

HIDDEN IN PLAIN SIGHT

TOMORROW'S EDUCATION LEADERS ALREADY WORK FOR YOU



edfuel

Developing and advancing today's education leaders promises to reduce turnover, boost retention, and increase diversity—in service of breakthrough student results.



FOREWORD

Much attention, rightly so, has been paid to the importance of developing strong teachers, teacher leaders, and school leaders. Yet our understanding of leadership pipelines for K–12 system leaders—including at districts, charter management organizations, and education nonprofits—is in much shorter supply. At EdFuel we believe these leaders play an integral role in the K–12 education ecosystem; we are committed to developing strong education professionals at all levels of our rapidly changing sector.

EdFuel, in close partnership with The Bridgespan Group, set out to engage a broad group of districts, charters, nonprofits, and funders to dig deeply into the state of leadership development for K–12 sector leaders. We sought both to understand the challenges facing our current and rising leaders and to surface solutions for attracting, developing, and retaining many more capable and diverse leaders in the decade to come.

This initiative—which includes a set of K–12 sector leader competency maps, a field-level survey, and this report—is the product of a sector-wide collaboration. We are very grateful for the engagement and guidance of:

- The Steering Committee of Alex Caram (NewSchools Venture Fund), Elizabeth City (Harvard Graduate School of Education), Tom Noble (The Broad Center), Veenay Singla (Talent, Leadership and Strategy Consultant & Executive Coach), and Betsy Doyle (The Bridgespan Group);
- Advisors including Chaka Booker (The Broad Center), Rachel Curtis (Rachel Curtis Consulting), Ethan Gray (Education Cities), Alex Johnston (Impact for Education), Deborah McGriff (NewSchools Venture Fund), Frances McLaughlin (Education Pioneers), Joe Sieldecki (The Michael and Susan Dell Foundation), and LaVerne Evans Srinivasan (The Carnegie Corporation);
- The 45 members of our Working Groups and the 380 current and rising field leaders who shared their perspectives with us in the survey. This group represents the best of our sector in their commitment to student impact and to growing as professionals;
- The Project Team, including Lisa Horowitz, Daniela Fairchild, Betsy Doyle, Lija Farnham, Roger Thompson, Aviva Altmann, Austin Lee, Anna Soybel, and Sara Snyder.

Finally, we want to thank the funders who generously supported the work: The Walton Family Foundation, The Broad Center, NewSchools Venture Fund, The Skillman Foundation, and The Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation.

We share this report with the education field in hopes of spurring conversation and action about what it will take to develop and retain the education sector leaders we need to achieve breakthrough results across our systems, schools, and classrooms. We are humbled by the opportunity to work each day with some of our field's most passionate and committed leaders and look forward to continuing on this important journey together.



JIMMY HENDERSON
EdFuel CEO



KATHLEEN DELASKI
EdFuel Founder and Board Chair

INTRODUCTION

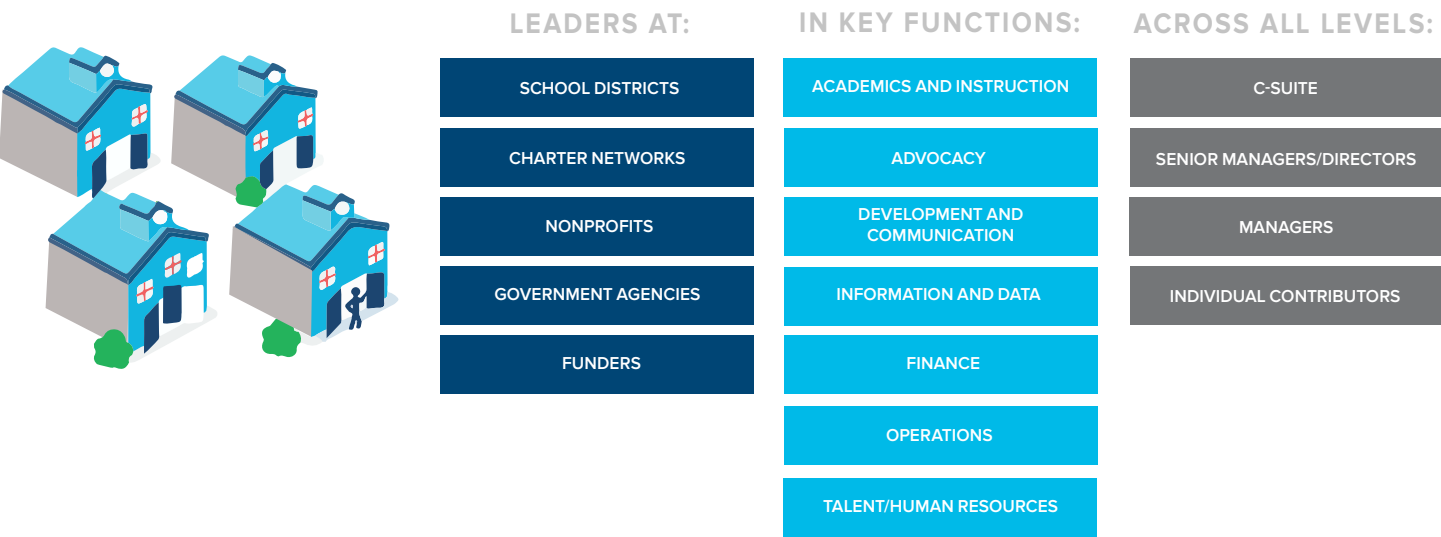
Dramatic change is afoot in our nation’s public school systems. Policies governing teacher effectiveness, curriculum standards, and student assessments stir vigorous debate. Technology pushes the boundaries of personalized learning. Charter schools attract an increasing share of the student population. Innovators intensify their quest for models to transform low-performing urban schools.

Collectively, these changes in the educational landscape represent a huge opportunity to prepare more students for success in college, career, and life. Realizing the full potential of these changes will require talented and dynamic people at every level—teachers, school leaders, and central office staff.¹ Leaders among them will excel at understanding the big picture, developing creative solutions, carrying out goals, and collaborating proactively with students, parents and the broader community. It will also require a commitment to significantly increase the diversity of education leadership, both to better reflect the communities served by our public schools and to bring the right mix of experience and insights required to drive breakthrough student results.²

And yet the public education sector—school districts, charter organizations, nonprofits, intermediaries, government agencies, and foundations—chronically underinvests in developing highly effective and diverse system leaders responsible for managing complex and dynamic K–12 organizations.

