

# Urban District Anchors Culture Shift in Standards-Based Leadership Strategy

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The role of the school leader demands the talent and finesse of a chameleon on roller skates. Today's leader is responsible for the accomplishments of students, the growth of teachers in the school building, and stewardship to the greater community—an instructional leader and not just the manager of people and buildings. The job has proved overwhelming. A 2012 study found that one in four professionals who assume the role of school principal in an urban district resign from the job within the first two years.<sup>1</sup> The average tenure of the principalship as a whole is three to four years, even shorter in low-performing, high-poverty schools.<sup>2</sup>

With its 208 schools, 130,000 students, and 19,000 employees, Prince George's County Public Schools (PGCPS) in Maryland is one of the country's largest school districts. Serving a high-poverty student population from urban, suburban, and rural communities, the district requires leadership that can enable its learners to combat the conditions of poverty and meet the rigors of college and the workforce. Despite nationally recognized, innovative initiatives to provide students with arts integration, environmental and financial literacy, and language immersion, Prince George's faced continual turnover at the executive leadership level over the last 15 years, significant gaps in student achievement, and community mistrust.

In addressing its challenges, the district was mindful of research that suggests that leadership is second only to teaching among school-related factors that affect student learning.<sup>3</sup> A 2011 Wallace Foundation study found an empirical link between leader practice and improved student achievement.<sup>4</sup> Thus, Prince George's could not tackle student achievement gaps without bolstering the preparation and development of school leaders. And it could not build a pipeline of strong leaders without clear standards for leadership.

The district's approach was fourfold. It mounted a rigorous search for a capable chief executive, adopted a coherence framework to tie expectations for school leaders to goals for

student achievement, collaborated with state and university partners to align the PGCPS Leadership Standards with state and national leader standards, and developed leadership pathway programs based on the PGCPS Leadership Standards.

## Sustained Executive Leadership

The district had followed a trail of broken leadership, with four superintendents in 10 years. There was a dire need for intuitive leadership with an unbreakable commitment to an urban school district that comprises children who receive free and reduced-price meals (over 60 percent), English language learners and students receiving special education services (25 percent), and minorities (96 percent). Prince George's partnered with the Maryland State Board of Education, county executive, and local board of education to identify a leader who could provide focus and sustainability. Kevin M. Maxwell assumed the helm of chief executive officer in 2013, remained for the duration of his four-year contract, and will enter into a second contract this fall. Maxwell's vision, leadership, and stability have positioned the district to achieve its goals, particularly around leader development. Most important, Dr. Maxwell placed relentless focus on literacy achievement throughout the district, something that had not existed prior to his tenure. Ongoing collaboration among local, state, and national partners support this focus on literacy.

With a progressive superintendent in place and a grant from The Wallace Foundation, the district conducted a gap analysis in 2013 covering communication and community engagement, teaching and learning, operations and finance, and organizational efficiency and effectiveness. As part of that effort, the district set five goals: to ensure that teaching and learning produces college- and career-ready students, transform community relations through transparent communication and relationship building, create an organizational structure centered on

enhancing teaching and learning, align resources to system priorities, and establish a transition team to conduct a thorough review of the system.

### Adoption of a Coherence Framework

The district adopted a Coherence Framework to articulate the interdependence of the parts of the school system and illuminate their alignment with strategies for improving student achievement (figure 1).<sup>5</sup> Prior to its adoption, the district lacked a cohesive system to integrate the strategic plan with knowledge management and an operational system geared toward school improvement and districtwide collaboration.

The framework targets instructional improvement at its core while giving all employees a role in teaching and learning and in increasing student achievement. The framework focuses all sectors of the district, including parents and family, on literacy achievement and expectations for school leadership, and it reflects shared core values:

