

# TRAINING FOR SUCCESSION

**In policy and practice, Mapleton Public School District  
commits to developing future leaders**

BY ASH VASUDEVA

**C**an a single sentence of school board policy help steer the direction of an entire district? Perhaps only when it points precisely to where district leaders have been heading.

Consider the Mapleton Public School District, located in Adams County, Colo., about 25 miles north of Denver along the front range of the Rocky Mountains.

In fall 2007, Mapleton's board of education unanimously passed a simple, single sentence aimed at maintaining district leadership continuity. Titled "Emergency Superintendent and Executive Succession," the policy states: "The superintendent shall not fail to protect the District from loss of its Superintendent or other key staff."

The Mapleton school board's pithy policy on executive succession reflected both its confidence in the reforms being spearheaded by Superintendent Charlotte

Ciancio and her administrative team and a desire for leadership continuity in the event of future changes.

While the board's primary goal was to protect and buffer the district's accomplishments from the superintendent's eventual departure, Mapleton's central administrative team nested the charge in a larger strategy for leadership development and sustainability at all levels of the system. By focusing on recruiting the right people, developing leadership skills aligned to the system and growing their internal leadership pool, district leaders are helping to ensure Mapleton's positive trajectory becomes a long-term institutional legacy rather than an ephemeral effort.

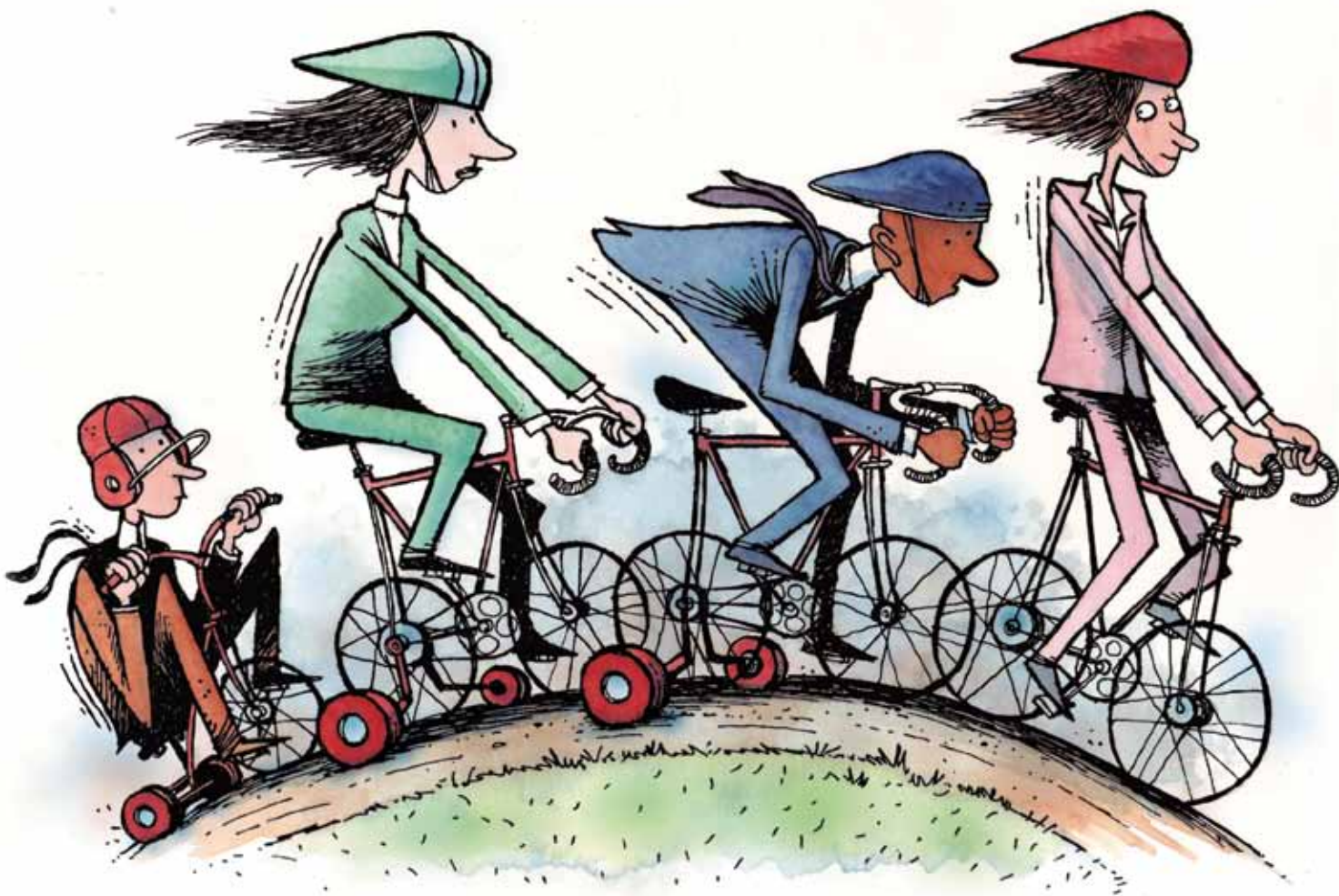
## **A District Reinvention**

Mapleton's board resolution on executive succession came five years into an ambitious "reinvention" campaign to reverse

years of declining enrollment and mediocre academic performance that, if unaddressed, threatened to "dry up the school district," Ciancio remarked in a 2006 interview.

