



LIFTING UP HIGH-NEED SCHOOLS

THROUGH **HIGHER ED PARTNERSHIPS**

A typical training program for principals involves a lot of coursework and very little time spent working in a classroom. In 2015, Texas Tech University (TTU) incepted a program that flips that formula on its head.

Working with the National Institute for Excellence in Teaching (NIET), TTU drives the Leadership Instruction for Teachers (LIFT) program, which is focused on job-embedded, on-site training in addition to learning the theoretical framework for effective instruction. And the principal fellows' training in theory is based on data and problem sets from the districts in which they are on the ground.

The LIFT program is an example of NIET's ongoing work with Institutions of Higher Education and their district partners to create a common language and understanding of what effective instruction and school leadership look like, promote feedback to teacher and principal candidates through a research-based rubric, and strengthen these partnerships so that district schools that need it most will have access to the highest-quality educators.

The goal of the intensive, fast-track training program is two-fold: to strengthen the partnerships between higher education institutions and surrounding partner school districts and to create a pipeline of talent into the communities through a “Grow Your Own” model for instructional training.

The training for principal fellow candidates is embedded at the university level, so they are taking courses at TTU and in their district from TTU site coordinators about how to effectively lead a school and teach other instructors and teacher leaders. As TTU strengthens its connections with surrounding school districts, such as Grand Prairie Independent School District (GPISD), the training the fellows receive at the university level is preparing them for the real-world scenarios in those districts. As Principal Fellow Corey Atkins of S.F. Austin Elementary School sees it, “We principal fellows are full-time graduate students even as we are full-time employees.”

The university-level instruction is tailored to make the whole experience of learning how to be a principal more authentic. The fellows are introduced to theory through book work, but then they have to put that theory into practice. The assignments from TTU are not vague, in relating to “some school in the United States,” but are specific to the school in which a fellow is working. The data sets they are working with are from the schools so every piece of work is authentic.

Atkins, whose studies at TTU have focused on the thesis that public education is a potential means of social justice, explains exactly how the theory and practice have intertwined during his time in the program: “In post-conferences and professional learning communities

(PLCs) with teachers, for example, I reflexively think about recent coursework incorporating the tenets of effective feedback. And when I meet with my classmates and professors during our learning sessions, as we discuss research-verified strategies for offering feedback, I reflexively think about specific teachers whom I see every day. My clinical experience helps me to contextualize my study of theory, and my study of theory helps me to interpret my clinical experience.”

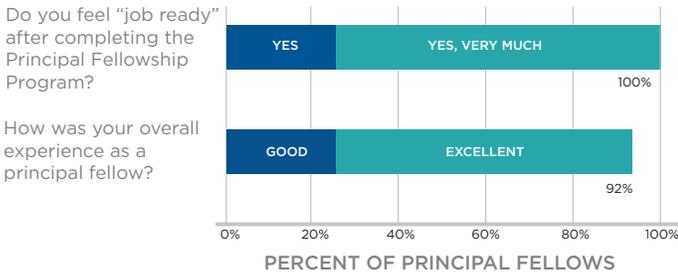
The familiarity with the on-the-ground situations better prepares the fellows to be effective from day one after their training is over. “The teacher candidates we’re getting though the [LIFT program] — there’s a level of maturity, there’s a level of confidence, and there’s a level of being understanding [of] what instruction is,” says Pat Lewis, associate superintendent of Grand Prairie ISD. “They understand the importance of forming relationships. They come in knowing how to plan our lessons.”

Lewis emphasizes the importance of this sort of clinical training in education. “In the medical and legal fields, they have to have some kind of clinical, practical experience before they’re really ready to do the job. So we look at it in that same way,” she says. “We look at it as providing our teacher candidates that practical experience so they will know what to expect when they get in the classroom.”

TTU Site Coordinator at GPISD Shannon Watson says that the experience the fellows receive in the classrooms “reduces their learning curve once hired as the teacher [or administrator] of record, allowing them to focus on students.”

In 2017 a survey was administered towards the end of the yearlong experience to gauge principal fellows' perceptions of the LIFT program. When asked about their overall LIFT program experience, 92 percent reported their experience as "Good" or "Excellent." Similarly, when asked whether they feel "job-ready," 100 percent voted "Yes" or "Yes, very much."

