Distributing Instructional Leadership

Implementation Lessons from an Urban School Leadership Residency Program

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RAND Education

WR-1275-NTP

September 2018
Abstract

Using focus group and interview data collected annually over four years with participants in an alternative-route school leadership preparation program, we examine the strengths and challenges of the preparation model as implemented in a small urban district. Representing a partnership between the city school district, local charter school networks, and a large nonprofit organization, the program provided a two-year residency for aspiring administrators working as assistant-level administrators or teacher leaders. By their second program year, most residents reported feeling rigorously prepared for school leadership roles. Amid declining enrollments and school closures, residents’ career paths diverged over time, with two of 42 initially placed residents obtaining principalships within the four-year study period, and about a third receiving promotions to higher positions. Residents reported differing levels of support for their residency roles, especially those teachers in instructional leadership roles. Some program participants reported that residents in their schools were strategically deployed to distribute responsibility for instructional improvement; this was particularly true in schools staffed by program alumni.
**Introduction**

A large body of literature attests to the importance of school leadership for improving student learning and attainment. Evidence generated over the last half-decade suggests that variation in principal effects may be as large as variation in teacher effects, meaning that a standard deviation in principal effectiveness appears to account for 10% of a standard deviation or more in student-level achievement across several recent large-scale studies (Branch, Hanushek, & Rivkin, 2012; Chiang, Lipscomb, & Gill, 2016; Coelli & Green, 2012; Dhuey & Smith, 2014; Grissom, Kalogrides, & Loeb, 2015). Moreover, teachers often identify school leadership as an important determinant of their morale and persistence in a given school (TNTP, 2012), and frequent turnover of school leaders is associated with lower-quality learning environments as measured by student test scores (Beteille, Kalogrides, & Loeb, 2012; Miller, 2013).

This growing empirical evidence about the importance of principals arrives amid modest structural changes in pathways to the principalship. In most U.S. states, school administrative licensure typically requires at least three years of classroom teaching experience, passing a licensure test, and obtaining a graduate-level degree in school administration or leadership (Campbell & Gross, 2012; Briggs, Cheney, Davis, & Moll, 2013). Thus, the vast majority of U.S. schools are led by principals prepared through traditional, university-based licensure routes (Hale & Moorman, 2003). But some researchers and policymakers have suggested that licensure criteria focused on graduate credits do little to promote high-quality leadership at a time when school leaders are expected to continuously raise student achievement (Campbell & Gross, 2012; Levine, 2005). They have also argued that the cost of a graduate degree may arbitrarily deter
talented individuals from pursuing school leadership roles and limit the diversity of principal labor force (Campbell & Gross, 2012; Hess & Kelly, 2005).

By working with state licensure offices and responding to local hiring needs, a new generation of school leadership preparation programs has begun to offer alternatives to university-based educational leadership programs. These newer programs have emphasized on-the-job training through paid leadership residencies, supplemented by professional development in leadership and management skills. One prominent example is New Leaders (formerly New Leaders for New Schools), a national non-profit organization that selectively recruits and places school leadership candidates into principalship residencies, where they learn on the job but are also supported by professional development from the program. Two studies of New Leaders-trained principals—one conducted in the Oakland Unified School District, and another undertaken across ten school districts—showed that students of New Leaders-trained principals outperformed same-district schools in mathematics and English Language Arts (ELA) once the principals had held their positions for at least three years (Booker & Thomas, 2014; Gates, Hamilton, Martorell, Burkhauser, & colleagues, 2014).

Another prominent alternative-route program is the New York City Leadership Academy’s Aspiring Principals Program, which selectively recruits and places candidates into principalship residencies in New York City. Corcoran, Schwartz, and Weinstein (2012) found that principals prepared through Aspiring Principals modestly improved students’ achievement in ELA relative to other schools in the city after holding their positions for at least three years.

And because charter schools in many states have at least partial autonomy from educator licensure requirements, some CMOs, such as the Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP), have
developed their own alternative-route training programs for preparing school principals (Prothero, 2015).

The current article focuses on a newer alternative-route program for school leader preparation, operated by a national nonprofit organization, TNTP (formerly, The New Teacher Project). Having worked for nearly two decades to improve the recruitment and placement of skilled teachers in urban school districts, in 2014 TNTP launched Pathways to Leadership in Urban Schools (PLUS), a program for recruiting and training promising school leaders through in-service residencies. The program launched initially in two cities, and subsequently expanded to other cities through separate, local partnerships. Each partnership has featured its own local recruitment process. Each has also aimed to select residents who were familiar with local schools and their needs, and who expressed a long-term interest in working in the city. The programs were designed to build a pipeline of skilled future leaders and to develop local capacity to sustain the pipeline, thereby promoting strong educational leadership over the long term.

In this article, we focus on implementation of one of the first two PLUS partnerships during the four years after its launch. Drawing on focus group and interview data with four cohorts of residents and on interviews with mentor principals and district and CMO officials, we describe the strengths and challenges of the model as perceived by participants, as well as the career trajectories of the first four cohorts of residents. The program was distinctive among many alternative school leadership preparation programs in that residents were employed in a variety of subordinate administrative roles and classroom teaching roles. As such, the program promoted a distributed approach to leadership, in which educators working in non-principal roles were prepared to lead instructional and cultural change within their schools. This approach challenged traditional leadership norms and encountered logistical hurdles in some contexts. Yet in some
schools—especially those staffed by alumni of the program—the model seemed to provide a strategy for cultivating leadership talent while cultivating shared responsibility for instructional improvement.

This article is organized as follows: The next section situates our study in the context of literature on distributed leadership. We then describe the PLUS implementation city and the program itself, including its theory of action, components, selection process, and placement of residents in the first three cohorts. The sections that follow describe our research questions, data collection strategy, analytic methods, and design limitations. We then turn to our findings with regard to the research questions. Finally, we discuss implications for other leadership pipeline programs.

The Promise of Distributed Leadership

For districts or cities, building a pipeline of future school leaders means equipping promising educators with the diverse array of skills needed to successfully lead schools—the kinds of skills that Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, and Wahlstrom (2004) have described as setting directions, developing people, and redesigning the organization. To achieve this, localities must consider not only the kinds of formal training principals need, but also how to hone and leverage these skills through on-the-job learning as they are being developed.

The research on distributed leadership provides a framework for conceptualizing this approach. Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond (2001) define distributed leadership as being “stretched over the work of a number of individuals” and grounded in “the interaction of multiple leaders” (p. 20). Leithwood and Jantzi (2000) found a positive association between the distribution of leadership tasks across teaching staff and student engagement, while Harris and
Muijs (2004) detected a positive relationship between teachers’ involvement in leadership activities and students’ motivation and confidence.

More recent studies have sought to examine the conditions that facilitate the effective distribution of leadership within schools. In a study of eight schools in a large Canadian district, Leithwood, Mascall, Strauss, Sacks, Memon, & Yashkina (2007) interviewed informal teacher leaders and their principals and teaching peers to understand factors that inhibited and supported distributed leadership. They found that the distribution of leadership responsibilities worked best when principals, and even district office leaders, created structured opportunities for teachers and other staff to take on responsibility for key initiatives. It also depended on teachers having the skills to implement the principals’ leadership vision. In other words, the context and structures created by formal administrators facilitated effective sharing of leadership tasks with staff who had the skills to execute those tasks.

The sharing of leadership tasks may, in turn, improve school effectiveness if it extends the reach and impact of formal leaders. This may be particularly important if distributed leadership expands teachers’ access to instructional coaching. In a meta-analysis of causal research on teacher coaching, Kraft, Blazar, and Hogan (2018) found an average effect of 0.49 of a standard deviation on instructional behavior, and of 0.18 of a standard deviation on student achievement. Though the study did not examine differential effectiveness by the coaches’ employment status (as full-time or part-time coaches, principals, or peers), the effect estimates suggested that instructional coaching can have substantial positive effects on teaching and learning. In addition, several studies have documented links, not necessarily causal, between the extent of faculty collaboration around instruction and gains in student achievement (Akiba & Liang, 2016; Goddard, Goddard, & Tschannen-Moran, 2007; Moolenaar, Sleegers, & Daly,
2012; Ronfeldt, Farmer, McQueen, & Grissom, 2015). Together, these studies suggest that increasing teachers’ access to instructional coaching—and even to collaboration around instruction—may help to promote school effectiveness. A distributed leadership approach may facilitate such access.

