

RACING TO THE TOP WITH LEADERS IN RURAL, HIGH POVERTY SCHOOLS

This article describes an innovative approach, developed by North Carolina State University, to prepare leaders specifically for work in rural schools in high poverty districts. Operating with Race-to-the-Top funding, the Northeast Leadership Academy is a selective program with embedded practice and focused summer community internships. The program aims at spanning developmental psychology across K–12 grades. Models of turnarounds are chosen for their rural contexts, and executive coaching and mentoring aid in the transition to leadership positions. Perhaps most innovative is the aim that leaders of rural schools in poor districts need to be both community-focused and student-focused. The activities for NELA Fellows are designed to graduate turnaround leaders who are diagnosticians of student learning as well.

A primary challenge for 21st century schools is achieving higher levels of learning for all children. Research clearly indicates that effective teachers increase student achievement and decrease achievement gaps. Even in the lowest-performing schools there are often examples of “heroic” teaching where an isolated teacher has a major impact on student achievement. However, if the effective teacher is the outlier, a lone island in a sea of ineffective teachers, then that teacher’s impact quickly fades out in subsequent years.

A critical and often overlooked aspect of increasing teacher quality is the role of the principal. The principal is best positioned to ensure consecutive years of effective teaching for students—thus influencing a child’s overall academic achievement (Cheney & Davis, 2011). Principals strongly influence teacher quality and, therefore, student achievement through the recruitment and retention of high quality teachers and through the creation of a school culture focused on learning and characterized by high expectations for all students (Cheney & Davis, 2011; Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Young, Crow, Orr, Ogawa, & Creighton, 2005).

Effective schools are led by principals who are equipped with the requisite knowledge, skills, beliefs, and dispositions required to improve teacher quality. In historically low-performing schools, improving teaching and learning requires a strategic investment in school leadership capacity. These schools, which are in great need of outstanding leadership, often struggle to find qualified individuals willing to serve as principal.

In this era of accountability, school leadership has become more stressful, more political, more complex, and more time-consuming (Duke, Grogan, & Tucker 2003). Transient student populations, ethnic and cul-

tural diversity, and achievement gaps contribute to creating hard-to-staff schools. In geographically isolated rural settings, high concentrations of poor and minority students, low per-pupil expenditures, and low principal salaries also create challenges for school districts when they attempt to recruit and retain principals who are capable of improving student learning outcomes (Browne-Ferrigno & Maynard, 2005).

Understandably, policymakers have become increasingly concerned about a pending shortage of qualified individuals to fill principal positions in the nation's high-need, hard-to-staff schools. It has been projected that more than forty percent of principals in U.S. public schools (and over 50% in North Carolina) will be eligible for retirement by 2015 (Education Schools Project, 2005), making the focus on educational leadership all the more timely.

A New Era

A new era of educational reform is knocking at the schoolhouse door. The U.S. Department of Education is focused on innovation, and they have targeted \$5 billion in competitive funds to back initiatives to transform schooling. The Investment in Innovation (I3) and Race to the Top (RttT) funding programs are clear and present signals of this swift move toward transforming normative practices. Both funding mechanisms have brought turnaround efforts to the fore. Secretary Duncan (Richardson, 2009) called investments such as the \$100 billion for education in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act our educational "moon shot." The president provided specific details in his 2011 State of the Union Address: "Race to the Top is the most meaningful reform of our public schools in a generation ... the approach we follow ... [will] replace No Child Left Behind."

In 2010, North Carolina was awarded \$400 million of Race-to-the-Top funding. Like many other states, North Carolina is facing a looming leadership crisis; over 50% of principals will be eligible for retirement over the next three years. Three regional leadership academies (RLAs) were established "to address the need to recruit, prepare, and support leaders of transformational change in challenging school contexts." Each RLA was charged with preparing 50–60 school leaders by providing a customized, comprehensive, research-based program that will position leaders to improve high-poverty, underperforming schools.

Building Leadership Capacity for High-Need, Hard-to-Staff Schools

Recognizing the impact that school leadership has on student achievement, particularly in high-needs schools, a major component of North Carolina's RttT proposal was to systemically design and deploy multiple pathways for recruiting, selecting and training a cadre of school leaders (both new and current) who can improve student achievement in a vari-

ety of school contexts. When North Carolina wrote its first RttT proposal, North Carolina had approximately 216 low performing schools (schools with performance composites below 50%, the vast majority of which are located in northeastern North Carolina). North Carolina's accountability model requires schools to provide students with a year's worth of academic growth annually as well as requiring a minimum performance level. Therefore, in addition to the low performing schools, a significant number of schools have not delivered student growth in recent years, which further highlights the need for school leaders who can sustain improvement once the minimal level of performance is met.

In January 2009, the Northeast Leadership Academy (NELA) received funding from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction to design a preparation program for school leaders in rural, low-performing schools in northeast North Carolina.¹ North Carolina State University's Northeast Leadership Academy (NELA) is a new model of preparation, early career support, and continuous professional development for leaders who have the desire and commitment to lead high-need schools. NELA is derived from research-based promising practices and was the pilot RLA for North Carolina's RttT proposal.

The Directors of NELA recognize that various permeations of "innovative" leadership programs have been tried in the past. However, two common criticisms arise: (a) programs often look more like traditional programs than being truly innovative and different and (b) little evidence is provided in regard to the effectiveness of the school leaders produced by these programs.

North Carolina State University (NCSU) believes that NELA truly represents a sea change in the preparation of school leaders. While NELA has invested in a number of innovative, research-based strategies that have been initiated elsewhere, the program also invests in new thinking about the preparation of future leaders in rural, poor, and underperforming schools. Additionally, an evaluation design incorporates what NELA fellows (our students) are learning and their impact on a school's teachers, students, and surrounding community.

In designing NELA a dramatic change from the ways school leaders have traditionally been prepared was sought. The directors have done more than tinkering around the edges of the program or shuffling the metaphorical deck of cards—more of the same, just in a different order. NELA truly represents a change in the deck. The Northeast Leadership Academy aims to balance theory and practice and inquiry and action. NELA did a deep dive into our Master's in School Administration curriculum and examined every assignment, every core reading and every experience to make sure that they were relevant, useful, and linked to our theory of action and North Carolina Standards for School Executives. NELA designed what was believed to be powerful learning experiences that force our students to stretch themselves and grow both professionally and personally.

NELA vetted components of our program design to panels of na-

tional and state leadership educators (including individuals from corporate leadership development and non-traditional school leader preparation programs) and continues to receive input from our external stakeholders through both our formal advisory panel and through more informal feedback processes. NELA is confident that coursework is rigorous, instructors and mentors are helpful and experienced, and internships are meaningful—focused on solving real school issues. Graduates will have the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to be effective leaders of change—using data to focus on results and reflect on practice. The NELA fellows are deeply committed to improving persistently low-achieving schools and make a three-year, post-degree commitment to work in high-need schools in the region.

NELA is aligned with constructivism and adult learning theory—tapping the wealth of adult experience and knowledge that when aligned with new knowledge, can foster deeper learning in adults. Fellows are supported through executive coaches and mentors as they are placed into challenging situations to apply their new learning. During various stages in the program, fellows are placed in project teams, the composition of which maximizes the diversity of experiences, perspectives, and leadership styles within the group.

Through role plays and challenging projects on child cognitive and developmental psychology, purposeful pressure is placed on the teams as a mechanism to help the fellows understand group dynamics, develop interpersonal skills and learn interdependency. This process prepares them for their first principalship by helping the fellows develop the skills necessary to build productive professional relationships and work with teachers and staff they did not hire and may not have chosen as employees. This is particularly important in the rural context in which they will work. They will be leaders in hard-to-staff schools in politically charged school districts where “cleaning house” by firing teachers and re-staffing the school would be impossible. The fellows will need to work with the existing faculty and lead the continuing professional development of both the faculty and staff.

NELA integrates three essential “anchors” of effective school leadership. These “anchors” encompass many skills and attributes that when combined help create a leader who is committed to excellence for students, empowers teachers and staff, and engages community stakeholders. NELA’s anchors of practice are: (a) relationships (developing and maintaining inter-personal relationships focused on the goal of educational improvement); (b) diagnosing effective teaching and learning and; (c) leadership and management skills and processes to implement change and transform schools.

Key Components

NELA incorporates a number of strategies to prepare innovative, effective leaders for rural, high-poverty schools.

Rigorous selection. Educational leadership programs have historically been populated by students who self-select into the program by meeting minimum academic requirements (most typically GPA and GRE scores). Little is done to ensure that applicants have a minimum threshold of competency in the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that research indicates are requisites for effective leadership.

For example, Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005) identified 21 characteristics of principals that are linked to higher levels of student performance. Seven of these are positively correlated with deeper school change: (a) change agent (challenges the status quo, leads change); (b) flexibility (comfortable with major changes, open to new ideas); (c) ideals and beliefs (holds strong professional beliefs about teaching and learning, shares those beliefs, and demonstrates behaviors consistent with those beliefs); (d) intellectual stimulation (up-to-date on current research, exposes staff to new ideas); (e) knowledge of curriculum, instruction, and assessment; (f) Monitors and evaluates the effectiveness of curriculum, instruction, and assessment; and (g) optimizer (inspires teachers, portrays a positive can-do attitude, drives major initiatives). However, leadership programs typically do little to screen for these characteristics in their applicants.

Further, emerging research indicates that while many of the indicators Marzano, Water, and McNulty identified can be taught, the most promising aspiring leaders also possess intrinsic values, orientations, and belief systems that include: a belief that all children can achieve at high academic levels (and they have accompanying high expectations for students and teachers); a sense of urgency; personal accountability for achieving results for students; and resiliency and perseverance when confronted with setbacks (Cheney & Davis, 2011). These intrinsic qualities are difficult to teach so NELA established a selection process that helps identify candidates with these promising qualities.

Potential candidates for NELA engage in a multi-phase assessment process which, in addition to the university requirements, includes a full-day candidate assessment during which applicants engage in authentic scenario-based activities. Candidates are assessed by evaluation teams composed of current teachers, principals, K–12 students, Department of Public Instruction representatives, district superintendents, and university faculty. (For a more detailed description of the Assessment Day, please see: <https://ncsunela.wikispaces.com>).

The multi-phased assessment process helps select NELA fellows who share the belief that all children can achieve at high academic levels, have a sense of urgency and personal accountability for achieving results for students, and have strong resiliency skills to persevere when confronted with setbacks.

As a strategy to build trusting relationships, expand collegial networks, and develop high-performing teams, fellows are admitted into a closed cohort of approximately 20 participants who progress through the

program together. Through strategic team building experiences, an expected outcome from the cohort structure is the creation of a region-wide leadership support network or community of practice which is sustainable across the fellows' professional careers.

Individualized leader development plans. At each milestone (every 4 months), NELA students use self, peer, instructor, and coaches' assessments to rate their knowledge, skills, and dispositions on the state school executive standards. Like an individualized education plan (IEP) for K–12 students, multiple diagnostic tools are used to identify areas for improvement; comprehensive action plans are developed for targeted improvement and measurable growth.

Daytime learning experiences. The very public criticism of colleges of education in recent years stems in part from the design and delivery of typical educational leadership programs. Typically teachers who want to become principals take night classes and squeeze in internship hours during their prep periods or lunch breaks—even supervising school dances counts as internship experience in some programs. Rightfully, critics have questioned how one learns to lead without authentic opportunities to practice leadership in the daily action of the school day.

NELA's learning experiences occur during the day on Tuesdays. To help bridge the geographic distance and to make the learning contextually authentic, the program is delivered in northeast North Carolina (not on North Carolina State University's campus). While our primary meeting site is at a local college campus, meetings are often held in K–12 schools to complete a school site visit before beginning the session.

During the first year of the two-year program, NELA fellows are released from teaching each Tuesday to experience facilitative, experiential learning, delve into case studies, and role play authentic scenarios, including using flip cameras for reflective practice and digital stories.

To create the time and space needed for leadership preparation and principal succession while maintaining a high quality teaching faculty, in the first year of the program, each NELA Fellow is matched with a full-time student teacher and a devoted substitute teacher (a retired master teacher).² This team is involved in co-planning and co-teaching during the days each semester that the NELA fellows engage in the practicum and other NELA activities. The substitute and student teacher co-teach the lessons those days—giving the student teacher hands-on experience and guidance from two experienced teachers. Thus, as excellent teachers exit the classroom to become effective school leaders, the teaching corps is replenished by having the aspiring leaders mentor and supervise the new teacher.