Principal Fellows Report Positive Perceptions of the LIFT Program

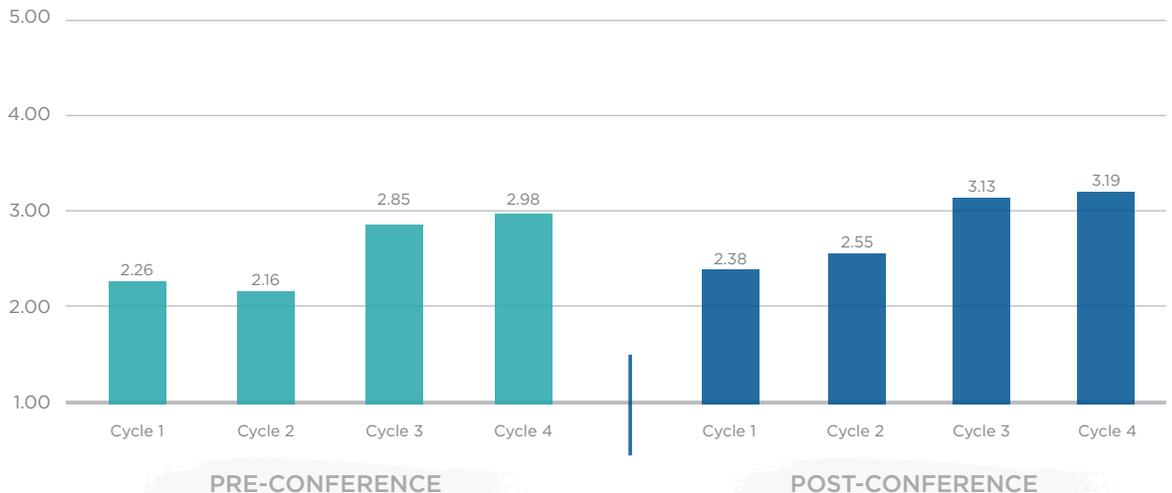


HOW LIFT WORKS TO ELEVATE INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP

Principal fellows who enter the program are paired with a mentor principal to shadow and learn from as they go about their daily routines. In Grand Prairie ISD, there is a significant focus on matching and training the mentors. The district is very intentional about the prep program, in that they work to find the right mentor matches for the fellows. They examine each fellow and mentor's strengths and areas for growth as they move through the program to decide whom to pair with each other. The mentor then coaches the fellow, co-plans instructional growth lessons, and co-teaches other instructors in the school.

Principal Fellows Improve Coaching Skills

Average Conference Facilitation Rubric Score



The program itself focuses on preparing the fellows to teach other school leaders. "I was able to learn how to be very specific with what I need other adults to do," says Amanda Rodriguez, a former principal fellow and current assistant principal at Lorenzo De Zavala Environmental Science Academy, a GPISD school. "So I know what I wanted. You know what you need to do to add value to students' lives. You know you want to increase student achievement. TAP has given me the specific tools to get other adults to be able to do that."

The program is teaching her how to not just tell the teachers the right way to do something, but also to make sure the teachers understand why one strategy works and another might not. "The principal fellows program has grown my leadership skills. I am now able to go right to a teacher's classroom, sit, observe, watch the interaction of that adult with those students, and not just say, 'Well, you know, I wouldn't have done it that way. This is how you should do it,'" says Rodriguez. "Now I'm able to coach that teacher into her understanding where she's at, where her students are at, and what she needs to do to grow them and get them to where they need to be to add value."

She stresses that the LIFT program has taught her how to allow teachers and teacher leaders to draw conclusions for themselves. "Allowing them to come to that conclusion on their own" helps earn buy-in from the other teachers, she says.