In addition, the distribution of leadership responsibilities could plausibly encourage employee retention among teachers seeking professional advancement (Firestone and Pennell, 1993; Grissom, 2011; Simon & Johnson, 2015). This may be important in many contexts, because the path from administrative licensure to the principalship is often lengthy and uncertain. Using North Carolina administrative data, Bastian and Henry (2015) found an average time of 5.12 years between licensure and the principalship among those who did eventually become principals. Using administrative data from Texas and tracking teachers from administrative licensure forward, Davis, Gooden, & Bowers (2017) found that only 20% became principals within six years, and that fewer than half became principals within the sixteen years observed in the data. Grissom, Mitani, and Woo (2018) tracked graduates from twelve principal preparation programs in Tennessee, finding that between 28% and 52% were hired as assistant principals within five years, and that only 6% to 17% were hired as principals within five years. How well schools are capitalizing on the leadership training of these educators as teachers and junior administrators is not entirely clear in the literature, and it is an issue we consider in the context of the PLUS implementation.

The PLUS Program and Its Context

Our analysis focuses on implementation of the PLUS program over a four-year period in a small U.S. city. Due to a decline in its manufacturing base, the city's population size has
contracted by about 40%, to fewer than 100,000 people, over the last seventy years. In the past 15 years, the city's poverty and per capita crime rates were among the highest in the United States, and its schools faced concomitant challenges. Between 2003 and 2016, the average percentage of public school students qualifying for free and reduced-price lunches in the city’s public schools was about 90%, versus 36% for the remainder of the state. And schools’ academic proficiency on state accountability tests lagged the rest of the state by 18 to 30 percentage points.¹

In 2013, the district partnered with TNTP on a plan to use the newly developed PLUS program to recruit and train promising local educators to become school principals. The plan’s design reflected attributes of principal preparation programs that had been highly rated by principals in a national study commissioned by The Wallace Foundation (Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, Orr, and Cohen, 2007). These included a rigorous selection process, an emphasis on instructional leadership, prioritization of practical skills, recruitment of educators who were familiar with the needs of the local community, and promotion of hands-on learning experiences. In 2013, the city’s plan received funding by a U.S. Department of Education School Leadership Program grant. This allowed the city’s PLUS program to recruit its first cohort of school leadership residents in the spring of 2014, and to launch the first summer institute in July of 2014.

¹ Based on authors’ calculations using school-by-year level panel data from the states' education department website, 2003-2016.
Theory of Action

The PLUS program's initial theory of action envisioned that recruiting, selecting, and preparing school leaders through a two-year residency consisting of professional development workshops, coaching by program staff, and mentoring by a lead principal would increase the pool of effective school leader candidates, increase the number of schools staffed by effective leaders and improve leadership practices in those schools. Improved leadership, in turn, was expected to increase teachers’ instructional capacity and improve student outcomes. This theory of action is formalized in the logic model displayed in Figure 1.

<Insert Figure 1 about here>

The logic model shows the key inputs of selective recruitment, intensive coaching and professional development, and on-the-job training leading to transformations in school processes (improved student support and intensified instructional coaching), which were, in turn, expected to lead to improved outcomes in the form of student behavior, attendance, graduation rates, and academic achievement. This change was expected to occur in two phases: first in the near term, with residents in supporting leadership roles, and then to a greater extent as residents rose to principalships three-to-five years after completing the program.

Program Components

For each cohort, the program began with the summer institute, which ran seven to nine hours per day for five weeks in the summer prior to the start of school. The institute sessions, which included extensive group work, simulations, and role-plays, focused on topics such as observing and evaluating teaching lessons, providing "bite-size" and actionable feedback to teachers, and "managing up" to work effectively with mentor principals and other supervisors.
During the first residency year, residents met in person about every two weeks with leadership coaches assigned to them by the program. The coaches helped residents address specific challenges. These included time management, obtaining supervisors’ and teachers’ support for instructional coaching, and balancing residency duties—such as observing and coaching teachers—with other responsibilities of their jobs—such as handling non-instructional administrative tasks or teaching classes.

Residents also participated in monthly, daylong professional development workshops. These provided hands-on practice and role-plays on topics such as instructional coaching, implementing Common Core State Standards, using data to make decisions, and developing leadership skills. In the first year, residents also took part in virtual coaching, in which they videotaped their instructional coaching sessions and discussed them with an online leadership coach, and they completed monthly assignments that culminated in an instructional improvement plan for their schools.²

Altogether, the program provided at least 300 hours of professional development to each resident during the first residency year. This included 200 hours for the five-week summer institute, 70 hours for the daylong professional development workshop each month, 20 hours for bi-monthly on-site leadership coaching, and 10 hours for virtual coaching. During the second residency year, the program provided at least 70 hours of support in the form of monthly

² In lieu of virtual coaching, Cohort 1 residents held monthly “Critical Friends Group” meetings, in which they convened with cohort peers to systematically discuss leadership challenges (Curry, 2008). For subsequent cohorts, virtual coaching replaced critical friends groups.
professional development workshops and periodic coaching, bringing the two-year professional
development total to at least 370 hours per resident.

Residency Placements

Residents were initially hired into one of three types of roles in the city: Lead Educator, Apprentice School Leader (ASL), and Teacher Leader. The first two categories were administrative roles, and the third was a teaching role. Lead Educator positions were limited to district-run schools and were similar to assistant principalships, with duties that included instructional leadership, test coordination, managing student behavior, and miscellaneous administrative tasks. ASL positions were specific to charter schools in the city. They included three local charter management organizations (CMOs). The vast majority of charter school residency placements were with a CMO that had contracted with the district around 2015 to take over operation of several struggling schools, but a couple of charter school residencies were with two other CMOs in the city. With titles such as Apprentice School Leader of Instruction, Apprentice School Leader of Specialized Services, and Assistant Principal of Instruction or Specialized Services, these positions typically emphasized teacher observation and instructional coaching responsibilities.

Teacher Leader roles began in the program's second year. These were full-time classroom teaching positions in which residents—as part of their PLUS program requirements—were expected to observe and coach a small caseload of fellow teachers. Scope and support for the Teacher Leaders roles varied widely by the hiring schools. A few Teacher Leaders reported that they received a release period for such coaching, but most said they did not.

<Insert Table 1 about here>
Table 1 indicates the distribution of initial residency placements across program years. Because all members of the program's first entering cohort in 2014-15 already held administrative licenses, eight of nine were hired into Lead Educator roles, and one was hired as an ASL in a charter school. In subsequent years, Lead Educators constituted a smaller fraction of initial placements. This was due to the program's admission of residents without administrative licenses and because of limited vacancies in Lead Educator roles. Across the four cohorts, just over half (52%) of initial placements were into administrative roles.

**Program Selection, Placement, and Advancement**

The PLUS program was designed to be selective before and during the residency experience. Phase 1 of the selection process was an online application with essay questions, including a prompt to evaluate a videotaped lesson. Phase 2 was a 30-minute phone interview about applicants’ leadership experiences and goals. Those invited to Phase 3 participated in a half-day meeting that included interviews, group work, and role-plays.

In 2014, 134 individuals applied to be part of the first cohort. Eighty-seven received phone interviews, 45 were selected to take part in the group interview, and 16 were selected for the program. Selected residents then had to find employment in a district or charter school in the city, with some support from the program. Of the 16 selected in the first cohort, nine found residency employment in the city, four found positions in a nearby city and joined a sister program, and three were unable to find positions or declined the residency program offer. This makes the in-city placement rate of initial applicants about 7%, meaning that about one of every 15 initial applicants found employment in a residency in the city. In subsequent years, the ratio...
of initial applicants to placed residents was reported to fluctuate only moderately around those initial figures.

<Insert Table 2 about here>

The residency employment experience served as an additional screening step toward program completion. As shown in Table 2, seven of nine residents in the first cohort completed the first residency year; the other two left the program mid-year but maintained administrative roles in the district. Among the second cohort, which initially consisted of 13 residents, two left the program during the first year, and another two left between the first and second years to take jobs outside of the city. The third cohort consisted of eight residents, seven of whom remained in the program through the first residency year. All twelve members of the fourth cohort persisted through the first residency year in 2017-18. Residents who completed the program, demonstrated proficiency in all program requirements, and did not already hold administrative licensure were able to receive the program’s endorsement for a school administrator license from the state.

