



EPISODE 1

Building the Pipeline: Invest in Your Best

Lucas Held: I'm delighted to welcome our two guests today, Carmen Fariña of the New York City Schools System, which is one of the six districts participating in our Principal Pipeline Initiative, and my colleague, Jody Spiro, who's the director of education leadership here at The Wallace Foundation. Thanks to you both for joining me to kick off the Principal Pipeline Podcast series, and let's turn first to Jody Spiro. Tell us about what is a principal pipeline?

Jody Spiro: Thanks, Lucas, and it's such a pleasure to be here with you and with Chancellor Fariña. A principal pipeline is, as you've said in your opening, a systemic way to think about everything that this important position, people in this important position need in order to be successful, ultimately for improving the life of the school and the achievement of students. And we would say, from research that's now been tested out in New York and the other five districts, that consists of rigorous standards for leaders, what does it take to be an effective leader; and then those same standards being applied to the training that those who aspire to be principals get, we call it pre-service; and then importantly, how principals are hired, and that they're hired according to those very standards, and that they're matched well with the schools that they ultimately serve as principal; and finally, the component of supporting the principals on the job during their first three to five years, which is often very overlooked.

As people get the keys to the building and are told, "Good luck," we need to see a pipeline as continuing through the first years that principals are on the job, and just to say that this is all research-based, and the big finding that we've just had that funding such a pipeline is actually affordable for districts in the study done by RAND, published just recently. It's been shown that in a district like New York, this type of pipeline costs less than half of one percent of the district's annual budget, so it's doable, it's affordable, and Carmen, our kids need it.

Carmen Fariña: They deserve it. They deserve it.

Lucas Held: And maybe speaking of why they deserve it, and speaking of things that are overlooked, all of us have had the experience of a great teacher, but maybe it's a little less visible what the principal does, maybe just to set us off, start us off on this, why is the principal so important, and why have you made it such a pillar of your leadership efforts here in New York City?

Carmen Fariña: Well, first of all, the principal sets the tone. How they act, what they say, what they choose to do in the classrooms and visiting classrooms and even curriculum choices they make in conjunction with their staff, really makes it a very, very good school or a very,

very poor school. So to me, the principal is the most pivotal role in the entire system, and I've had every role in 52 years in education, and I would say in terms of where you can make the most change or the most destruction is at the principal level. So I want to be clear: for me, having the best principals in New York is a mandate. There's nothing that's more important, and I think also, it's not just working with teachers and children, but as we've seen in New York City, if you don't also include families as part of the people that you work with and who you outreach to, it's only going to be good for a moment in time, not over a period of time.

So as we embrace the framework for great schools, we put in a lot of evaluative tools for principals on how they meet with their families, how they do parent professional development, are they trusted by their community? And in order to ask so much of principals, we also have to make sure that when they become principals that they know what's expected, but they're prepared for the work, so in terms of pipeline in New York, the very first regulation that I put in place as chancellor – I think I was there a month – was that anyone who wanted to be a principal had to have at least seven years of pedagogical experience. And it may seem very simple, almost common sense, but if you haven't been a teacher for at least a while, why should anyone trust you, that you're credible in telling them what to do?

So to me, a principal is a model teacher, it's a master teacher, it's someone who understands what it's like to be a parent, and is able to be in an affirmative way, saying that it's a great profession, follow my lead, you too will succeed.

Lucas Held: So that's a terrific description, Chancellor, of the pivotal role of leadership.

Jody Spiro: Could I just ask Carmen to compare, since you were an extremely successful principal for many years, and you say that it's the position with the greatest leverage. What's the difference in how you were recruited and hired and prepared for the job compared with those functions as you now have them performed for principals?

Carmen Fariña: Well I think, first and foremost, I was very fortunate to be cajoled into becoming a principal, and sought after. So I think because the dignity of the superintendent, and we brought back superintendents big time in New York City, are that they give the first message. They are the first model principals, and if they say, I need the best to be working for me, you already raise the dignity of being a principal, and I think one of the, for me, parts of the pipeline, is not just recruiting teachers, principals, but how do you retain them? So to me, as a principal, I was not only cajoled into becoming a principal in a school I became a principal in, but also, it was very obvious that the superintendent wanted to retain me over time.

