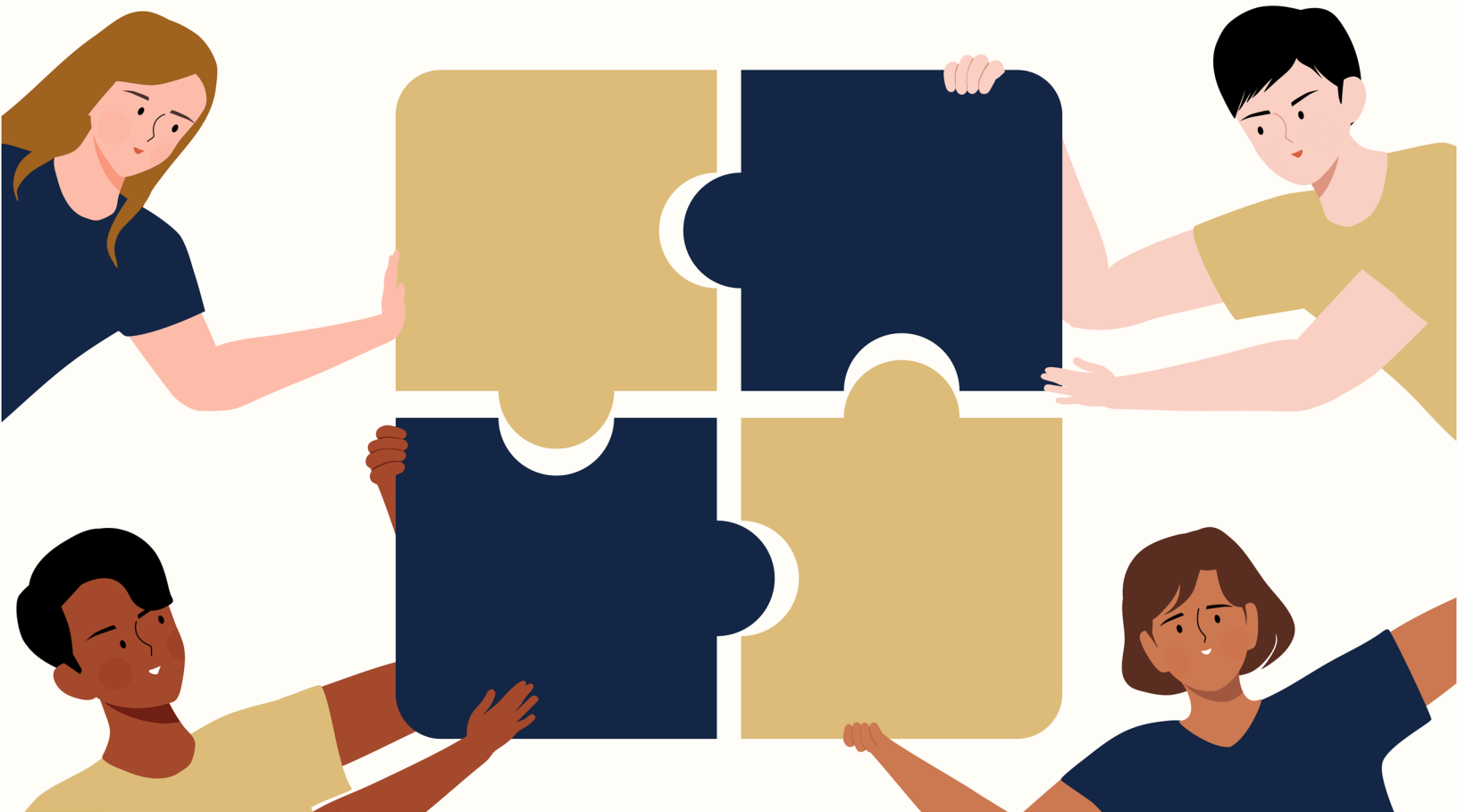


# To Create a Leadership Pipeline, Start Where You Are

By Jill A. Baker, Ed.D.  
Long Beach Unified School District





## INTRODUCTION

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It's hard to imagine the Long Beach Unified School District without our leadership development pipeline, though until 17 years ago, such a system didn't exist. LBUSD had operated on the premise that leadership could simply be passed along, for instance, through athletic coaches who wanted to become principals, through the informal relationships that existed within the school district community, and through faith in the idea that there are enough leaders around to ensure that seats are filled and schools are staffed. How far we've come!

In 2004, when LBUSD was a repeat nominee for the Broad Prize for Urban Education, feedback from the visiting team was cause for pause and contemplation. While the District was lauded for its commitment to teacher professional development over the course of the prior two decades, there was a notable lack of attention to the significant role that leaders played in achieving student success, and few internal methods of ensuring that leaders were intentionally developed. The only thing that had the potential to lure me away from the principalship was the opportunity that arose in those moments.

