

the waiting game

Graduates of New Leaders for New Schools sport enviable resumé's and a zeal for education reform. But will school districts give them the key to the principal's office? by ALEXANDER RUSSO

ON THE FIRST Monday of the 2003–04 school year, Pablo Sierra was not where he hoped to be. Instead of greeting students as the new principal of a Chicago public school, Sierra was driving downtown for another round of meetings with district officials, trying to keep his spirits up and hoping that a position would open soon.

As a newly minted graduate of the widely heralded New Leaders for New Schools training program for aspiring principals, Sierra (and the developers of New Leaders) had understandably expected to find a slew of opportunities awaiting him.

He thought that his prestigious MBA, private-sector experience, and nine years as a classroom teacher would distinguish him from more traditional applicants for the principalship. The intense yearlong “residency” program developed by New Leaders would make up for his lack of traditional administrative experience.

As of September, however, Sierra had all but given up on his first choice: being tapped to run a neighborhood school. He had started looking for a start-up or charter school opportunity and was hoping to avoid taking a job as an assistant principal. The sil-

ver lining is that Sierra was eventually able to secure a job as the assistant principal of a charter school and is now set to head a new charter school opening next year.

Sierra's situation was not unique among his New Leaders peers. Of his graduating class at the program's Chicago location, less than half had found jobs by late June. Those without preexisting connections to the community or to the school bureaucracy were struggling even to get interviews. Surprisingly, Sierra's private-sector training and experience were “not being perceived as positive,” he said.



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“All the positions are going to experienced [assistant principals].”

Since its founding four years ago, New Leaders has shown that there is no shortage of accomplished individuals like Sierra who want to be principals. The program continues to expand each year and has become a national voice for the reform of principal training. The remaining questions are whether school districts will let New Leaders run their own neighborhood schools—and are the New Leaders fellows really ready for the job?

New Blood

New Leaders for New Schools is the brainchild of a group of graduates from Harvard’s business and education schools including CEO Jonathan Schnur, a former Clinton administration official. The New Leaders idea is to recruit accomplished individuals from both the private and public sectors, including public education, and provide them with the leadership training necessary to take on significant school management roles. “We’re looking for the best people, wherever we can find them,” says Schnur.

The motivation behind New Leaders was to supply new blood to cities that were reportedly facing shortages of qualified principals ready to turn around dysfunctional schools. New Leaders fellows would also receive the kind of leadership and management training that principals hired through traditional routes seldom enjoy. Each cohort of “new leaders” is chosen through a highly competitive application process. Those selected take courses during the summer, then spend a year in full-time “residency” at a school under the guidance of a mentor principal.

While securing principalships for the program’s trainees has been challenging, finding accomplished aspirants has not. In 2003 the program received more than 1,000 completed applications for just 55 spots. Overall, roughly half the applications—and half of those accepted into the program—have

come from nontraditional candidates, meaning that they were coming to the program from outside education or from another part of the country. Even those with traditional education backgrounds have flocked to New Leaders, seeking a program that is more hands-on and collegial than many of the principal-training programs based at schools of education.

As a result, the pool of New Leaders includes a concentration of individuals with backgrounds not often found among public school principals. For instance, Danny Kramer was a VISTA coordinator, a member of an Internet start-up, and a website designer for Oprah Winfrey. Drema Brown graduated from Yale Law School and ran a children’s program in New Haven, Connecticut. And Cindy Moeller, a member of the current cohort of fellows, entered the program after earning her MBA at Northwestern and serving as a vice president for human resources at Baldwin Pianos. New Leaders usually requires its applicants to have two years of classroom experience in order to meet guidelines for certification as a public schools administrator. The program also works in partnership with local universities to secure formal certification for its graduates.

The current fellows range in age from their late 20s to their mid-50s. Two-thirds are African-American, Hispanic, or Asian-American, and two-thirds are women. Most important, they are among the most confident, determined, and accomplished school leadership candidates you can imagine.

What Shortages?

Despite their accomplishments and passion, New Leaders fellows have had a hard time breaking into traditional public schools, especially those fellows who lack contacts or extensive experience in education. It’s not that New Leaders can’t get work; nearly all of the New Leaders have secured education-related jobs. But just 5 of the first 15 graduates and just over half of the 32 graduates in 2003 found positions running schools of any type.

Of course a 50 percent placement rate for aspiring principals is no small accomplishment, and there has been undeniable progress in getting fellows hired at neighborhood schools. Patrick Baccellieri, a graduate of the program’s first year in Chicago who had previously run a nonprofit, was hired to run a traditional school, as was second-year graduate Jarvis Sanford, a former diversity

consultant for the Anti-Defamation League who holds an MBA and a Ph.D. Drema Brown is currently running a traditional public school in the Bronx, New York. Carleton Gordon, a longtime financial services executive, was named the principal at a tough school in Brooklyn in the fall of 2003. And after just a short time, some New Leaders have moved from assistant principal to the leadership spot in their schools.

