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Authors

Cheung, Rebecca

Grubb, W. Norton

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PLI

IMPACT REPORT Collective and Team Leadership

REBECCA CHEUNG
W. NORTON GRUBB¹

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the last two years, UC Berkeley's Principal Leadership Institute (PLI) has published two impact reports: one focused on the breadth of regional impact and strength of program model, the second focused on alumni and district partner feedback. This third report* focuses on the impact of a preparation program on leadership practice by examining concentrations of PLI alumni in administrative teams. In its fourteenth year, the PLI now has 491 graduates, 88% of whom work in the Bay Area; 50% work in PLI's four partner districts. This staffing impact (described in the first impact report) has led to the phenomenon of administrative teams composed entirely of PLI alumni. Using data from interviews of 26 alumni on 10 all-PLI administrative teams, this report indicates that PLI teams enact strong equity-centered distributed leadership models that originate from their PLI preparation. Specifically, the alumni on these teams highlight the ways in which trust, common language and practices, and shared philosophies and values enable them to work more efficiently and effectively as school leaders. The conclusions focus on how leadership preparation programs and employers can use these findings to better support practicing school leaders.

*This report is an abbreviated version of our study. Complete study available at http://principals.berkeley.edu/documents/pli/PLI_Collective_and_Team_Leadership.pdf

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David Norris, Doreen Bracamontes, Nathan Geller, Janelle Bugarini
(PLI Cohort 14)

INTRODUCTION

In this report, we analyze the impact of leadership preparation by focusing on administrative teams comprised exclusively of leaders who graduated from the Principal Leadership Institute (PLI) at the University of California, Berkeley—a program that prepares leaders for urban schools in the San Francisco Bay Area. In its fourteenth year, the PLI now has 491 graduates, 88% of whom work in the Bay Area. Half of PLI alumni work in PLI’s four partner districts: Berkeley Unified School District, Oakland Unified School District, San Francisco Unified School District, and West Contra Costa Unified School District. This regional concentration has led to the phenomenon of more than 10 teams composed entirely of PLI alumni, with 2 to 9 members per team.

We wondered what difference it makes to have several PLI graduates with the same leadership preparation on an administrative team. What might be easier or more effective? What might be more difficult? Does common preparation make a substantive difference in everyday leadership practice?

METHODOLOGY

To start our inquiry, we first queried the alumni database to identify all alumni teams. Then, we decided to narrow our focus to 10 administrative teams who represent each of our four partner districts, each school level (elementary, middle, high school), as well as charter and public schools. The alumni represent Cohorts 3 through 13² of PLI. Our interview team³ was able to interview 26 of our 28 target alumni during the summer of 2013.

The 26 graduates had administrative experience ranging from one to ten years. They all had some experience in schools without other PLI graduates, so they could compare their experiences working with and without fellow PLI students. In addition to background information on their leadership trajectories, our interview questions asked about the advantages and disadvantages of working with PLI alumni, the capacities these individual felt were most important in their work, and how well or poorly PLI prepared them for leadership roles. All interviews were transcribed and analyzed for common themes and patterns.

² We made sure there were alumni from different cohorts, but did not choose to prioritize representation from all cohorts in the final sample.

³ A special thank you to our interview team, which included Jane Stern, Ann Rarden, and Carole Robie, who all work as leadership coaches in our programs.



Sonya Martin (PLI Cohort 6), Michelle Sinclair (PLI Cohort 13)

FINDINGS

Collective Leadership: The Advantage of Working in All-Alumni Teams

In response to interview questions about the advantages and disadvantages of coming from the same preparation program, our alumni overwhelmingly described the ability to enact collective leadership strategies. By collective leadership, we mean decisions made by a team of leaders deliberating together, including those in formal administrative positions as well as teacher leaders, and achieving consensus because they have similar norms, values, and conceptions of appropriate practice. Collective leadership, then, requires some mechanism to harmonize the values and norms of different individuals. Our alumni described the Principal Leadership Institute at UC Berkeley as the place that provided the calibration of a set of shared beliefs, values, and attitudes toward equitable and socially just schooling. In their view, the similarity of perspectives among the members of a leadership team made decision-making less contentious, more effective, and even more efficient. In addition, the common knowledge of specific strategies for how to address leadership challenges and dilemmas in an equitable and socially just manner provided a common “toolbox” for the teams.

Such a collective view underlies the concept of distributed leadership initially articulated by James Spillane and his colleagues. In their conception, leadership is distributed among many individuals within a school including principals and vice-principals, teacher-leaders including department heads or grade-level chairs, instructional coaches, and reform facilitators.⁴ Then many individuals have leadership responsibilities, not just the principal and, in theory, all the leaders in a school can be consistent in their approaches to schooling and instruction.

In practice, distributed leadership has often been confused with delegating decision-making authority to various groups within a school. This does not challenge the dominant hierarchical model of leadership. Further, it does not assure that the several individuals or groups leading a school agree on the mission, values, purposes of schooling, or the practices that should be implemented to further school improvement. Our conception of collective leadership expands on distributed leadership by adding the dimension of shared values and beliefs. In the case of PLI, there is a focus on promoting equity and social justice in schools.

⁴ See James Spillane, *Distributed Leadership*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006. For empirical work on the practice of distributed leadership, see the website of the Distributed Leadership Study, www.distributedleadership.org/DLS/Home.html.



José De León (PLI Cohort 7), Summer Sigler(PLI Cohort 12)

In response to interview questions about the advantages and disadvantages of coming from the same preparation program, a small number of respondents disagreed that working with fellow PLI graduates automatically results in stronger working relationships. One noted that graduates vary in their learning and capacity and another noted the variation among PLI graduates. So while the advantages of working with fellow graduates are substantial, they are not foolproof; they depend on individual circumstances such as the extent to which graduates have absorbed the program's central principles and their overall experiences within the program.

Overall, however, the leaders we interviewed overwhelmingly agreed that collective leadership is anchored in three important ways: relational trust, common language and practices, as well as shared philosophies and values. Further, they emphasized several distinct ways that PLI instills these capacities in its students.

The Centrality of Trust

Foremost, graduates stressed the dimension of trust on all alumni administrative teams – an element missing in many schools but emphasized as important by many educators (e.g. Barbara Schneider and Anthony Bryk in *Trust in Schools: A Core Resource for School Reform*). Several individuals described an “automatic trust” when working with alumni from different cohorts. They indicated that this trust was engendered through belief in the PLI program to select and develop leaders with equity centered values and leadership strategies. For example, an alumnus said, “I don’t have to question motives of my teammates. I know that the basics can be assumed; I can assume that [other leaders from PLI] have the best interests of kids in mind, have a lens of the things I talked about earlier as far as underrepresented, disenfranchised, oppressed youth.”

With trust can come more stability, allowing administrative teams to become more coherent over time. Stability is a much-neglected resource in schools,

The PLI values and underpinnings—they are all part of a daily practice. If you aren’t on the same page with somebody on those fundamentals, then you would have somebody else that you are constantly managing to get through to the real work, which is for kids and families. -PLI Alumnus

[The benefit of having PLI teams is] having a common language about the work we do, and a passion for the work we do. The teamwork exactly mimics what we created in the very first year in PLI. Having PLI language and PLI research-based techniques gives us more drive. PLI Alumnus

particularly in urban schools where students, teachers, principals, and district office leadership have high turnover rates. (Currently in California, 50% of sitting principals have less than five years of experience.⁵) But if a leadership team can stay together over a period of years, a school can move forward in its instructional and managerial practices, and reform and improvement are more likely to take hold. One alumni described this phenomenon in detail stating, “[My school does not] have a great record of consistency in leadership. A lot is made [by the community related to] the stability of the principal...I don’t think you [can] go back 25 or 30 years at our school and see a leadership team that was going to stay intact [over time]; [instead, they had] a new principal every one or two years for 20 years. The fact that I have a team going into its fourth year intact—I don’t know if that has ever been done here. [The current administrative team], all being from the same program and having some commonalities, has a big part to play in that.”

Common Language and Practices Related to School Reform

Our study participants indicate that the PLI curriculum resulted in common language and practices among their PLI teams. These included the course readings and curriculum, program design (including orientation, recruitment, and selection), and

pedagogical strategies like project-based learning and student-centered instruction. For example, one alumnus stated, “PLI gave us a foundational common language. Common language that we draw from or pull from whenever we feel the need to. Non-PLI teams, there is – I don’t want to say a vacuum, but there is a lack of a foundation.”

With the shared background of the PLI curriculum, one graduate said the team doesn’t have to spend time on the “basics” and can make faster progress on reforms. In other words, they can assume that they have each discussed and analyzed various aspects of major educational issues with a focus on equity and social justice during the program. As one participant stated:

Another huge advantage [of my PLI team] is we talk about changing systems and working on curriculum—and we talk about that process requiring some common language and common terminology, so that we all can have richer conversations. We’ve had to spend less time crafting our common language and been able to spend more time on actionable instructional reform. A group commitment has allowed us to do what we want to do a lot faster than we would have if we would have had to spend a year or two working on our language, our mission, our norms.

⁵ Bland, J., Sherer, D., Guha, R., Woodworth, K., Shields, P., Tiffany-Morales, J., & Campbell, A. (2011). The status of the teaching profession 2011. Sacramento, CA: The Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning at WestEd, 2011.



Daniel Roose (PLI Cohort 8, Pasquale Scuderi (PLI Cohort 6)

Similarly, several graduates noted that coming to agreement on school policy would take time away from other efforts at reform and that this consensus building is expedited on PLI teams.

Another value of shared practices is that PLI graduates have familiarity with similar tools, strategies, and approaches to facilitate the work. Several alumni described protocols and group roles that were learned in PLI and adopted by their teams. Another example is having hard conversations. This is something heavily emphasized in the PLI curriculum. As an assistant principal noted, “When really hard conversations come up, we know how to check ourselves and we know how to enter the really hard conversations—because we know it’s what’s needed. We can bring things to the table that are scary or frustrating.” Another graduate noted the common experience of intense group work during the program stating, “We all know how to work as a team. One strength of the program was learning how to work in groups and how to have conversations around equity and those difficult conversations. That’s the impact on my work—I can go to any of my team and close the door, and we know how to talk to each other.”

Common Philosophies for School Leadership

Study participants also recounted with great consistency that PLI graduates have similar equity-centered philosophies, sometimes expressed as “the basics,” “fundamentals,” or “vision.” Values cited included understanding equity issues in schooling, improving outcomes for students, and racial justice. They indicated that leadership team decisions stem from these assumptions. For example, the practice of replacing conventional punitive student discipline systems with restorative justice models and the prioritization of instructional and distributed leadership were cited multiple times by study participants.

In addition, PLI graduates cited the need for leadership teams to have open and honest conversations about difficult topics. They said that they value interrogating the underlying issues in education. As one graduate indicated, “You can talk candidly, you can talk honestly. There has never been a time when I couldn’t say something, when I would be misunderstood. There is a respect for communication styles as well. When we do have conversations, we are able to drill it down to what we believe in; we do have a clear vision.”

[Working with another PLI grad] makes it phenomenal because you’re leading a school with total trust. You can close your eyes and just know that your colleague, your partner not only has your back but also will challenge you. Also will coach you, and help continue to build your capacity. But it starts with trust. PLI Alumnus



Deanna Yasaki (PLI Cohort 15), Armando Torres (PLI Cohort 12)

CONCLUSIONS

From our interviews with PLI administrative teams, several conclusions emerge. First, school leadership is complicated and difficult work. The demands that PLI graduates experience on the job, working both with and without fellow alumni, are so overwhelming and varied that only a comprehensive and intensive preparation program can prepare them for school leadership. **PLI graduates value the rigor of the preparation they received, even though it is difficult.** Study participants repeatedly noted the ways in which readings and course practices were frequent reference points in their work.

Second, our evidence indicates that preparation does influence future leadership practice. **Leadership programs can instill their participants with the basic values and broad perspectives that alumni take into practice.** These deep understandings are what stay with graduates, even over long periods of time, and such capacities are crucial on the job.

Third, many preparation programs (and the national and state standards that drive them) and employers focus on individual traits, and there's no question that many of them are necessary on the job. But we argue that it is necessary to go beyond the

laundry list of such beliefs and capacities because they alone cannot foster the collective leadership that is so necessary in schools — particularly in urban schools with their contentious personal relationships, lack of trust, incoherent policies, and lack of consensus necessary to develop consistent reforms. **In leadership preparation, the right kinds of collaboration, problem-based exercises, and practice via workgroups are necessary to prepare graduates for collective leadership.**

Fourth, leadership teams composed of graduates from the same preparation program have many inherent advantages. In the case of PLI, our all-alumni teams enact collective leadership teams built upon the pillars of **increased trust, common language and practices, and shared philosophies and values that enhance the leadership capacities of each individual and team and accelerate the complex process of reforming schools.** In contrast, when a graduate works as an assistant principal or instructional coach under a principal with a very different orientation or when a graduate is a principal working without like-minded administrators and teacher leaders, it becomes much more difficult to implement a collective strategy and affect change under the traditional hierarchical model.



Jeff Manassero (PLI Cohort 12), Alex Horowitz (PLI Cohort 14)

These conclusions point to implications for the policies and practices of school districts. When assembling leadership teams, **schools and districts should make considerations for similar education philosophies, values, and perspectives—the prerequisites for collective leadership and perhaps a strategy for administrative stability.** Otherwise the development of strong working relationships—of trust and shared responsibility in particular—takes time and attention away from other crucial activities. Further, districts can work with preparation programs to foster the skills, traits, values, and philosophies they value in their leaders. Creating a community of shared values has been identified by researchers as a fundamental part of effective organizations.⁶ And the importance of setting a strong culture by creating common language and conceptual categories has also been established.⁷ When employers and preparation programs share similar values, philosophies, and practices about effective school leadership, a powerful partnership is formed that has significant impacts on improving schools.

CREDITS

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For further information about how you can become engaged in the work of the Principal Leadership Institute and Leadership Program, contact us at:

University of California, Berkeley
Principal Leadership Institute
Graduate School of Education
3653 Tolman Hall #1670
Berkeley, CA 94720-1670
(510) 643-7458
<http://principals.berkeley.edu>

⁶ See L. Lezotte, *Learning for All*. Okemos, MI: Effective School Products, 1997; and C. Enz, *Power and shared values in corporate culture*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1986.

⁷ See E. Schein, *Organizational culture and leadership*, 3rd. edition. San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2004.