This is particularly acute in the central offices of the 14,000 school districts and 1,000 charter management organizations across the country.³ While school systems often spend between 70–85 percent of their total budgets on personnel and benefits, investing in the professional growth of system-level leaders is rarely a top priority.⁴ These roles encompass key functions, such as executive leadership, instructional planning, human resources, information technology, finance and budgeting, operations and facilities, fundraising, and community engagement and advocacy.⁵ Not surprisingly, the need for capable central-office managers and leaders is on the rise in tandem with the elevated expectations and increased complexity pressing on school districts and charter organizations. Yet EdFuel’s 2014 *Map the Gap* report found a large impending talent deficit for senior and mid-level system leaders over the next decade.⁶

WHO ARE SYSTEM-LEVEL LEADERS?



So what will it take to recruit, develop, and retain a diverse generation of education sector leaders? That's the question that EdFuel set out recently to explore with The Bridgespan Group, in partnership with The Broad Center, NewSchools Venture Fund, Harvard Graduate School of Education, and 50CAN.

The answer, based on a spring 2015 survey of noninstructional leaders, came through loud and clear: allocate the time and funding necessary to develop and retain more current staff as system leaders.⁷

Following through means fundamentally reorienting our priorities around talent and investing more consistently in the development and growth of leaders. Talent development must become part of the fabric of an organization and how it operates day-to-day. It's no mystery how to do this. Articles and books on the topic abound. But it's something that eludes even the most well-intentioned organization.

What will it take to do better? Our survey results and extensive interviews with current and rising education system leaders point to four interlocking steps:

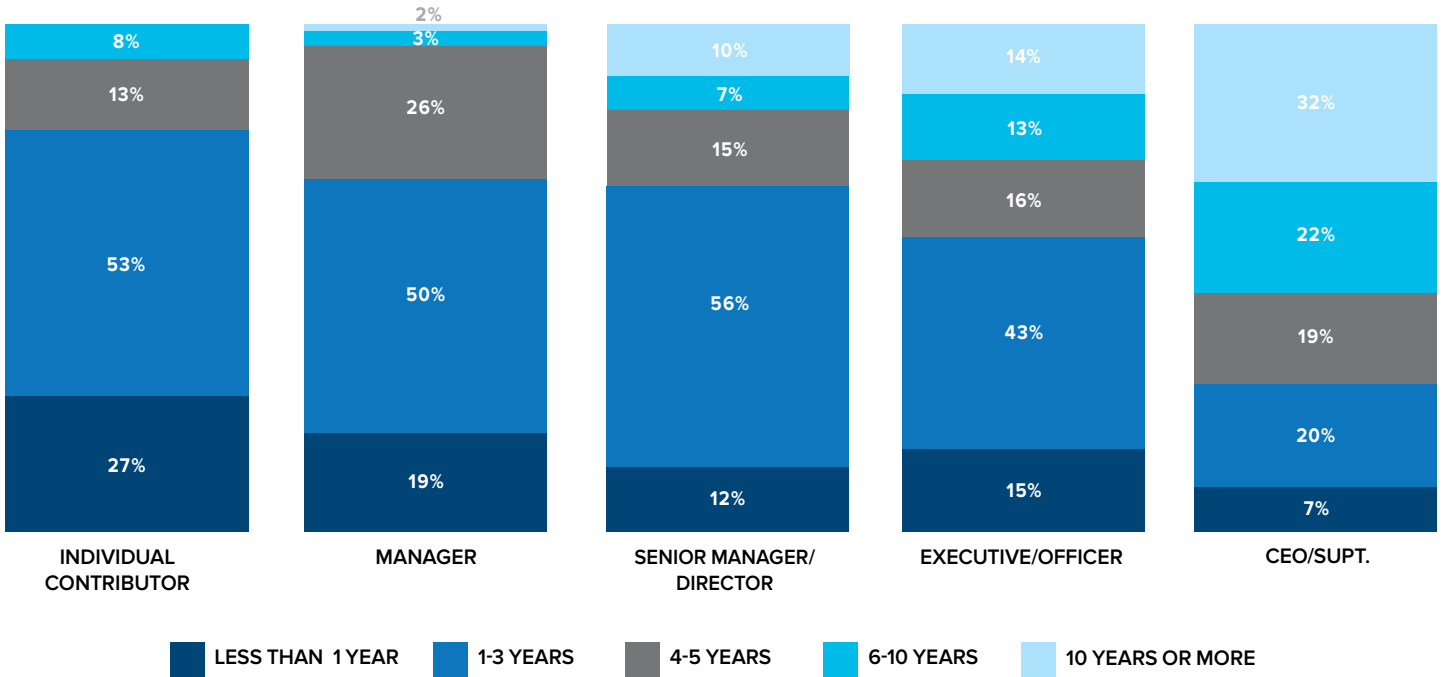


This report will expand on each of these steps and highlight the roles that CEOs/superintendents, senior leadership teams, funders, and nonprofits can play in making it a reality.

THE CASE FOR CHANGE

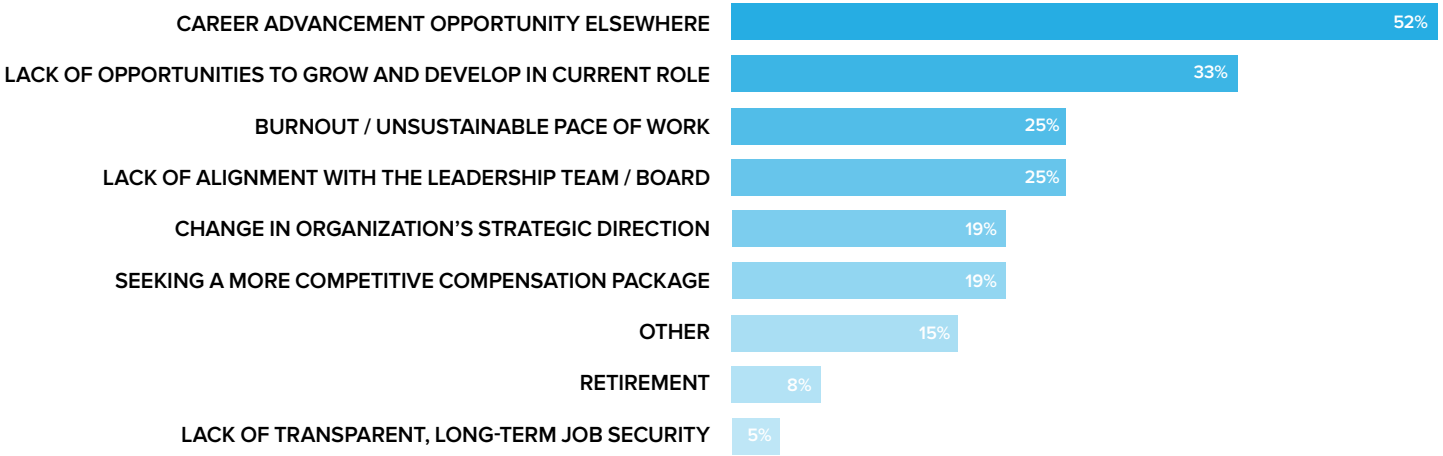
Today the education field is characterized by a troubling musical chairs dynamic as central office staff anticipate turning over at a high rate. **Sixty percent of our survey respondents anticipate leaving their organizations within the next three years.** This number is even higher at the middle manager level, with approximately 70 percent intending to leave within the next three years.

