



Fairfield County  
Community Foundation

# The School Leadership Initiative

of the Fund for Academic Excellence

**A Primer for Donors and Partners**



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of the Fairfield County Community Foundation's  
Fund for Academic Excellence

## **A Primer for Donors and Partners**

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## **What is the Fund for Academic Excellence and why did The Fairfield County Community Foundation establish it?**

The Fairfield County Community Foundation is deeply committed to closing the achievement gap in Fairfield County. We have a long history of supporting such efforts, primarily through three strategies:

1. Increase public awareness of the achievement gap by bringing together stakeholders and by providing technical assistance to nonprofit groups interested in developing programs to increase student achievement;
2. Award and broker grants to local nonprofit organizations that target reducing the achievement gap through programs delivered outside of the regular school day and academic year; and
3. Award scholarships to area students for pursuing higher education from specific designated scholarship programs.

Although these activities have been important and necessary, the Foundation recognized the compelling need to exert more leadership in this critical regional issue. The Community Foundation's board established the Fund for Academic Excellence as a field of interest fund in December 2006 in response to growing concern about the achievement gap in the county's urban public schools.

Though the focused approach of the Fund for Academic Excellence, the Foundation's board and dedicated staff will align grantmaking resources, communications, convening skills and donor services to have a measurable impact on student achievement, especially in the four urban districts of Bridgeport, Danbury, Norwalk and Stamford.

## Why focus on school leadership? How does it address the achievement gap?

For the past two years, Connecticut has had the widest achievement gap between non-white/white and low income/non-low income students in the country, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress.<sup>1</sup> Studies over the past 10 years have shown convincing evidence that school leaders have a profound impact on student outcomes, second only to classroom teachers.<sup>2</sup>

In an era of increasing accountability and disparity, society is placing ever greater demands on school leaders to produce significant positive student results. Yet, research reveals that districts with large percentages of minority and impoverished students—where the achievement gaps are most pronounced—encounter great difficulty in attracting highly qualified principal candidates.<sup>3</sup> In addition, school systems face daunting challenges in finding ways to provide the capacity, coordination and control strong leaders need to achieve the results demanded.

Further complicating this situation, our nation faces a nationwide shortage of principals and assistant principals within 10 years.

In Fairfield County, an average of 50 percent of the urban school district leaders will retire within the next five years. The Bridgeport Public Schools are predicting a leadership turnover closer to 80 percent. *No other philanthropic entity is focusing on this important issue, nor are there any nonprofit organizations specifically addressing this need regionally throughout Fairfield County.*

The Foundation's School Leadership Initiative will help fill this void. This multi-year undertaking will cultivate a diverse group of public school principals who will serve as instructional leaders, entrepreneurs and agents of change for the county's urban districts.

Yet strong leaders can only flourish in strong systems. Therefore, in addition to the initiative's primary focus on increasing the number and quality of aspiring principals, the Foundation will proactively seek opportunities to fund and support work that improves existing leadership systems, whether at the school, district or state level. The Foundation will work closely with school districts, public agencies, the business community, local and national nonprofits, and others committed to strengthening education to ensure that projects and reforms are embedded—rather than temporary Band-Aid—approaches to addressing this critical issue.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/>. Last accessed 2/28/08.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example: Leithwood, K., Louis K. S., Anderson, S., and Wahlstrom, K. (2004). *How Leadership Influences Student Learning*. Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement: University of Minnesota. Commissioned by The Wallace Foundation; Miller, K. (2003). *School, Teacher, and Leadership Impacts on Student Achievement*. Policy Brief: Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning. Colorado; and Walters, T. Marzano, R. J., and McNulty, B. (2003). *Balanced Leadership: What 30 years of research tells us about the effect of leadership on student achievement*. Aurora, CO: Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning.

<sup>3</sup> Mitgang, Lee D. (2003). *Beyond the Pipeline: Getting the Principals We Need, Where They are Needed Most*. Policy Brief: The Wallace Foundation. New York.

