



## Improving Leadership for Learning ■ Stories from the Field

# A Better Pipeline to the Principalship

*Atlanta builds education leaders from within*

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By Dale Mezzacappa

Shirlene Carter, principal of Southside High School in Atlanta, was in the hallway when a boy who had been involved in a dispute with another student said something that made her understand how far she had come as a school leader.

“Dr. Carter, you listen to me,” he said. “Nobody else listens to me.”

Earlier in her career, Carter recounted, chances were slim that a student would have said those words about her. That was because, by her own reckoning, she was a top-down, “do-what-I-tell-you” administrator. She thought that she listened to others, but she really did not.

What changed her — her understanding of herself, her approach to her job, and her ability to transform a low-achieving school into a high-achieving one — was an innovative, home-grown leadership training program called the Superintendent’s Academy for Building Leaders in Education, or SABLE.

“I learned I had to build a more human piece into everyday leadership,” said Carter, who was an assistant principal at a middle school when she went through SABLE in 2001–02. “Before SABLE, I would have been a little less tactful.”

She smiled. “I didn’t know I was a certain way,” she said. “The oddest thing is, I’m different now.”

Carter is one of 135 Atlanta educators to go through SABLE, which now is beginning its seventh year. Devised jointly by Atlanta educators, outside consultants, and experts in organizational development, the unique two-year experience is designed to produce principals and other leaders who focus on Atlanta’s overriding goal: improving student achievement.

SABLE does so by helping participants figure out who they are, what they value, how they lead, and what they can do to tailor their gifts to the needs of Atlanta schools. The program encourages reflection, collaboration, problem-solving, and communicating, all qualities that have not always been prized in the traditional “I’m-in-charge” mode of school leadership. Throughout, participants are immersed in educational best practices by working on real school problems — with relentless focus on the specific needs, culture, and reform strategies of Atlanta’s schools.

“SABLE is professional development unlike any I ever had before,” said David White, who was promoted to principal of Rivers Elementary School in Atlanta’s Buckhead neighborhood after participating in SABLE in 2004–05. “I felt valued by the district in ways I hadn’t experienced.”

According to Deputy Superintendent Kathy Augustine, Beverly Hall found a veritable leadership crisis when she arrived in Atlanta as superintendent in 1999. Not only were two-thirds of principals eligible to retire within the next five years, but many of them didn't understand how to improve teaching and learning at their schools.

Nor, said Augustine, did most of their available successors. Plenty of district employees held principal certificates, but few met the new superintendent's strict requirements. Typically, they were steeped in a culture of getting ahead by taking the necessary graduate courses, paying their dues, and knowing the right people. Many fit the mold of the ex-coach or physical education teacher, prized for being an authoritarian presence. Most defined success as keeping their school under control, not improving student achievement.

"They couldn't articulate their vision," Augustine said. "As far as understanding what quality teaching and learning looks like and how you organize to promote it, they didn't know."

Hall and Augustine decided that they needed to create their own leadership pipeline. With the help of start-up funds from the Wallace Foundation — \$5 million over five years — they created Project LEAD Atlanta, which included several programs:

- The Aspiring Leaders Program was for promising young educators who still needed principal certification;

- SABLE was designed to mold those who already had credentials into the kind of leaders that Hall and Augustine wanted; and

- The Leadership Engagement Network was to help central office leaders learn how to better support school needs.

To devise the SABLE training, Hall and Augustine brought in several consultants, including Larry Coble of School Leadership Services, a former principal and superintendent in North Carolina. To coordinate leadership training in the district, they hired Sharon Rowell, a non-educator whose background is in journalism and organizational development. Linda Hollomon, who ran a principals' institute in San Antonio, became the executive director of professional development.

The team set about designing a selection system and a program that sought out educators committed to Atlanta, willing to take a hard look at themselves, happy to embrace change, and urgent about improving student achievement. The application process was thorough and transparent. Hall and Augustine put out the word to district leaders to recommend promising candidates, but anyone could apply, and they ranged all over the map, from music teachers to assistant principals. It attracted a combination of restless veterans, like Carter, and young up-and-comers, like White.

In the beginning, "nobody knew what it was," White said. But then some of the early participants "had great things to report back," he said, and more people applied.