As noted, PLUS was developed with the idea that dynamic educators would be prepared for principal positions from which they could lead school improvement efforts. In practice, one obstacle to realizing this vision was the scarcity of principal positions—and even junior-level administrative positions—available in the district. According to school-level data from the state, the number of schools in the district declined from 33 in 2003 to 21 in 2016. Coupled with high principal and administrative stability in the district, openings for principalships were scarce. As of the 2016-17 academic year, only one program resident had been hired into a principalship, and another was hired as principal of a charter school-within-a-school in the 2017-18 academic year.
**Relationships of Residential Placements to School Performance and Culture**

In a companion paper, we examined whether schools' exposure to PLUS residents was associated with their performance over time (Steele, Steiner, & Hamilton, 2018). Using school-by-year data from across the state, and employing school fixed-effects models that relied on within-school changes over time, we found that each resident-by-year in an administrative role was associated with an additional 14% of a school-level standard deviation in mathematics scale scores, 10% of a school-level standard deviation in ELA scale scores, and 2.5 percentage points in four-year graduation rates. Estimated effects of each resident-by-year in a teacher leadership role were 17% of a school-level standard deviation in mathematics scores. However, each resident-by-year in an administrative role was also linked to higher chronic absence rates by one percentage point, and to higher suspension rates by nearly four percentage points. These estimates were smaller, and few reached statistical significance, in samples estimated only within the treatment city. There was little evidence of a relationship between presence of a resident and teachers' reports of school culture.

**Research Questions**

The implementation study presented here was designed to illuminate how well the program model—the two-year residency placement in combination with leadership coaching and professional development—met the priorities and needs of program residents. As the study progressed, we also wanted to understand how mentor principals, as well as district and CMO officials, viewed the program. The paper addresses three key research questions:
(1) What were the strengths of the PLUS program as reported by residents and other stakeholders?

(2) What were key challenges that residents and other stakeholders encountered with the program model?

(3) How did residents' career trajectories develop over time, and what did they consider to be their own key impacts on their schools?

Data Collection and Sample

To gain an understanding of the perspectives of residents and alumni, we conducted cross-sectional resident focus groups annually in the fall of 2014 through 2017, and longitudinal case study interviews annually in the spring of 2015 through 2018. We also spoke with a subset of mentor principals and district and CMO officials in the fall of 2017.

Focus groups were held each fall for all residents in their first or second year in the program. These lasted about 60 minutes and were conducted separately by cohort. Focus group participation was voluntary, but for the convenience of the residents, the focus groups were conducted, whenever possible, at the end of the program's professional development days. Participation numbers in each focus group are shown on the right side of Table 2. Participation for residents in their first year was moderately higher than for those in their second year, in part because attendance at the PLUS professional development workshops preceding the focus groups were not usually mandatory in the second year. Semi-structured focus group protocols addressed residents’ experiences with the program's professional development offerings, support from their leadership coaches, support and challenges in their residency placements, and professional goals.
In addition, we invited three-to-four members of each cohort to be part of a longitudinal case study subsample, whom we interviewed annually by phone for 60 minutes from their program entry year through the spring of 2018 academic year. We selected case study participants with input from the program. In doing so, we aimed to include individuals in a diverse set of placements (elementary versus secondary, district-run versus charter, and teacher leaders versus school administrators), insofar as such categories were applicable in a given year. Participation was voluntary, and one invited resident in the first cohort declined to take part. In subsequent cohorts, all invited residents agreed to participate. There was no attrition until the final study year, in spring of 2018, when we experienced the attrition of two cohort 1 participants—one of whom we were able to replace with an alternate—and one cohort 2 participant. Semi-structured case study interview protocols addressed participants’ professional histories and goals, changes in their residency and post-residency roles over time, accomplishments and challenges in their jobs, views about program strengths and needs, prospects for long-term program sustainability, and perceived impacts on their schools over time.

In the final study year, 2017-18, we interviewed a subset of four mentor principals who volunteered to speak with us about the program, three in a focus group setting, and one in a one-on-one interview. We also conducted individual interviews with two district officials and two central-office officials of a partner CMO. These interviews focused on these leaders' experiences.

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3 In cohort 1, two case study participants were interviewed in spring 2015, and one was interviewed in fall 2015. Two others were initially interviewed in fall 2015 but left the program before the end of the first residency year.
of the residency program, views about the residency roles, and perspectives on the program's value and sustainability in the city.

For each instance of focus group or interview participation, participants received a $40 gift card in appreciation of their time.

Analytic Methods

We audio-recorded focus group proceedings and interviews with participants’ informed consent. Recordings were transcribed, and the transcripts were checked and edited by the interviewers for clarity and accuracy.

We developed a codebook for qualitative coding based on the focus group and interview topics and organized by themes including prior experience, experiences in leadership training, experiences in residency placement, professional goals, local context, and challenges and successes. We refined the codebook with input from PLUS program staff, and we conducted further refinements during the coding process. We analyzed transcripts using NVivo 10 qualitative data analysis software. We then completed a second round of inductive coding to address the research questions, and we drew representative quotations to illustrate salient themes.

Study Limitations

This paper provides insights for the field from the experience of one school leadership pipeline development strategy in an urban district that was facing economic and student achievement challenges. The findings are based on the insights of four cohorts of program participants and reflect the particular context in which the program's strategy was implemented in the summer of 2014 through the spring of 2018.
Because our data collection strategy was centered around focus groups with residents and longitudinal interviews with a selected subset of those residents, our findings do not reflect the direct perspectives of district or school leaders who, undoubtedly, were juggling many competing priorities and interests beyond those of the leadership development program. Still, our findings illuminate the strengths and challenges of an alternative route to school leadership preparation in an urban school district as experienced over time by program participants.

This qualitative study may be of interest to cities developing or refining their own leadership pipeline strategies. Readers should nevertheless bear in mind that the city's context is unique, and the way the PLUS program is implemented in any given city is highly sensitive to the local and state context. This analysis also serves as a companion to our aforementioned quantitative study of the schoolwide achievement, attainment, behavior, and culture associated with schools’ exposure to PLUS residents (Steele, Steiner, & Hamilton, 2018).

One point to note about our reporting conventions is that, when quoting participants, we have tried to protect their confidentiality as much as possible by omitting particular attributes of their career histories, often including their cohorts, except when they are relevant to the point at hand or demonstrate consistencies or variation in themes over time. Also, we broadly use the term “resident” to include both current residents and program alumni except when the distinction between the two statuses at the time of data collection is relevant to the analysis.

**Key Findings**

Our findings are organized by research question. We first address program strengths as perceived by residents and other stakeholders. We then address program challenges, and how
schools mitigated these in some cases. Finally, we discuss residents’ career trajectories over time and what they perceived to be their main areas of impact on their respective schools.

**Strengths of the Leadership Preparation Approach**

In all four years of the study, focus group and case study participants reported that they valued the program, found the training to be relevant and applicable in their jobs, and believed that the training would position them for future success as school leaders. In particular, they reported finding value in the PLUS program’s job-embedded coaching, its hands-on summer institute and workshops, and the support they received from peers in the program.

**Job-Embedded Coaching**

Residents consistently highlighted the value of the program's bi-weekly, one-on-one coaching during the residency years. They said they valued the bi-weekly coaching support because it was customized around their individual needs, providing them with an opportunity to navigate challenging situations. They also appreciated that it was job-embedded, in that coaches met with them at their schools, and accessible, in that they described communicating with their coaches via text, phone, and email between in-person sessions. Several alumni of the program noted that they wished they still had access to the regular coaching support.

Residents reported that coaches taught them how to organize their calendars around classroom observation priorities without neglecting other job responsibilities. "I went to my coach with my schedule,” explained a Cohort 1 resident, “and a couple tweaks made all the difference."
Residents also described how coaches had helped them to refine their instructional observation and feedback skills. A Cohort 3 resident offered the following example:

[My coach] has been really good about when we walk in [to a classroom], and she and I are together, she’ll say all these things she saw and I think, “Are you serious? I didn’t see any of that.” She is showing me how, when I walk in, that there are...specific things that you have to recognize right away.