LENGTH OF TIME LEADERS INTEND TO STAY AT THEIR ORGANIZATIONS



Employees vote with their feet primarily because they lack on-the-the job career development and advancement opportunities. Nearly two-thirds of respondents report not receiving adequate development support or having access to coaches or mentors; and over half do not have adequate budgets for professional development.

LEADERS CITE LACK OF INTERNAL CAREER ADVANCEMENT AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR DEVELOPMENT AS TOP DRIVERS OF ATTRITION

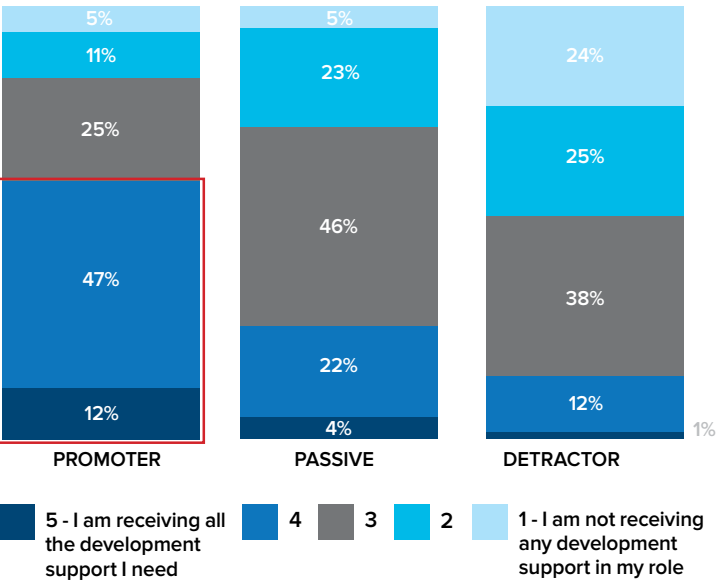


The cost of turnover is significant in terms of the time, effort, and expense it takes to recruit and develop staff to succeed in their roles. The direct cost of filling a vacant position can exceed half of the allotted annual salary, including recruiting costs (up to 30 percent of annual salary alone), hiring inducements such as relocation expenses, new-hire training and orientation, as well as payout of accrued time off for the departing staff member. Productivity suffers as managers train and onboard new staff instead of serving in their usual roles on their teams.⁸

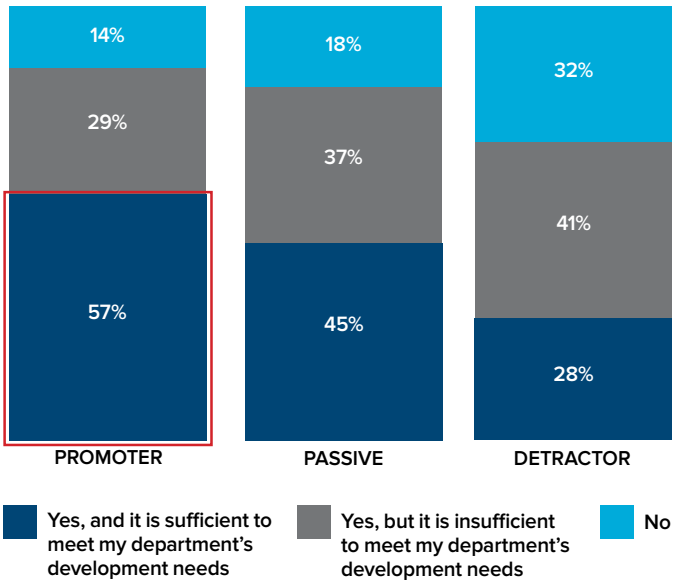
High turnover will persist as long as educational organizations continue to undervalue and underinvest in staff development. The absence of such support today likely explains why only 23 percent of survey respondents would recommend their organization as a place to build a career in education. Among those who do recommend their organizations, development opportunities emerge as a key differentiator. **They are 5½ times more likely to report receiving this support than those who would not recommend their organizations.** Further, charter schools seem to do a better job of staff development than school districts, as respondents from charter school organizations are twice as likely to strongly recommend their organization as a place to build careers in education as their district counterparts.

***“Rising leaders feel they need to step out to step up.”
–Leader of a K–12 Talent Organization***

DEVELOPMENT SUPPORT IS THE LARGEST DIFFERENTIATOR BETWEEN PROMOTERS AND DETRACTORS*



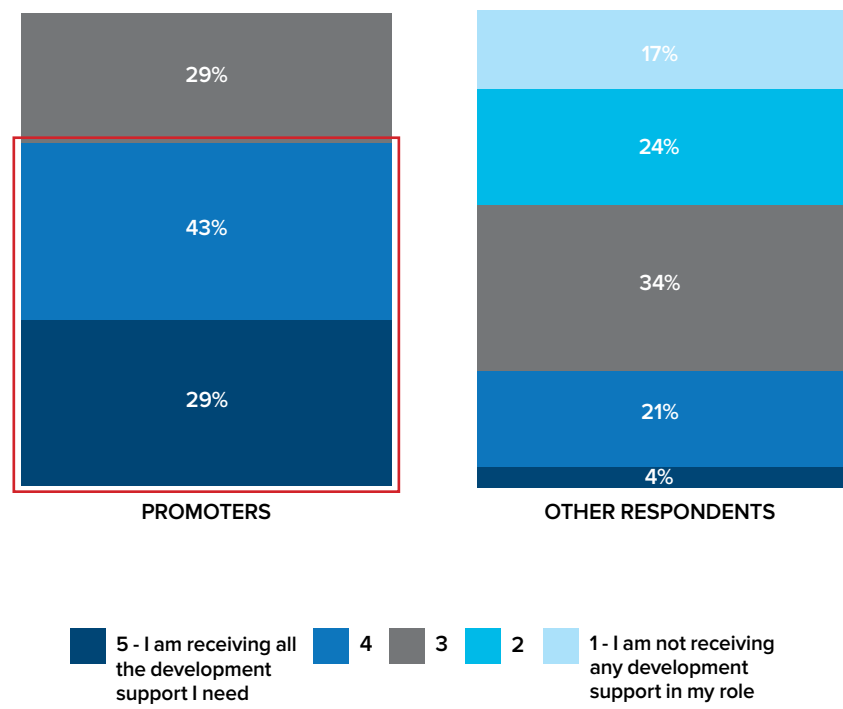
PROMOTORS REPORT THEY ARE TWICE AS LIKELY TO HAVE SUFFICIENT BUDGET FOR DEVELOPMENT



**Throughout this report, we refer to Promoters, Passives, and Detractors. These titles are based on responses to the question: "On a scale of 0-10, how likely are you to recommend your organization looking to build a career in education," with Promoters responding "9-10," Passives "7-8" and Detractors "0-6."*

Development also emerged as a critical factor in retaining leaders of color. Among the subset of African-American and Hispanic respondents, those who would recommend their organizations are more than three times as likely to be supported as other African-American and Hispanic staff.

