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Best Minds Sought for Central Office, Startups

Cultivating leadership talent for managerial roles seen as 'desperate' need

By Lesli A. Maxwell

The central office isn't being overlooked in the movement to find and develop top talent for school districts.

Although ways to recruit, groom, and keep top teachers and strong principals tend to dominate discussions of "human capital" needs in education, a handful of nonprofit organizations and foundations also see providing smart managers as essential.

The best-known of these is the Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation's residency in urban education, which recruits professionals with backgrounds in management, law, and public policy to work in school systems' central offices full time for two years.

A newer outfit, Education Pioneers of Oakland, Calif., taps graduate students in business, law, education, and public policy to spend a summer working on high-profile assignments for leaders in urban districts, charter schools, or other education reform organizations.

And the Mind Trust, based in Indianapolis, is looking for education entrepreneurs with big ideas who might become the next Wendy Kopp, the highly touted founder of Teach For America, or Jon Schnur, a co-founder of New Leaders for New Schools, an alternative principal-training program.

"Whether it's people shaping public policy, starting new education ventures, or working as managers in school districts and central offices, there are all these other leadership positions outside of school buildings and classrooms where we need talent desperately," said Scott Morgan, the chief executive officer of Education Pioneers, the nonprofit group he founded more than five years ago.

As school district leaders focus increasingly on how to better recruit, train, evaluate, and compensate teachers and principals, his group, the Broad Foundation, and the Mind Trust are tapping in to nontraditional talent pools to help fill gaps in critical areas. Those include opening and running new charter schools, launching large-scale reform initiatives meant to transform schooling for disadvantaged children, and running human resources and business operations.

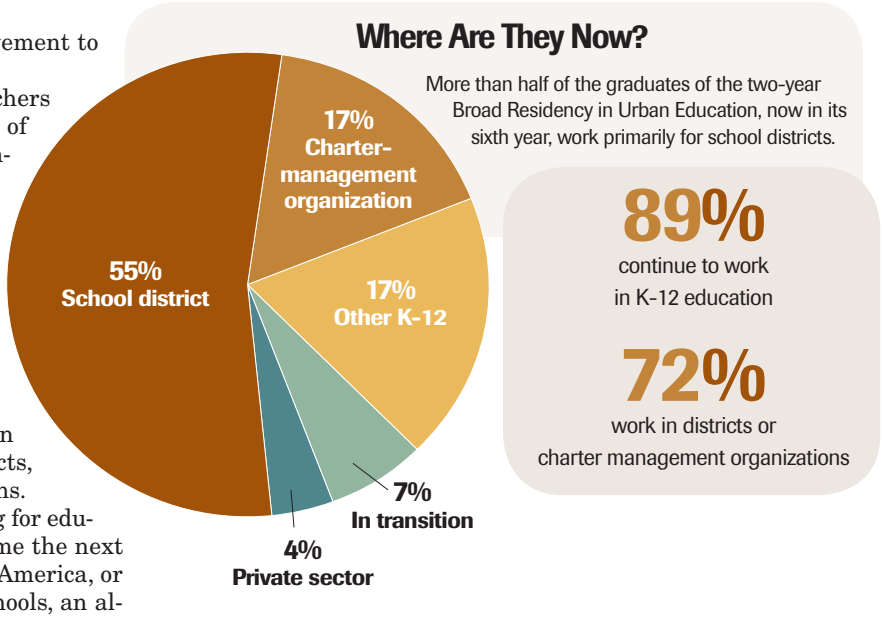
While distinctive in their missions and operations, all three groups have opened up new channels of talent for the public education enterprise.

'Grabbing Talent'

Don Shalvey, the chief executive officer of Aspire Public Schools, a network of 21 charter schools in Oakland, Calif., has used fellows from Education Pioneers every summer since the program began. He credits the first fellow who worked at Aspire, in the summer of 2003, with figuring out how best to build a college-going culture in every school, along with devising the organization's mantra of "College for Certain."

Another former Education Pioneer is running the human-resources division for Aspire, which is one of the nation's largest charter-school-management organizations.

"They have filled very important gaps for us," said Mr. Shalvey. "They provide passionate, high quality, part-time help and do things that no other part-time employees in schools could ever do. Most of us educators don't think about grabbing talent out of a [master's in business administration] program or using a law student, but we should."



SOURCE: Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation

The Broad Residency in Urban Education, a highly selective program run by the education reform team at the Los Angeles-based foundation, has placed residents in 29 cities, working in traditional school districts and in charter-management organizations, since it was created six years ago. (The Broad Foundation also provides grant support to *Education Week*.)

Most residents—all of whom have graduate degrees in business, law, or public policy, and have worked in the corporate or civic sectors for at least four years—are assigned to the central offices of urban districts. Most have little to no experience in education.

Lynn Liao, the residency program's senior director, said the idea for tapping management executives from the private sector came directly from school district superintendents and leaders who wanted to revamp the way their school systems were run, particularly on the business-operations side.

"But they didn't have the kind of people they needed to do that," Ms. Liao said. "What they had were people who knew how to run districts the way they'd always been run."