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At the same time that SABLE was acquiring prestige among potential applicants, district leaders were clear about their intent: Participation was no guarantee to a promotion.

“It is a professional learning opportunity, not the specific pipeline to a sure shot,” Augustine said. “In the beginning, that was troubling for people to understand, because of what had happened in the past,” when connections meant everything.

### **A new kind of leadership network**

To date, of the 135 participants, 54 have been promoted, 26 of them to principalships and 28 to other critical positions: model teacher leaders, who work with a cluster of schools on teaching and learning; instructional liaison specialists, who are school-based; and other roles, such as program managers, academic deans, and assistant principals.

“We’re preparing people for all kinds of leadership roles,” Rowell said.

So far, 23 SABLE graduates have either left the district — many to assume leadership positions elsewhere — or retired.

But that leaves more than 100 educators in the 93-school district who are now part of a new kind of leadership network, one of like-minded individuals trained to work together in a certain way for school improvement. Newly promoted SABLE principals seek out their SABLE colleagues to join leadership teams in their new schools.

“SABLE represents a culture change,” Rowell said.

For sure, the road to the principal’s job is no longer about who you know.

Applicants are required to write an essay about their core values and assemble a portfolio enumerating efforts they have made to assume leadership roles at their schools — whether, for example, they’ve analyzed test scores, served on a faculty search committee, worked on a school improvement team, or mentored a teacher. Then, they undergo not just an interview, but a process known as the “fishbowl,” in which they participate in a facilitated group discussion while being rated by observers. The raters look not just for depth of the participants’ knowledge, but for the way they interact with others — whether they tend to hog the conversation, serve as a mediator, listen actively, respond to previous points, or support what others say.

While the program has evolved and adapted, the basic structure remains the same. Initially, the participants, between 20 and 30 a year, spend an entire week in training, during which they undergo a series of assessment instruments designed to help them understand themselves. The assessments include the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, which helps determine introversion or extroversion and other personality traits, and a multi-rater feedback — the so-called 360 in which the person designates others, including a peer, a supervisor, and a subordinate, to rate them in several areas. Those evaluations are compared to the person’s view of himself or herself.

### **Dissecting strengths and weaknesses**

“The beginning parts are very reflective, who you are and why you are the way you are,” White said. “We do personal, leadership, and work inventories, all of that in depth.” With the help of their colleagues, participants dissect their own strengths and weaknesses.

None of that, said White and other SABLE alumni, is common practice in university-based courses that lead to principal certification.

“It gave me the opportunity during the first few months to look at my own values and belief system and how they impact my decision-making,” said Clara Taylor, the instructional liaison specialist at Martin Luther King Middle School, who finished two years of SABLE in 2005–06. “SABLE deals with professionalism, but also emotional things that may be barriers to moving on.”

Tresa Riney Andrews, who was promoted after SABLE to be principal of King, said that SABLE also promotes Hall’s vision and priorities.

“There’s a lot of self-discovery during the SABLE program, but it also gives you a better understanding of the superintendent’s expectations of where we’re moving as a district,” Andrews said.

After the first weeklong training, participants meet once a month for two days, on a consecutive Friday and Saturday. Initially, the focus is on creating a collegial, non-threatening atmosphere. In addition to examining their own leadership style, participants learn about shaping a healthy school culture, using time efficiently, building relationships, and cementing trust. In those sessions, called learning modules, they are divided into “table groups” of four or five people who meet throughout the year to hash out problems and work on specific projects.

They are constantly examining their own styles, vision, core values, beliefs, decision-making process, and sense of mission.

“By interacting, you can see how different belief systems can lead you to take a different route,” Taylor said. “I could think about some decisions I made and why I made them.”

The table group, she and others said, becomes a kind of family and counteracts the inclination for educators, principals, and teachers alike to work in isolation from their peers.

At the weekly sessions, participants also learn practical skills, particularly how to use data to drive student achievement, how to recognize effective teaching, how to coach colleagues and subordinates for higher performance, and how to develop professional learning communities within their schools. They study successful school reform models and dissect videos of teachers at work. They do case studies: A school is considered failing, has a majority of students living in poverty, discipline is a problem, and teacher morale is low. What would you do? What are the first steps you would take?