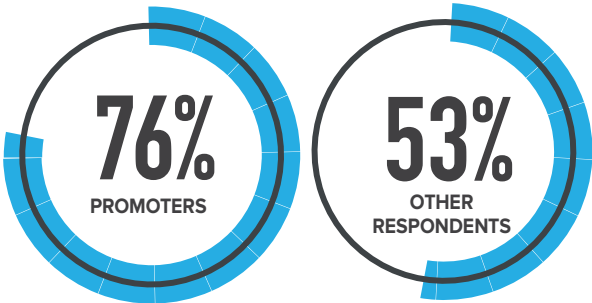
AFRICAN-AMERICAN AND HISPANIC PROMOTERS REPORT SIGNIFICANTLY MORE DEVELOPMENT THAN OTHER RESPONDENTS



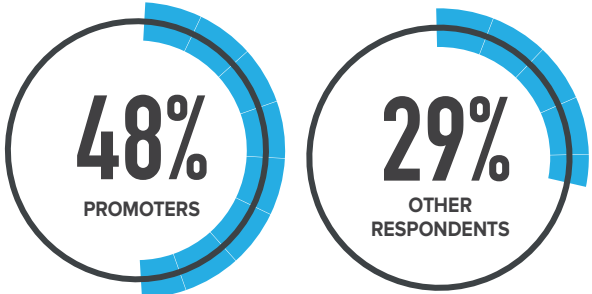
African-American and Hispanic respondents who would recommend their organizations also report significantly more development resources and opportunities than those who would not.

AFRICAN-AMERICAN AND HISPANIC PROMOTERS ARE MORE LIKELY TO HAVE HAD A FORMAL EVALUATION IN THE PAST YEAR AND TO HAVE A COACH/MENTOR

PERCENTAGE RECEIVED FORMAL EVALUATION

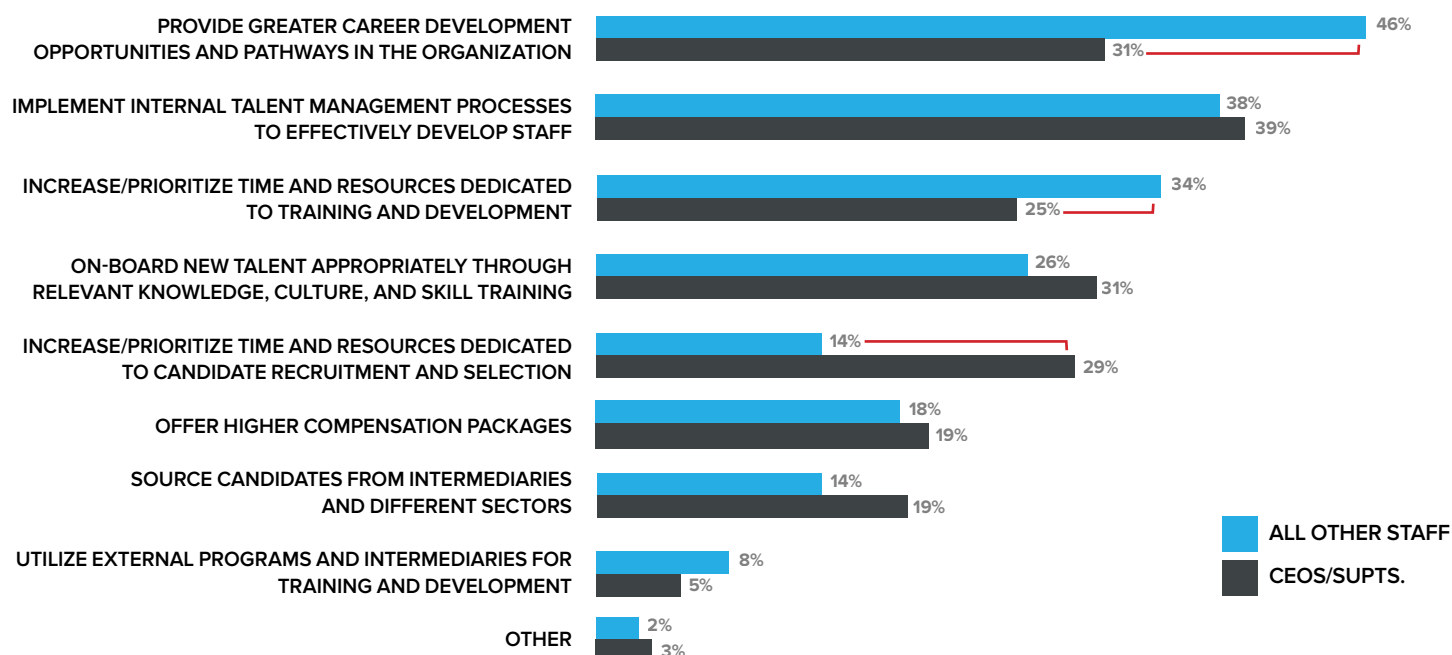


PERCENTAGE HAVE COACH/MENTOR



Looking ahead, superintendents and CEOs agreed with staff about the need to invest in stronger internal talent management processes. However, top leadership also focused on recruitment and on-boarding, whereas respondents from other organizational levels made it clear that career development and advancement opportunities top their lists. Interviews further expanded on this finding, as many described a tendency for superintendents and CEOs to first look outside when filling senior roles.

CEO AND STAFF PERSPECTIVES ON WHAT IT WILL TAKE TO MAKE ORGANIZATIONS MORE “TALENT READY”



This top-level focus on recruitment may explain the perception among staff members that they have limited room for professional advancement within their organizations. While a high-quality hire from the outside may introduce new ideas or improve staff morale, providing tangible and immediate benefits, recruiting, no matter how successful, is not a silver bullet. By default, the short-term challenge of recruitment may overshadow the long-term solution: investing in the development of the staff already on the job and over time, retaining a stronger, more experienced talent pool.

“Perception of the problem has everything to do with where you sit.”
—Education talent consultant

High turnover doesn’t mean a mass exodus from education. In fact, the field proves to be sticky. Nine out of 10 respondents said they came to the field to make a positive impact on student learning, and they remain committed to that goal. When asked where they would likely seek employment if they were to leave their current organization, 88 percent said they intend to continue working in education. The level of commitment helps to explain why respondents did not cite compensation as a key factor in job turnover, nor was it cited as a major barrier to recruiting.

