



Education Commission
of the States

The First Ring Leadership Academy: A Multidistrict Model for Developing, Sharing and Supporting Leadership Talent

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Introduction

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Many school districts prefer to grow their own leaders for student learning. These unique, homegrown initiatives send strong, positive signals about employee worth and offer employees the opportunity to grow and advance. Equally important, such programs ensure the district has a recognized leadership pipeline and a continuous supply of leaders from the ranks of those who are familiar with the district and its particular challenges.

One program that has had remarkable success with the homegrown approach is the First Ring Leadership Academy.

Established in 2003, the academy serves 13 school districts surrounding the city of Cleveland, Ohio: East Cleveland, Euclid, South Euclid Lyndhurst, Cleveland Heights-University Heights, Shaker Heights, Warrensville Heights, Bedford, Maple Heights, Garfield Heights, Parma, Berea, Fairview Park and Lakewood. These districts collectively serve over 73,000 students and their families.

The academy is guided and supported by the First Ring School Superintendents' Collaborative, whose member superintendents know intuitively – as well as from the data – that their districts share many of the same challenges (poverty, high mobility rates, gaps in achievement), and require building-level leaders who can create the conditions in which all students can and will learn. Instead of working on a district-by-district basis to produce leaders with these capabilities, these savvy superintendents joined forces and have found a collective answer: the First Ring Leadership Academy. Working in partnership, the 13 school districts, Cleveland State University, the Ohio Department of Education and the participants – aspiring school leaders – have created and implemented a program for preparing school leaders that is worthy of replication.

As a member of the ECS/MetLife Foundation advisory board on identifying exemplary leadership practices, I am happy to present to you this snapshot of the First Ring Leadership Academy.

Betty Hale

President, Institute for Educational Leadership

The History of the First Ring Leadership Academy

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Cleveland, Ohio, is surrounded by 13 communities known as the “First Ring Suburbs,” which have begun to experience what once had been exclusively inner-city challenges: deteriorating and obsolete real estate, disinvestments, changing demographics, strained race relations, and high rates of poverty and out-migration. In 1997, mayors and other elected officials representing the First Ring municipalities established the Northeastern Ohio First Suburbs Consortium to address these regional challenges in partnership.

With the encouragement of one of the major foundations in the region, First Ring school district superintendents came together to discuss forming a similar consortium to address the challenges in their schools, including the detrimental effects of student mobility and poverty, a lack of school funding, racially aligned achievement gaps, low achievement in general, and the alarming rate of turnover among staff, particularly school principals (25% in two years).

The First Ring Superintendents' Consortium was established in 2000, with funding from that same foundation. According to Shaker Heights Superintendent Mark Freeman, the consortium's top priority was determining how to focus and leverage its power to the benefit of First Ring children. The group decided the most promising and productive approach was to concentrate on developing and retaining highly skilled school leaders who, with appropriate training and support, could help their communities overcome the many challenges they face.

To this end, the superintendents chose to partner with Cleveland State University to create an alternative leadership training program for aspiring school principals that would address the particular challenges of First Ring schools, many of which are not addressed in traditional graduate school and licensure curricula. Extensive discussions with the dean of the college of education and the university president helped make clear the university was sincere in its commitment to create a unique program, tailored to the needs of the First Ring communities.

The next step was to recruit an individual to help them develop and establish the program. Looking for a dedicated, organized “self starter,” the superintendents identified Deborah Morin to serve as the academy’s executive director. In 2003, the First Ring Leadership Academy was established as an accelerated route to licensure and certification focused on recruiting, training and retaining exemplary principals.

Leading in Challenging Environments

In an unpublished paper, “First Ring Leadership Academy: Creating the Next Generation of Leaders for First Ring Schools,” Morin says high poverty and mobility in the First Ring communities both reflect their economic despair and contribute to the low academic achievement of their children. Further, socioeconomic and ethnic diversity is aligned with unacceptable achievement gaps in the First Ring school districts. These challenges are complicated by constantly changing leadership in the schools. Morin outlines five specific challenges to learning in First Ring schools:

- **Student mobility and school achievement.** In East Cleveland, as many as 44% of the students attended school in the district for less than six months of the school year; in Maple Heights, 39%; in Euclid, 37%; and in Garfield Heights, 29%. First Ring school districts’ scores on the state report card are correlated: high mobility paralleled low scores. Five First Ring school districts were on the state’s “academic watch” list and one was designated as being in “academic emergency.”
- **Poverty.** According to the 2000 Census, over 13,000 school-age children (17%) were living in poverty in First Ring communities, compared to just over 3,000 (less than 1%) in surrounding suburbs. In East Cleveland, the poverty rate of school-age children was 41%.
- **Diversity and the achievement gap.** Achievement gaps exist between minority and white students across all subjects, but especially in mathematics and science (Ogbu, 2003). In a survey of 15 school systems across the country, including two First Ring districts (Cleveland Heights-University Heights and Shaker Heights), differences in achievement were found along racial lines (Auster, 2002).