Because charter school work calendars began in the summer, charter school residents were often precluded from attending the PLUS summer institute, and their schedules conflicted with some monthly professional development workshops. They described their coaches as supplementing the training that other residents were receiving.

Another resident working in a charter school emphasized the importance of learning to work smoothly with principals and supervisors:

Something I learned from [the program] was about having conversations with people above me, "managing up" conversations, getting others who have an impact on what you do be on board. It was [my coach's] strength. She will say to me, “So have that conversation with me right now, I’m your principal.” And she walked me through it. I felt more comfortable having those conversations with my principal as a result.

**Hands-on Summer and Academic Year Workshops**

Beyond the job-embedded coaching, residents also praised the five-week summer institute that preceded their first residency year, and the monthly, daylong professional development workshops they attended during the first residency year. A Cohort 1 resident explained:
The one thing that has stuck out was the sense of urgency I left the summer training with. I never worked so hard... and when I got to my building, I really had a sense of urgency to make moves quickly.

A Cohort 2 resident offered a similar assessment: “I learned more in five weeks--and I have education coming out of my ears—and I [still] learned more in the five weeks of my [summer] boot camp than I have ever learned."

Pointing to specific features that made the program compelling, one resident noted the importance of instructional coaching role-plays and the constructive feedback they engendered:

Specifically, it’s the feedback you get, regardless of whether you wanted to hear it or not...[T]he trainers told me what I needed to know. At first I thought the role-plays were excessive, but in an urban school, situations can get [stressful], so having some experience was useful.

Another resident offered a similar analysis:

Primarily it was the process of observation and feedback, having the opportunity to practice that with role-playing, watching the videos—that’s not something we did in our principal certification program.

In characterizing the monthly professional development workshops, residents attested to the relevance of the sessions, the opportunities for hands-on practice, and the model the sessions provided for their own professional development planning:

By being able to participate in the workshops...we can actually not only lead PD [professional development] better in our own schools, but when we go to other workshops that are being offered by the district or whatever, we can see the difference. If
it’s an [administrator] leading a workshop, and two of us are in the room, we know if it isn't a PLUS person.

Another Cohort 3 resident clarified the difference: “It’s that PLUS training is more hands-on. We’re doing the work as opposed to being told what to do.”

Several residents commented on the advantages of skills taught in the program relative to those learned in traditional principal preparation programs. One resident initially placed as a Teacher Leader commented on the skill of taking non-evaluative, descriptive observation notes, and on the general level of preparation the program offered:

I want to say up front that there is no PD like PLUS PD…I completed [a traditional master’s] program coincident with the PLUS program, and it’s like comparing apples to oranges. Even just taking low-inference notes...[These] were never mentioned in any of my master’s [degree] classes, which is nuts because we were evaluating teachers, but they didn’t give us the practice and tools to do it. Action steps and coaching tools were given by PLUS, not my [master’s] program, and that’s what teachers need to hear, that’s what moves practice. If I’m going up for the same position as someone else, I have the edge, because I will be able to help the teacher more than someone who came from a master’s program. We had [an administrative] position filled recently, and feedback was given that the candidate pool was strong, but the person who got the job was from PLUS because that person already had everything they would need.

Other stakeholders concurred with the positive assessment of residents' skills. A mentor principal in a school staffed by PLUS residents described the residents as "a different breed" in comparison to other Assistant Principals and Lead Educators she had worked with, noting that "They are much more knowledgeable. Even when we started [as principals], we weren’t prepared
like they are being prepared now." Another principal concurred, but with a qualifier about the residents' chief domains of expertise: "I think they are knowledgeable about [the teaching rubric] and pedagogy and providing measurable feedback to teachers." Yet another principal noted that in the past, junior administrators "were exposed to the theory, and the practice came when you got the job. [Whereas] these residents have the theory and the practice. That’s the difference between then and today."

Even several years into the program, its alumni described the persistent relevance of skills it had taught them:

_I had an “aha moment” recently when I remembered the professional development we did about staff retention. I had staff I worked very hard to develop and I need them to stay. I don’t have time to reinvest in training new teachers so I had to take steps to have the retention conversations, and I was already prepared for that because of PLUS._

One resident in an administrative role commented on the global value of the residency program, and its lasting impact:

_I didn’t have any real experience as a leader prior to PLUS other than knowing things weren’t ideal, and this wasn’t how it should look. PLUS showed me how you do [school improvement], and here are some tools you can use. Anyone can point out these things, but not everyone can make those changes, and PLUS showed me how._

**Peers Within and Across Cohorts**

Another theme that emerged consistently is that residents viewed one another as like-minded allies who shared a focus on instructional improvement. They spoke of one another as sources of support, advice, and inspiration. In the words of one resident in an administrative role,
“One of the saving graces about the program is I know there are people who are like-minded, and I’m just not here alone in this district.”

By the fourth year of the program, two-thirds of residents had other program residents in their buildings from the same cohorts, different cohorts, or both. Residents frequently spoke of the advantages of having multiple residents in the building. “At [my school],” one resident commented, "we are the three amigos, and we are making more intentional moves [toward] more collaboration.” Another resident commented on the philosophy that seemed to connect the residents:

*I think it’s really nice to work with people without questioning whether you have the same values... With school leadership, we try to focus on a vision, but we don’t necessarily norm on the values, at least in the schools I’ve worked in before. Like, what are the values we share? And that’s not really a question if you’re in [the program]. You value student achievement above all, and you value the individual child in that experience...and getting them to be college or career ready. So that automatically opens up a very honest dialogue between me and the other resident at my school.*

This theme of relying on other residents for support and shared perspectives was raised by members of each cohort whether they worked in district or charter schools. One program alumnus described the spirit of camaraderie as “PLUS for life,” noting that “all PLUS graduates talk all the time.”

Though members of all four cohorts cited their program peers as crucial sources of support, there was variation in the extent to which residents said they experienced that support. For instance, residents working in charter schools reported weaker initial connections with cohort peers because their schedules caused them to miss many summer institute and workshop
sessions. Even in district schools, some residents reported receiving only occasional support from other residents in the same schools. One Teacher Leader explained that:

> If you are in a certain group, or school, or position, it appears like you get more support than other people. Or the support you get comes more frequently. I still feel like I’m on an island, and [there are other PLUS residents and alumni in my school]. They treat me like I’m fine and we are all too busy [to connect].

Such reports were noted in Cohorts 2 through 4, but with much less frequency than descriptions of program peers as a source of affirmation and support. One resident captured the spirit of camaraderie by stating:

> I don’t look at anyone [from the program] as a competitor; I see [their success] as a benefit. I hope [our program] is a point of differentiation, and if in a few years most of the leaders in [the city were] grads [of the program], I think the district would benefit.

**Challenges of the Leadership Preparation Approach**

Despite the sense of preparedness residents said they received from the PLUS program, they consistently described a number of key challenges in their residencies. These involved difficulty balancing responsibilities, imperfect alignment of program expectations with other school and district priorities, and limited support for the Teacher Leader role in many schools.

**Workload and Competing Expectations**

Across cohorts, a majority of residents reported feeling overwhelmed during their first program year, as they struggled to manage their time and prioritize critical tasks. Specifically, Cohort 1 Lead Educators described the challenge of balancing test coordination and student
behavior management tasks with instructional leadership. Among later cohorts, reports of being overworked remained similar, but the details differed. A Teacher Leader expressed difficulty balancing the demands of teaching in a new school with the imperative to help other teachers:

*My virtual coach asked me, “How are you balancing being a Teacher Leader and meeting their requirements of teaching?…” Um, I don’t know how I’m balancing that—I’m really struggling to teach my children anything.*

And a Lead Educator noted that:

*All of [the program's] training and PD works. It's all relevant and applicable, but it's a lot of work, and very time consuming. If you have a family or are involved in other things, or if you don’t have a lot of time to commit, [keeping up with the program] can be a cumbersome task.*

Fortunately, most residents described the problem of balance as at least partially ameliorated by the second residency year, as their time management and instructional leadership skills improved, and as their formal list of deliverables for the residency program had lessened.