So he just didn't see my job within a box, he said, "What more do you want to do? How much, where do you want your sphere of influence to grow to?" So I became a principal mentor, lots of things. So in this job, I make very sure that one of the first things we did was raise the dignity of principals and teachers because we can't do one without the other, but made it also a job that you celebrated all the time, and that you told publicly about it, and even when I speak to the press, I keep saying, "Do you know what the life of a principal is like?" Because I don't think, unless you've been in those shoes, you

really get it, and understand that you're changing families' lives, especially in New York City where now we have over 100,000 kids in homeless shelters. That's overwhelming if you look at it from a principal's perspective, but not if you look at it from a perspective of how can I change the course of history for these particular kids.

So I think I learned lessons because I was principal in a place that did it right, and I wanted to bring that kind of structure here. Not anybody can become a principal. Not anybody should be a principal. It shouldn't be based on who you know, but what you know, and I think that's a major shift in New York. Also, the career ladder, what you talk all about in terms of pipeline, we now have in New York City, well, a teacher. You have a master teacher, you have a teacher leader, we expect you to pay your dues in many different ways so that you get credibility in the field. So before you go up to the next level, you've already proven that you're an instructional leader. That's a big change because either it's perceived, in the principalship, you're either a manager or you're an instructional leader. You need to be both, and I think we can mesh that in ways that make sense, but unless you have a lot of preparatory work for this, it's not going to happen. So I'm very, very proud. I have 1,600 principals. That's a lot of principals.

Jody Spiro: It's unimaginable, really.

Carmen Fariña: And yet, I can tell you that I know the vast majority of them, and that I can tell you that our top tier of principals is really probably one of the largest percentages, but also if you're in the middle, great, we'll get you better. But if you're not in either one of those two categories, then there's really maybe not a place for you all the time.

Jody Spiro: So without wanting to hog the questioning, but I have a burning question for Carmen. You mentioned the superintendents, which these are the people who supervise principals and support principals. They're called superintendents in New York. More generically in the country, they're called principal supervisors, but you took some very politically courageous, important action in New York City in regard to that principal supervisor position. Could you share?

Carmen Fariña: I really should preface this by saying that this was possible because of mayoral control, because the mayor... was president of my school board when I was superintendent, and we had many discussions at the time, gave me the authority to restructure the system, such as it was, and the first thing we did, which I don't think a lot of people believe that we were going to do, or going to be able to do, we asked all the superintendents in New York City to reapply for their jobs. That was 44 superintendents. We're not talking two or three, and of the 44, we probably hired back probably a little less than half, and that really set the stage for what superintendents had to do, compared to what they had to do in the past, and the most important criteria was that they had to be instructional leaders.

If you're going to be in charge of principals, then making principals better, or in the long run, evaluating principals, which is much more strenuous and rigorous now than it's ever been, then you had to know what a classroom education system looked like. You need to go into a classroom and be able to give teachers feedback. So that was really a good year's effort, and we interviewed everybody who applied, and I think the biggest

surprise then, what happened if I didn't get my job? I'd been a superintendent for 10 years, and now you're telling me I can't do this? Yeah, we are, and that was really partially also when we raised the level, and when people saw her, what type of people we were putting in those positions, it became actually more pleasant to apply for them because you were recognized as being a superior educator, where in the past, that wasn't necessarily one of the criteria for being a superintendent.

And then excellent superintendents will pick excellent principals, and one of the things we've done in New York City, we've asked every superintendent to have a bench of assistant principals, a minimum of five, each of them, so that we don't always have to be scratching our heads when another opening comes up. But also, due to something which is, again in a city like New York, rather unique, that don't stick within your own geographical area, and I have to say, my superintendents have been phenomenal. If you have a vacancy for principalship, for example, and we need someone with a very strong English language arts, or you're working with dual-language students, we expect you to be very generous and offer that kind of data that you already had your eyes on to another superintendent. We've done several of those this year. So we've moved from a very competitive model to a very collaborative model of leadership, and that has been very important because we now know that even with the best principals, they're not all the best for all the schools. It's not one size fits all.