- **Increased accountability.** Because of continuing low proficiency scores and the requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act, nine First Ring schools had to offer students the option of transferring to other schools within their districts in 2003 (Reed, 2003).
- **Principal shortage.** The difficulty of filling principal positions with qualified candidates is of particular concern to First Ring communities. Twenty-five percent of principals quit between 2002 and 2004. Superintendents say demands on inner-ring principals and a statewide education funding crisis have left their districts facing an acute shortage.

According to Morin, the academy instills the empathy that school leaders need to help struggling students and gives them a perspective they can impart to their staffs. "They need to have a deep understanding of poverty that goes beyond people being poor," says Morin, a former principal. "It also affects achievement, motivation to achieve, support for learning, feelings about school and education. For teachers to help...children who are born into poverty, they really need to understand that culture."

Key Elements of the First Ring Leadership Approach

The mission of the First Ring Leadership Academy is to recruit, train and retain school leaders capable of meeting challenges unique to First Ring school districts to increase the region's capacity for educational leadership and school reform. To achieve these goals, the 13 district superintendents committed to some unique agreements: to openly share program graduates across the districts, to be personally and actively involved in the program, to lend senior staff as faculty, and to provide release time and financial and administrative support to program participants.

Three beliefs that underlie the program's structure appear to contribute to its success:

1. **Creating Leadership Capacity for the First Ring.** The First Ring Leadership Academy is built on the premise that great schools are places where every child learns and achieves at high levels, that it takes a great principal to lead a great school, and that the most fundamental work of a principal is to improve instruction and create a learning environ-



ment in which each child is a high achiever. The program's guiding theory of leadership is that an effective leader drives innovation and improvement in schools – from policies and procedures to curriculum and instruction.

Distributed leadership and creating leadership capacity at all levels are emphasized as essential to school success. Each person at each level of the system is accountable for student success.

2. Building a Value for Community.

The program emphasizes a definition of the principal as a public servant – a leader out in the community, working with parents and others to build public, moral, financial and emotional support for students and the school. Community engagement and ownership of the schools are essential. While instructional leadership skills are a “must-have” for academy graduates, the First Ring superintendents and academy staff recognize that community leadership may be the most important skill to ensure their long-term success.

The six Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) standards help structure the First Ring Academy curriculum. The program heavily emphasizes ISLLC standard one, which states, “A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by facilitating the development, articulation, implementation and stewardship of a vision of learning that is shared and supported by a school community.”

3. Establishing a Transparent Vision.

Transparency, accountability and an entrepreneurial spirit are values the academy staff and First Ring superintendents seek to integrate into the program to cultivate leaders who are adaptable, nimble, flexible and empathetic. Morin, the academy's executive director, says enabling academy participants to build authentic relationships – among their cohort and within the local community, research community and private sector – forms the basis for the academy philosophy. Authentic relationships connect people in meaningful, mutually supportive ways to learn from one other and accelerate everyone's successes.



A Promising Practice

The First Ring Superintendents' Collaborative structured the leadership academy in a unique way and with a purposeful design. The program:

- Is *cohort-based* to establish a network of support among colleagues
- Uses a *performance-based* rather than credit- or seat-time-based curriculum to ensure leaders master skills before entering the districts
- Emphasizes *practice-based* experiences to ensure the candidates have real district and school context to apply their learning.

Candidates for the academy are nominated by their superintendents to participate in 11 two-and-a-half-day training modules over a 15-month period. Participants may be teachers, supervisors or assistant principals; they may or may not have current licenses. But in one way or another, they have expressed the desire and commitment to become school leaders.

A particularly unique feature of the academy is the customization of each participant's program to his or her academic and experiential needs, with a strong emphasis on linking leadership theory and best practices. This sense of connectedness is reinforced by the strong working relationship between the superintendents' collaborative and the university's College of Education and Human Services.

A long-term study of First Ring graduates has been commissioned to track its progress and experiences.

Preliminary findings suggest that principals coming out of this program feel less isolated and more prepared for their job.

"A community is known by the schools it keeps."

– Shaker Heights School District
Mission Statement



According to a review of research published by the Stanford Educational Leadership Institute and commissioned by the Wallace Foundation, "School Leadership Study: Developing Successful Partnerships," the First Ring Leadership Academy is using several strategies typical of successful leadership-development programs. They include:

- A research-based program
- Coherent, aligned curriculum
- Authentic, context-based applications for student learning
- A cohort-based structure and mentor
- Collaboration between the preparation program and area schools.