A BLUEPRINT FOR SUCCESS

The survey data clearly show that current and rising system leaders place a high value on opportunities for on-the-job learning and career advancement. Those who get it are happier at work and less likely to leave for greener pastures. That means greater leadership “bench strength” for organizations, greater likelihood of retaining more leaders of color, and less time and effort spent on recruitment. So how do successful organizations do it, and what will it take for others to get there? Our research points to four steps that, taken together, offer a blueprint for change.

Adopt a development mindset

Nurturing system-level leadership from within must be a top priority for every school district and charter management organization. A talent-focused culture starts at the top. Superintendents and CEOs need to recalibrate their thinking about talent. For sure, vacancies need to be filled. But unless system leaders make a commitment to internal talent development, the expensive, time-consuming churn that creates the vacancies will steam ahead. Putting the brakes on churn requires prioritizing in-house staff development that prepares employees for future leadership roles. To make this happen, managers at all levels need to invest in developing individuals and teams.

Talent development is important enough that it should be a part of every organization’s strategic plan. Today, few organizations give staff development that level of priority.

“In all my time leading my organization, I don’t think I’ve ever had a funder or partner ask me about our talent strategy— whether I actually have the people and system in place to pull this off.”
—Education nonprofit leader

Better in-house talent development will help to make schools an employer of choice for the best, most diverse system-level leadership. Leaders need to name this as a goal, and walk the talk. As the talent quotient rises, school systems strengthen their ability to deliver on their impact goals.

A development mindset also opens opportunities for employees to move up a career ladder and move horizontally across roles. Horizontal skill building is particularly important for small organizations with limited upward mobility. These organizations tend to rationalize under-investment in talent given limited promotional opportunities. Creatively scoped internal and external “stretch” assignments can provide the challenge needed to motivate and retain talented employees. Organizations, even small ones, that do this well also stand to build a reputation for grooming future leaders, which will work to their benefit over time.

A BLUEPRINT FOR SUCCESS TO SUPPORT SYSTEM LEADERS

- **ADOPT A DEVELOPMENT MINDSET**
- **BUILD MUSCLE**
- **PRIORITIZE DIVERSITY**
- **MEASURE, TEST, LEARN, AND ADAPT**

“We must get key leaders in the field to own this.”
—K–12 education funder

DEVELOPMENT DNA UNCOMMON SCHOOLS

Organizations looking to jump-start in-house talent development can start by naming it as a top priority. Consider Uncommon Schools, a nonprofit network of 44 charter schools serving 14,000-plus K–12 students in New York, New Jersey, and Massachusetts. It has received high marks from survey respondents as a place to develop a career in education.

While operating across multiple states and cities, Uncommon aspires to operate as one mission-driven organization. As Chief of Staff Laura Lee McGovern explains, “Our senior leadership team feels strongly about the value of home office staff and sees them as true partners in the work of our schools. This is a core belief and shapes how we think about developing our home office team.”

Growing strong leaders is celebrated at Uncommon. For instance, a recent email to the full network staff recognized many people moving across teams and advancing in their roles, and moving between schools, regions, and the home office. “It’s a way to reinforce career pathways and the value that people at all levels and functions bring to our organizations,” observes McGovern.

This summer, Uncommon plans to take things one step further and launch a home office team focused on talent development. The team will tackle things such as continuing to strengthen practices around growing and retaining talent and creating a strong leadership bench for key roles. “We are proud to have a lot of talented people who have joined Uncommon and stayed over time,” reflects McGovern, “and there’s a lot more we hope to do moving forward.”

Build muscle

Developing current and future leaders is a skill that, with practice and sustained modest investment, can be learned. So along with a mindset shift, organizations need a workout.

While there is not a one-size-fits-all approach to talent development, it’s important to set clear goals and invest in the internal processes and systems required to make progress now and over time. Fortunately, there are resources and tools readily available to aid system leaders on this journey.

***“This is what people are asking for:
more concrete, actionable tools that
they can implement with teams.”
—K–12 education funder***

One is the 70-20-10 leadership development model, pioneered by the Center for Creative Leadership.⁹ It rests on the belief that leadership is learned through doing. As the 70-20-10 name implies, the learning model calls for 70 percent of development to consist of on-the-job learning, supported by 20 percent coaching and mentoring, and 10 percent classroom training. The model builds on research showing that we retain information most effectively when it’s gained experientially in a practical context. Learning is even more powerful when the lessons of experience are reinforced through informal discussion with people who have performed similar work. The 70-20-10 model is a compelling solution to survey respondent’s strong desire for more on-the-job development, coaching, and mentoring.

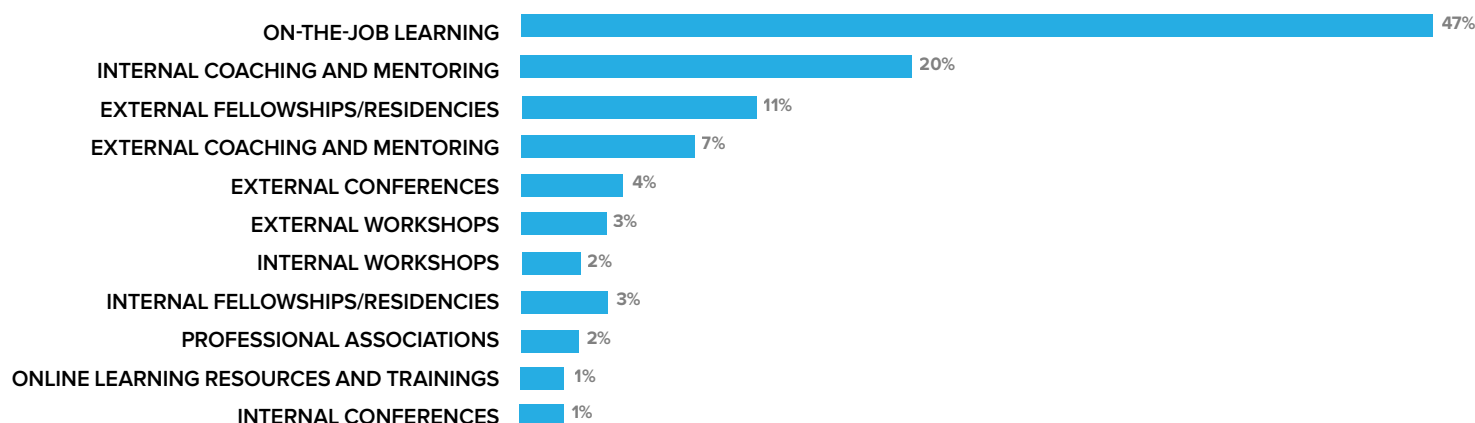
STRETCH AS YOU GROW GREEN DOT PUBLIC SCHOOLS

For fast-growing charter networks, stretch opportunities are often a normal part of day-to-day operations. With the right coaching and support, high-potential leaders can adapt alongside the organization. This is Kevin Keelen's experience at Green Dot Public Schools. Currently serving as Chief Information Officer, Kevin joined Green Dot six years ago as the Director of Knowledge Management. Since then he has shifted between teams and responsibilities, including student data and information systems, IT, human resources, and even supporting the implementation of Common Core and teacher incentive programs across the network. For Keelen, the opportunities for both lateral and vertical growth have kept him motivated and committed.

