

# Hopes, Fears, & Reality

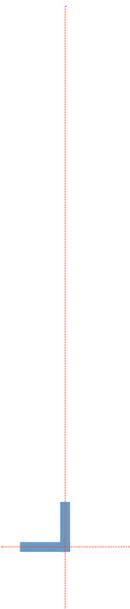


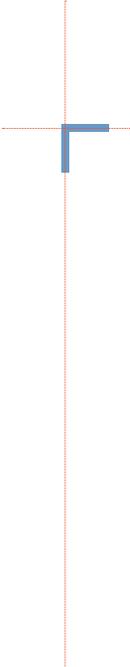
A BALANCED LOOK AT AMERICAN  
CHARTER SCHOOLS IN **2007**

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DECEMBER 2007





# About NCSRP

The National Charter School Research Project (NCSRP) brings rigor, evidence, and balance to the national charter school debate.

NCSRP seeks to facilitate the fair assessment of the value-added effects of U.S. charter schools and to provide the charter school and broader public education communities with research and information for ongoing improvement.

NCSRP:

- Identifies high-priority research questions.
- Conducts and commissions original research to fill gaps in current knowledge or to illuminate existing debates.
- Helps policymakers and the general public interpret charter school research.

The Project is an initiative of the Center on Reinventing Public Education.

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## CHAPTER 3

# Building a Pipeline of New School Leaders

*Christine Campbell*

In the spring of 2007, Cole College Prep, a Denver middle school run by the national charter management organization KIPP (Knowledge is Power Program), announced it would have to close at the end of the year because it was unable to find a suitable principal.<sup>1</sup> Good leaders are always hard to find, but it was surprising to hear that even KIPP, an organization that has its own leadership-training program, was forced to close its doors for this reason. The complete story of Cole's demise is complicated, but it highlights the difficulty of finding, training, and keeping strong leaders to support the expanding U.S. charter school movement.

New charter schools are opening at the rate of approximately 400 per year. Currently there are approximately 4,000 in existence.<sup>2</sup> Though many of the skills needed to run a charter school are similar to those of today's traditional public school principals—leading instruction, tending to the culture of the school, and managing people—charter leaders need an additional set of skills, similar in many ways to the additional skills required of parochial and private school principals. Charter leaders are required to ensure student enrollment sufficient to fund operations, to find and manage school facilities, to hire the right faculty for the school, and to negotiate relations with boards, parents, and authorizers.<sup>3</sup>

In the early days of the charter school movement, the leadership supply question consisted mainly of finding people foolhardy enough to want to start a completely new school and take on the superhero job described above. The supply then came mainly from renegade public school principals who wanted to start their dream school or teachers who wanted to run a school without a traditional administrator. As the charter

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movement matures, however, new pipeline issues arise that the movement may not be prepared to deal with:

- Where will the supply of leaders come from when the supply of renegades is fully tapped?
- How can the movement protect great charter leaders from the burnout that may accompany running a highly independent young school?
- How can good training help bring about high-quality school outcomes?
- What kinds of state and local policies are needed to strengthen leadership supply?

To begin to answer such questions, researchers at the National Charter School Research Project (NCSRP) interviewed Jonathan Schnur, co-founder of New Leaders for New Schools (NLNS). NLNS is often cited as the gold standard in principal recruitment and training and has won diverse awards, including *Fast Company Magazine's* "Top 25 Social Capitalists Set to Change the World."<sup>4</sup> A former education policy advisor for the Clinton administrations's Department of Education, Schnur was spurred into action by the realization that the pool of principals necessary for great urban schools was in short supply. His thoughts on the charter school leadership pipeline, how to best train charter leaders, and the emerging challenges of scaling up high-quality charter schools represent the thoughts of just one leader in the charter school field. They are, nonetheless, the insights of a visionary and entrepreneur grounded in experience.

Schnur's insights make up six major lessons:

- Ensuring a pipeline boils down to good recruitment.
- One-person-leadership training approaches are not enough.
- Training programs and trainees should be accountable for results.
- Hands-on training with support trumps coursework.
- District demand will drive true scale in innovative leadership training.
- Charter leadership training is the future of traditional public school training.

## NEW LEADERS FOR NEW SCHOOLS

New Leaders for New Schools (NLNS) is a pioneering school principal training program whose mission is to improve the academic achievement of every child by recruiting, training, and placing talented principals in urban schools. NLNS hopes that building a critical mass of NLNS principals in large urban districts will transform the way these districts select, train, and support all principals. The program was founded in 2000 and has trained 430 people who are actively working to improve the achievement of 165,000 students. The training involves a one-year residency working alongside a mentor principal in a school much like the one a candidate hopes to run. For example, would-be charter leaders are placed in charter schools. Coursework is fairly limited—a summer’s worth of classes—and training is focused on developing instructional leaders, rather than executive directors. That is to say, no courses are offered on board development or operational issues. Developing these skills is left to the charter management organizations (CMOs), such as Aspire, where most NLNS charter leaders are placed.