However, these are the exceptions. Only 7 (out of 47) New Leaders have been hired to run traditional neighborhood schools. One problem is that, as it turns out, there isn't really that much of a numerical shortage of principals in the four cities—Chicago, New York, Washington, and the Bay Area—where New Leaders currently operates training programs. Principalships don't open up all that often. And when they do, these school districts receive tons of applications from insiders with more experience in education.

For instance, New York City may need to fill 150 open slots each year in a system with more than 1,200 schools. Program founder Schnur estimates that there are well over a thousand qualified candidates. Schnur says that there were only 60 to 70 genuine openings in Chicago this year, with about 65 applications for each position.

It is not just a numbers game though. The fact is that school district administrators and teachers have not wholly embraced the New Leaders concept. They tend to believe that the principal is also the instructional leader and should therefore have significant classroom experience. "Certainly, experience in other professions brings a perspective that could be a plus," says Deborah Lynch, president of the Chicago teacher union. "But so little teaching experience really makes me wonder if that's enough for a person to really get to know instructional improvement and school leadership."

Even the New Leaders candidates agree that this is somewhat of a disadvantage. "I might have wanted a few more years in the classroom from the curriculum side," says Kelly Wilson, a New Leaders graduate who holds an MBA and has a background in TV production. "We're being developed as curriculum leaders, but I probably needed more exposure to that."

The New Leaders training, while intense, will not make them curriculum experts. They get enough training and experience to talk the talk and are expected to learn along the way. And so, despite the widely acknowledged need for better-

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trained principals, reports of shortages, and waves of retirees, New Leaders candidates can end up seeming green. "Everybody just wants experience," says one Chicago school administrator who has observed several of the principal searches where New Leaders fellows were interviewed. "The bottom line is that schools want someone to run the school, not just theories."

There are also cultural and stylistic conflicts that can complicate the relationship between nontraditional principals and career educators. Winning trust at a new school—what New Leaders tend to call "gaining entry"—is a key challenge, especially for those who have spent most of their careers outside of schools.

Danny Kramer, for example, had a few run-ins with other teachers during his residency year that a more experienced administrator might have avoided. "Danny started with us before the school year started and stayed with us the whole year," says Armstrong Elementary principal Arline Hersh. "He put his foot into it occasionally and learned that way," she says. "But that's part of the process, learning how to extricate yourself gracefully."

There are also those who, threatened and offended by the notion of programs like New Leaders, question the fundamental legitimacy of bringing in outsiders. "Why should we think someone would be an effective principal just because they were once a student?" asked Jill Levy, president of the 5,500-member Council of School Supervisors and Administrators in New York, last year. Her organization has vociferously opposed Chancellor Joel Klein's efforts to revamp principal training in New York City.

Conservative Hiring

New York is actually a bright spot in the New Leaders portfolio. Three quarters of the 2003 graduates of the New York program were selected to lead schools—a big increase from the previous year, when just two of eight became principals. Chicago

Hiring a nontraditional principal may be more of a risk than hiring teachers or superintendents with nontraditional backgrounds.

has been more difficult to break into. In the program's first year, just one New Leaders graduate was tapped to run a school; two more have moved up to the top job since then. The share remains below 50 percent for the 2003 crop of New Leaders.

The disparity at least partly reflects the sheer size of the New York school district and thus the greater number of openings it has to fill. But the actual mechanisms for hiring principals in each city may provide a more likely explanation.

In New York it is largely up to district administrators to hire and assign principals. By contrast, in Chicago each individual local school council makes its own hiring decision. These councils, made up of parents, teachers, and community members, can be advised by the district. But the decision is, in the main, the council's to make.

Making the situation more difficult, roughly three out of four New Leaders in Chicago come from outside education—reflecting a priority expressed by the Chicago board of education, says Schnur.

The effects on the hiring process in Chicago are many. Local councils may not be familiar with the still-new New Leaders program, creating an enormous marketing challenge. With their strong ties to the community, local councils may also be more inclined to hire an inside person—an assistant principal, interim principal, or someone else from the community. And the principal contracts, set at terms of four years, make it very hard to remove someone if a decision goes awry.

"It is hard to get these people hired," says John Ayers, executive director of Leadership for Quality Education, a Chicago education reform group that has worked with New Leaders and supports its efforts. "Local school councils tend to be surprisingly conservative."