"Green Dot gave me space to be creative. When I was interested in innovating, they allowed me to go down those paths," recalls Keelen. "They saw that my ideas would help to fill organizational gaps where we weren't doing things. Those successes gave me the chance to try different things and to advance my career."

As an organization, Green Dot has learned that static titles and job descriptions are less important than identifying and growing your rising stars. As Marco Petruzzi, Green Dot's CEO describes it, "We've been rapidly growing for over a decade, in Los Angeles and now nationally. To do this well, we need to keep investing in entrepreneurial leaders who see what's possible and want to grow with us. Our senior team today is made up of people who have worn many different hats at Green Dot, and in whom we have built a lot of trust over the years." For Keelen, this has made all the difference. "It's important to be deliberate about career paths, but equally important—at times—to simply get out of the way and give people space to be creative and successful."

ON-THE-JOB LEARNING AND COACHING/MENTORING ARE TOP DEVELOPMENT METHODS DESIRED BY RESPONDENTS

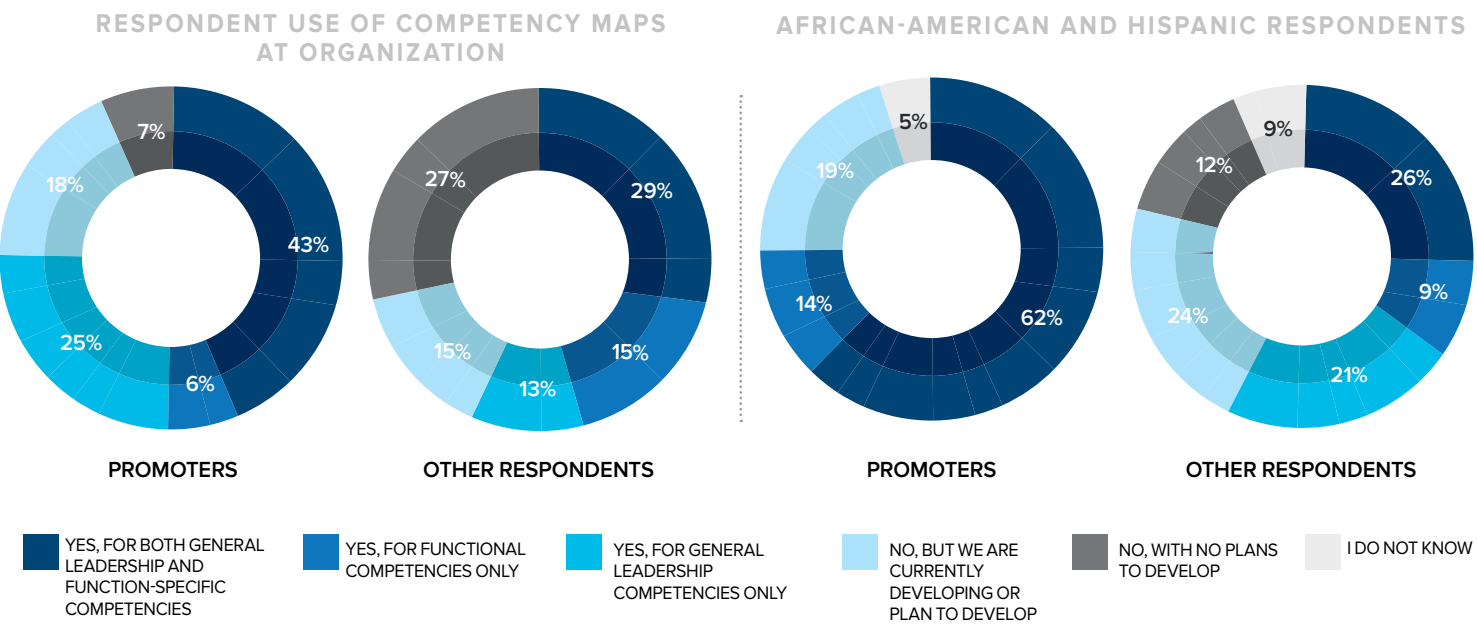


Respondents were asked to rank the three approaches he/she has found most effective in his/her own development. Graph includes the approaches that respondents rated as "most effective" out of the three each individual listed.

Competency-based talent development systems complement and reinforce the 70-20-10 model. Competency maps, for example, provide clarity about the knowledge, skills, and behaviors required to do a job well, and what is expected at increasing levels of seniority. They allow organizations, teams, and individuals to visualize career pathways and to focus development efforts on a progression of concrete, actionable skills. Competency maps provide a foundation for identifying on-the-job learning opportunities (the 70 percent), guiding effective mentoring and coaching (20 percent), and for identifying external training opportunities (10 percent).

When implemented well, competency maps can also mitigate both intentional and unintentional biases that may tilt talent-related decisions away from candidates of color, and instead provide a transparent system for development, hiring, and promotion. Among survey respondents, competency maps ranked high as an aide to career development, particularly among African-American and Hispanic respondents.

COMPETENCY MAPS ARE USED FREQUENTLY AMONG PROMOTERS, AND PROVE TO BE EFFECTIVE TOOLS FOR SUPPORTING DIVERSE STAFF



A comprehensive talent management system should take into account both an individual’s current performance and their potential for continued growth. One of the most widely used tools to accomplish this is the Performance Potential Matrix. It is a powerful resource for both organization-wide talent planning and for individual development efforts. Organizations can use the matrix to assess each individual’s current performance and potential to contribute over time—information that can inform organization-wide talent reviews, forward-looking talent planning, and individual development plans. Survey respondents made it clear that they value development and growth, with 52 percent of respondents intending to leave their organizations for career advancement opportunities. Embracing a talent management system that places a premium on performance and potential can be a strong signal of an organization’s commitment to both current and rising leaders.

These tools do not entail big financial investments. But carrying out an effective leadership development program does require consistent commitment of the senior team backed up by ongoing, hands-on efforts across the organization. It’s also important to know where you are headed with a talent management approach before adopting a new resource. That ensures organizations avoid disconnected or seemingly random initiatives, or using tools in ways that are counterproductive to talent goals. This work is by no means easy, and it requires organizations to build capacity at all levels to do it well.

TOOLS FOR SUCCESS

Organizations looking to build muscle need not start from scratch. A number of resources and tools already exist, and many are free or low cost to nonprofits.

