Doctoral programs prepare teachers for leadership roles
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Shawn L. Jackson has been a principal at Chicago Public School's Spencer Technology Academy for five years. He has some definite ideas about what makes a good school administrator.

"Pursue this career for the right reason — and that is to be an instructional leader," he says. "If money, power, or prestige is your motive, do something else. Any future principal must be humble, engaged, and reflective as there is always something to be learned."

Being a principal is a calling, believes Cherie Novak, a principal at CPS's Robert Fulton Elementary for three years. "You have to love your job," she adds. "You have to see your purpose as more than a principal. Your ideals have to be firmly rooted in social justice, and you have to live, breathe, and fight for your students and community on a daily basis."

Jackson received his doctorate in administration and supervision from Loyola University in 2010 and Novak is pursuing her Ed.D at UIC in its Urban Education Leadership Program (UELP) with one year left to go.

Loyola and UIC are two area universities that receive high marks for offering teachers the education and support needed to pursue a school leadership career — and to succeed.

First of its kind

UIC's UELP — the first of its kind in the country to be designed for urban principals — has been offered since 2002. Its principals currently lead 10 percent of Chicago's 130 high schools. All of these high schools are showing significant gains on improved school culture and climate measures and nearly all are exceeding district gains in freshmen-on-track (first year students' course grades and credits on track to stay in school) and graduation rates, reports Steve Tozer, co-founder and coordinator of UELP and Professor of Educational Policy Studies at UIC.

UELP came about through this observation: That a number of exceptional principals nationwide, and in Chicago, were leading high-need schools to dramatic learning gains in low-income neighborhoods.

"The conventional wisdom was that such principals were simply gifted — born and not made," says Tozer, "but we believed that such principals could be produced in much greater numbers if the preparation program was designed to accomplish exactly that. So the guiding question for us was, 'What would it take for a program to produce such principals as a rule, rather than as a rare exception to the rule?'"

In addition to designing a curriculum that focuses on producing measurable results in schools, what helps UELP meet its mission is the criteria set for candidates.
"Our candidates have to want to become principals in high-need schools, they have to succeed in obtaining those principalships, and they have to demonstrate improved student learning soon after obtaining those positions," relates Tozer. UIC's program accepts one out of three applicants. Fifteen to 20 candidates are admitted annually and require a minimum of three years teaching experience and a master's.

The program is full time for the first 18 months, during which time students are preparing for principal certification by the state and eligibility status in the district, explains Tozer. After the first 18 months (four academic terms), students typically attend classes part time as they complete their coursework.

Education for all

Loyola's doctoral candidates represent leaders from CPS, as well as city and suburban public and private pre-K-12 schools. Its Ed.D program has an ethical component reflecting its Jesuit tradition of social justice.

"This means that our candidates are dedicated to providing equity and access to all children," says Janis Fine, Associate Professor of Educational Leadership, and Graduate Program Director of the Administration and Supervision Program, School of Education, Loyola University Chicago.

All classes in the doctoral program focus on leading schools to respond to the needs of an array of student populations: general education, special education, English language learners, migrant and refugee, and gifted, says Fine.

The on-campus program at its Water Tower Campus admits 10 doctoral candidates from diverse communities each year. The Ed.D. is 72 hours beyond a bachelor's degree. Of that, up to 33 hours may be transferred in from approved graduate coursework.

Fine says pre-K-12 educators who are contemplating careers as administrators should become involved in their home schools taking leadership roles in such things as committees. "These committees should focus on curriculum, school climate and culture as well as committees that review teacher professional development," says Fine. Such leadership roles provide teacher leaders with the opportunity to demonstrate they have what it takes to be change agents.

Fine advises building a personal portfolio to demonstrate the successes with student achievement and or conduct and be able to back that up with data.

Support

Both Novak and Jackson say the support from their respective universities is a key to their success. Novak says UELP provided support from her early days on the job.

"A first year principalship is unlike any other position that you hold in CPS," she says. "The expression 'It's lonely at the top' definitely rings true when I think of the principalship."
Novak is quick to point to UELP as her lifeline. "I have a network of leaders that are working to transform the culture in and around their schools that I can collaborate with at least twice a week."

In addition, Novak receives coaching from a mentor that has "been there-done that" as a former CPS principal. "The coach understands my deficits and 'newness' and works with me on a consistent basis to decrease my learning curve," she says.

The Loyola experience, says Jackson, "helped me to identify who I am as a leader.

Coursework exposed me to various leadership theories and philosophies that would eventually help to shape me into the leader that I am today. The program instilled in me the idea that the world can be changed, and challenged me to be an agent in this process. I realized that being an instructional leader required more than just the task of managing individuals, but more so in motivating them to do things they may not have thought possible."

Challenges faced

Novak and Jackson face specific challenges as urban principals. "Urban principals in high-poverty schools tackle issues like poverty in a much more concentrated manner than other schools that have a lower concentration of students in poverty," Novak says. "However, if you look at scores of suburban schools and even some of our high achieving urban schools, we are all trying to increase the number of students that are ACT/college ready."

Robert Fulton, serving pre-K-8, has very large class sizes this year, says Novak, with from 30 to 40 students in each class. Its core values are RFES: Respect, Focus, Excellence, and Scholarship.

In her role as principal, Novak says it's important to be reflective and collaborative.

"The most important task is to understand you, and surround yourself with a team of individuals that support and drive your mission and vision. No one is an island, and we cannot do this work alone."

Jackson's school, Spencer Academy, serves approximately 800 pre-K-8 students. The foundation of the work done at this school is rooted in its mantra, "Moving Our Students Beyond The Immediate."

Jackson says this means they are committed to taking students' learning beyond the classroom, providing them with positive experiences that may be the opposite of the more negative circumstances and influences they encounter that are often beyond their control.

Despite the differences in the level of parental involvement, socioeconomic factors, and safety issues, Jackson says the one consistency between an urban school and a suburban school is that they both prosper with effective leaders.

To become effective in this role, Jackson recommends teachers get as much experience dealing with adults as possible, "as this is a key part of the job, and in my opinion, the most difficult part of the transition from teacher to administrator," he says.