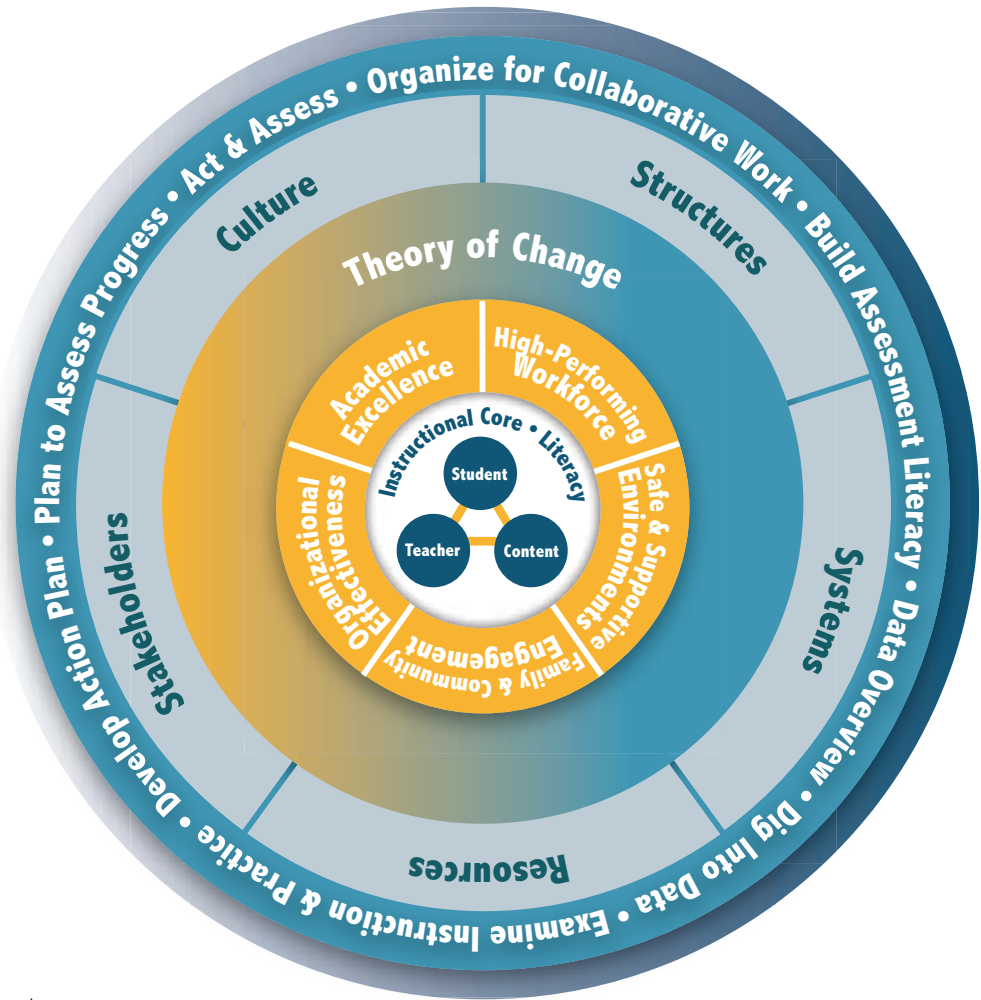
- Students are our priority, and all students can achieve at high academic levels.
- Families, students, and educators share the responsibility for student success.
- High expectations inspire high performance.
- All staff share the responsibility for a safe and supportive school environment contributing to excellence in education.
- The support of everyone in our community is essential to the success of our schools.
- Continuous improvement in teaching, leadership, and accountability is the key to our destiny.

### Collaboration with Vested Stakeholders

The district defined the hallmark for leader behavior by creating and adopting distinct PGCPs Leadership Standards aligned to state, university, and national leader standards. These standards provided a common language for

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Figure 1. Coherence Framework



**All who join the workforce as principals participate in systemic professional development aligned to the standards.**

what effective school leaders in the district should believe, know, and be able to do. Our district convened many stakeholder groups to help make a one-to-one correlation of the district's leadership standards with the Maryland Instructional Leadership Framework, the former Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) Standards, as well as the Educational Leadership Constituent Council Standards.<sup>6</sup> This work established a baseline for leader performance that could not only be measured but could be communicated to districts across the country.

The district's standards for leader practice were then relayed to local university partners, who revamped their leadership development partnership programs to align with them.<sup>7</sup> It is challenging work: University requirements, policies, and restrictions around program offerings hindered our ability to be more flexible and creative in some cases. But through a cohort approach, graduate leadership development, education administration doctorates, and certification programs are offered throughout the district and focus on projects that address areas of need such as poverty, English language learners, special education, social justice, parental engagement, teacher leadership, and leadership sustainability.

The district continues to refine its leadership standards to ensure continuing leader proficiency aligned with current demands of instructional leadership, such as benchmarks established by the Common Core State Standards. We most recently revised the PGCPs Leadership Standards to match the newly adopted Professional Standards for Educational

Leaders.<sup>8</sup> By doing so, we help principals gain a better understanding and recognition of their role as school leaders.