Even so, the balancing act may have been exacerbated by imperfect alignment between what the schools expected of residents and what the program expected. One Lead Educator explained:

*We are charged with getting the job done for the city who pays us. If there are choices about foregoing my job responsibilities so I can meet PLUS responsibilities, the choice is clear to me – I choose my job.*

Another Lead Educator concurred, saying, "My heart wants to prioritize instruction, but other things get in the way."
Misalignment took a variety of forms. For instance, residents described having to master different rubrics for evaluating teachers—one developed by PLUS, a different one used by the district or CMO in which they worked.

Meanwhile, as more residents began to find positions in the city's charter schools, including schools that were being converted to charter schools through the district-CMO partnership, misalignment often occurred in the form of conflicting professional development schedules and conflicting sequences of teacher observation cycles and observation foci. As noted above, PLUS coaches helped residents in charter schools navigate the misalignment by catching them up on professional development content they missed, and by modifying deliverable assignments where needed.

Residents in later cohorts described other kinds of misalignment as well. First, within the program itself, they described confusion in responding to so many mentors and coaches. These included not only their PLUS leadership coaches, whose support they consistently praised, but also the online virtual coaches and their principals, whose expectations seemed to vary widely. One Cohort 4 Teacher Leader explained the tension as one of too little time and too many perspectives: “It feels like five coaches are looking over my shoulder.” A Lead Educator in the same cohort highlighted the many perspectives residents needed to satisfy:

*We are required to have a mentor from the state, and then a virtual coach, and we also have a physical coach, and a [district] supervisor. So we have four masters all at the same time, and it’s not consistent, and we have to answer to our principals. How do we navigate that to meet all those expectations?*

In the last two years of the program, many PLUS residents and alumni who were Lead Educators also noted that they were expected to take part in philosophically aligned but
pragmatically distinct leadership training programs, Achievement Networks (A-Net) and Relay, as well as in the state-mandated mentoring program for novice administrators. The A-Net sessions were provided at district-run professional development sessions. The Relay program sessions, which typically involved travel, were described as similar to the PLUS in philosophy and intensity (12 summer days and 4 weekends during the year, plus project work), but with different meeting management protocols, rubrics, and tools. Both programs reportedly focused on instructional leadership, and residents differed in the extent to which they found them useful. Some program alumni said they found the material largely repetitive of the residency program and thus a non-optimal use of time—"there was a lot in Relay that was redundant with what I had in PLUS", said one alumnus—but others said they found that the supplemental programs offered a useful review of their residency program's principles, alongside new and complementary management tools. One resident speculated that the district may be reluctant to embrace one particular leadership preparation program over another because the student performance impact of any given model, including the residency program, is always difficult to isolate:

*We move around [change schools] so it's hard to say the exact impact PLUS has had—this is my interpretation—and therefore...[it's] just a program that functions in isolation [from other district initiatives].*

Regarding the state-mandated mentoring program, residents across cohorts reported that they were required to pay for it out of pocket, that it lacked the other programs' focus on instructional leadership, and that they viewed it as an inefficient use of time. However, because it was state-mandated, they were not able to use the PLUS residency or their other leadership preparation experiences to opt out.
Variation in School Support, Especially for the Teacher Leader Role

Across cohorts, residents’ experiences seemed to be shaped by how well their principals’ visions aligned with the instructional leadership priorities of PLUS. Residents who reported strong alignment generally reported the highest levels of satisfaction with the program. Those who reported less alignment described greater frustration. In district-run schools, this was true for Lead Educators as well as Teacher Leaders.

Philosophical misalignment was rarely cited by residents working in charter schools, perhaps because the local charter organizations shared PLUS’s administrative focus on instructional quality and improvement. Residents working in charter schools generally reported that their work coaching teachers was not only supported by their schools but was a central aspect of their jobs as ASLs.

In district schools, even residents in Lead Educator roles experienced tension around their instructional leadership responsibilities. The extent to which Lead Educators were permitted to focus on teacher coaching and feedback ranged, in residents' reports, from less than 20% of their time to a large majority of their time, depending on the extent to which their principals supported and protected that work. Some Lead Educators described close collaboration with their principals, whereas others described more distant or estranged relationships. "The program has to be adaptive to the residents' working environments," one Lead Educator in a later cohort explained. "There are some principals who are very supportive, but I interviewed around the district, and I met with people who didn't know what PLUS was." And some Lead Educators perceived that their visions were heard by their principals but ignored:
Things are just not aligned together in terms of instruction... There’s no real cohesion in terms of... having a curriculum that’s aligned to assessment, and a cycle where you can track growth... When I push for these things, I’m heard and everybody nods their head, but when it comes to taking the action, I feel like I’m left alone.

Another Lead Educator described being called upon to keep order when district officials visited the school, or when stakeholders launched complaints, rather than to focus on instructional improvement:

Though the district says coaching is important, it isn't what gets [principals] the most praise. It's not "Oh, they're coaching teachers." It's "Oh, they're changing climate. When you walk in there are no fights. Oh, test scores are going up. Oh, there are no protests."

But it was the Teacher Leadership role that seemed to garner the widest variation in principal support, and in which principal support seemed most essential to the functioning of the role. As noted, the Teacher Leader role was created from the second program year, 2015-16, onward. It provided a leadership pipeline pathway for residents who aspired to administration but did not yet hold an administrative credential in the state, and it allowed residents to cultivate instructional leadership skills in schools that did not have Lead Educator or other administrative openings. Teacher Leaders were employed as teachers. The PLUS program viewed them as instructional coaches and leaders-in-training, but the extent to which their schools—and even the district—recognized and supported their instructional coaching roles varied dramatically. As a Teacher Leader noted in the second year of the study: "It’s almost as though the principals have no idea what to do with us. And that has been stated by higher-ups...They have said, '[The district is] still trying to figure out how to handle you.'"
This uncertainty was not just a function of the newness of the role. Two years later, a Teacher Leader in a school that had reportedly begun to bar teachers from the leadership team noted that philosophical differences about teacher leadership were endemic: “[Leaders not trained by PLUS] don’t have the buy-in, so it’s hard to do what we know we should do when they’re telling us no. And I think the principal buy-in comes from downtown [central office].”

For instance, as noted above, only a small percentage of Teacher Leaders reported that they received a formal release period for coaching teachers. When asked about their coaching caseloads, Teacher Leaders generally reported that they coached three to five teachers each, many of whom they had to gather through their own initiative, and they noted that they could observe teachers only during their own planning periods. This not only restricted the time they had to plan their lessons, but it also restricted the teachers they could coach to those with whom they did not share a planning period.

This challenge, residents said, was exacerbated by union rules that technically precluded teachers from meeting during their lunch or planning periods to debrief their observations and receive feedback. Thus, the pool of teachers coached by Teacher Leaders was further restricted to only those teachers who were willing to ignore those time-use restrictions or meet outside of the school day. Both Teacher Leaders and district officials cited union restrictions as a barrier to the teacher leadership model. As one Cohort 2 resident explained during a focus group, "We’re fighting against a union now that says nobody is to meet with us at their lunches or during their prep or anything. Not just us but anybody. You have to stick to the contract."

When asked about this conflict, a district official elaborated on the challenge of the Teacher Leader model, acknowledging that:
Yes, [the union contract] is a barrier to the spirit and nature of [the Teacher Leader role]. If the Teacher Leader is on the school leadership team, and at some point the school leader asks and the Teacher Leader answers about what a teacher [is] doing wrong...It's couched in coaching and feedback, [but] it could be detrimental to the [teacher's] evaluation.