NLNS is one of 11 alternative and innovative training programs that train traditional and charter school leaders. It also has some of the deepest reach in terms of dozens of principals trained and placed in each of the following large urban districts: New York City Department of Education, District of Columbia Public Schools, Chicago Public Schools, Memphis City Schools, Oakland Unified School District, Baltimore City Public School System, Prince George’s County, Milwaukee Public Schools, and New Orleans Public Schools. NLNS also has a relationship with Aspire Public Schools, a California CMO based in Oakland.

### NLNS AT A GLANCE

<b>Year founded</b>	2000
<b>Number of applicants last year</b>	1730
<b>Number enrolled this year</b>	100 (includes charter and district schools)
<b>Charter leaders trained to date</b>	430 (includes 28 leading charter schools)
<b>Length of program</b>	15-month residency and 5 total years of support
<b>Locations</b>	HQ in NYC, working with these districts: Chicago, NYC, Washington, D.C., Memphis, Milwaukee, New Orleans, Oakland, Baltimore, Prince George’s County
<b>Tuition</b>	No cost to trainee
<b>Cost to train each person</b>	About \$100,000 for recruitment and 15 months of training
<b>Cost to districts</b>	None, but they pay the salary of the assistant principal residency
<b>Sources of revenue</b>	Private foundations, U.S. Dept. of Education
<b>Measures of success</b>	Aims at 90–100% of students at NLNS schools at or above proficiency levels on state assessments

**SOURCE:** CRPE survey of charter school leadership training programs, July 2007; verified by NLNS staff.

## ENSURING A PIPELINE BOILS DOWN TO GOOD RECRUITMENT

As the charter school movement looks ahead to the next 15 years, issues of sustainability rise to the top. As NCSRP found in a survey of Midwest states, a significant proportion of charter schools are still run by their founders.<sup>5</sup> Few charter leaders, moreover, have given much thought to where to find the next generation of people to replace themselves. On this question, Schnur says the first essential step is creating ways to recruit people into training programs. Here are some of the lessons NLNS has learned about recruiting quality people:

### HAVING A BIG PRESENCE IN A DISTRICT IS BENEFICIAL, BUT RECRUITING MEANS WORKING MANY ANGLES, ALL THE TIME

NLNS has 60 principals in both traditional and charter public schools in Chicago. This translates into more educators and peers who know about the NLNS program and might consider it for themselves. But beyond name recognition, Schnur says it is about rolling up your sleeves and recruiting. “We have a staff that is focused on recruitment. We go to conferences, send out email blasts, get nominations for people and track them down and cultivate them over the course of several months or even years, in some cases.” In Schnur’s view, recruiting means working as many angles as possible, all at the same time.

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### SUCCESSFUL RECRUITMENT REQUIRES OPENING THE CHECKBOOK

“We spend about \$18,000 a year for each person just on the recruitment and selection of that person,” Schnur points out.<sup>6</sup> “Some people might say that it’s too much, but we don’t think so. If you don’t get the right person in the first place, then the training isn’t going to help much. Charter schools will often pay this much in a headhunting fee. The point here is that you can’t do this well without a budget to do this.” NLNS’s selective and intensive approach is paying off. Fully 95 percent of all candidates trained are still on the job 3 years later, and no one has yet left the program during the training phase.

### THERE IS A RECRUITING ADVANTAGE TO WORKING WITH TRADITIONAL DISTRICT SCHOOLS AS WELL AS WITH CHARTER SCHOOLS

NLNS wants to change the way cities educate students. As Schnur puts it:

*Our theory of change is that to improve how cities educate kids, you need to start with cities where there are charter schools and a willingness to give increased levels of autonomy to existing traditional school leaders as well, because there are many more of them being hired. Only about 25 percent of our leaders go to charter schools and the rest go to district schools. We want to create a community of leaders across the district and charter sectors and we need to go where the kids are—that means working with both kinds of schools.*

Recruits also come into the program unsure about what kind of school they would like to lead. The NLNS program helps them think this through, steering some trainees who had never considered charters before toward them. Recruiting and placing both kinds of leaders is part of the goal of changing how cities educate students.