I loved being a school principal. In the seven years that I served in the role, I experienced both the beauty and the heartbreak of leading a school community. I loved the chance to learn alongside teachers through coaching and co-teaching, to cultivate the culture and climate of our school, to nurture the development of the team as a professional learning community, and to know the stories of both staff and students. What I didn't know at the time was that my experience as principal allowed me to feel the sweet spot of leadership, one that greatly impacts both the students and adults in a school community. Can you see why I thought I'd never leave? And then during my last year as a principal, I was part of a team that had the opportunity to study leadership development through a network supported with grant funds, and that changed the trajectory of my career and the direction of LBUSD. Simply stated, those funds did exactly as they were designed to do; they opened the door to a new world of possibilities in LBUSD.

## WHAT DOES THE RESEARCH TELL US?

I know what the research tells us about the importance of human capital in the success of students in a school district. Having high quality teachers is the number one factor influencing student achievement. And, while that seems obvious, how often do we see the efforts of a district, along with the strategies and investments that they make, not align to the research? The research is also clear that having an effective principal in a school building is the second most powerful influence on student achievement (Leithwood et. al, 2004). While perhaps less obvious, then, why don't all districts invest in a leadership pipeline aligned to the research?

Almost seventeen years ago, I left a job I loved as principal in the pursuit of launching the LBUUSD Pipeline. I hold on to the original graphical illustration of what the LBUUSD Pipeline could be because it reminds me of how incredibly far we have come. I also hold on to that graphic because it tells part of our story and helps to encourage others in their pursuit of a leadership pipeline. In LBUUSD, we started right where we were and over time methodically added programs and built curriculum for teacher leaders, aspiring administrators, leaders at different stages of their careers and those who aspire to go beyond the principalship and lead at a high system level.

I'll share with you my one-year journey launching our LBUUSD Pipeline (and the subsequent opportunity to pass on the work to some brilliant colleagues who have systematically designed our current equity-centered leadership pipeline programming

over the past 15 years). But first, allow me to provide a superintendent's perspective on why a leadership pipeline program matters to the work of a district.

In 2021, the Wallace Foundation published significant findings from its study on effective principals. In fact, these findings further illuminated the research that correlated an effective principal with increased student achievement.

*“Effective principals affect achievement at levels similar to an effective teacher – but across an entire school. Replacing a low-effectiveness with a high-effectiveness principal would boost student learning by nearly 3 months in math and reading (Wallace Foundation, 2021).”*

In addition to the academic boost of an effective principal, schools saw better student attendance, less exclusionary discipline and less staff turnover.

These findings followed a multi-year research study of six districts where a leadership development pipeline was either systematically enhanced or developed. In this RAND-led study comparing 1,100 pipeline schools to 6,300 comparison schools,



In 2005, the leadership development pipeline program started with two programs, one that focused on coaching first-year principals, and another that engaged all principals in studying school culture and climate through the Southern Regional Education Board's curriculum. By all accounts, the initial year of our LBUSD pipeline programming opened a door of possibilities and set us on a course of work that has impacted thousands of teachers and leaders and hundreds of thousands of students.

For most of the years between 2006 and 2014, Leadership Development was supported by a significant federal grant and led by a former high performing principal, Dr. Kristi Kahl. Under Dr. Kahl's leadership, effective programs were developed for teachers who aspired to become school leaders and those who aspired to move from a more junior leadership position to the principalship. Dr. Kahl connected research to programming and curriculum, selected text for leaders to study, and developed hundreds of leaders who are still in our system leading schools today. As a former principal of a school that Dr. Kahl led from underperforming to National Blue Ribbon status, Dr. Kahl used her expertise and deep understanding of the role of principal to elevate leadership development across LBUSD.

In 2015, Dr. Kelly An was tapped to leave her role as principal supervisor in order to lead the Leadership Development Office. Similar to Dr. Kahl, Dr. An had also served as a high performing principal, bringing her

expertise and experience to the role of leadership development director. Dr. An's transition coincided with two significant events in Long Beach Unified's leadership development journey. In 2015, we launched an internally developed principal evaluation system. For the first time in our history, we defined the system expectations for all principals (elementary, middle, high school) through performance expectations aligned with leadership standards. And, the system was driven by a coherent continuous improvement cycle that involved attention to the ways in which principals learn and grow when provided clear expectations. Secondly, the District was invited to apply for a Wallace Principal Supervisor Initiative grant, which ultimately provided the opportunity to expand pipeline programming in support of principal supervisors.