Skills Plus Fulfillment

Ms. Liao said Alan D. Bersin, a former U.S. attorney who served as superintendent in San Diego from 1998 to 2005, had brought in a trio of business executives to work on projects for him over one summer and ended up hiring them permanently.

"That became a prototype of sorts for us," Ms. Liao said. "And we all knew of talented colleagues in the corporate sector who had great skills, but weren't fulfilled in their work, so we thought we could bring these two groups together."

That was the case for Melissa Megliola-Zaikos, a Harvard Business School graduate who was working as a consultant in the private sector but wanted to do something more meaningful. From 2003 to 2005, she was a Broad resident in the Chicago public school system, and worked on special projects for the district's chief administrative officer. Her first assignment was to untangle a series of problems in the office of special education, particularly around the rising costs of providing such services.

"I think I am good at framing abstract issues into concrete problems that people can solve," Ms. Megliola-Zaikos said. "In this case, I found the mid-level manager who knew how to solve the problem, but didn't have the audience or a way to manage it."

Ms. Megliola-Zaikos remains employed by the district and is now managing its 139 "autonomous" schools, campuses allowed to operate more independently from the central office. She reported directly to schools chief Arne Duncan, until he was confirmed as the U.S. secretary of education last month.

During the two-year program, Broad residents receive intensive training in how school systems operate. The foundation hosts several forums during which residents interact with top school executives from around the country.

Ms. Megliola-Zaikos said that training was invaluable for her.

"You have to have humility when you come into an organization without content knowledge," she said. "I now mentor new residents, and I tell them there are complex problems and it's naive to come in and think you are going to fix everything."

Since the program's inception, 17 Broad residents have worked in the Chicago system, more than in any other district in the nation. Several residents have worked in Oakland and Boston, and both districts have hired many of them permanently.

Broad residents have especially made their mark on human-resources departments in urban districts, said Allan R. Odden, an education professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison who is the co-director of Strategic Management of Human Capital, a national project formed last summer to try to identify and share effective practices.

"Those individuals have been important in restructuring HR departments and systems," Mr. Odden wrote in an e-mail, "including helping to put into place new HR information-system programs and modifying over time the policies and procedures surrounding HR programs to enhance customer service and ability of schools to select staff."

385 'Pioneers'

Education Pioneers was launched by Mr. Morgan, who decided while enrolled at Stanford University's law school that he wanted to offer his legal skills to public education.

"I found out that it's difficult for people to understand and figure out what opportunities are out there in education reform if they are not planning to become a teacher or principal," he said.

While working at Aspire—helping the charter organization to write new charter petitions and other legal documents—he decided to set up a nonprofit organization that could match bright graduate students with districts, charters, and other school reform organizations that wanted their help over a summer.

After five years, roughly 385 graduate students have served as "pioneers;" 111 are working in education-related jobs after finishing their graduate programs, according to Mr. Morgan. Now, the organization is getting ready to expand, and recently received a $6 million grant from the Broad Foundation and the Michael and Susan Dell Foundation to recruit more fellows and place them in more cities.

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> DON SHALVEY
> Chief Executive Officer
> Aspire Public Schools

One district official in Boston said the work of Education Pioneers has been critical to improving the school system's human-capital practices. Last summer, a graduate student in business was tapped to cull through mountains of recruitment and hiring data to discern which teacher-recruitment methods had been the most successful, said Craig Chin, the assistant chief operating officer for the Boston district.

"We had a good handle on how many teachers we'd need to hire and how much money we had to do that, but no real sense of where we were getting the best return on our investment in marketing and recruiting," Mr. Chin said. "He figured that out for us, and now, we are not operating in the dark."

Filling a Niche

Leaders at the 2-year-old Mind Trust in Indianapolis recently launched an "education entrepreneur" fellowship that is meant to incubate the best and brightest education improvement ideas, said David Harris, the chief executive officer and president of the organization.

Mr. Harris, who previously served as the head of the charter school office for former Indianapolis Mayor Bart Peterson, said he learned during his work recruiting charter organizations to the city that there was a dearth of good ideas and strong leaders.

"We were limited in our ability to grow the charter sector because of the lack of available talent," he said. "We also saw that the organizations that were really moving the needle in public education were all launched by entrepreneurs, but we also saw the limited opportunities available to those folks who might have an idea for the next Teach For America."

So with financial backing from locally based foundations and some national philanthropies, Mr. Harris and others launched the Mind Trust as an organization that would seek out potential entrepreneurs and back them and their ideas with roughly $250,000 over a two-year period. So far, four fellows have been selected.

"The niche we are trying to fill is to support promising education entrepreneurs who can launch transformational initiatives," Mr. Harris said. "We want to free them to execute their vision, but they have to convince us that their idea will have a large impact."

Fellows are required to start their initiatives in Indianapolis, but they are also encouraged to launch them in other cities at the same time, Mr. Harris said.

"What we are trying to demonstrate here in Indianapolis is that if you have lots of talent and innovative people in one city, the entire system will start to change."

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