

HELPING ARLINGTON BUILD CAMPUS LEADERS: A CASE STUDY

In 2012, the Arlington Independent School District (AISD) launched a strategic plan for school improvement that placed strong school leadership at its center. The district and school board established an ambitious goal for every school in the AISD to effectively prepare students for college, or a career of their choice. To achieve this vision, they needed a pipeline of great campus leaders who had the skills to guide teachers to excellence and to implement strong college and career preparatory programs, such as early college, advanced academic tracks in math and science, and career-technical academies.

Arlington understood that developing highly skilled school leaders required a leadership training program with the following elements:

- A selection model that identifies candidates with clear leadership potential.
- A curriculum that helps participants master key leadership skills, particularly those related to instruction.
- Job-embedded coaching and feedback so participants can apply new techniques in a real-world setting.
- A robust system to measure program outcomes, including the program's impact on student learning.

In the first year of its strategic plan, the AISD created an “Aspiring Principal Academy” for assistant principals and teacher leaders. However, district officials recognized that the challenge of limited staff time and resources would prevent them from fully implementing the kind of innovative program they wanted. They began exploring possible external partners and soon learned about New Leaders, a national non-profit with more than 15 years of experience developing school and teacher leaders in many of America’s highest-need communities. New Leaders’ work aligned perfectly with what AISD officials sought for their schools and, with support from Raise Your Hand Texas and the Meadows Foundation, they hired New Leaders to partner with them on principal pipeline development. Since 2014, the AISD and New Leaders have worked hand-in-hand to implement Emerging Leaders, bringing to life the district’s vision for a high-impact training program that builds the school leader pipeline and elevates instruction and student achievement across classrooms and schools.



“My team was willing to engage in intensive preparation and data analysis, identifying areas of growth using Emerging Leaders templates. We talked constantly of our vision of success for all students and together planned engaging, hands-on lessons that helped students develop true understanding.”

Assistant Principal, AISD

ABOUT ARLINGTON INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT (AISD)

63,405 students

70% are economically disadvantaged

26% are English language learners

69% are black or Hispanic

The district has

54 elementary schools

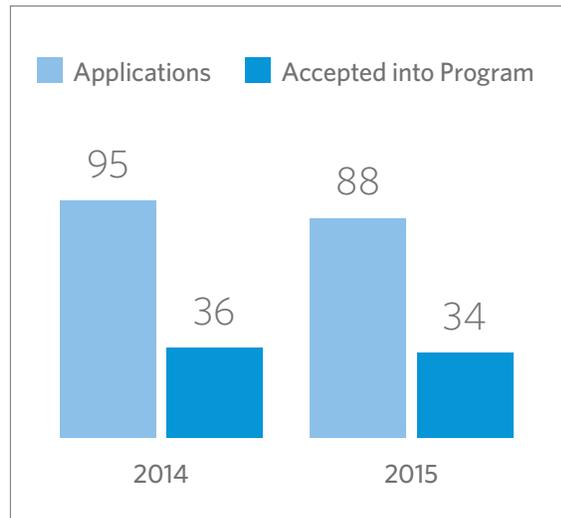
11 junior high schools

10 high schools

Selective Admissions Process

When the AISD launched its Aspiring Principals Academy, district officials became concerned that they were not meeting their recruitment goals. New Leaders helped the district tackle this challenge, drawing on strategies that had helped the organization build robust pools of talented applicants in other cities.

Among other approaches, New Leaders deployed a targeted nomination process, reaching out to Area Superintendents and AISD principals to solicit recommendations for high-potential candidates. New Leaders and the AISD carefully cultivated these candidates, through a mix of in-person and virtual information sessions, regular email outreach, and “open” office hours. This crucial step generated a sufficiently large pool of applicants



to enable careful selection. A proactive approach to recruitment also allowed the district to engage candidates with characteristics and skills they sought — such as diverse backgrounds and Spanish-speaking ability — but who might not otherwise have considered applying.

Applicants participated in a rigorous selection process, which uses objective, research-based criteria to identify educators with strong leadership potential. These include a deep belief that all students can achieve at high levels, a track record of success as a teacher, and the right disposition to lead other adults. The program screens applicants against these criteria through a series of exercises: for example, they watch a video of a teacher in a classroom, critique instruction, and provide feedback that includes concrete guidance for improvement. These exercises, which New Leaders has developed and tested through years of work in leadership development, were cited by the AISD as particularly relevant and useful for a wide range of their work.

In 2014-15, just 36 of 95 applicants (38 percent) were offered admission to Arlington Emerging Leaders, a level of selectivity that the AISD welcomed. Like many districts, it had launched its own leadership program with the intent to be selective, but the applicant pool had not been substantially larger than the district’s recruitment needs, and ultimately, almost everyone who applied was accepted.

The introduction of this selection model ignited a culture shift across the AISD. Arlington teachers and aspiring leaders now recognize that leadership roles must be earned, based on instructional expertise and demonstrated leadership skills.