## THINK BEYOND A ONE-PERSON-LEADERSHIP TRAINING MODEL TO ADDRESS SUSTAINABILITY

Investing in leadership teams can eliminate the problems of burnout. In the world of schools, principals are often viewed as *the* source of leadership. The exceptional demands placed on principals are sometimes mastered, but in Schnur's view the model of a one-person leader is unsustainable.

Schnur argues that leadership needs to be redefined so as to focus more on the leadership team:

*The real issue we face in many schools, especially charter schools that are getting incredible results, is the risk that principals will leave without accelerating the work. We need to start thinking about this more strategically. As a society right now, we under-invest in school leadership teams. One principal cannot do this alone. Even though the principal is necessary, he or she is not sufficient. Instead of focusing more dollars in classrooms, we should be sending more dollars to the school, to really over-invest in these leadership teams. One of the keys to getting results over time and making it sustainable is to develop a really robust school leadership team. There hasn't been enough funding to do that in many schools, especially smaller schools. I think that's a key lever for success and sustainability.*

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Investing in the pipeline of leadership teams is something NLNS is beginning to do. The organization is spending more time training and coaching leadership teams across their cities so they can help a good principal engage others in the school. Over the life of the program, over 7,000 people have applied to be “New Leaders.” Some 430 have been trained, but another 500 or so have been “denied with encouragement,” reports Schnur.

*[Those] denied with encouragement were incredibly strong people who weren't ready to be a principal. But they could be an assistant principal or a lead teacher. We're looking at tapping that pool by offering training to them. Then we'd like to get them into a New Leader school in one of these other roles so that we can cluster more and more people with the same philosophy in these schools.*

In terms of burnout along the pipeline, Schnur says it is the third-year teacher who is most vulnerable, and who seems increasingly to be lost to education. “But they are actually the ones you want to be moving into leadership roles, such as dean of students,” he argues. “Right now we’re looking at policy ideas to deal with this problem and when we solve it, it’s really going to address the pipeline issue. There are a lot of people who would stay in schools with the right support and encouragement.”

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## TRAINING PROGRAMS AND THEIR TRAINEES SHOULD BE ACCOUNTABLE FOR RESULTS

### TRAINING IN THEORY AND ABSTRACTIONS IS NOT THE ANSWER

In recent years, many researchers, superintendents, and principals have been critical of traditional principal preparation in university colleges of education. They say it is too theoretical, misses the important topics, and offers few supports once people are on the job.<sup>7</sup> Jon Schnur’s impression of these programs is no different.

Schnur’s decision to create an entirely new training program, rather than trying to work with existing university-based programs, grew out of his belief that traditional programs were too abstract and removed from the work of the principal. In addition, he sensed that there was little interest on the part of colleges of education in a dramatic reshaping of the way they prepared principals. He notes:

*When we looked carefully at some of the university programs that are training principals, they seemed in general quite disconnected from what is needed to have principals who would be ready to lead dramatic improvement in schools. Operationally, the programs were a reflection of how a university would structure a program to teach the theory of something, but they weren't structured in a way that is actually looking at the best way to help people acquire the skills and knowledge they need to use in a very practical way to drive big improvements in education . . . No one was saying "We're going to look at the achievement results at the schools of the principals we've trained," much less describe how well they themselves were doing as an institution based on that.*

This lack of accountability or interest in seeking more accountability led Schnur away from colleges of education and toward an entirely new training institution with the following accountability components.

### **PRINCIPALS SHOULD SET DEMANDING GOALS FOR STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT RESULTS**

Schnur's organization places all its principals in urban districts and asks them to agree to get 90–100 percent of their students to achieve proficiency on state assessments. This means they need to choose the right people to lead the schools in the first place—the recruitment piece NLNS focuses on so heavily. Once the organization has chosen its candidates, NLNS expects all of them to sign on to the achievement goal. This is the first step in the challenge. According to Schnur, "By naming it and tracking it, and getting people invested in it and signing on to it rather than feeling like it's something that's being done to them, that's not insignificant."

### **A RELENTLESS FOCUS ON TAKING STOCK AND LEARNING FROM WHAT WORKS ARE ESSENTIAL**

Schnur believes that setting the goals is the first step, and tracking them is the next. So far for NLNS, he says, there is both good news and bad news.