The Stanford study acknowledges that while these five indicators are not necessarily empirically based strategies for effective leader development, they are elements of programs with promising practices and warrant further research.

In addition to supporting the leadership academy, the First Ring Superintendents' Consortium meets on a monthly basis to share information, ideas and insights; to explore common ground and develop consensus; and to provide support to one another across a wide range of issues. This support system is particularly crucial in light of the volatile education-financing environment in Ohio. Of the 13 superintendents who formed the collaborative, only three remain – and several of the First Ring superintendencies have turned over more than once. Mark Freeman, Shaker Heights superintendent, notes a school district's health and success is dependent to a large degree on relationships, which have to be rebuilt with each new superintendent.

One relationship Freeman emphasizes – and often is overlooked in discussions about increasing leadership effectiveness in schools and districts – is the superintendent's relationship with the school board. When the superintendent and the school board – along with the principal and the community – function as a team, everyone has clear roles and responsibilities within the district. The district then is better able to implement and sustain its vision for educating all children. Further, when superintendents and other school leaders turn over, a healthy school board can provide leadership and continuity.

The importance of school board training is an issue the First Ring Superintendents Consortium and the First Ring Leadership Academy are now beginning to pursue.

What Can Superintendents Learn From the First Ring Academy?

Implementing a program such as the First Ring Leadership Academy can help superintendents meet their school-improvement goals by:

- **Leveraging resources across districts.** The multidistrict approach allows for the creation of a more robust program and can help establish a consistent vision across districts. It also creates an inherent support structure for superintendents and increases the chances for program sustainability.
- **Training leaders to understand regional challenges.** Giving candidates a better understanding of regional challenges improves their ability to recognize and address needs across districts, and to consider issues and problems not just in terms of their individual schools.
- **Establishing a tailored pipeline.** By hand-selecting candidates and staying actively involved in the program, superintendents not only build leadership capacity for their districts, but they personally know each leader and his or her skill set.
- **Decreasing turnover in the principalship.** Preparing candidates with knowledge of the specific challenges they will face in schools and equipping them with the tools to succeed, including the network and support system of their cohort group, mitigates the chance of their burning out.
- **Creating an effective curriculum.** Assessing each participant's specific academic needs and tailoring instruction accordingly gives leadership candidates the best opportunity to become effective school leaders.

- **Encouraging community.** Agreeing to share graduates helps instill cooperation and authentic relationships across districts as opposed to the usual sense of competition. As a result, new leaders begin their careers not isolated but as members of a large community.
- **Opening the door to innovation.** The close and ongoing communication among First Ring superintendents, Cleveland State University and academy participants creates a constant exchange of ideas that leads to improvements in practice and to new strategies and solutions.

How Do You Create A First Ring Academy?

- **Reach out** to other superintendents in your area to assess the needs of the community and willingness to pursue the idea. According to veteran First Ring superintendents, it is important for school districts and consortium members to have good professional relationships among themselves. Give issues a thorough airing and share thoughts, plans, goals and designs.
- **Find a partner.** Veteran First Ring superintendents say it would be very difficult, especially for smaller districts, to operate an academy like the First Ring by themselves.
- **Determine what resources and potential partners** are in your area. For example, is there a business in the area that has a program of leadership succession planning that works? Maybe it would be willing to share the process, design and outcomes. Or is there a university program with innovative, energetic faculty who are willing to try a new approach? Not every program or opportunity will be applicable, but chances are you can learn something relevant from each one.

- **Build relationships** with the community and potential partners to assess the feasibility of a program. Build relationships with those across the country who have a successful track record of creating programs.
- **Talk to your policymakers** about helping in an initiative like this. Your school board, the legislature and the state department of education can likely help garner resources and add valuable input into the design, implementation and sustainability of the program.
- **Develop shared ownership** of the program with teachers, principals, community members, policymakers and business leaders. It will make it much more sustainable if it is everyone's program.
- **Stay involved.** Veteran First Ring superintendents strongly emphasize that care be taken not to give this away to someone else. Stay involved and make sure all superintendents are active participants.

What Can Policymakers Do To Support a Program Like the First Ring Academy?

- **Convene a group** of teachers, principals, district superintendents, university college of education deans, state education agency personnel, state board members, local business partners, foundation officials and others to talk about the need for and the possibilities of a leadership program in your state.
- **Work with these leaders** to develop legislation or state policy that encourages and provides resources for the development of exemplary leaders in the state.
- **Ensure current policies allow for proper credit and licensure opportunities** through these new programs (as long as the programs are deemed high quality).
- **Ensure new, high-quality programs can become accredited** and properly sanctioned by state agencies.



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