Research-Based Curriculum

By partnering with New Leaders, the AISD was also able to take advantage of a proven curriculum that ensures Emerging Leaders participants master the key skills they need to lead colleagues to instructional excellence. Core leadership competencies covered by the curriculum include delivering effective feedback, having difficult conversations, and leading teams in reviewing and using student data to set goals and better support students. The curriculum places a heavy emphasis on real-world learning: participants lead teacher teams in their schools to improve student achievement and complete on-the-job assignments to demonstrate mastery of skills.

Research shows that adults learn best by doing, but the approach also delivers immediate benefits to AISD schools and students. Before the program kicks off, New Leaders sits down with principals and designs goals for participants that align with existing school priorities, and participants work to advance those goals as part of the training experience.

Job-Embedded Coaching and Feedback

Receiving personalized feedback is also critical to mastering new skills, and Arlington Emerging Leaders participants work closely with their Program Director and Leadership Facilitator — both successful former school leaders — who provide ongoing coaching and feedback throughout the training year. Participants have ample opportunity to practice both with peers and in their actual schools, and they regularly capture real-world leadership interactions (e.g., team meetings; feedback sessions with other teachers) on video so they can observe their leadership practice in action while getting feedback about their performance. This approach allows Emerging Leaders to see firsthand where they're succeeding and where they need to grow.

Measuring Program Outcomes

New Leaders and the AISD are committed to developing school leaders who have the skills to help all children achieve at the highest level. To that end, the Arlington Emerging Leaders program tracks participants' mastery of key leadership competencies as well as their impact on student achievement. At the outset of the program, all participants set SMART goals — specific, measurable, achievable, results-focused, and time-bound goals — for student learning with their teams, and track progress toward them. In order to graduate from the program, participants must demonstrate proficiency in the leadership competencies, as well as student achievement growth in the classrooms they supervise. Additionally, the Program Director and Leadership Facilitator share with the district which participants performed strongly overall in the program and are best positioned to grow into more senior leadership roles.



Natalie Williams

Assistant Principal, Arlington High School

When Natalie Williams joined Emerging Leaders in fall 2014, 80 percent of Arlington High School students were meeting proficiency standards in U.S. history — but that number excluded students with disabilities. Williams knew her team could do better, and she wanted to establish the understanding that *every student* can achieve at a high level. She set a SMART goal for 82 percent of students to achieve proficiency by year's end, but expanded the focus to include *all* students.

With the support of her Emerging Leaders Program Director, Natalie helped her team analyze data to understand individual student needs and provided ongoing instructional coaching and support to help teachers meet those needs. By the end of the year, 95 percent of Arlington High School students met her team's goal for proficiency in U.S. History, proving that when you set a high bar and provide quality instructional support to teachers, students can rise to those expectations.

"My team was committed to using student data to improve instruction, viewing setbacks as opportunities to make systemic changes to better meet student needs. As an instructional leader, I followed up with conversations to reflect on best practices and brainstorm next steps. By fostering the strong friendships that already existed on the team, teachers were willing to attempt this new process, and that played a major role in our success."

Program Results

Student achievement results for Arlington Emerging Leaders' first year have been impressive, particularly when considering that they were achieved while participants were still completing training.

The strong partnership between the AISD and New Leaders is powered by a perfect alignment between the district's priorities and New Leaders' expertise. The AISD wanted great school leadership as the centerpiece of its strategy to achieve college and career readiness for every student, but recognized it did not have the staff time and resources to bring this vision to life on its own. With support from Raise Your Hand Texas and the Meadows Foundation, the AISD and New Leaders quickly executed on the strategic plan, empowering teachers and assistant principals with the skills they needed to be highly effective leaders and to immediately begin raising student achievement. Moving into the future, the program will also be supported by an increased financial contribution from the district, and a grant from American Express and the National Association of Secondary School Principals.

72%
of Emerging Leaders led gains across the classrooms they impacted.

100%
of Emerging Leaders working with math teachers led gains across their teams, with **75 percent achieving double-digit gains.**

69%
of Emerging Leaders oversaw student learning gains of at least five percentage points against their SMART goals.

53%
of first-year Emerging Leaders were promoted to be assistant principals or principals for the 2015-2016 school year.

Participants and Supervisors find Emerging Leaders Relevant and Effective

Participants who find Emerging Leaders content relevant to their needs as a team leader in their schools	97%
Participants who say their skills improved in:	
Using data to understand students' academic achievement	97%
Building team culture around student achievement	100%
Providing instructional strategies to teachers	100%
Participants who say Emerging Leaders helped to build their leadership capacity	97%
Participants who say Emerging Leaders helped improve student achievement at their school	100%
Supervisors who saw growth in participants' team-building and instructional leadership skills	95%
Supervisors who felt having an Emerging Leader was beneficial, and would like one again	100%

"My Program Director is so adept at pinpointing areas of growth for each Emerging Leader and then helping us come up with a strategic plan that addresses that area. The assignments are challenging and the bar for success is high. My Program Director never allows me to settle, but I have had constant support throughout the process."

Teacher Leader, AISD