*Right now we can say that the early returns show that the schools led by our New Leaders for two years are generally making faster progress improving academic achievement than the other schools in the system they are in. But when you look at the pace of gain that's needed to get them there in five years,*

*Schnur's organization places all its principals in urban districts and asks them to agree to get 90–100 percent of their students to achieve proficiency on state assessments.*

*we've only got 25 percent of our schools making the kind of dramatic progress that's necessary to meet the five-year goal.*

How can NLNS raise those numbers, a quest similar to those pursued by every district in the country? Schnur is betting that reverse engineering “what works” is the answer. “We study the small number of schools that have been able to do this and look at the practices, people, and skills needed to do this. Their leaders share what’s worked for them.” This is not easy, however. He notes that they usually do not “get it right” the first time. “It usually takes a couple of years to refine the lessons; to figure out how it works and how people acquire those skills and work to get it to a shape that other people can actually learn from it.” Sharing what works between sites is key. “We also document the schools and classrooms that are making the most dramatic achievement gains through video of classroom practice, formative assessments, and other ways. Then we make these available to everyone to learn from.”

#### TARGETED AND STRATEGIC SUPPORT IS THE NECESSARY FOLLOW-UP

“If the first front was to prepare a pipeline of new leaders,” says Schnur, “then the second is to invest about a third of our budget in what happens to support the schools led by our new principals once they are on the job.” To that end, he feels that the most important work is to get data-driven instructional improvement support available. NLNS now offers, free and online, the tools, assessments, and organizational systems from some of their best schools so that principals and school leadership teams can locate and apply them. Why does a recruitment and training program care about this? “Because,” Schnur says, “ultimately it’s about results. We think this is one of the most important levers to drive those results.”

#### HANDS-ON TRAINING WITH SUPPORT TRUMPS COURSEWORK

With a focus on accountability for student achievement, NLNS quickly concluded that because a principal’s job is very applied and hands-on, the organization should build its training around a year-long residency with a mentor principal in a school similar to the school the new principal would be leading. Schnur notes:

*The year-long residency is an absolute cornerstone of our training. Aspiring charter leaders do their residency in a charter school. So they are taking on a*

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*very structured leadership role in a charter school, and getting feedback from both a principal on-site, as well as a leadership coach, while they are leading and learning about what it takes to lead a charter school.*

What about coursework? NLNS condenses the coursework element to six weeks during the summer and brings in the most successful and talented leaders from the field to teach. “We use this opportunity to learn about what has made those leaders so successful, so we can better understand them and scale them in both charter schools and district schools.” When national surveys of principals show that principals find they learned more on the job than they did in school, Schnur is not surprised.<sup>8</sup> “Not everything can be taught in a classroom. Being a principal is such an applied job, you really should be learning most of it on the job. NLNS believes that the residency year is the solution.” In fact, his experiences of the trials and setbacks of starting a nonprofit have proven to be the best fodder for helping develop the training for principals at NLNS. “Every time something big happens at NLNS, we say, “Now, how can our principals learn from this experience?”

## DISTRICT DEMAND WILL DRIVE TRUE SCALE IN INNOVATIVE LEADERSHIP TRAINING

When NLNS was in its infancy and building its plan, the founders reassured themselves with the knowledge that, compared to training teachers, training the principal corps is a more “doable” job. “It’s not like trying to find and train 3 million teachers!” Schnur and his colleagues believe that, by 2008, they will meet their goal of recruiting and training at least a critical mass of principals in most of the cities in which they have invested time and energy. They believe that goal was already met in six of their cities by 2006. They added three new cities in 2007, and plan to add one city per year for the foreseeable future. “Adding new cities helps us refine what we do with all of our cities.” Even at 330 schools, however, NLNS serves only a small fraction of all urban schools. There are other excellent charter leadership training programs, but they serve an even smaller segment of all schools. What will it take to dramatically expand the supply?

### DISTRICTS AND CITIES WILL HAVE TO DEMAND BETTER TRAINING

Very few traditional principal training programs have talked with NLNS about learning from or emulating their model, according to Schnur. However, in Chicago, where

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NLNS has the most presence, the University of Illinois-Chicago has made changes to its program. “The competition between our institutions helped them to think about changing what they do,” notes Schnur. But by far the most energy spent on rethinking principal training originates in cities and school districts. They want to learn what NLNS does and how to make it happen in their own training and principal development efforts. Districts across the country have come to NLNS, says Schnur, studied what NLNS is doing, and have taken it home to try locally. “These districts are not being well served by the local universities and they are interested in taking matters into their own hands,” he observes.

### **EVEN THE BEST TRAINING CANNOT OVERCOME DISTRICT OR STATE POLICIES AT ODDS WITH SUCCESS**

After working with many districts, Schnur contends there is a need to change policy and practice in districts. “Sometimes for the best training in the world to help train great leaders, you still need to transform the job of the principalship so that the school system is ready to accommodate the kinds of leaders and skills that they need in their buildings.” Before they go into a district, NLNS negotiates many things up front, such as changing contracts around autonomy for school leaders, and principal certification. “Before we go in, the state has to agree to changes that allow (our trainees) to become certified principals going through NLNS rather than through colleges of education.” NLNS views these changes as not just important for its trainees and principals, but as opportunities to influence the conditions of success for everyone in the district.