Bernard Lacour, a longtime school reformer who works with local school councils and consults with New Leaders on placement issues, believes

that the obstacles thrown up by council dynamics and the predisposition for experience may be exacerbated by system politics, the advantages of incumbency, and fear among local councils that their candidates will be challenged by the board of education and their authority taken away from them.

Lacour notes that candidates who have not been administrators or who come from outside education frequently make it to the interview stage but rarely get hired or placed in the Chicago system. Only in rare cases is someone's newness and lack of strong affiliation with the school system a real advantage. Sometimes council members don't even know who has applied for the job, he says. "What we need is a process that is less daunting and procedural."

Heading Charters

Not surprisingly, one result is that a substantial number of New Leaders end up running charter schools, small schools, start-ups, or education organizations rather than traditional schools, especially in Chicago.

Take Kelly Wilson. She was the second New Leader to do her residency at a small but well-known school, Ariel Community Academy, located on the south side of Chicago. Her predecessor had been hired as an assistant principal at Ariel, but before the year was even over, Wilson became executive director of a school-based teacher-training program in Chicago. She was the second New Leader to hold this position.

Opinions vary about whether this is a good outcome for graduates of New Leaders. Wilson and others say that having effective leadership in urban school systems is important, regardless of where that leadership is located. But sending too many New Leaders into alternative schools could easily create the impression that the program is not well suited for mainstream schools or that the school system is not ready and willing to hire even the most capable candidates if they enter through alternative routes. After all, imagine what would have happened if Teach for America, the storied program that places talented college graduates into low-income schools, had sent many of its members into charter schools.

In fact, many New Leaders would rather work in a traditional environment. "I'd love to work in a traditional school," says Kramer, who is now serving as an assistant principal at Clinton Elementary School. "But that's a hard nut to crack, to get the [school councils] to interview you."

Despite these difficulties, New Leaders already seems to be making an impact, both directly and indirectly. Evidence from the 2002–03 school year, while minimal, suggests that schools with New Leaders fellows at the helm outperformed other schools with first-year principals in reading and math improvements and in reduced percentages of failing students.

At the same time, there has been an enormous increase in attention toward new ways of recruiting, training, and placing principals, at least some of which can fairly be attributed indirectly to New Leaders. New Leaders has 55 residents in training this year, has expanded to Washington, D.C., and will be expanding to Memphis, Tennessee, this summer. Moreover, the organization was recently named one of the top 20 organizations that are changing the world by *Fast Company* magazine. In the meantime, other efforts to set up fast-track principal training programs dot the nation, and in-depth residency components are increasingly common. The New York, Chicago, and Boston school systems have all initiated or adapted school leadership programs that have key elements in common with New Leaders.

Befriending the System

Nevertheless, New Leaders will need to find more success in placing its graduates if it is to remain a viable model for improving the management of regular public schools. This presents no small challenge. In the end, hiring a nontraditional principal may be considered more of a risk than hiring teachers or superintendents with nontraditional backgrounds—two related trends that have swept the nation over the past decade.

For starters, compared with the principal, a teacher has an important but relatively small role in the overall well-being of a school. Principals and administrators may be more willing to “take a chance” with a single 4th-grade class than risk the health of an entire school on a candidate with little experience in education. Furthermore, with the proliferation of alternative certification and programs like Teach for America, the practice of hiring teachers without formal degrees in education or classroom experience is fairly well established. Teaching, unlike the principalship, is also often an entry-level job that requires little previous experience aside from student teaching. The only real difference between a Teach for America teacher and

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a regular teacher is the nature of their training.

Similarly, the trend toward bringing in outsiders to run school districts is now at least a decade old. Superintendents with backgrounds in business, the military, or government are hired more for their forceful personalities and management skills than for their knowledge of instruction. They can arguably rely on the veteran educators within their systems to provide instructional leadership, while school principals need to be involved more directly in the process of upgrading the curriculum and monitoring the performance of teachers. By contrast, entering a role that involves directly managing professionals, like teachers, is tough to nearly impossible in any field where a candidate does not have significant experience. After all, how many newspaper editors did not do significant time in the reporting trenches? How many law firms’ managing partners were not once first-year associates?

The lessons from the Chicago experience are clear and are already being implemented, according to Schnur. “We need to become more aggressive earlier in the year about helping nontraditional candidates access networks that can help them and in helping them understand the climate of the school system,” he says. Last year, “We didn’t invest enough time and energy into this part of the process early enough.” This year the program has started networking earlier in the process and beefed up efforts to make sure that, when the time comes, New Leaders fellows are not just ready to take leadership positions, but are also welcomed by the school system.

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