



EPISODE 2

Improving Job Standards and Hiring Pays Off

Lucas Held:

Well, I'm delighted to welcome our two guests today from Hillsborough County Public Schools in Florida, which is a district that includes Tampa. Tricia McManus is an assistant superintendent in Hillsborough and Tricia oversees educational leadership and professional development for the district. Our other guest is Robert Bhoolai, who got his job as a Hillsborough school principal a year and a half ago after having been cultivated through the district's new Principal Pipeline. Hillsborough County is one of the six school districts participating in Wallace's Principal Pipeline Initiative.

There are two key parts of the pipeline that we'll be focusing on today. The first is job standards that foster a districtwide understanding of what constitutes effective leadership. The second is the hiring of school principals and how that has been made into a more intentional and rigorous process. An evaluation we commissioned shows that putting in place these two components of the pipeline produced immediate benefits for both districts and novice principals and these two steps cost the least of any part of the pipeline. So, let's find out from those who are managing and experiencing the pipeline how these two components of job standards and hiring worked and why they were worth doing. Tricia, let's start with you. Developing job standards sounds like perhaps a mundane thing to some, and so from your perspective as an assistant superintendent, why was this important and how are the standards helping Hillsborough?

Tricia McManus:

Okay, well, thank you and thanks for allowing us to be part of this. Job standards, to me, were actually the most important part of developing our principal pipeline, because our standards, which we call in Hillsborough competencies, and I'll describe what they are in just a second, but they form the foundation for everything else that we did. Until we had those very clear, we wouldn't be able to design quality selection, hiring, preparation programs and evaluation instruments, how we support principals, the goal setting, none of that would have been able to be designed at a high level without strong standards defining what it is that principals and assistant principals should be doing in our district.

Our job standards of leadership in Hillsborough have paved the way for all other parts of the pipeline. They are, just so you know what they are, achievement focused and results oriented, that's one of ours for principals. Also, instructional expertise, managing and developing people, culture and relationship-building and problem-solving and strategic change management. Those are our

competencies and they have actually formed the foundation for all other components of the pipeline.

Lucas Held: Did those take a while to develop and was there a lot of debate about what those should be, Tricia?

Tricia McManus: Yes. It probably took a year to actually end up with what is the agreed upon expectation. We looked at our national standards at the time. We looked at the state standards. We looked at research. We looked at Wallace studies that were on the Wallace site. We looked at many things with a committee, a core committee of leaders from our system, many principals, APs, and district leaders. It took us a while, and we actually started with 21, and we knew that was too many. So, we narrowed it to eight, and we still thought that was too many, and then we narrowed it to five. So, to get to that point of the core five, it probably actually took two years. Because after the eight, we actually developed a lot of tools around the eight, and when we narrowed it to the five, we had to re-adjust those tools. It was probably about a two-year process to really get to the final five.

Lucas Held: Well, that's a fascinating journey. Now, you could have just skipped the process and perhaps issued them, what do you think the process gave you that was better than just sending them out?

Tricia McManus: Ownership, number one. Our leaders have owned what those competencies look like, and they've evolved over the six years of our implementation. Because until you use them in the field, so you still have this list of competencies and you have a rubric that defines them, and that's all very powerful, and it's very important. But not until you use them in your daily work, so our area superintendents who are principal supervisors in Hillsborough, having those conversations every time you're in a school working with a principal, having principals work together on how are we improving our practice around the competencies. It's when you start to have that really deep use of the competencies, that they completely transform the work.

Lucas Held: Really interesting. Can you share with our listeners one or two of the competencies that didn't make it to the final cut? This is sort of the whole DVD version that you can get for an extra \$10.

Tricia McManus: I don't even remember what the ones were, which is a good thing. Because that was literally about six years ago when we had the 21 and then five years ago we narrowed it down to the eight. It's been a good five years with the five. I don't remember. I know there was some merging of different ideas because there was overlap and we thought, "We can say this in one competency, and we can define the elements more deeply."

Lucas Held: There was a lot of combining and making these as tight as possible.

Tricia McManus: Yes.

Lucas Held: And the fact that you can't remember them, maybe suggests how embedded they are into the fabric of the district.

Tricia McManus: Yes.

Lucas Held: So, let's turn to Robert. Were those standards something that you were aware of when you started moving through the pipeline?

Robert Bhoelai: Yes, thank you for having me here today, I appreciate it. I was very aware of them. My cadre of colleagues, we came up in the Assistant Principal Induction Program, which is the second part of the pipeline, so that's where I started my journey. That's where we really went through, and that was about six or seven years ago. So we really went through the transformation of these competencies, and we were able to better understand what was being asked of us as leaders, and what we were preparing ourselves for. I did hold a deep understanding of all of the competencies when I applied for my first principalship job.

Lucas Held: It sounds like that was helpful to know what those were? And if you sort of imagine applying for the job and not having them, what kind of advantage do you think knowing what they were gave you?

Robert Bhoelai: For me personally, I think having the competencies in place helped me obtain a sense of self awareness. What my strengths were, what areas I needed to focus more on and grow, and what I needed coaching around. Part of our program is we get provided a coach for our first two years at the assistant principal and principal level, so it gave me something to focus on with my coach where I could have those constructive conversations and talk about some of the situations I may have dealt with at the school level that I may not have been comfortable with because I hadn't fully developed that competency. It also gave me the ability to have those conversations with my principal and have my principal coach me up in those areas using their expertise.

Lucas Held: So it really sounds like it focused some of your studies that prepared you to be principal. There is an adage, really, that people can't hold more than five to seven things in memory, so really squeezing them down makes them manageable and focused. That's really interesting to hear that. Let's shift over to hiring practices. But before we do that, Tricia, maybe you want to say a word about what the role of the principal is and why principals are a priority for the district. Then I want to ask you about how the pipeline has really changed hiring.