## Creation of Leadership Pathways

The district has designed a strategy of leadership development centered on mentoring and coaching to mold strong principals and aspiring principals, and it also developed a standards-based leadership development program, Aspiring Leaders Program for Student Success, in which prime candidates are poised to assume school leadership vacancies as they arise. Previously, the district struggled to maintain a school leadership "bench" that was prepared for the rigors of urban leadership. Now there is a consistent bench of able candidates developed through a program aligned to the PGCPs Leadership Standards (table 1). Moreover, all who join the workforce as principals participate in systemic professional development aligned to the standards.

Throughout this process, PGCPs has used a "progress versus plans" approach. Plans guide the work. But through implementation of the plans, leaders engage in critical learning that has a lasting effect on their decisions and actions. This leadership initiative has sparked significant change across the district. There is now a tiered approach to leadership development, with a broader definition of leaders that includes teachers, school-based leaders, and central office leaders. Our leadership pipeline is stronger and more robust, with candidates ready to take on formal and informal leadership roles. Inherent in this framework is an emphasis on

**Table 1. Principal Hires in Prince George's County, 2012–17** (number and share of total)

	2012–13	2013–14	2014–15	2015–16	2016–17
Graduates of PGCPs Leadership Programs Aligned to Standards Appointed as Principals	13 (35%)	9 (64%)	13 (45%)	9 (47%)	16 (62%)
Principal Hires Outside PGCPs Programs	24 (65%)	5 (36%)	16 (55%)	10 (53%)	10 (38%)
Total Number of New Principal Hires	37	14	29	19	26

instructional leadership training. As the role of the school leader has evolved from that of a building manager to that of an instructional leader, PGCPs recognizes the importance of grooming leaders to meet the demands of preparing learners to participate in the global economy. By providing training grounded in the PGCPs Leadership Standards, particularly those standards that speak to the role of instructional leadership, the district renders a preparation program that is focused on improving teaching and learning through coaching. Additionally, the district provides a segue from its graduate and aspiring leadership programs by providing a residency for select leaders who have demonstrated readiness to serve in a quasi-principal role. Assistant principals who have undergone either the ALPSS program or the Assistant Principal Induction Program are required to apply and submit to a rigorous screening, interview, and leadership exercise process for selection into the residency program.

## Implications for State Leaders

Prince George's goal has been to expand its bench of highly skilled leaders, with a focus on data analysis, resource allocation, human capital development, and the evaluation of instructional practices, and thereby drive and maximize student achievement.

We learned valuable lessons. First, state education agencies and other partners are indispensable in creating processes for selecting the right individuals. For instance, Maryland has developed a leader tracking system that can monitor individuals' professional growth and allow districts to more efficiently and equitably identify potential candidates. Partner contributions are particularly valuable in design and monitoring. In general, districts will benefit if state agencies can share how districts across the state align leadership standards and select leaders.

Second, as the role of the school leader evolves, so must the appraisal process for principals and assistant principals. Through trial and error and in collaboration with the Maryland State Department of Education, our district developed a systemwide evaluation tool for principals and assistant principals that bases school leaders' evaluations on evidence of professional practice and student growth. Previously, the

district wrestled with establishing a quantifiable means to assess effective leader practice, a task that requires direct engagement of the state on practices it deems most critical.

State leaders will need systems and structures to support leader development statewide, in addition to helping a district here or there. State boards and state education agencies should make the time to become intimately acquainted not only with the supports the state already offers but also with what districts in their state are developing. State leaders can participate in local events or audit programs to gain insights around their districts' unique challenges and differentiate the types of support districts need.

In addition, state leaders may find that expertise on leadership development lies buried in unexpected areas within their districts. Some of the districts with the most challenging needs find the most unique solutions, and these approaches could be helpful to other districts in the state. We got into this work by launching regular, purposeful convenings with university and other partners to discuss issues, challenges, and successes. Other districts would surely benefit from such conversations.

State leaders can further assist local education agencies by creating opportunities and structures to share, collect, and analyze hiring, retention rates, and trend data. State leaders and universities should talk with the districts about the candidates who emerge from their programs so district leaders can make informed decisions about placement. Even more important are the discussions about changes needed in educational leadership programs at the university level. When states, universities, and districts are on the same page about the desired quality and characteristics of graduates, they can help to produce able leaders who are ready to assume roles across the state.