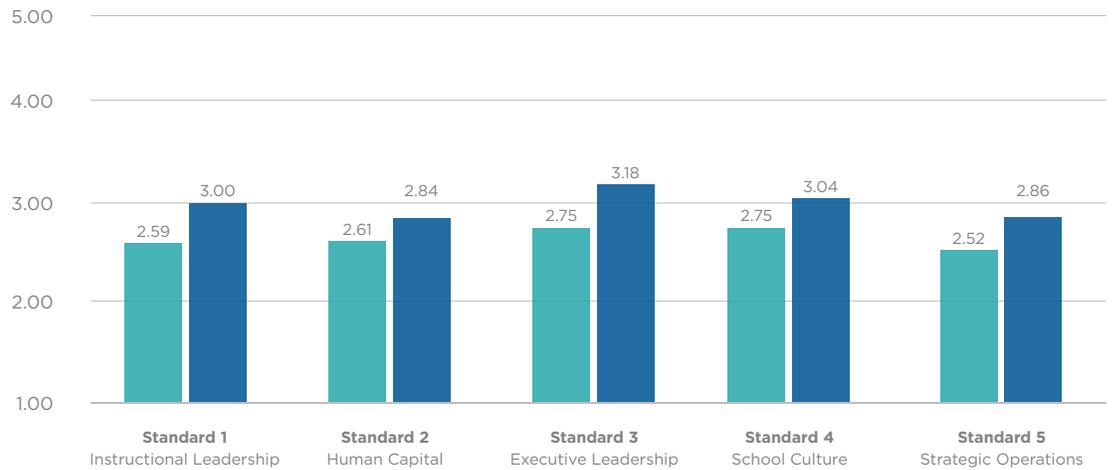
Throughout the program, TTU faculty and staff assessed principal fellows' coaching skills by evaluating their ability to facilitate discussions before and after the observations

Growth in Principal Fellows' Leadership Skills

Average T-PESS Score

Midyear

End-of-year



of teachers (i.e., pre- and post-conferences). NIET findings show that on average, principal fellows demonstrate improvement in their coaching skills at pre- and post-conferences. Moreover, dependent sample t tests suggest that principal fellows' improvement in coaching skills from Cycle 1 to Cycle 4 were statistically significant ($t(10) = 4.91, p < .001$ for pre-conference and $t(10) = 4.66, p < .001$ for post-conference).

In addition to improved coaching skills, the principal fellows' leadership skills are also seen to be improved through their participation in the LIFT program. Principal mentors evaluated principal fellows' leadership skills using the Texas Principal Evaluation and Support System (T-PESS). NIET research indicates, on average, principal fellows showed improvement in each T-PESS standard from midyear to end-of-year evaluations. Moreover, changes in three T-PESS standards were statistically significant: Instructional Leadership ($t(10) = 2.78, p < .01$), Executive Leadership ($t(10) = 2.43, p < .05$), and Strategic Operations ($t(10) = 2.22, p < .05$).

GROWING TALENT IN HIGH-NEED COMMUNITIES

In addition to the focus on instructional leadership training through the TTU partnership, there is also a focus on growing teacher and principal candidates from inside high-need school districts and communities. They recruit fellows who are local and have finished two-year associate degrees. For Atkins, GPISD is his home district, and working in the district, he strives to be a positive role model, particularly for students of color, by becoming as effective of an instructor as he can be through his training in the LIFT program.

By growing talent out of high-need areas, the program is addressing the pipeline need on all cylinders; filling gaps in areas where teacher shortages are often an issue, and making those educators as effective as they can be in areas where teacher effectiveness is a major shortcoming. A by-product of this equation is that students get to work with teachers from similar backgrounds as their own, and learn that they, too, can pave pathways to success.

While Atkins was working with a set of students to prepare them for the Eighth-Grade Science TAKS exam, one student asked him, "Why do you tuck your shirt in and wear a belt even on Saturdays?" Though the question seemed out-of-left-field, questions like this and scores of similar ones he had encountered over the years brought him to the realization that his students were watching, even studying him. He felt that his "comportment was [often] more compelling than the subject that I worked to help [the students] learn."

When several students remarked to Atkins that they had never seen an African-American male instructor outside of P.E. classes, he understood how much it meant for him to be working in GPISD helping to lead the school.

Atkins says, "If I can become the effective administrator that I intend to be, maybe some students who look *like* me will look *at* me and think that it might not be so bad to wear a belt and a tucked-in shirt and to lead a school." 