Tricia McManus: The research is very clear as everyone knows on the role of principal and the impact a principal has on a school. In Hillsborough, we've actually seen that. We've seen it in reality. We've seen what a principal can do when they walk into a school, especially a school that may be struggling. If they're a strong principal that are demonstrating these competencies at a high level, they can turn around

a school. They can get the right staff there. They can retain the right staff. They know how to develop people. They know how to create systems and structures to ensure that students and the adults are successful. So, a principal is a critical player and in our district, that role has been extremely elevated. Our superintendent and everyone feels the role of the principal is probably the hardest and most important position in the district because their ability to really get that staff moving in the right direction. It's the difference between seeing pockets of excellence in a school, or seeing an entire school that is striving for excellence together.

Lucas Held: That's really helpful. Tell us how hiring practices have changed since you began work on the pipeline in 2011.

Tricia McManus: We have drastically shifted our hiring practices. The hiring actually really starts not just once you're finished with our Preparing New Principals program, and you're in the pool waiting to be placed into a school. It doesn't just start there. It actually starts when you're trying to get into the Preparing New Principals program. We used to have a very short type of process to be selected into our Preparing New Principals program. That has shifted.

We now take our five core competences, our leader competencies, and we have selection systems that include a lot of front-loading with essays, responding to, that are addressing the competencies. With references that are rubric-based references that address the competencies. After we go through that type of screening, we then bring our candidates, our principal candidates into a review process of about 120 minutes. They are role-playing, and they're answering questions that are based on our competencies. The whole time, we're assessing them on our five core competencies. From there, they then go into our pool, and they get the development. Now, they are placed in a pool, once they exit that program successfully.

That's the first part of hiring. We don't wait. We're looking at them throughout this process, each of our candidates. Now that they're in the pool, placing them in the right school, which is what we, with Robert, and he can explain his journey there, but the next part of hiring is another critical part. That is, once you have a school vacancy, who is the best fit to go into that vacancy? We have a high, a quality pool of folks. Who is the best person to go into that vacancy based on what the school needs, matching it to the strengths of the candidate?

Lucas Held: So, let's turn to you Robert. What was it like going through what really sounds like a two-stage process that is built around these five competencies? Did it feel like a walk in the park or something else?

Robert Bhoolai: No, no, it was hard work. To sum it up, I would say it was probably one of the best experiences of my professional as well as my personal life. It helped prepare me for this dynamic role that I'm in now. It gave me a support system. It introduced me to district staff that I'm working with every day as a principal, so that I know them at a deeper level before I even started the job. It provided me

a cohort of colleagues that are now doing the same work that I am, that I can reach out to if their areas of expertise are different than my own, so that we can share ideas. I'm comfortable doing so because I've gone through this process with them, and we've watched each other grow.

Very, very comprehensive program. A lot of heavy lifting. A lot of project-based assessment, not just theoretical knowledge. I feel it truly has prepared me to take on this role.

Lucas Held: That's really terrific to hear, and what I hear you emphasizing is both the content and the relationships that you developed in a sense, you're part of a network in a district. Again, focused on these five competencies. Tricia, what do you think is next for Hillsborough as it continues to evolve the pipeline in the area of hiring and standards?

Tricia McManus: We have even, since last year, also shifted the hiring part of the process, meaning there are many stages. Once you are going to be determined to be the match for the school, and in Robert's case he was one of three finalists for his school, and he was the best fit based on what we needed and based on where he was coming from. But even to get into that position, that school, we are now doing community interviews. We have learning walks that are happening. There are many parts now to figure out that you're the best candidate to be in that school.

All of this is kept in what we call our leader selection tool. A lot of data about each of our candidates are in a tool so that we can do those best-fit placements. Next steps for us, are really, we're looking now at: are there any competencies or any elements that need to be further called out that really identify a leader that would be ready to lead in a turnaround-type school, or a school that is persistently struggling? Is there anything else?

We're spending, we just received a national grant, and we're going to be studying: are there competencies that are not fully addressed within our competency framework that would help us better identify? Now that we have this great cohort of leaders, are any of them really standouts that could lead in a turnaround school eventually, and let's put that group through another type of process, get them trained, and then those will become our future turnaround leaders. Hopefully, one day we won't need any of them because we will have turned around all of our schools. That's our next step with this.

Lucas Held: So that really sounds like an example of continuous improvement. Let me close this podcast with you, Robert, the principalship has been called an impossible job. How are you enjoying it? What are your future directions in this principalship?

Robert Bhoolai: I love the job. To say it's impossible, I don't think is accurate. To say that it is a heavy-lift would be very accurate. I enjoy a challenge, given my skill set, the

school that I'm at now serves military students as well as high-performing magnet students as well as low SES [socio-economic status] students. My experience thus far has been in all of those areas. I had the military experience. My parents were in the military, so I was a military child. I was serving as an assistant principal in an IB [International Baccalaureate] school and prior to that, I was serving as an assistant principal in a turnaround school. So for me, I think the ability to find out more about myself and what I can do to further help students show success and learning gains, would be my next step.

Lucas Held: It sounds, just to close out this podcast, that both of you are gaining deep satisfaction from your work and you're applying the tools of continuous improvement. I want to close by thanking our two guests today, Tricia McManus, assistant superintendent in Hillsborough County Public Schools in Florida, and Robert Bhoolai, who is a school principal. Thank you both for an informative and an insightful conversation.

Tricia McManus: Thank you.

Robert Bhoolai: Thank you.