.g., go to a Parents Association meeting, school dance, sporting event, or to a South Bronx Churches' rally.

These steps helped teachers to see beyond their classroom door and to think about the needs of the school as a whole.

### **2. Mentoring**

**A. Defining the Opportunity:** Once teachers decided to take on a role, KK would work with them to define their role and what they might want to get out of it.

Example: Dean of Discipline

KK might ask the teacher some leading questions: What do you think the job of the Dean is? How would you like to see the position function? How would you increase the students' ability to deal with their own problems? How would you create a strong relationship with the faculty for common problem-solving?

Hopefully, the teacher will respond with some creative ideas, e.g., they want to do peer workshops with the students, help a student and teacher work out a behavior contract and then monitor it, give workshops to faculty so teachers and dean can find some common ground. All jobs have a certain percentage of grunt work, but the idea here is to create leadership development aspects in any role or task What might be a dreaded task for

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an experienced teacher is a leadership development opportunity for someone else.

Example: Mentor of New Teachers

KK would meet with the mentor and mentee to set some basic goals and areas to work on. But she would also point out that she hoped that they would develop a trusting relationship, that she did not want to hear about every problem; nor did she want the mentor to be a “quasi-supervisor.” KK was confident that she could keep tabs on her own, through her walkabouts and through feedback from the students.

Other advanced roles/tasks

Class Advisor (the advisory typically follows a class until graduation); Department Chair, COSA staff person (e.g., teacher in charge of student activities), PM School Coordinator, Peer Mediation Coordinator, Officer of the School Leadership Team (NYC equivalent of the Local School Council).

**B. Mentoring Along the Way.** Thereafter it is important to keep touching base about how the new role/task is going in order to problem-solve and help the staff member grow. Is it what you expected? Did you enjoy the experience? What did you learn about yourself? Regarding results, KK would, for example, help the new dean evaluate how s/he was doing. But, she points out that people would generally know for themselves. Some indicators for the dean would be: decrease in referrals, more peer mediation, fewer fights, halls clearing on time, positive relationship with the faculty.

For the aspiring principal/supervisor, the key question is: Can you see yourself mentoring and working with adults? She also would give her feedback about what she saw as strengths and areas to be developed, helping teachers think through whether a job/role is a good match for them. At times, KK had to counsel a new leader out of a new role if it was going badly.

Too often great teachers aren't given enough varied opportunities to find out if they would be good at working with and leading adults, which is what a principal must do. KK often says it is the adults who can make the job of a principal hard – not the students.

NOTE: Teachers and other staff members who are struggling to do their basic job deserve lavish attention and access to a variety of training/development options. “Some teachers are literally afraid to move the chairs into circles for group discussions and you have to talk through and support them as they take each step.” But if she reached the conclusion that a teacher was not a good fit for their grade-level, for BLA, or even for the profession, she felt that she owed it to them to tell so and to counsel them about next steps. “To be less than honest or upfront

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will only make the situation worse, leaving teachers feeling less than human, says KK.“

### **C. Moving Up and Moving On: It's OK to Leave BLA**

When a teacher or AP had progressed to higher levels of skill and experience, KK ended up saying to the leader, “You know, you are going to have to think about moving to another school if you are going to reach your leadership potential.” It is important to be explicit so that the teacher won't feel disloyal. KK would remind them that all children deserve someone good to work with them.

Some actual career paths: Supervisor of BLA Student Court to Dean to membership on the SLC to AP for Guidance to Principal; Class Advisor to AP; new teacher mentor to full-time study for principal credentials; COSA Director to AP. Typically, KK would assist teachers to develop a qualifying supervisory internship at BLA if needed for their degree.

### **SUPPORT STAFF**

It is vital that school aides and para-professionals are also offered the opportunity to grow. KK encouraged aides to go back to school to become secretaries (which is twice the pay). Two aides took her up on that. Another aid became the programmer for the school.

KK would make up titles, which didn't bring extra pay, but did bring extra respect. Some examples: coordinator of the dress code (could write up dress code violations); lunchroom coordinator (now an official Board position); transportation coordinator; assistant coach for sports teams.

### **STUDENTS**

Student involvement in the ongoing life of the school is one of the hallmarks of BLA. Students were constantly challenged to develop their leadership potential and to give their feedback on everything from the report card format to the implementation of the block scheduling program, for which KK went on a campaign to meet with all the students to get their feedback. She told the students that she was thinking about doing block scheduling and why, and then asked what could go wrong and what they could do to make it work. KK is currently writing up her reflections on how to build a student-centered school, which I look forward to reading.

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