Since 2015, under the leadership of Dr. An, the Leadership Development Office has reached a number of significant milestones, including:

- ▶ Creating programs for aspiring central office leaders
- ▶ Offering a central office leader onboarding program
- ▶ Partnering with universities to transform the credentialing experience for candidates and to elevate a doctoral degree program for current leaders
- ▶ Developing programs for teachers who want to remain as teachers, but who desire the opportunity for continued development

## THE LBUSD PIPELINE JOURNEY (CONTINUED)

As the district strengthened its overall systematic approach to excellence and equity, in 2021 the leadership development office became Equity Leadership & Talent Development, reflective of a revised curriculum across all of its programs.

Within the current 16 Equity Leadership & Talent Development programs, all certificated staff in LBUSD can find a place for themselves. The District's equity leadership programming is designed with a journey in mind. That journey includes different opportunities for staff to learn and grow, to stop and pause, to consider new possibilities and to be supported throughout one's career. While this article will not allow for a full description of all of the programs, to demonstrate the breadth of our work, I have selected three programs that provide illustrations.

### Continuing Future Administrators Program

Teachers with an administrative credential and who have completed the Future Administrators Program, but have not yet moved into an administrative position, are eligible to participate in the Continuing Future Administrators program. This program ensures that pipeline candidates do not inadvertently "fall away" from the opportunity to continue their education and experiences in service to being a future administrator. The program includes professional development that connects applicable research to practice, the connection to a professional learning community, and job embedded coaching

support provided by staff in the Equity Leadership & Talent Development Office.

### Principal Coaching Program

Since 2017, Dr. An and I have worked together to offer the LBUSD Principal Coaching Program. Prior to 2017, in order to be eligible to provide peer coaching for first and second year principals, principals had to attend a training series outside the district. At times, there were disconnects between what was taught and the district's expectations for coaching. In order to both elevate the role of coaching in LBUSD and to ensure alignment with internal expectations, we built a curriculum for coaching that now serves as the foundation for the Principal Coaching Program. And, based on the effect of coaching observed over time, all principals participate in the Principal Coaching Program when they enter their third year in the role. This ensures that there is a common language of coaching across LBUSD and that coaching is implemented as the foundation of work between leaders and teachers, as well as between administrative peers. Based on the implementation of this philosophy, we can now say that, "coaching is a way of being in LBUSD." (An & Baker, 2019)

### Exploring District Leadership

The Wallace Principal Supervisor Initiative created the space and opportunity for us to develop new strategic ideas around central office leadership. As the Wallace Foundation studied the impact of principal supervisors throughout the initiative, we developed a number of new strategies that are now

embedded into the fabric of both our Equity Leadership & Talent Development programs and the expectations that are set for central office leaders. Critical to the transformation of our work in the central office was the development of the Exploring District Leadership Program. In this program, Dr. An and I work with a small cohort of effective principals each year to introduce them to concepts connected to system level leadership. The program combines reading, discussion, observation and application of learning. It also allows me the opportunity to interact with potential central office leaders in a systematic way. The result of this program is a bench of motivated, qualified and prepared pool of leaders who have simultaneously increased their personal capacity in their current role and have demonstrated a readiness to promote into central leadership positions.

**How does the research and my experience guide me as superintendent? And, where can school systems start developing their leadership pipeline?**

I have been asked these questions many times over the past decade (in my prior role as deputy superintendent and current role as superintendent). My advice has been consistent, and I'll offer it again here. If we want students to be successful, we must align our aspirations to our intentions and our investments. Investing in well-thought-out, research-based curriculum and programs for teacher leaders, aspiring and current principals and central office leaders is both necessary and cost effective. It takes a commitment to develop staff with intention

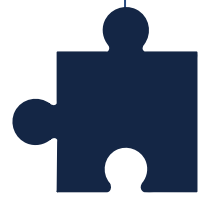
and by design, rather than by chance. Since 2005, this has been the approach in LBUUSD, and we have seen the results in student achievement, school culture and climate, and persistence of those who assume leadership roles in LBUUSD.

To the question of where to start, as simple as it sounds, my advice is always, start where you are. The act of becoming what you want to be requires starting somewhere. In 2005, we started with two programs because we knew that coaching new principals would impact students, teachers and leaders immediately and that studying what a principal can do to ensure that a school culture is healthy and vibrant would focus all leaders in a way that would create the start of a unified approach to developing our leaders across LBUUSD.

Those modest starting points kicked off what has become our modern-day, multi-faceted Equity Leadership & Talent Development system. I could not have imagined in that initial year what this work would mean to our students, to our leaders at that time, to those who would later become leaders, or to me personally.

What a journey it has been!





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