“SABLE reinforced a lot of my ideas and thought patterns, and I was able to add things to my tool box,” said LePaul Shelton, a 35-year-old Morehouse College graduate who was promoted after one year in SABLE to lead the Ed S. Cook Elementary School. “It made us look at leadership through different frames — the business, human, and political side — and helped us understand the vast responsibilities of being an instructional leader. The bottom line was always improving student achievement.”

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During that first year, each participant also gets a mentor, which is one of the key facets of the program. The mentor is an experienced principal chosen for his or her experience and success in improving academic achievement and works with two or three SABLE participants at a time.

Shelton was mentored by Marcene Thornton, a motherly former English teacher who has spent 30 years in the system.

“I allowed them to see the full picture of what a school administrator does,” she said. “Some asked me to help them with their [job] interview; some visited my school and did walk-arounds with me.”

Some, like Shelton, consulted her every week.

## **Year 2: Learning in action**

Interspersed during the first year are panels and discussions that bring in a broader view, including a session with a visiting group of principals and superintendents from around the country. Last year, the program inaugurated a panel of Atlanta school leaders, including Augustine, who discussed in depth the district’s reform priorities, which include middle school transformation, small high schools, and single-gender education.

After the first year, some SABLE participants get new jobs immediately — about half of the 54 promoted so far are in that category. Those not immediately promoted participate in a yearlong project called Learning in Action. They are divided into three groups, each studying a different Atlanta middle school.

Again, they meet once a month for two straight days, but this time, each team spends Friday in their school and Saturday debriefing about what they learned. The teams are assembled to assure diversity, and the schools they study are diverse as well: One is high-achieving; one is in the middle; and one is low-achieving. The principals in the schools are all strong leaders — with different styles — and serve as school-site mentors to the participants.

They read Robert Marzano’s *Failure is Not an Option* and *School Leadership that Works*. They shadow the principal and see firsthand how decisions impact students and teachers.

“We have a set of guiding questions, and each week, we have to get answers to those questions,” Clara Taylor said.

At the end of the year, they make a presentation, which the district then uses to drive further reform at the middle schools, which is its next big reform priority.

Whenever they are promoted — after the first year, second year, or subsequently — all SABLE participants get executive coaching to help them with their new job. The coaches are outside leadership consultants, not Atlanta principals, who are available for once-a-month on-site visits and through e-mail and phone calls.

## **Making sense of what’s going on**

While the coaches all have some experience in education, “they are people developers,” said Melody Clodfelter, one of the outside consultants who has been with SABLE from the start. “The coaching experience is a confidential relationship. A first-year principal needs to unload and make sense of what’s going on.” The coaches help the new principals, who may seem overwhelmed by identifying the two or three areas in which they need the most help.

“We talk about a problem within school, how they’re addressing it, how the approach is working or not working,” said Clodfelter, who also serves as a coach. “The coaches raise questions to help them think about the next step.”

Eventually, all SABLE alumni who are promoted get coaching, even if it is several years later.

Finally, the SABLE coordinators help participants prepare for job interviews.

Are the SABLE principals succeeding? While there hasn’t been a controlled study, Augustine said that most are fulfilling expectations.

Shelton’s school, with 94 percent of its students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch, has met its state and federal achievement goals for the past seven years, four with him as principal.

White’s school, which uses International Baccalaureate, is more middle class and diverse ethnically. It also has continued to increase its academic achievement.

Andrews so far is the only SABLE person promoted to lead a middle school — Martin Luther King. After not making its federal achievement goals for seven years, the school now has done so for two.

As for Carter, Southside High has turned completely around under her leadership. One of the few SABLE graduates so far to lead a high school, Carter entered a place in which the graduation rate was just 40 percent and academics were lackluster. Since she arrived, the school has made its federal achievement goals for four years in a row, and the graduation rate has more than doubled.

But despite the progress, these leaders know that there is much more to be done. Carter, for one, wants to focus even more intently on what happens in the classroom. She plans to meet more regularly with groups of teachers to address issues they face in bringing the quality of instruction to the next level.

“Now,” she said, “I’m concentrating on making sure my teachers continue to get better. I’m going to start to bring together teachers to talk about student work.”

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