Autonomy for all principals is one approach to improve the chances of success. Another lies in sharing NLNS’ principal selection criteria with districts as a model for identifying and training other district principals. Finally, NLNS believes that a critical mass from their training program can make dramatic changes in a city. By working in a small number of cities, NLNS trainees are poised to make up a significant percentage of school leaders in some of the nation’s biggest cities. By 2008, NLNS expects to reach critical mass in Washington, D.C. (55 percent of school leaders), Memphis (45 percent), and Oakland (40 percent). Schnur and his colleagues view reaching critical mass in these communities as an opportunity to bring about district-wide as opposed to school-level change.

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## CHARTER LEADERSHIP TRAINING IS THE FUTURE OF TRADITIONAL PUBLIC SCHOOL TRAINING

In the end, although there are many daily differences between the job of a charter school principal and a traditional public school principal, Schnur believes there are more similarities than differences. District schools can benefit from the entrepreneurial drive and data-driven focus of great charter leaders, he argues.

*We believe that district principals need to be leading schools in much the same way that these very successful charter leaders do. It's not in any way similar to what districts are like now, but I really think that is where a lot of district principals will need to go. . . . When you look at what it takes to get dramatic improvement in a charter school, it actually is very similar to what it takes to get that improvement in a traditional public school.*

What he implies is that cross-pollination between charter and traditional public schools has many advantages and, if done thoughtfully and carefully, can benefit students in both types of schools.

### IMPLICATIONS

The experience of the New Leaders for New Schools leadership training program suggests lessons for any district or city struggling to raise student achievement. Strong leadership in charter schools and traditional public schools is a necessary part of any answer. Mayors and school superintendents who wonder where this supply of leaders will come from, how best to train them to ensure their success, and how to keep them from burning out, can apply the lessons described here if they:

- *Aim for a menu of high-quality training options.* NLNS is one way to train leaders who will go to existing district or charter schools, but NLNS does not offer training for leaders who want to start a new independent public school. Other national training programs, like Building Excellent Schools, train people who want to open and run a start-up charter school. In addition, organizations that are trying to replicate successful schools often offer leadership fellowships. Savvy locales will explore all of these national options as well as create high-quality local leadership development programs.

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- *Create a local recruitment strategy.* Recruiting from outside, grooming from within, and providing future leaders with access to high-quality training and residency options is key.
- *Look closely at the policies that support or hinder strong leadership.* At a minimum, states need to allow for principals to be certified by alternative training programs, not just through schools, colleges, and departments of education. On a broader scale, districts and states should be examining policies and procedures that limit principal autonomy; the goal should be providing principals with as much autonomy as possible within a framework of accountability.
- *Create mechanisms for schools to learn from leadership practices of any school that is beating the odds.* Whether it is a charter school or a traditional public school, leadership practices that help students beat the odds and help educators close the achievement gap should be celebrated and shared in public, not hoarded as “our approach” or “our program.” Teaching and learning is a collaborative endeavor, and leadership development should be, too.
- *Hold training programs accountable.* Setting a common accountability standard and measuring programs’ effectiveness through the success or failure of their graduates in meeting the bar should be standard district practice.

*In the end, leadership is about pointing people in the right direction and persisting toward well-defined goals in the face of evasion, denial, scapegoating, and personal attacks.*

In the end, leadership is about pointing people in the right direction and persisting toward well-defined goals in the face of evasion, denial, scapegoating, and personal attacks. As the NLNS experience indicates, the right direction for school leadership training rests on setting a high bar, supporting candidates as they learn and settle into their new jobs, making adjustments based on experience and data, and holding individuals, schools, and the system accountable. School districts, states, and independent agencies such as NLNS that pursue that direction, under those guidelines, will not go far wrong.

## NOTES

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4. [http://www.fastcompany.com/social/2006/index.html#social\\_list](http://www.fastcompany.com/social/2006/index.html#social_list)
5. Betheny Gross and Kirsten Martens, “Leadership To Date, Leadership Tomorrow: A Review of Data on Charter School Directors,” NCSRP Working paper #2007-2 (Seattle: Center on Reinventing Public Education, June 2007), 6-9.
6. The total cost of training each person is approximately \$100,000, which includes recruitment costs, room and board during three months of summer training, coursework, instructors, and support and follow-up during the following 12 months.
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