



## **Bolstering Coaching in a University's Principal Preparation Program**

**University of Connecticut**

A few years ago, the University of Connecticut took on the task of redesigning its principal preparation program. Leaders in some of the state's urban districts had expressed to the [UConn Administrator Preparation Program](#) (UCAPP) a need to better equip school leaders to address challenges unique to low-performing and city schools. UCAPP responded by making coaching and experiential learning the center of its redesigned program. "We wanted aspiring leaders to be able to immediately apply what they were learning, to plan their work with support and be observed and given feedback on the spot," said UCAPP Director Dr. Richard Gonzales.

UConn engaged in this redesign as part of the University Principal Preparation Initiative, a national effort led by The Wallace Foundation to improve university principal preparation programs. Before the initiative's launch in 2016, school district superintendents had expressed overwhelming dissatisfaction with the quality of principal preparation programs, and university program directors agreed they had room to improve. The foundation chose UConn as one of seven universities that would work with external partners to redesign their programs and create model prep programs.

Housed in the University's [Neag School of Education](#) for several years, UCAPP was already aligned to national and state learning standards with several programmatic components essential for principal preparation. To create opportunities for aspiring leaders to practice leadership behaviors aligned to standards, UCAPP worked with the Connecticut State Department of Education and local districts to design specialized urban and turnaround leadership preparation cohorts.

UCAPP selected the NYC Leadership Academy to help design a leadership coaching model focused on supporting aspiring school leaders to identify and address inequities in schools, to reflect on their behaviors, and to build their capacity. Until then, UCAPP students took a proscribed set of courses, many of them determined by the state, and university faculty monitored and evaluated them in the university classroom. To keep up with the field's increased focus on growing principals rather than supervising them, said UCAPP Program Coordinator Jen Michno, "We truly set the curriculum aside and said, 'What would we like graduates to know and be able to do?' Then we customized the instruction, put aside traditional courses, and went to a more spiraling modular approach."

*Responding to school district demands, universities are redesigning their principal preparation programs. The University of Connecticut made real changes and is seeing results.*

## WHY FOCUS ON COACHING?

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Research has found coaching to be one of the most effective forms of professional learning for a school leader. When done well, it can support principals in making transformative and sustainable change.<sup>1</sup> Coaching can be customized and develop skills and knowledge that can be applied immediately.<sup>2</sup> School leaders who receive coaching have been found to stay in their schools longer, preventing the decline in student learning and rise in teacher turnover to which principal turnover can lead.<sup>3</sup>

Despite these benefits to leaders and their schools, coaching is not the norm: Only 50% of principals in the U.S. receive coaching and mentoring on the job,<sup>4</sup> and just 64% of university-based principal

preparation programs include or have plans to include mentoring or coaching.<sup>5</sup>

That said, there is a desire among school system leaders for more effective principal preparation programs, and for more coaching for leaders. A recent survey found 80 percent of superintendents say much improvement is needed in principal preparation efforts, with a specific call for university-based programs to increase relevance and rigor.<sup>6</sup> State education leaders across the country say they are increasingly prioritizing coaching and mentoring as a way to develop school leaders.<sup>7</sup>



## PARTNERING TO ELEVATE COACHING

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UCAPP chose the NYC Leadership Academy as a partner because its coaching model “fit nicely with what we were trying to do with respect to focusing on equity and some other strategies,” said Michno. Coaching is an essential component of the NYC Leadership Academy’s work. The NYC Leadership Academy has coached more than 2,300 school and system leaders since its founding in 2003. Recent research has found that principals who receive NYC Leadership Academy coaching for more than three years stay in their schools more than twice as long as the national average for a principal.<sup>8</sup>

The NYC Leadership Academy served as a thought partner for UCAPP; provided formal training to the program coordinator and coaches; and directly coached the program coordinator and coaches.

“Together we mapped out a very well-thought out and articulate strategic plan about how to teach people about the work of leadership coaching of principal aspirants,” said Michno. The NYC Leadership Academy team “was influential in helping me create a plan for redesigning the internship and executing that plan.”

# THE NYC LEADERSHIP ACADEMY'S APPROACH TO COACHING

Coaching occurs around an agreed upon set of competencies, rich with personal reflection, experiential learning, and behavioral shifts. Our coaches' work shapes the coaching experience in concert with the leaders, basing the coaching on the school's needs and the principal's leadership needs. In learning sessions facilitated by the NYC Leadership Academy team, UCAPP coaches were trained in effective school leader practices as well as the NYC Leadership Academy's research-based coaching competencies. During the training sessions, UCAPP coaches developed the skills of listening, questioning, giving feedback, overcoming bias, identifying purpose, and integrating data and evidence.

## The NYC Leadership Academy's Coaching Competencies

### Relationship Building & Learning Context

*Who are we and why are we together?*

- Set parameters for an effective coaching relationship
- Establish a foundation for equity
- Nurture an authentic relationship with the education leader
- Learn about the education leader as a person and leader
- Learn about the education leader as a learner
- Use a system's approach to examine the education leader's context



### Establishing Coaching Purpose & Goal Setting

*Where do we need to go?*

- Explore and identify organizational goals
- Explore and identify leadership goals
- Support the education leader in envisioning change
- Develop and reflect on one's development and approach to coaching



### Fostering Learning & Achieving Results

*How will we get there?*

- Create a holding environment of support and challenge
- Listen deeply and ask questions to understand and support the education leader
- Share effective feedback
- Embody the stance of a coach
- Facilitate self-directed learning in service of coaching goals
- Cultivate and sustain accountability

What makes NYC Leadership Academy's coaching model effective:

#### **Facilitative**

Coaches create an environment in which the principal engages in critical and targeted reflection on her practice with the goal of facilitating shifts in behavior and thinking (mindset) needed for the principal to develop her capacity.