## What is the School Leadership Initiative?

### **The School Leadership Initiative Direction**

Over the next several years, the Foundation will work with districts and other local and state education stakeholders to improve the academic achievement of Fairfield County's underserved students. Given the significant influence principals have over this outcome, **the School Leadership Initiative will focus its efforts on ensuring that principal positions in Fairfield County's urban districts are filled with exceptional, passionate leaders trained in the best methods available.**

### **The School Leadership Initiative is guided by the knowledge that...**

- After teachers, principals have the largest school-based influence on student outcomes;
- Finding, hiring and supporting high quality leadership is an issue in every urban area of the county;
- There will be a countywide shortage of quality leaders in five to 10 years;
- There is already a shortage of candidates of color and candidates with a passion for leading urban schools;
- The need for improvement exists along the entire leadership pipeline, from pre-certification to post-induction year; and
- Excellent leaders will thrive in systems that provide the capacity, coordination and control necessary for their success.

### **The School Leadership Initiative is guided by the beliefs that...**

- A focus on closing the achievement gap should be a countywide endeavor;
- The Foundation's work must occur in partnership with school districts;
- The Foundation's value-added includes the ability to provide: seed funds; convening; a community of learners; long term commitment to the issue; oversight and accountability; connections to experts and policy makers; connections to corporate, individual, and national funders; knowledge and research; connections to local media;
- Education systems need additional, innovative ways to think about who leaders should be, how to train them, and how to sustain and support them;
- The Foundation and the community have a responsibility to promote diversity and quality;
- There are many stakeholders within and outside individual school districts who care about student success and whose voices deserve to be heard and involved; and
- We must act together to investigate, implement and uphold systems and policies that best serve students.

## How will the School Leadership Initiative achieve its goals?

The School Leadership Initiative will pursue its mission of **ensuring that principal positions in Fairfield County’s urban districts are filled with exceptional, passionate leaders trained in the best methods available** through two main approaches:

1. Help produce a new generation of excellent urban school leaders, and
2. Build knowledge, awareness and collaboration around Fairfield County’s school leadership needs



### **1. Help Produce the Next Generation of Excellent Urban School Leaders**

The Foundation is working with Bridgeport, Norwalk, Stamford and Danbury school district leaders to develop a countywide *Urban School Executive Leadership Program*. The Executive Leadership Program is designed to increase the numbers and diversity of assistant principals who are ready to become skilled, effective, entrepreneurial and motivated principals for the county’s neediest schools.

Under the Connecticut Center for School Change’s guidance and with the Foundation’s input and oversight, the partners from each district’s central office will design, implement and evaluate the program together. The Connecticut Center for School Change is a nonprofit that works with school districts to create customized programs designed to improve student outcomes. For the first cohort of the Executive Leadership Program, the Foundation has set aside \$200,000 in grant funds. The United Illuminating Company has also made a generous contribution towards the first class of leaders and program evaluation. The Foundation is seeking additional funding partners for the evaluation component and future cohorts.

### **2. Build Knowledge, Awareness and Collaboration around Fairfield County’s Leadership Needs**

The Foundation is working with local, regional and statewide stakeholders, agencies and organizations on various advocacy efforts. Together, we will work towards building systems that will result in recruiting, training and supporting high-functioning school leaders. The Foundation will seek opportunities to bring together key constituencies to work collaboratively on this issue.

The Foundation will produce and disseminate “School Leadership Matters for Fairfield County,” a report summarizing effective means to address the achievement gap and what is currently being done in Fairfield County. The report will focus primarily on the reasons the Foundation has chosen school leadership as a key lever to closing the achievement gap, document the state of leadership in Fairfield County, summarize best practices in principal recruitment, training and support, and discuss the intersection of best practices, needs and what offerings are currently available. The report will highlight our efforts along with other organizations, businesses, and agencies working on school leadership and student achievement; and it will indicate the myriad ways others can contribute to ensuring our neediest schools have the best leadership possible.

There is currently no such report available with both a local and national perspective. The Foundation is seeking corporate underwriting for this project.

## About The Fairfield County Community Foundation

The Fairfield County Community Foundation promotes the growth of community and regional philanthropy to improve the quality of life throughout Fairfield County.

Individuals, families, corporations and organizations can establish charitable funds and contribute to existing funds. The Foundation provides philanthropic advisory services and develops and leads initiatives to tackle critical community issues. It is in compliance with the Council on Foundations' national standards for community foundations. The Foundation has awarded over \$110 million in grants to nonprofits in Fairfield County and beyond.

To learn more, please visit [www.fccfoundation.org](http://www.fccfoundation.org) or contact Karen R. Brown, MPA, [kbrown@fccfoundation.org](mailto:kbrown@fccfoundation.org), 203.750.3200.



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