I know personally for me, I was a pretty good principal. The school I was in, not everybody would've been good for that school, and I know there are some schools I wouldn't have applied to because I don't think I was the right fit for those schools. So knowing yourself, and I think that's part of what Jody did particularly well with us when we worked on some of the Wallace work, where do you fit in, where will you be most successful, and again, retention is crucial. You don't get good at any job until your third to fifth year. So this notion that you have to move to do this very fast to get the next level and the next level, we've kind of said, "Okay, you're a great principal," I'm thinking of my Learning Partners ...

Jody Spiro: Yes.

Carmen Fariña: Program. If you're a great principal, just in one of the schools the other day, I said to him, "Well, now what are you ready to do? Not to be taking you out of this job, but how many other people do you work with?" And I have a principal now who's working with six other principals, and they come to visit her school, and they learn from her, and then they replicate things she's doing, and then each of these principals is going to take on three more principals. So how do you take principals who are doing a good job and share them with others without always elevating them up? So we now have master principals that we actually pay more money to depending on the number of other schools they work with, and now we have a master principal who actually runs two schools. So if we have a school that has a specific issue, and yet another principal has been very good at solving the issue, and they're willing, they now run their own school, which basically, their AP does a lot more of, and they also run another school, we just did one last week.

Jody Spiro: And you also have evidence that those principals are staying.

Carmen Fariña: Absolutely.

Jody Spiro: Excellent principals, and they're staying.

Carmen Fariña: In the original learning partner schools of 100 schools, only two principals have left, and both of them have left because I needed them for other jobs. And by the way, a lot of them are eligible for retirement, and not one of them has left.

Lucas Held: It sounds like you've really instituted a comprehensive approach to developing and supporting leaders, both at multiple levels. You've mentioned superintendents, known as instructional supervisors in some other context, master principals, principals, assistant principals, multiple levels, and you've emphasized that this support takes place over time, encompassing recruitment and retention. I wonder if we might close this terrific discussion by asking you, Chancellor, what advice would you give another district that is thinking about how do we really sharpen our focus on principals to enhance our recruitment and support?

Carmen Fariña: I would say one of the most important things is invest in your best. We spend too much time working on the ones that are struggling, rather than working on the ones that are the best, and then giving away our ownership to them for them to work with the next tier, and the next tier to work with the bottom tier. A leader can't be everywhere. I know I certainly can't be, as much as I think I'm trying too hard on this. So if I can pick the 100 best principals in New York City, and ask each of them to work with at least two to three to five more principals, then those principals, we're going to get a sense of energy and celebration, and by the way, I mention my really phenomenal principals every time I have an opportunity. I put out a monthly newsletter called "P Notes," and it has a shout-out section, and in that shout-out section, I always celebrate whatever schools I've been to that month. I visit anywhere from three to four schools per week, and I take out the best highlights of the visits to those schools.

And generally, if the school I visited is not on my shout-out list, the message is there. And also I think, that focusing on the best of something that we don't tend to do as leaders, and it's to our disadvantage because they're the people who do the work for us. We don't have to do it all. So I have a principal's advisory group, I have my lead principal leaders, and I think celebrating and more and more so, we are not celebrating good stuff that's happening in education.

Lucas Held: I think it's striking, the extent to which you are working to build understanding and awareness of the role of leaders and celebrating their achievements, and Jody, any final thoughts on what we've heard today from the chancellor of New York City?

Jody Spiro: You're asking me to follow what Carmen just said? I wouldn't dare. I think that notion about working with the best is actually new. This is actually something that might be advice that other folks looking to do this work take to heart. There's a real resource in the excellent principals, and then you create that cascade effect. So I think we've heard some really important advice from Carmen today, yeah.

Carmen Fariña: Can I add one thing? The other thing is we sometimes have to really bite the bullet, and really say, "You're not meant to be a principal," and if we don't do that equally as much as we celebrate, we give mixed messages, and it's very, very important to say, "This job is not for you." Whether you've been doing it for two months or 20 years, there is a time when maybe you're not the right person for this job.

Lucas Held: Yes, and what we've, I think, heard from you in this conversation is the importance of both celebrating, but also invoking accountability to this job because it is such an important one, and to return to a theme you brought up earlier, it is a pivotal role, I think you called it the most pivotal role. And with that, let me take the opportunity to thank our two terrific guests for this podcast, Carmen Fariña, the chancellor of the New York City Schools System, and Jody Spiro, director of education leadership at The Wallace Foundation. Thank you for joining us.

Carmen Fariña: Thank you.