#### **Collaborative**

Provides leaders with critical thought partner who can create space for the principal to reflect without fear of judgment or evaluation.

#### **Equity-Minded**

Supports equity by helping leaders address inequity and focus on the adaptive work of school improvement.

#### **Iterative**

Continuously practice and reflect on leadership skills, behaviors, and practices as a way to build capacity and improve.

#### **Competency-Based**

Rooted in clear competencies which fall under three themes: relationship building and learning context; establishing coaching purpose and goal setting; and fostering learning and achieving results.

## A SUPPORTIVE PARTNERSHIP YIELDS BENEFITS

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In two years, the partnership between UConn and the NYC Leadership Academy resulted in the design and pilot of an intern coaching model and development of eight leadership coaches. Like a good coach, said UConn's Gonzales, the NYC Leadership Academy "did a great job of listening to us and allowing us the space to decide for ourselves... Anything we've ever wanted to see, or anything that could be shared, it's been done in a heartbeat."

Gonzales also appreciated the NYC Leadership Academy's collaborative style in helping facilitating progress and smooth partnerships.

Added Michno, "The partnership has been a wonderful return on investment," noting that the work inspired a true commitment to leadership coaching among university staff, coaches, and aspiring leaders.

### **Building a program coordinator's skills**

For the changes at UCAPP to really take root, the professional learning needed to start at the top. UCAPP Coordinator Michno had been a successful principal for more than a dozen years and was experienced in instructional coaching. However, like much of the coaching team, Michno admits she was "a blank slate" when it came to leadership coaching beyond instruction. With support from NYC Leadership Academy coaches, Michno developed leadership skills like being more observant, using day-to-day evidence during conversations around practice, and being a better listener. She improved her own coaching practice when she engaged in tiered coaching – a practice in which she would provide feedback to UCAPP coaches and then received feedback from an NYC Leadership Academy coach.



### **Building a coach's skills**

During her 11 years as a principal, Susan Muirhead led schools that earned awards such as a National Blue Ribbon School and a Connecticut School of Distinction. Yet, it was not until she became a coach for UCAPP that she received formal training as a coach and mentor. The training, she said, has helped her ask her coachees better questions "that get people to do deeper thinking rather than surface thinking," she said. She has benefited from having Leadership Academy staff observe her coaching sessions with UCAPP participants and give real time feedback.

The support from the NYC Leadership Academy has also allowed Muirhead to develop her own equity lens, she said, enabling her to support the aspiring leaders in reflecting on and talking about their own biases and how they impact their leadership practices and their schools. As a principal, she was good at examining data to develop strong programs for her school. But her work with the NYC Leadership Academy has exposed her to "different ways of looking at equity and parsing out and using the data to make sure you are having an effective program," she said. Now she is able to offer the aspiring leaders critical feedback and helps them embrace their own accountability in their leadership.





### Building an aspiring leader's skills

Muirhead's students say they are benefitting from her newly developed coaching skills. Before attending UCAPP, Brian Martin was an assistant principal at an urban high school. He was fortunate to receive coaching in that role and he selected the UConn program in part because of the leadership coaching it offered. His growth under Muirhead's coaching has been multi-faceted. He is better able to motivate staff, manage up to principals, and facilitate difficult conversations to build teacher capacity. As a leader in a charter school network, Martin saw the need for a more consistent professional learning schedule in one of the network's schools. With support from Muirhead, Martin was able to talk through and role play different approaches for getting this done and selected one that proved successful: The principal re-established professional learning community time for Martin and the teacher leaders to meet.

Martin has felt the power of the coaching support most acutely "in the details" of his approach -- preparing for a meeting with teachers or broaching a conversation with the principal. Martin also appreciates how reflective he has become under Muirhead's coaching.

**For more information on our principal preparation or coaching work, contact Mary Jo Dunnington at [mdunnington@nycleadershipacademy.org](mailto:mdunnington@nycleadershipacademy.org).**

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<sup>1</sup>Drucker, K., Grossman, J. & Nagler, N. (2018). Still in the Game: NYC Leadership Academy.

<sup>2</sup>Bloom, G., Castagna, C., Moir, E., & Warren, B. (2005). Blended Coaching: Skills and strategies to support principal development. Thousand Oaks: Corwin Press.

<sup>3</sup>Aguilar, E., Goldwasser, D., & Tank-Crestetto, K. (2011). Support principals, transform schools: Even a great leader needs a coach. *Educational Leadership*, 69(2), 70-73.

<sup>4</sup>Lavigne, H., Shakman, K., Zweig, J., & Greller, S. (2016). Principals' time, tasks, and professional development: An analysis of schools and staffing survey data. Regional Educational Development Center, Inc.

<sup>5</sup>The Wallace Foundation (2016). *Improving University Principal Preparation Programs: Five Themes from the Field*. New York: The Wallace Foundation.

<sup>6</sup>The Wallace Foundation (2016).

<sup>7</sup>Riley, D. L. & Meredith, J. (2017). State efforts to strengthen school leadership: Insights from CCSSO actions groups. Policy Studies Associates. Retrieved from <http://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/Documents/State-Efforts-StrengthenSchool-Leadership-CCSSO-Action-Groups-PSA-2017.pdf>

<sup>8</sup>Drucker, K., Grossman, J. & Nagler, N. (2018).



Contact us to learn more about our leadership development solutions.



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