For this reason, the official noted, "To me, the Teacher Leader role is not super high-priority," speculating that a new, formalized administrative role of content coach might receive more traction in the future. A Lead Educator also acknowledged teachers' concerns as "reasonable," saying:

*I thought we were supposed to have courageous conversations with teachers about...setting the bar high for students, but this is a district where union teachers lost their jobs. So there is confusion [among teachers] about whether they will have their jobs next year, which means there is hesitance to do anything above and beyond. Teachers fear they won’t receive the support they need.*

Numerous Teacher Leaders across cohorts said that their principals and peers viewed them simply as teachers rather than instructional leaders. As one Teacher Leader noted, “[My principal] is like, ‘Oh, don’t worry about observing, we’re not going to do that.’ And I said, ‘Oh no, I’m doing it.’” A few residents in their first program year said that they perceived their instructional leadership roles as nonexistent: “As far as knowing what I’m trying to do [as a resident], the school leadership doesn’t. Nobody knows.” Another concurred, stating, "I’m not a leader in my school."
Strategic Use of the Teacher Leader Role

Importantly, we heard reports that leaders in a few schools were deploying Teacher Leaders deliberately and strategically as part of their instructional improvement strategies. In some cases, Teacher Leaders described being given specific directives from their principals or Lead Educators about which teachers to coach and how best to do so. One Teacher Leader, for instance, said that her principal—who was not PLUS-affiliated—helped her plan how to continue coaching teachers when district budgetary changes restricted the time she could spend outside of the classroom. And some PLUS-trained Lead Educators also described using Teacher Leaders strategically as coaches and leaders of school-based PD. They described Teacher Leaders as a vital part of their leadership efforts, allowing them to delegate instructional leadership responsibilities. One Lead Educator, a PLUS alumnus, described deploying the school’s Teacher Leaders in a variety of ways—coordinating testing, running data meetings, conducting classroom walk-throughs, and setting goals for teachers. When asked about the experience of having multiple residents in the building, the Lead Educator said:

*I love it. You understand that person has the background knowledge, and you see with same lens, so it’s very efficient. We had the residents do a student work analysis with the staff, and it was very positive.*

Another Lead Educator who was a program alumnus described assigning a coaching caseload to the Teacher Leaders and helping the Teacher Leaders hone their coaching skills:

*For my Teacher Leaders, I decided to give each of them one highly effective teacher and three teachers in need of some improvement…. We do weekly walkthroughs together, and we norm on action steps. I walk through their teachers' classrooms and see if what they*
are doing aligns to the action steps the Teacher Leaders have given them, and then I give the Teacher Leaders feedback on that. I have one Teacher Leader running data meetings…. I delegated to Teacher Leaders and put systems in place. Things got done.

In general, Teacher Leaders who had program residents or alumni as administrators in their buildings reported receiving greater support for their roles and more opportunities to coach teachers. One Teacher Leader in her first residency year explained it as follows:

*Three of us aren’t in buildings with PLUS residents, and we’re the ones who are getting the most resistance. It’s gone as far as we have to go to the teachers [we are supposed to observe] and ask if we can coach them, and they’re looking at us like, “You’re the new person in the building, you’re just a teacher, why are you asking me this?”*

Still, a few Teacher Leaders without resident-peers in their buildings described building relationships to facilitate their coaching. This was especially true for residents working in schools where they had previously taught. One Teacher Leader in such a context described her caseload by saying, “Two were assigned [to me] but are happy that I am working with them, and then [there were] two I asked to work with me, and they were eager.” Another Teacher Leader working in her longtime school site said that her teaching peers were responsive to feedback “because it’s low-stakes… I say it’s for my program, and through the process, hopefully I’ll be able to tell [them] something beneficial, but I’ll also be learning. That’s my conversation with them.”

And though it was described as helpful by many residents, having a PLUS-trained administrator in the building did not guarantee a smooth Teacher Leadership experience. A few Teacher Leaders with administrators who had been trained by PLUS still reported struggling to find time or authority to coach teachers.
Principals' Loose Connections to the Program

The wide variation in schools' support for residents' roles may have been at least partly driven by principals' limited understanding of the PLUS’s philosophy and professional development model. One mentor principal who was working with residents for the first time in 2017-18 said, "There should be some orientation for us before [residents] came into our building." When PLUS launched in the fall of 2014, Cohort 1 residents noted that the program's formal efforts to engage principals in formal meetings had not been successful, largely due to principals' busy schedules. The result, they said, was that "Nobody told the principals what our job was supposed to be."

Efforts to engage principals subsequently waxed and waned. One alumnus who was supervising newer residents noted the scarcity of information for school administrators about program goals and activities:

Last year we had a meeting: "These are your residents, and this is how to support them."

There was no meeting this year...If I had a calendar out of all the things [residents] were doing,...if they gave me a checklist or something, it would keep me organized in making sure that I'm supporting them the best I can.

Perhaps as a result, mentor principals we spoke with in the fourth implementation year expressed some confusion about demands the program placed on residents' time:

When the PLUS coach comes in, they take my Lead Educator for two to three hours. I spoke up and said that was too long of a time. I said to the coach that I have a problem with three-hour coaching sessions, and that's going to take her away from being in the classroom, because from 9 to 11 AM, she was with the coach.
One resident at a different school noted that the school's principal had occasionally prohibited residents from attending PLUS professional development workshops because the workshops pulled them away from important responsibilities in the building.

The concern some principals expressed about professional development time arose in the context of related questions about how the program valued their own expertise. As one principal explained, "I have 14 years of experience. I [understand] all the coaching the residents are getting, but if they are in our school[s], why couldn’t we be the coaches?" Another mentor principal raised similar questions:

If their aspiration is to become a principal, they have to do what I do. Not exactly everything, because she’s in training, but the expectation is that she would accomplish what a principal would do in a building.... If she were to go to another district, they might not have an operational manager, so my responsibility is to make sure she learns how to manage a building.

A mentor principal working in a charter school also expressed this view:

[In the future] it might be just them leading a building, and they need to know everything. I’m not sure how much that [set of operational skills] is offered in the program, but it would be so beneficial to teach those things.

Principals were not alone in asking that the program pay more attention to operational skills. A few residents had previously said that they would have liked more training in school operations, education law, and even charter school creation than the program typically offered. One resident who aspired to an operational role, said, for instance:

As a Dean of Students, my primary job [would be] discipline. I [wouldn’t] coach anybody—it rarely touches instruction at all. [But] my entire year [as a resident], my
coaching is about instruction; I wouldn’t have any clue about the [Dean of Students] position.

In short, mentor principals and some residents expressed concern that the program underemphasized school leadership skills that were not related to instruction. Mentor principals, having led schools for some time, saw operational leadership as a strength they had acquired and said they would have liked to see the program make greater use of their skills.

Residents' Career Paths and Perceived Impacts

To address research question 3, we examined the career paths of the 42 initially placed residents, as well as their views on how they had influenced their schools since their PLUS residencies had commenced.

Career Path Variation

We found that PLUS residents’ career trajectories diverged notably over time. Figure 2 tracks the career progressions of the four cohorts from the first implementation year, 2014-15, through the fourth year, 2017-18. The top panel represents the fraction of originally placed residents who persisted in both the program and the city over time.

As anticipated in the program design, a small fraction of residents did not complete the first program year due to issues of workload or fit, but after that initial attrition, persistence rates in the program and city held relatively steady. Cohort 1 saw a loss of an additional two alumni (22%) in their fourth year, 2017-18. In anticipating these moves, the two alumni had described
them as partly for personal reasons, and partly in pursuit of leadership opportunities, including consulting and organization-building jobs, in other cities. One of them explained:

*I was really interested in being a principal and leading a school. I still think that would be something that I wouldn’t mind doing, but I [also] think I would like to be able to work and have a bigger impact…. I am not sure how it will take place but it is very important to me that kids are given the opportunity to attend a functional, strong, instructional place of learning. However I can get that done, I will do it.*

The second panel of Figure 2 illustrates the share of initially-placed residents in each cohort who held an administrative role by the end of each academic year. Residents who left administrative residencies during an academic year are excluded from the numerator, so the first-year fraction for Cohort 1 is only 78% even though all Cohort 1 placements were originally, and continued to be, administrative. The fraction of Cohort 2 residents in administrative roles held steady over time at 46%, even as a few residents attrited from the program or moved between roles. And the share of Cohort 3 residents in administrative roles nearly doubled between the third and fourth program years.

The third panel of Figure 2 represents the fraction of residents in each cohort who were promoted from their initial placement levels over time. We define a promotion as moving from a Teacher Leader role to an administrative role, or from an assistant-level administrative role (Lead Educator, Apprentice School Leader) to a principal role (including Acting Principal), or moving from a school-level administrative or Teacher Leader role to an administrative role in a district or CMO central office within the city. Among the first three cohorts, about a third of initially placed residents had received promotions as of the 2017-18 academic year. This fraction was 22% for Cohort 1, bearing in mind that all Cohort 1 residents began the program in
administrative positions. It was 31% for Cohort 2, and 38% for Cohort 3. All Cohort 4 residents were still in their first program year in 2017-18, so they had not had time to be promoted.

