



EPISODE 10

How Districts Sustained Their Principal Pipelines

Lucas Held:

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Welcome to the second series in the Wallace Foundation's Principal Pipeline Podcast. I'm Lucas Held, Director of Communications at the Wallace Foundation. We've added this second series of podcasts in order to discuss major new findings from a study of the Foundation's six-year Principal Pipeline Initiative.

The multiyear implementation and effects study on the pipeline was conducted jointly by Policy Studies Associates and the RAND Corporation. Importantly, the evidence from this study of pipelines is strong enough to make pipelines eligible for federal funding under the Every Student Succeeds Act. Now when we talk about a Principal Pipeline, we mean a comprehensive, district-led effort to put into place four interlocking components: rigorous leader standards, high quality pre-service principal preparation, data informed hiring and placement and well aligned on-the-job support and evaluation, especially for new principals.

Those four components can also be accompanied by system supports to help make pipelines work. Those include leader tracking systems and new roles for principal supervisors. Now, in prior episodes we discussed the impact pipelines have on student achievement and principal retention, as well as how impact was measured and how pipelines are carried out.

Today, we're going to talk about how districts have sustained their efforts after the official Wallace portion of the Principal Pipeline Initiative ended. With that, let me give a warm welcome to my guests who are from three of the six districts participating in the Principal Pipeline Initiative. Marina Cofield is the senior executive director of the Office of Leadership in the New York City school system and that's the nation's largest.

Tricia McManus is assistant superintendent of leadership, professional development and school transformation for the Hillsborough County, Florida public schools. Glenn Pethel, who was a guest on a prior episode of the podcast, as I believe was Tricia, is the assistant superintendent of leadership development for the Gwinnett County Georgia school system.

Thanks to each of you for making the time to talk with us today. First, let's make a definition. I want to be clear about what we mean by sustaining the pipelines. Here, a 2019 report from Policy Studies Associates found that two years after Wallace funding ended, the district commitment remained strong. It's interesting to note that each district has institutionalized a high level position of director of leadership development as part of the superintendent's cabinet.

Tricia let's start with you. Why do you think Hillsborough decided to continue funding for pipelines, and what role did leader standards play?

Tricia McManus: [03:03](#)

In Hillsborough County public schools, we do believe that leadership is the key lever for improving schools. The current release has actually proven that across the six districts that have been part of the Principal Pipeline. Because we believe that about leadership, we decided to continue the pipeline and all of the components of the pipeline, which include the four components that you already discussed, which were leader standards, pre-service training, selective hiring, and then on-the-job evaluation and support.

Our district believes that if we have the right principal in every one of our schools, that they will create the right conditions for teachers to be the best they can be, so that student learning will be at an optimal level, and we will have successful schools. Leader standards, so that's why we've continued the funding, and leader standards, which is one of the least expensive part of the pipeline, is a critical foundation for all other components of the pipeline.

Knowing what it is you want your principals to know to do, knowing the competencies needed to be a successful school principal form the foundation for every other component of the pipeline. That is a key in not only creating a strong pipeline, but sustaining it over time.

Lucas Held: [04:17](#)

Well that's really helpful, Tricia, and it's great that you really described a through line from principals to teachers to student learning. Since that's the largest goal, it made sense for Hillsborough to continue to use that lever of leadership for student achievement. Just a brief question on context, is it unusual for an initiative that's funded by an outside entity, whether a foundation or something else, to be sustained?

I imagine Hillsborough has a lot of things that it tries out—are most of them sustained?

Tricia McManus: [04:56](#) This is sustained, because this is actually about the people and we've invested in people. That's how we've sustained this initiative. This is not a program, this is a system, it's a process where we've invested in people. Do we sustain everything? No, but I will tell you from the beginning day one of Wallace's partnership, we already had to show across the board how we were sustaining those four components.

We were primed to do that from day one.

Lucas Held: [05:24](#) Really interesting and also I think very helpful to hear your distinction between a program as opposed to a process that really is how the system functions. That's a great segue to Glenn Pethel. So Gwinnett, which has really put a deep emphasis on leadership for many years, was engaged in building pipelines before this initiative began.

How did the Principal Pipeline Initiative that you partnered with Wallace change or enhance that work, Glenn?

Glenn Pethel: [05:59](#) First, it caused us to be more thoughtful. Perhaps some of the things that we had put in place, we had put in place because other people had done that, but this initiative caused us to think more deeply about what we were doing and perhaps how we were doing that. Another word that comes to mind is intentional. This initiative caused us to be more intentional in what we were doing.

Tricia talked about leader standards. For us it caused us to think more deeply about what leaders should know and be able to do. Along the way we were able to enhance our standards, so using that as an example, we had standards in place, but this initiative caused us to be more thoughtful, to take another look, to be more intentional.

It caused us to expand our knowledge of what school leaders should know and be able to do.

Lucas Held: [07:03](#) Can you give our listeners a little example of something that might've been changed or added on that hadn't been there before?

Glenn Pethel: [07:11](#) One, for example, when we talk about what leaders should know and be able to do, we sometimes forget that there are attitudinal or dispositional areas or behaviors. Sometimes those are called competencies, so we use a number of different words

perhaps to describe one thing, which may illustrate how we sometimes have difficulty with our words.

What are the attitudes or the dispositions? Sometimes I've heard those referred to as talents. Those often are referred to as the soft skills. This initiative caused us to think long and hard about those soft skills and how we measure those and how we monitor those along the way.

Lucas Held: [07:59](#) A lot of discussion to get to an agreement on what those were. I imagine that not all principals have the same, because no two people ever have the same suite of skills and competencies.

Glenn Pethel: [08:12](#) You're absolutely right and it may be not that any particular attitude or disposition or behavior is correct, but as we broaden our understanding... Again, I think this initiative has allowed us to do that; the more we know, the more we can understand about how a candidate fits for a position, for a school, with a school community.

Lucas Held: [08:39](#) It's partly about continuing to learn and enhance the pipelines and thinking about, in the example you just gave, what is the right fit for the particular school? Well, we've been talking about sustaining principal pipelines and therefore components, but the four components, as mentioned earlier, also have some system supports.

Let's turn to the great metropolis of New York City and Marina Cofield. Marina, why don't you tell us a bit about how New York City thinks about and deploys principal supervisors who are one of the two system supports along with leader tracking system? What's the current arrangement and how is that changing?

Marina Cofield: [09:28](#) Well, in a system as large and as diverse as ours, we have about 1600 schools in our system covering a huge range of neighborhoods and communities. The principal supervisor really plays a critical role. Those principal supervisors are very closely connected to the communities that they serve, and they understand the unique strengths and the needs and challenges in the communities and the schools that they supervise.

They're really the eyes and ears on the ground to inform the work that needs to happen at the central office. We organize our principal supervisors in a few different ways. For PK-8 schools, the principal supervisors are organized geographically by community. Then we have separate high school principal supervisors who are organized by borough.

One big change that's happened over the last several years is that those principal supervisors have been really put at the forefront as the instructional leaders of the schools that they supervise. They've taken on a dual role of supervision and support. I think in the past they were really seen primarily just as supervisors, and there was a whole different group of people who were providing support, but those two roles have been brought together.

Those principal supervisors now are in a position to really organize the professional learning for the principals that they supervise and really provide coaching and supports for them. One other thing that's new just within the last couple of years, is that there's an additional layer that's put in place that we call the executive superintendent.

That's the supervisor of the principal supervisors and they've been put in place to provide professional development and supports for those principal supervisors and help coordinate efforts between central office and the schools.

Lucas Held: [11:18](#) Really interesting description and Marina, it used to be said that the job of the principal was a very lonely job, long hours. Do principal supervisors make a difference in helping principals feel connected to each other and to districts?

Marina Cofield: [11:35](#) Absolutely, I think that particularly, we see in the community school districts that those principal supervisors are bringing their principals together on a monthly basis to learn from and alongside one another, to make sense of the different initiatives that are being handed down from the central office, and to really support one another in growing their schools and accelerating student learning.

Lucas Held: [12:01](#) Really interesting and it echoes Glenn's points about continuing to really learn and develop at all levels of the system. It's been said on occasion that all education improvement efforts at some point come down to money. Let's talk a little bit about dollars and cents. There is a cost to continuing this work. All three districts have sustained it.

During the initiative we know that about a third of the funding came from Wallace and that was mostly for one time investments in system supports. RAND found, in a separate cost study, that the overall pipeline costs just under half a percent of the district's annual expenditures. Let's turn to you, Tricia— what difference has the cost made in Hillsborough's ability to sustain the pipeline?

Tricia McManus:

[13:03](#)

Many of the onetime costs were to help us bring partners to the table that could really help us think differently about how we are selecting leaders, about how we are succession planning for future leaders, developing leaders. As we met with partners, from day one, every partnership was built on the premise that they are going to build capacity of district leaders to keep the work going.

We do not want to have a partner that we have to actually invest in forever. Many of our partnerships started with one or two years with these thought partners at the table with us helping us design the systems, helping us design the practices. Then they trained our own district leadership, and so again, we are now owning, we own, we all own.

Our motto is we all own the pipeline in Hillsborough, because we also use our own school-based leaders, our own principal supervisors to do the lift of selecting future leaders. I mean they're trained, they serve on the panels, they are the folks that are developing the leaders in our aspiring leaders programs, our aspiring principal programs.

We are capitalizing on the talents within our own system, so again, those are one-time costs that we funded, but always with the goal that we would actually sustain those practices ourselves. The pipeline, it's not only funding that leads to sustainability, it's also what your district believes should be part of the...what becomes part of the culture.

I will say that what becomes part of the culture is even more important than funding as far sustainability. The strong pipeline and the components of the pipeline are now part of each of the six districts, including Hillsborough's culture. All parts and components of the pipeline are actually implemented by folks within the system.

Lucas Held:

[14:57](#)

It's a really interesting point and it's said that something is sustained when it becomes institutionalized. I think you've given us a really great definition in five words, we all own the pipeline. It doesn't belong to one department or one person, it's part of what the system does. Terrifically helpful.

Glenn, let's turn to another system support, which is leader tracking system. This might be a new concept to folks, it sounds something digital, so maybe give us a brief flavor of what it is.

Glenn Pethel:

[15:39](#)

We often say that we are data rich, but information poor. I think that's especially true for school districts. What that means is that we collect a lot of information, but we store that information in any number of different ways. A leader tracking system simply put is just an automated system. It's a way of pulling all of that data where we are rich, and pulling it together in a way, in a systematic approach, so that we can retrieve that data and we can match data when we need to.

For example, historically all of us have collected data about a principal's past experiences: where they taught, how they were prepared, where they were prepared. Perhaps we kept historical information on their job performance. We kept information on their professional learning experiences. A leader tracking system takes that data that may be located in a human resources software package.

It takes data that may be simply stored away as a paper file somewhere, and it brings all of that data together, so that we have what we would call the business intelligence, so that we can improve our decision-making. For all of us, these leader tracking systems have taken the form of being webpages, being dashboards that have been created that pull from that automated system and some tools along the way.

Again, they help us to answer quickly and easily problems that we're trying to solve for, specifically when we're trying to ensure best fit with a vacancy at a school. We go to our data, again, which may have been loosely connected in the past. The beautiful thing is that the leader tracking system now tightly pulls that data together, so that we are information rich, as well as data rich.

Lucas Held:

[18:16](#)

Well, I want to thank each of our three panelists, Marina Cofield, Tricia McManus, and Glenn Pethel. I think they have helped all of us listening become more information rich. Just to pull out a couple of themes, we heard from Marina that the pipelines are ways of strengthening the principal and the principal's role in the community by providing coaching and connecting.

We've heard Tricia note that we all own the pipeline, which suggests an extraordinary degree of institutionalization. We've heard the theme of improved decision-making and data collection to make better choices. We also heard, to close this podcast, I think a reaffirmation of the wisdom of connecting investments in leadership to what ultimately our schools are

seeking to do, which is to provide every child the opportunity to fulfill his or her potential.

Let's thank our three panelists again and we'll see you next time.