EdFuel offers a range of customized development opportunities for education leaders, including an organizational effectiveness diagnostic, Peer Learning Communities, executive coaching, and workshop based trainings. EdFuel also offers **eight competency maps** to help leaders and organizations develop their capacity: Leadership, Academics & Instruction, Advocacy, Development, Information & Data, Finance, Operations, and Talent.

www.edfuel.org

Bridgespan provides a **Leadership Development Toolkit** and the “Plan A” leadership development **guide**, videos, and tools within it, are designed to share stories, lessons, and immediately actionable next steps for organizations interested in developing the next generation of home-grown leaders. This includes resources on the 70/20/10 approach and Performance Potential matrix.

www.bridgespan.org

AchieveMission provides **consulting**, coaching, tools and related support to nonprofits building integrated human capital management solutions. **Talent Initiative** and **VP of Talent On-Demand** are two popular options for larger and smaller organizations, respectively.

www.achievemission.org

Bellwether Talent Services builds the capacity of both individual education leaders and education organizations through services ranging from organizational diagnostics to talent-ready organization design, strategy, implementation, coaching, and recruiting.

www.bellwethereducation.org

Prioritize diversity

Today, students of color represent half of our public school population and are the growing majority in many of our nation's urban centers.¹¹ In contrast, leaders of color comprise less than 25 percent of senior management roles in most systems.¹²

As a recent report from Koya Leadership Partners and EdPioneers highlights, increasing diversity—and specifically, the presence of African-American and Hispanic leaders—must be a field-wide priority: “In short, the success of all our missions depends, in part, on our ability to build high-functioning, diverse teams.”¹³

Investing in leadership development means not just taking diversity into account, but making it a core commitment. Challenges exist along the leadership pipeline: recruiting practices that rely heavily on predominantly white networks and elite institutions; insufficient mentors and role models for rising leaders of color compared to white peers; a lack of formal talent management systems, which leads to advancement based not on performance and potential, but on informal or intangible criteria that tend to favor white staff. It's important to note that addressing the gap between students and leaders of color requires continued efforts to attract and hire many more leaders of color at all levels. Organizations must expand and strengthen the pool of diverse talent to draw from in the future.

“As a person of color, I’ve often found myself trying to navigate on my own up and through this organization. It would be really helpful to have visibility into what it takes to get to the next level.”
—K–12 education leader

These themes resonated in our survey. African-American and Hispanic respondents consistently highlighted a desire for more development and opportunities for advancement. Those who would recommend their employer to others pointed to strong employee development programs as a critical factor in their job satisfaction. They were far more likely to have budgets for learning and growth opportunities, work with coaches and mentors, gain career insights

from competency maps, and feel supported in their development. Respondents make a strong case for adoption of tools, such as competency maps, that identify the skills needed for individuals to succeed and advance in their roles, provide a transparent and accessible roadmap for all staff, and encourage promotion decisions based on the demonstration of competencies, rather than informal networks and individual preferences.

Yet closing the gap between the diversity of our public schools and the diversity of our leadership ranks is not just about talent development. It requires more dialogue about how issues of race and equity influence organizational culture. This likely requires changing organizations from the inside, so that they are more supportive and inclusive of difference and willing to challenge the status quo when it comes to leadership.

The message here is that while development and opportunities for advancement are critical for all rising leaders, it's particularly important for expanding the number of senior leaders of color. Many systems have stated diversity as a core value, but few have built the capacity required to follow through.

DIALOGUE ON DIVERSITY DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA PUBLIC SCHOOLS

With 90 percent students of color, the District of Columbia strives to build a home office staff that reflects the diversity of its local community. In addition to various initiatives to recruit and develop leaders of color at all levels, several years ago senior district leadership decided to facilitate discussions around race and equity with a goal of strengthening trust and authentic collaboration.

This effort led the school system in 2013 to forge a partnership with the Fellowship for Race and Equity (FREE), a local nonprofit that aims to build individual and collective will, skill, and courage to address racial inequalities within the American public education system. District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) and FREE embarked on a multiyear effort that blends opportunities for personal reflection, group learning, and facilitated dialogues around issues of racism and inequity. As Michelle Molitor, Executive Director of FREE explains, “to do your best work as an organization, it’s imperative that communities build capacity by being in a constant cycle of reflection and development...able to look without blame, shame or guilt at the issues of inequity truly facing the organization.”

As the partnership heads into its third year, over 300 central office staff are actively participating. Next year, DCPS will fund a full-time position focused on scaling this work across the home office and the school network. There are already signs of change. “This work allowed us to identify an inequity...in the way we recruit, select, onboard, and manage the people we want at the Office of Human Capital,” says Jenn Robertson, DCPS training manager. For example, the office is focused on improving the process for bringing on new team members. “We’re really trying to make this work live all the time in our office,” explains Robertson. “How do we think about racial equity so naturally that every decision we make takes it into account? We’re not sure how we do that, but we’re willing to do the messy work to find out.”

Measure, test, learn, and adapt

Organizations that are serious about staff development have to establish measures for progress. Such measures exist for other areas; leadership development should be no different.

There are a number of diagnostic tools that can provide leadership teams with consistent, high-quality data regarding the health of their talent pipelines and the effectiveness of their organizations. Organizations can also solicit feedback using employee satisfaction or organization “pulse” surveys. Such resources can serve as a forcing mechanism to regularly revisit and refine development efforts. Competency maps can also serve as a helpful baseline, providing a platform for measuring progress of staff over time and whether and how investments in development and coaching are accelerating growth.

Despite the best of intentions, complex systems—like school districts and charter networks—often struggle to embrace change and innovate. It’s important to get started by taking small, simple steps that allow organizations to learn and to build a sense of momentum. Consider launching a pilot with a department or team that seems ready. Commit as a senior leadership team to setting clear development goals with direct reports, making time for weekly check-ins, and reporting back on what happens.

Identifying a set of focused investments and learning what works (and doesn’t) within a particular department considerably increases the likelihood of long-term success. It also signals real commitment to staff and generates momentum when early wins are realized.

Organizations should also resist an urge to go at this work alone. Building the muscle to develop and retain staff must become a shared goal for districts, charter organizations, and education intermediaries. The more that organizations share and learn from one another, the faster the field can build its collective capacity to develop and retain the next generation of education leaders.

DATA-DRIVEN DEVELOPMENT UNCOMMON SCHOOLS

Data plays a big role in Uncommon Schools’ approach to talent management. “We’ve been doing a home office staff survey for years,” explains Chief of Staff Laura Lee McGovern. “We analyze the data with an eye toward what we’re doing well and what we can improve on. We share the results transparently and try and take action on it.”

Through this ongoing staff engagement, people consistently voiced interest in two things they’d like to see more of: clarity about future opportunities at the organization and direction on ways to develop and grow. Building capacity to do both well is a primary reason Uncommon decided to launch a talent development team. “It’s powerful to have data pointing us in this direction,” says McGovern, “and we’re excited to up our commitment and investment in something that matters a lot to both the senior team and our staff.”