Mapleton's reinvention has focused on creating a system where families are able to choose from a diverse portfolio of high-quality schools for their children. The diverse-portfolio concept grew out of a series of community listening tours in 2001-02. It gained momentum after district and community leaders visited innovative schools in districts across the country and the concept featured prominently in a \$2.7 million grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation in 2005 to support district reform.

As a result, the school district has gone from offering families eight school options in 2001 to 17 school options today. Mapleton's portfolio includes a preK-6 Montessori program, a K-12 school focused on global lead-



ership, a 7th-12th grade school connected to the national Outward Bound program and a small high school based on the New Technology High School originally developed in Napa, Calif.

Mapleton's slew of new and largely nontraditional schools posed a considerable leadership challenge to the district. Would leaders trained in conventional programs and districts be able to adapt to Mapleton's efforts to offer multiple educational approaches under a single system?

Mapleton's central-administrative team used Jim Collins' seminal 2001 book *From Good to Great* to help them focus on finding the right leaders for the district's unique approach to reform. Jackie Kapushion, the district's assistant superintendent, said the conversations left her and the leadership team wondering, "How do we find [the leaders we need], and how might we grow our own?"

The answer to her question was partly inspired by Mapleton's participation in a national district leadership network developed at Stanford University. In early 2007, Mapleton joined the LEADS (Leadership for Equity and Accountability in Districts and Schools) network, a multiyear cohort of school districts organized by the School Redesign Network at Stanford University. The network, now in its third year, provides a venue for district leaders to learn from one another's systems-change initiatives as well as study and apply academic perspectives from Stanford University's School of Education, Graduate School of Business and design school.

During a 2007 summer session at Stanford, Mapleton's leaders were struck by the Miami-Dade County Public Schools, whose leadership team was focused on developing a districtwide succession management plan. While Mapleton grappled

with its efforts to build instructional capacity among principals, the interactions with Miami and other district leaders helped team members situate their challenge in the larger context of systems-level leadership development.

Despite dramatic differences in size and scale, the connection between Mapleton and Miami was crystallized for Mapleton Assistant Superintendent Sam Molinaro and Principal Paul Frank during a LEADS session in January 2008. At the Miami-hosted event, Molinaro and Frank realized the two districts were essentially confronting the same underlying problem — continuous leadership transition and turnover.

While Miami's large-scale efforts to build a leadership pipeline included locally developed preparation programs for principals and assistant principals and a leadership academy for school-based administrative teams, Mapleton's adminis-

trators began to creatively assess how they could organize the district in ways that supported existing leaders and encouraged emerging leaders to prepare for their future roles. What resulted was a strategy that promoted cross-functional collaboration among current leaders as well as a concerted effort to grow and nurture the leadership pool within the district.

### Hiring Right

After being named superintendent in 2001, Ciancio began developing a recruitment and selection strategy that reflected the district's reinvention initiative and was aligned with it. In addition to considering candidates' experience in other school systems, she focused on their openness to learning and an orientation to working on teams.

Ciancio's shorthand description of this approach is to "hire the right person and develop the skill." Sometimes the right person had little to no prior education experience, but all the right skills. For example, Phillip Russell, the district's recently retired director of operations, was a former Air Force colonel.

Russell's commitment to making each system work under adverse conditions was especially well-suited to the transportation challenges that emerged during Mapleton's reinvention as a choice-based district. Russell worked closely with colleagues on the central administrative team to ensure Mapleton's students would have access to any of the district's growing number of schooling options.

Yet simply hiring the right people was not enough to establish sustainable leadership. New leaders also would need to develop the right skills, ideally in ways that were broadly distributed across people rather than narrowly concentrated within them. To achieve this goal, and to avoid creating "silos" within the central administrative team, the district committed itself to creating cross-functional teams.

Cross-functional teams have helped Mapleton build redundancy in the organization. "Our intention," Ciancio said, "is to create interdependencies that allowed people to learn from and with other people on the team."

Jamie Kane, executive director of professional services, initially learned this position by mentoring with Molinaro and now partners with Kapushion, who oversees the

district's professional development strategy. This allows Kane, a former high school principal in Mapleton, to better understand the district's hiring needs and labor issues in relation to the academic supports and expectations for certificated staff.

Similarly, Chief Communications Officer Damon Brown, a member of the district's classified staff, works with Kane on the human resource team. According to Brown, the pairing helps "Jaime and I collaborate together as thought partners ... allowing us to build capacity in discrete ways."

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### Pairing Partners

In addition to helping ensure that no one tackles issues in isolation, the composition of the cross-functional teams is designed to have experts and novices working together. Mike Kirby, former executive director of support services, emphasized the importance of bringing together people who are not likely to see problems in the same way. "We want people to ask different questions and avoid slipping into 'group think,'" Kirby said.

The novice-expert relationship between Brown and Kane in human resources helped spur a conversation about why newly hired teachers waited nearly two months before receiving their first paycheck and whether district policy could be changed to reduce the lag time. By questioning the district's standard operating procedures, the cross-functional teams help identify areas for improvement and provide a source of suggestions for more attractive alternatives.

Perhaps most importantly, