A lack of insight into administrator careers limits

LAUSD’s ability to develop effective strategies for workforce development.

In the complex, high-needs environment of urban public schools, building an organization of high-performing leaders is critical.

Los Angeles Unified School District is the second-largest school district in the country, employing 45,000 staff and serving approximately 700,000 students, most of whom come from minority and economically disadvantaged groups (Ed-Data, 2009). Academic achievement as measured by standardized tests and graduation rates are below the state averages (CDE, 2009) and have incited pressure for stronger outcomes.

In 2009, LAUSD publicized its mission of ensuring that “every classroom is led by an effective teacher, and that every school is led by an outstanding leader, who is surrounded by a team of excellent support personnel” (LAUSD, 2009). While several concurrent efforts are focused on identifying high quality teachers and determining how to best support and retain them, fewer efforts have been made to do the same for district leaders.

While the majority of education research and policy reform efforts focus on teachers, research shows that school and district administrators also have significant impact on student achievement, especially in a high-needs urban district like the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) (Waters & Marzano, 2006). Therefore the candidates who are up for leadership positions must be as well-prepared as possible to take on their work. However, the experiences that best prepare a district leader are unclear. LAUSD needs information about what pathways current upper-level district administrators have followed to reach their current positions and about what factors influence individuals to follow a career path toward district-level leadership. This lack of clarity limits the district’s ability to develop recruitment and staff development strategies to build a more effective administrator workforce. Identifying and developing education administrators is increasingly critical in light of research that shows there may soon be a large proportion of school leaders exiting the system in the near future (Gates et al, 2003).

17 interviews were conducted to look into the careers of upper-level administrators.

This report, commissioned by LAUSD, outlines a study of previous roles of upper-level administrators and the factors that have influenced career movement. We completed interviews with 17 administrators holding positions in the Human Resources Office, the Office of Curriculum, Instruction and School Support (OCISS), and various Local District Offices. Interviews examined the following two areas of interest: (1) Career pathways of upper-level administrators, and (2) the formal and informal processes that may help facilitate career movement into administrator roles.

**Interviewee Overview:**
- 3 Human Resources Administrators
- 4 OCiSS Administrators
- 10 Local District Administrators

**Key Interviewee Stats:**
- Avg Yrs Teaching: 8
- Avg # of Unique Positions: 11
- Avg # of Places of Work: 7
Tapping Into Talent
An Analysis of the Careers of Upper-Level Administrators at LAUSD

Interviews reveal a typical career path for administrators

Analysis of interviewee career histories revealed a common career path. With a few deviations, 13 of 17 interviewees followed a career path whereby they first assumed the role of a teacher early in their careers, then became a school-level coordinator or coach, then an assistant principal, principal, then finally became a local or central district level administrator. This common career path leading to the principalship exists presumably because the requirements for becoming a school principal necessitate having teaching and at least some school leadership experience. More interesting, however, is that in roles all across the district, including those in Human Resources, this career path persists.

Most interviewees have professional experience only in education-related roles. A bias may also exist towards teachers with elementary school experience.

Analysis also revealed that a majority of the interviewees’ career experience was obtained in education-related roles. Only 3 of 17 interviewees reported having worked experience in non-education related fields.

Furthermore only three individuals ever held a position outside of a school or school district office. About 70% of the interviewees’ total years spent in schools took place in elementary schools (some positions were excluded if the number of years were unknown, though without bias toward elementary, middle, or high school). It will be important for the district to look further into this pattern to determine whether there is, in fact, a bias toward elementary educators and whether this could be detrimental.

Career movement is due, in large part, to intervention by leaders or mentors.

From school level administrators to the Superintendent of the district, respondents reported that their superiors or that they themselves have passed on valuable information on a position, supported others in acquiring additional valuable experiences and responsibilities, mentored, and encouraged others to apply for a new role. The depth of relationships varied, with some reporting strong mentoring partnerships that last throughout an administrator’s career, while others reported that a principal or LD administrator recognized their work and offered them an opportunity to advance. Nonetheless, every respondent communicated that personal relationships are key to developing professionally within the district—with twelve of the seventeen respondents explicitly being asked to apply for a new role at least once during their career at LAUSD.

Visibility of career growth options for upper-level positions is relatively low.

There appear to be few ways of finding out about roles and what requirements or skills are needed in order to reach them. At least 11 of 17 interviewees entered their current administrative role after being informally asked or referred. This is a reminder that an individual’s network is an important component in finding out about positions for which one is qualified—implying that those with better networks experience higher levels of information visibility. Further, because job descriptions are not publicly available until a position is open and competencies desired for different roles seem somewhat undefined, it would be difficult for an employee to determine what skills to build prior to that position becoming available.

Talent identification is important, but there is no consensus on how it should be done.

The majority of administrators interviewed reported that talent identification efforts are important and are taking place—either through individual mentoring relationships, “tapping”, local district programs and central office practices. While respondents report that talent identification is being done in some capacity, they have varying perspectives on who “owns” this work. Exploring whether the local districts or central office can best execute talent identification and development for school and district levels administrators is an important area for exploration for the district to establish effective practices and get the best leaders.

“LAUSD has a greater talent pool than it is aware of.” --Administrator

Years of Experience by School Level (all positions)

- Elementary: 15%
- Middle: 14%
- High: 72%

Minter and Thomas (2000) write that there are possible negative outcomes if high-performing employees find that there are not enough opportunities for movement in an organization.

“Every local district should be building that next generation of leaders so that knowledge isn’t lost when people leave.” --Administrator

“I met a principal who was very influential in my life... he has really monitored and helped me shape my career... Relationships are so important and he’s given me a lot of opportunities.”

--Administrator

“...Minter and Thomas (2000) write that there are possible negative outcomes if high-performing employees find that there are not enough opportunities for movement in an organization.”

--Administrator