Perceived Factors in Career Path Variation

The reasons that some residents were promoted and others not was not always clear.4 School leadership positions are competitive in most contexts, and this may be especially true in a small, urban district with shrinking enrollments and few open positions. One resident described this reality in pragmatic terms: “When we’ve done with our PLUS year, not all of us will walk into leadership positions and change everything.”

As might be expected, residents who had received promotions, or who viewed promotions as forthcoming in the near future, expressed greater satisfaction with the program, in general, than those who had or did not. But residents reflected on the determinants of promotion in different ways. Some said that it seemed useful to have worked in a school of similar size and grade levels to those with leadership openings, though others noted the opacity with which promotions became available:

In other districts there would be an internal invitation for people who want to apply for principal positions, and then they would go through the [application] process. But [here]

4 In terms of race and ethnicity, those promoted were relatively representative of all initially placed residents. Across four PLUS cohorts, black and white males were promoted at slightly higher rates (about 33% and 25%, respectively) than black and white females (about 18% for both groups). About 67% of initially placed residents were female, and approximately 55% of initially placed residents were black or African American.
there was nothing formally done [to post openings publicly], and when I asked [the
district] about that, [they] didn’t have a very good answer.

Some residents who had been promoted attributed their success largely to the leadership
coaching they had received in the PLUS program:

My coach…walked me through the entire process [of pursuing a promotion] from the
application, to interviews, through lots of role playing, and what it would be like to be in
the interview. She coached me through several situations where she allowed me to dig in
to the situation and evolve to arrive the answer I came up with rather than her telling me
what I should do.

Meanwhile, some residents who had not been promoted spoke of variation in the
leadership coaching residents received from the program:

The people in my cohort were told, “There’s an opening. You should put your name out
there, and you should apply,” and that was it, and we didn’t get any [other support]. Yet,
another resident I saw…was working with a PLUS coach, was doing mock
interviews…and got the position.

School-based mentoring may have played a role. One resident said, "I’m getting
[encouragement] from both my principal and my coach. They are pushing me, when I find
myself in a situation, to think about how I would handle it if I was the principal." And nearly
half of those promoted in the final two program years had begun their residencies in a particular
school staffed by a program alumnus who was often described by residents as focused on
mentoring.

But other residents said they would not have received promotions from their initial
residency roles without their own initiative and persistence:
I reached out [to the principal] via [social media] and volunteered time over summer to work, which [the principal] was open to, and I took the Praxis to see if I could pass to get principal certification to move into an administrative position... When it comes to PLUS, the support I had was that I had done the program to get my principal certification.

Another resident concurred, and cited political skills as essential for navigating the district context:

[The district] is very political, and the politics of it intrude on students. And I've learned to survive in it. Some residents don't understand the politics. If you have to deal with the politics to create student success, you've just gotta do it.

The same resident also cited the importance of personal initiative in determining who gets promoted:

Tools from PLUS can help me get where I want to be. But I don't think PLUS can help me get where I want to be. The more I'm working, I realize it's up to the individual to take what you learned, and not say 'I'm from PLUS, I'm supposed to be...at a certain level.' You as an individual need to take what you learned and go to it.

Given this range of perspectives, it is possible that the support residents received in pursuit of promotions varied by their coaching experiences and placement schools. But the extent to which this variation also reflected differences in residents' demonstrated leadership facility is not clear. In other words, it is not clear how much of coaches’ and principals' time investments were driven by residents' demonstration of leadership skills, and how much of residents' demonstrated skills were driven by the support they received. It is also possible that ongoing
professional development offerings on how to navigate the local hiring context might have increased the homogeneity and transparency of support that residents received.

Residents’ Perceived Impacts on their Schools

When asked about the impacts they felt they had had on their schools, residents spoke most frequently about their impacts on teaching and learning. In this way, their responses were consistent with the instructional leadership emphasis of the program.

Residents in administrative roles spoke often of making changes to influence teaching and learning, as well as student behavior. Some spoke of working to retain effective teachers and to counsel out those whose instruction was below expectations and not improving:

[One] teacher I was coaching was not effective... I was spending a lot of time [with this teacher], doing weekly coaching, real-time feedback, and [the teacher] wasn’t making progress. We had to take steps to exit [this teacher], which did happen. [The teacher] finally realized our school was not a good fit.

Another administrator also described his impact on instructional culture in terms of teacher coaching and personnel decisions:

It's a comprehensive package that PLUS taught me: How to analyze who are your "irreplaceables" [teachers who are important to retain]. The whole process [is to] let irreplaceables know they are that, and find areas for them to prosper, while also counseling folks out, and helping teachers improve.

Others spoke of working to establish instructional quality as the school's highest priority:
[I have been] focusing on the instructional culture in the building, raising expectations for teachers to raise expectations for students, so...everyone in the building knows where the focus is—on instruction—and where they should be putting their effort.

Residents in charter schools spoke of their influence not only in terms of coaching teachers, but in terms of adapting curricula to make them accessible to struggling students:

There is not much [curriculum] to fill that gap [between grade-level expectations] and where kids are. That's where our work is exhausting; we are doing that work. We are not curriculum designers but...I'm trying to serve kids who are not able to access the curriculum we are given.

In a few cases, residents in administrative roles spoke of influencing school culture, especially in relation to teaching and learning. One Lead Educator, for example, spoke of implementing schoolwide classroom management norms, like a five-clap rule for bringing a class to attention. Another spoke of working to create a friendly environment in which teachers and staff greeted each other warmly, and students were not roaming the halls. Yet another spoke of strengthening trust between teachers and administrators. And one administrative resident spoke of changing key policies to improve student attendance and engagement, including downgrading the importance of school uniform and cell phone infractions, and replacing suspensions with in-school study sessions.

Teacher Leaders, on the other hand, spoke of their main perceived impacts in terms of their relationships they had built with particular teachers and the improvement they had seen in those teachers' practice.

When I say that I am having an impact on the teachers, for the most part it is just seeing them implementing the action steps that I am giving them, and also hearing their results
Another Teacher Leader spoke of helping a struggling teacher improve:

One teacher I coached was on a corrective action plan, and by the end of the year [this teacher] came off the plan... [The teacher] was very receptive to coaching, implemented feedback right away, and asked lots of questions.

Finally, some program alumni spoke not only of impacts on their schools, but also of the mentoring they had been able to do with later cohorts of residents. Several alumni noted that they would have liked to receive more support from the program on how to better develop their junior residents. One noted, "I would love to give back, because I received so much from [the program], but I haven’t really been asked to." Another commented:

If there was a PD on how to be a better coach to your Teacher Leaders, that would be great. Especially since...it falls upon the graduates to keep some kind of momentum going...I feel like I want to be able to support Teacher Leaders whether [they are] under the PLUS umbrella or not, through what PLUS has taught me.

Discussion and Implications

Launched in 2014 in a small, urban district, the PLUS model offered several promising attributes for a school leadership development program. First, it provided a grow-your-own approach, meaning it was designed to build on existing strengths of local educators who were already committed to the city and its schools. Second, it provided rigorous, hands-on professional development attuned to the real-world challenges of leading instructional improvement. Residents were taught how to identify and prioritize improvement steps for
teachers, how to have delicate conversations with teachers about instructional strategies, and how to organize their time and delegate responsibility so that instructional leadership could remain a key focus of their work. Third, the model provided a distributed leadership approach in which the responsibility for carrying out change resided not just within a single principal but within a broader array of staff members (Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2001). It placed junior administrators and Teacher Leaders in schools as change agents and helped them promote instructional improvement even as they were learning to take on leadership responsibilities. In short, the model sought to capitalize on existing leadership potential in the city and to build on the relationships that already existed among seasoned educators.

**Implications for Building Leadership Pipelines**

When asked what they considered to be their primary impacts on their schools over time, residents focused mainly on their efforts to improve teaching and learning. These efforts took the form of coaching teachers and helping them improve, counseling out those who did not improve, and creating resources to help teachers succeed. In broad terms, residents' perceptions of their own impacts aligned with our quantitative estimates from the larger study showing that schools exposed to a higher number of residents over time improved their mathematics scale scores and graduation rates relative to comparable schools (Steele, Steiner, & Hamilton, 2018). In contrast, that analysis found no relationship between schools' resident exposure and teacher-reported measures of school culture, and it found a positive relationship to chronic absence and suspension rates (Steele, Steiner, & Hamilton, 2018). The quantitative study cannot definitively attribute these relationships to the residents themselves. But they are consistent with residents’ perceptions that their main domains of influence were instructional. The fact that positive effects
were not found in terms of teachers’ school culture ratings or students’ attendance and behavior is consistent with most residents’ perceptions that these domains were outside their main spheres of influence.

Despite their sense of impact, residents described real obstacles to meeting the PLUS program’s instructional leadership objectives. Their experiences raise the question of how leadership pipeline programs might ensure that residents in a variety of roles have latitude to work with teachers on instruction.

Reframe the Role of Mentor Principal

One clear insight from the data is that school principals charged with mentoring the residents had a limited understanding of the PLUS program. And yet residents’ ability to execute their responsibilities as PLUS residents seemed to hinge on their principals’ support, much as Leithwood and colleagues (2007) discovered in their study of conditions that facilitate district leadership. Thus, a key recommendation for similar programs is to frame the mentor principal's role more explicitly as part of the program. Interviews from the first PLUS year suggested that the program attempted to do this at the beginning and found limited traction with principals. The partnering district may also have a role to play in making the expectations for principal participation clear and consistent, and district officials acknowledged as much in interviews. Even so, the mentor principal's role could be framed from the outset as a type of residency in its own right—perhaps as a "senior fellowship." Busy principals might be incentivized to apply for such fellowships if, for instance, their supplemental budgets to hire residents into junior administrator or teacher leadership roles were contingent on the fellowship. Senior fellowships for mentor principals might then include occasional, dedicated workshops on how to cultivate
teachers as instructional leaders (regardless of whether “Teacher Leader” was a formal residency role) and on how to cultivate organizational leadership skills, including discipline, scheduling, and facilities management, in their residents. Expanding the professional development opportunities offered to principals could require modest increases in the cost of the program. However, it could also improve efficiency in both school leadership and resident deployment, perhaps even offsetting the need for some other supplemental types of professional development.

Streamline Leadership Training Across the District

Another way to improve efficiency from a district standpoint would be to streamline the pathways to the principalship and the professional development offerings available to principals and junior administrators. Residents spoke of participating in intensive professional development opportunities that closely reflected their training in the PLUS program. In the cases of Relay and A-NET, residents spoke highly of the quality of the programs and their philosophical alignment with PLUS, but some expressed frustration about the demands these offerings placed on their time, given their strategic and philosophical similarities to the residency program. A plausible counterargument is that broadening access across the district to instructional leadership programs may increase support for instructional leadership across the district, and that the use of Relay and A-NET alongside PLUS accomplishes that expansion. But given the resource constraints all school systems face, it is possible that a more streamlined set of professional development offerings might not only reduce demands on administrators’ time, but also save money for the district.
Leverage and Retain Leadership Talent through Distributed Leadership Models

An additional takeaway from the study lies in the variation that emerged in residents' career trajectories. About a third of residents from the first three cohorts had been promoted by the fourth program year, but only one of 42 initially placed residents became a principal within the first three years, followed by another resident assuming principalship of a charter school-within-a-school by the fourth year. Certainly, part of the reason for the career path variation and modest promotion rates is the size and contraction of district enrollments, which resulted in few available positions. Moreover, slow pathways to the principalship for newly licensed administrators appear typical in several recent studies (Bastian & Henry, 2015; Davis, Gooden, & Bowers, 2017; Grissom, Mitani, and Woo, 2018). Bearing this in mind, districts and cities considering leadership pipeline programs should ideally assess labor market needs before launching. Their analyses should include an examination of annual principal turnover and vacancy rates, as well as the level of preparation their new hires are receiving through existing preparation pathways.

But even in a city with greater availability of principal slots, a program that builds a pipeline of leadership talent will give rise to career path variation. Competition for leadership slots is a natural feature of most organizations, and competition among well-prepared candidates allows school systems to be selective in the principals they hire.

The question is how districts can leverage the expanding skill set of residents who are promoted more slowly. A quarter-century ago, Firestone and Pennell (1993) noted that educators were more likely to feel committed to their work when they perceived that their expertise was valued and that they had opportunities for autonomy and growth. Indeed, Teacher Leaders in the study whose instructional leadership roles were stymied reported feeling isolated and alone.
Meanwhile, a few Lead Educators who said they sought to have a wider impact but did not see a clear pathway to the principalship began looking for—and finding—leadership opportunities outside the city. Educator attrition over time is perhaps inevitable, but ideally, schools would find ways to take advantage of their residents’ expertise. In doing so, they might better retain their leadership pipeline candidates while also increasing the instructional capacity of their schools.

Our study does provide examples of strategic human capital use that seemed especially promising. In a few schools, especially but not exclusively those with PLUS alumni in leadership roles, leaders assigned instructional coaching caseloads around the availability of Teacher Leaders, and they taught their Teacher Leaders how to norm their observations and how to allocate their time among the teachers they coached. This reportedly lightened the coaching caseloads of administrators, freeing up more of their time for whole-school responsibilities, and allowed Teacher Leaders to develop and hone their instructional leadership expertise.

This approach could be construed as challenging contractual delineations between teaching and administration roles. A district official voiced this concern, echoing feedback that some residents said they were receiving in their schools. And in a shrinking district where teachers and administrators reportedly worried about job security, the concern is understandable. However, it does lay bare the tension between a contemporary view of teaching for continuous improvement, in which teachers collaborate to improve instructional quality and consistency (Goddard, Goddard, & Tschannen-Moran, 2007; Kaufman, 2007; Louis, 2007), and a more traditional model, in which teachers operate in isolation in their classrooms (Little, 1990; Lortie, 1975).
It is also noteworthy that residents working in charter schools did not report similar tension around their instructional leadership and coaching roles. The instructional leadership model promoted by the PLUS program appeared to challenge the norms of the district schools more than those of the charter schools.

In summary, the residency model appeared to have succeeded in preparing a new cadre of future leaders, and even in bolstering instructional quality during the years of the residency program. Strengthening senior leadership's support for such models might render their implementation even more efficient, and their potential for impact even more enduring.
References


Table 1. Initial placements by cohort among those who completed first residency year (all initial placements, including non-completers, in parentheses if different)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cohort</th>
<th>Lead Educator</th>
<th>Apprentice School Leader (Charter)</th>
<th>Teacher Leader</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1: 2014-15</td>
<td>6 (8)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7 (9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2: 2015-16</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3 (4)</td>
<td>6 (7)*</td>
<td>11 (13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3: 2016-17</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5 (6)*</td>
<td>7 (8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4: 2017-18</td>
<td>3**</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7*</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>11 (13)</td>
<td>8 (9)</td>
<td>18 (20)</td>
<td>37 (42)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* One each in Cohorts 2, 3, and 4 were charter school placements.
** In Cohort 4, one of these was an operational rather than instructional role.
### Table 2. Summary of qualitative data collection samples by cohort

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cohort</th>
<th>Initially Placed in Residency</th>
<th>Completed first residency year</th>
<th>Continued into second residency year</th>
<th>Participated in first-year focus group</th>
<th>Participated in second-year focus group</th>
<th>Longitudinal case study interviewees</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1: 2014-15</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>2: 2015-16</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3: 2016-17</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4: 2017-18</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 1. Logic model showing anticipated near-term and mid-term results of school leadership residency program

- Selective recruitment of local talent
- Intensive coaching & professional development
- On-the-job training via two-year residency placements

Inputs

- Improved focus on student support & safety in resident-staffed schools
- Intensified focus on instructional leadership & coaching in resident-staffed schools

Processes

- Student attendance, behavior, and persistence improve in resident-staffed schools
- Student achievement improves in resident-staffed schools

Outcomes

- Expanded pool of leadership candidates trained in instructional leadership gradually assume principal roles in the city
- More focus on instructional leadership & coaching in resident-led schools

Output

- More focus on student support & safety in resident-led schools
- Student achievement further improves in resident-led schools

Near-term (1-3 yrs.)

Mid-term (3-5 yrs.)

Processes

- Student attendance, behavior, and persistence further improve in resident-led schools
- Student achievement further improves in resident-led schools

Outcomes
**Figure 2.** Within-city career paths of initially placed residents, by cohort