Data has been similarly powerful as Uncommon continues to prioritize attracting, developing, and retaining leaders of color at all levels of the organization. Uncommon took a hard look at its diversity numbers—for teachers, school leaders, and home office staff—and has developed a number of home-grown programs to address gaps and variations. This includes an internship program for teachers of color that has grown from 10 to 100 people in five years. Data also plays a role as Uncommon seeks to create more open dialogue: for example, setting a network-wide goal for holding at least three staff-wide conversations about race and equity at every school and at the home office next year.

FROM ADVICE TO ACTION

The case for change is compelling: too much talent churns through our school districts, charter management organizations, and education nonprofits. Most move on because they failed to get the development and career advancement opportunities they expected. The solution lies in elevating in-house staff development to an organizational priority, following the four steps outlined above, and making it a matter of routine. Putting that advice into action means different things for the various groups involved.

Superintendents and CEOs:

- **Champion development, growth, and retention of staff as a top organizational priority.** In addition, set clear expectations with the senior leadership team about investing in current and future leaders. Hold the senior team accountable for making progress on key development and retention metrics.
- **Adequately fund activities that build the individual and collective capacity of the organization to develop staff skills and knowledge,** such as support to deploy various development tools or bringing in an external coach.
- **Seek opportunities to promote from within,** rather than defaulting to external searches, particularly at the top-level jobs. Consider and change practices and biases that limit internal bench strength, giving particular attention to diversity goals. Use interim roles more consistently, not just as a seat warmer but as a way to test for ability in a more senior role.
- **Invest in succession planning for yourself and your senior leadership team.** All too often, succession planning happens in response to an imminent vacancy, and in the absence of a plan to cultivate a leadership bench for all key senior roles. This results in a low rate of planning across the field—only 30 percent of CEOs reported having a succession plan. It is critical for organizations to know far in advance who they can count on for future leadership so that they can immediately invest in developing these individuals in their current roles to be prepared for succession.

School District and Charter Leadership Teams:

- **Strive to become an “employer of choice” for talent.** Recognize and reward managers who successfully invest in the development of their team members. Emphasize to leaders across the organization the value of growth through career ladders and lattices; encourage growth through both vertical and lateral career paths.
- **Promote competency-based talent systems.** Use competency maps; adopt the 70-20-10 staff development model, and invest in Performance Potential talent planning within teams and departments.
- **Provide guidance on how much time managers should spend on staff development and recommended best practices.** This should include weekly one-on-one check-ins, informal mentoring and real-time feedback, and regular performance discussions.

Individuals:

- **Become an advocate for your personal development.** Make a point of knowing the skills and knowledge required for success within your function and level, diagnose your strengths and areas for development, seek out stretch opportunities, and identify a coach or mentor who can help you develop.
- **Support the adoption and implementation of development tools within your organization.** These include competency maps, and the 70-20-10 development model.
- **Take it upon yourself to invest in your teams and in other potential future leaders.** Allocate your own time to mentoring others, encourage their growth and support them in developing core competencies necessary for success.

Funders:

Education funders typically invest in programs without giving equal attention to investments in the people who will make or break a program's success. Going forward, funders can play a critical role by building school district and charter organization capacity, and by working with other funders to support the field in doing this work well.

This begins by taking stock of current investments and determining whether and how building system leaders should become a core part of a funder's grantmaking approach. From there, funders can invest in system leadership in a number of ways:

- **Allocate funds for talent development as an explicit part of a grantee's strategic planning.** Funders can provide essential unrestricted funds—good overhead—that systems need to invest in their people. Organizations can use this funding to develop and operate strong, high quality talent management systems.
- **Share promising talent development practices and resources with grantees.** Support adoption at scale.
- **Support “communities of practice”** comprised of school district and charter management organization leaders that are committed to building their in-house talent.
- **Partner with other funders in the field to create momentum behind investments in system leadership.** Accelerate spread of best practices among practitioners and support organizations.
- **Measure the impact of leadership investments to ensure that money is well spent** and to help guide others who want to invest in this area.

Education nonprofits:

- **Identify and share best practices and tools related to talent development.** Provide actionable, open-source resources to the field to ensure results scale quickly and cost-effectively. This includes investing internally in your own talent development, recognizing the flow of staff between nonprofits and school systems.
- **Provide technical assistance services.** These are needed to support the development of staff and to build capacity in organizations over time.
- **Convene peer organizations to share knowledge of promising staff development and growth practices.** Build a sense of shared accountability for improving the capacity of organizations and the field to do this work.
- **Advocate for the importance of building leadership talent within the education field.** Serve as a model organization among partners and peers for putting this into action.

CONCLUSION

Under the circumstances, perhaps it shouldn't be surprising that nearly two-thirds of current and rising system leaders anticipate leaving their jobs over the next three years.

Respondents to our survey made clear how to slow the revolving door: proactively put more emphasis on staff development and career advancement. The message for superintendents and CEOs is equally clear: invest more in home-grown talent. And pay particular attention to development and advancement opportunities for leaders of color. The payoff accrues to the individuals involved and their organizations, and over time to the education field.

Few would balk at the idea of promoting a new culture of staff development in our school systems. Yet, it's hard to follow through. That's the challenge ahead for those who want to get serious about developing and retaining the capable, diverse leaders we need to move our educational system forward.

“There is a belief in the education field that anyone smart can do the job. Just hire the right person, put them in the system, and let them figure it out. There’s been no recognition that developing and growing our people is important.”
–K-12 education leader

MONDAY MORNING CHECKLIST

Superintendents and CEOs:

- Champion development, growth, and retention of staff as a top organizational priority.
- Adequately fund activities that build the individual and collective capacity of the organization to develop staff skills and knowledge.
- Seek opportunities to promote from within.
- Invest in succession planning for yourself and your senior leadership team.

Individuals:

- Become an advocate for your personal development.
- Support the adoption and implementation of development tools within your organization.
- Take it upon yourself to invest in your teams and in other potential future leaders.

Funders:

- Allocate funds for talent development as an explicit part of a grantee's strategic planning.
- Share promising talent development practices and resources with grantees.
- Support "communities of practice."
- Partner with other funders in the field to create momentum behind investments in system leadership.
- Measure the impact of leadership investments to ensure money is well spent.

School District and Charter Leadership Teams:

- Strive to become an "employer of choice" for talent.
- Promote competency-based talent systems.
- Provide guidance on how much time managers should spend on staff development and recommended best practices.

Education nonprofits:

- Identify and share best practices and tools related to talent development.
- Provide technical assistance services.
- Convene peer organizations to share knowledge of promising staff development and growth practices.
- Advocate for the importance of building leadership talent within the education field.

ENDNOTES

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