Perhaps most important to supporting leadership development is the learning culture that is created amidst this work—reflection on efforts, listening to colleagues, learning together. For our district, many improvements have been made in human resources, talent development, work between and among departments, and systems learning by embracing a learning culture. ■

<sup>1</sup>S. Burkauer et al., *First-Year Principals in Urban School Districts: How Actions and Working Conditions Relate to Outcomes* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 2012).

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Policy Attributes.”

<sup>3</sup>M. S. Polikoff, A. C. Porter, and J. Smithson, “How Well Aligned Are State Assessments of Student Achievement with State Content Standards?” *American Educational Research Journal* 48, no. 4 (2011): 965–95.

<sup>4</sup>For a review, see A. Martone and S. G. Sireci, “Evaluating Alignment between Curriculum, Assessment, and Instruction,” *Review of Educational Research* 79, no. 4 (2009): 1332–61. For a newly developed methodology, see N. Doorey and M. Polikoff, *Evaluating the Content and Quality of Next Generation Assessments* (Washington, DC: Thomas B. Fordham Institute, 2016).

<sup>5</sup>For a review, see D. N. Figlio and S. Loeb, “School Accountability,” in E. A. Hanushek, S. Machin, and L. Woessmann, eds., *Handbook of the Economics of Education* (North-Holland, The Netherlands: Elsevier, 2011).

<sup>6</sup>C. E. Rouse et al., “Feeling the Florida Heat? How Low-Performing Schools Respond to Voucher and Accountability Pressure,” *American Economic Journal: Economic Policy* 5, no. 2 (2013): 251–81.

<sup>7</sup>See, for instance, M. S. Polikoff, “How Well Aligned Are Textbooks to the Common Core Standards in Mathematics?” *American Educational Research Journal* 52, no. 6 (2015): 1185–211. See also Polikoff, Porter, and Smithson, “How Well Aligned Are State Assessments?”

<sup>8</sup>M. S. Polikoff et al., “The Waive of the Future? School Accountability in the Waiver Era,” *Educational Researcher* 43, no. 1 (2014): 45–54.

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<sup>2</sup>K. Seashore-Louis, et al., “How Does Leadership Affect Student Achievement? Results from a National US Survey,” *School Effectiveness and School Improvement* 21, no. 3 (2010): 315–36.

<sup>3</sup>K. Leithwood et al., “How Leadership Influences Student Learning,” (New York: The Wallace Foundation, 2004).

<sup>4</sup>Wallace Foundation, *The School Principal as Leader: Guiding Schools to Better Teaching and Learning* (New York, 2011), <http://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/school-leadership/effective-principal-leadership/Documents/The-School-Principal-as-Leader-Guiding-Schools-to-Better-Teaching-and-Learning.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup>The district organized its work around principles articulated in Jim Collins and Morten T. Hansen, *Great by Choice™* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011), whose titular maxim grounded the district’s strategic plan, theory of action, as well as its Coherence Framework.

<sup>6</sup>For example, one group included representatives from Maryland Department of Education’s Breakthrough Center, the National Institute for School Leadership (NISL), principals, and central office administrators and executives from the district. See Maryland State Department of Education, Maryland Instructional Leadership Framework (2016), <http://archives.marylandpublicschools.org/NR/rdonlyres/DF957230-EC07-4FEE-B904-7FEB176BD978/19877/MDInstructionalLeadershipFramework.pdf>; National Policy Board for Educational Administration, *Educational Leadership Program Standards* (Reston, VA: NPBEA, 2011).

<sup>7</sup>PGCPS partners with Johns Hopkins University, Bowie State University, the University of Maryland-College Park, and McDaniel College. We started by addressing preservice programs at each and then developing a common language around expectations, guided by the district standards.

<sup>8</sup>National Policy Board for Educational Administration, *Professional Standards for Educational Leaders* (Reston, VA: NPBEA, 2015).

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<sup>8</sup>Jensen et al., *Beyond PD*; The Wallace Foundation, “School Leadership,” Knowledge Center [website] (2017), <http://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/school-leadership/pages/default.aspx>.

<sup>9</sup>Learning Forward and Education Counsel, *A New Vision for Professional Learning*.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 39.