Embedded practicum. Each course has a leadership application block or practicum with related field activities and an action research project. Every other Tuesday (fellows are in training one week and in the field the next), fellows are in schools engaged in powerful learning experiences

and completing field-based assignments. Here, experiences take place in the daily flow and life of a school that is in session. Students utilize flip cameras to document their experiences for self-reflection and feedback provided by instructors and coaches.

Rural context and turnaround principles. Program curriculum and experiences are customized to the specific context—in this case rural, low performing, high-poverty schools and communities.

Community internship. NELA fellows are required to have a focused summer internship experience in the community that surrounds the district's school. Fellows are immersed in the community and learn how to build networks of partnerships to provide the critically needed resources, support, and opportunities for students in high-need schools.

The Northeast Leadership Academy partnered with the Rural School and Community Trust (www.ruraledu.org) and an extension professor from College of Agriculture and Life Sciences (CALs) (4H) to offer that experience. This is the first time that this program has engaged in such cross-university, interdisciplinary efforts. It is also the first time the program has partnered with a non-profit organization to provide the highly specialized training our students will need to be successful in rural schools.

Fellows learn about grant writing and complete a grant application on behalf of the community organization. To date, four of the 10 grant proposals from summer 2011 have been funded, providing a tangible benefit to both the school and the community agency partner.

Specialized training. NELA is preparing community-focused school leaders who are diagnosticians of learning in their school. To this end, students engage in experiences and specialized training on a variety of specific topics including: poverty, grant writing, crucial conversations, data boot camp, relationship building/trust, conflict resolution, local and federal educational policy, content area expertise (with a concentrated focus on literacy and numeracy), etc. NELA has training on utilizing digital technologies to both improve organizational skills and to model appropriate use of technology for the “wired generation” of students in our schools.

NELA fellows complete Facilitative Leadership® (FL) training and utilize FL's seven practices of facilitative leadership in their internship work: share an inspiring vision; focus on results, process, and relationships; seek maximum appropriate involvement; design pathways to action; facilitate agreement; coach for performance; and celebrate accomplishments.

Replenishing the pipeline. The program compels the development of a succession plan for leadership. Moreover, stipends are paid to encourage student teachers to go to these geographically isolated schools - providing an opportunity to replenish the teaching pipeline and fill the vacancy during the internship year and potentially beyond.

Pre-K–12 developmental psychology. Each semester students engage in a grade spanning developmental project. For instance, the first semester focuses on early childhood to early elementary age students—looking at developmentally appropriate teaching and learning practices. Similar projects are completed for upper elementary, middle school, high school, and adult learning.

The fellows gain experiences in schools across grade levels, know what resources are available in the districts, and understand developmentally appropriate pedagogy. An important component is for each fellow (or team) to design a way to “give back” to the districts or community in the form of a useful resource. The fellows share what they learned by creating various pamphlets, digital stories, web resources, professional development seminars and other materials for teachers, parents, and community agencies.

Learning exchanges. Because NELA firmly believes that seeing is believing, NELA fellows visit high-poverty, high-performing schools both in and out of the state. They also apply for grant funds to attend professional development conferences based on their individualized leadership development plans.

Executive coaching and mentoring. Executive coaches (retired expert principals and superintendents) are deployed to work with fellows based on specific needs from their individualized leadership development plans. In-school mentors play a different role—targeted at advisement in the daily functions of the internship. These school mentors receive concurrent specialized training with NELA fellows in order to integrate reforms for the individual leader and the school as an organization. As a result, both fellows and their mentors (practicing principals) receive advanced leadership training and development as they work together to solve real problems of practice at the mentor principal’s school. This degree of purposeful alignment of professional development for current and aspiring leaders helps create systems open to innovation and continuous improvement efforts.

NELA fellows have both a principal mentor and an executive coach. The principal mentor is a source of advice and information regarding district matters and help guide the action research projects. The coach is as an external source of confidential and expert support.

While executive coaching is an established practice in corporate America, the literature on the coaching of school leaders is very limited. Coaching is based on a collaborative partnership between a coach and individuals willing and ready to engage in work to develop their skills to their full potential. As such, coaching is a vehicle for analysis, reflection, and action. The business model demonstrated that effective executive coaching must be both strategic and individualized.

The executive coaching model resolves some of the long-standing problems with typical principal mentor programs. For example, in a traditional mentor program the mentors are senior organizational insiders,

often in job-similar positions. The supervisory nature of the relationship means that it may be difficult for mentees to share confidences—especially when they are struggling. Further, informal mentors have their own demanding jobs, and though they may have the best of intentions, they are usually not fully available to their protégés.

The NELA model of coaching was designed around the particular needs of school leaders. Loosely drawing from Bloom, Castagna and Warren's (2003) work, it is designed around the following precepts: (a) the coach's fundamental commitment is to student success, and the coach will appropriately direct the coachee to that end; (b) the coaching relationship is based upon trust; (c) the coach moves between instructional and facilitative coaching strategies based upon assessment of the coachee's needs and in pursuit of agreed-upon goals; and (d) the professional standards (North Carolina's Standards for School Executives) are the framework for goal-setting and ongoing formative feedback.

Before working with their mentees, the coaches participated in a customized coaching training program. The principal mentors also participated in a customized mentor training program. To enhance the work of the coaches and reduce isolation, a community of practice for the coaches was built. They share tools and resources during periodic meetings and through an electronic network. In addition to their work with the NELA fellows, the coaches are also available to work with the mentor principals of the fellows they coach.

Full time internship. Fellows participate in a full-time, paid internship in the second year of the program. Fellows continue to come together each week for learning and reflection. During the internship each fellow conducts a comprehensive review of his or her school's educational program, a review that uses both qualitative and quantitative data regarding student performance trends and other performance indicators.

Fellows use this review and other data to identify a problem of practice, develop a logic model and theory of action, and then implement a year-long school improvement project with input from their mentor principal, NELA executive coach and leadership faculty.

Transitional and early career support. Upon program completion, graduates are provided ongoing support from North Carolina State University faculty, coaches, and mentors for two years. This transitional support marks a break from the past practice of "get them through and bring in the next group" common among school leadership programs.

External evaluation, performance tracking, and internal feedback loops. NELA is being evaluated by an external evaluation team as a part of North Carolina's Race to the Top award. In addition to the external evaluation team an electronic data collection system is utilized to track individual student growth and additional dynamic internal feedback loops to drive continuous program improvement (see: <https://ncsunela.wikispaces.com/NELA+Home>).

Conclusion

The NELA design aims to disrupt the two inhibiting forces that have stalled previous reform efforts. First, educational reform efforts have been thwarted by the public's perception of what schools look like—mostly from their own experience. This has led to innovations morphing back to current practices. Second, developing individuals' capacities can be usurped by organizational dysfunction. That is, working on the individual alone will not lead to meaningful, effective, and lasting reforms. Systems that are rife with dysfunction must be simultaneously dealt with.

Currently, NELA is supported from various external funding sources, including over \$6.2 million from Race-to-the-Top (RttT) funds. The institutional barriers to reform that seemed almost insurmountable when this work began are steadily being broken down. NELA is strategically building partnerships, support structures, and highly productive inter-agency relationships so that North Carolina State University will continue to be able to provide the innovative components of NELA after the RttT funding ends.

The prowess of reforms like NELA will be predicated on the skills of school leaders that emerge and the new forms of schooling that materialize through such innovations. Early indications signal that this new era of educational reform funding is in fact creating a new wave of sustainable innovative educational reforms. NELA is utilizing an innovative, systems-based approach to leadership development and is tapping into and building on local strengths to bolster both human capital and system capacity. In doing so, NELA has re-conceptualized leadership preparation—taking it from the “I” to the “we;” from school leadership to community leadership; from superhero to servant leaders; and from lone wolf to critical mass. Thus, the cadre of 60 NELA graduates (along with their like-trained mentors and coaches) can create a tipping point—creating a new narrative of high expectations and performance.

Author Note

To learn more about the Northeast Leadership Academy (NELA), please visit: <https://ncsunela.wikispaces.com>

Endnotes

¹North Carolina's lowest performing schools are disproportionately clustered in rural school districts in the northeast region of the state.

²Identifying undergraduates who are willing to student teach in challenging, geographically isolated schools has been a difficult component of the model. While NELA hopes to have even more success with this component in the future, only a few fellows currently have student teachers. However, NELA has been highly successful in securing retired teachers to work every Tuesday in the fellow's classroom.

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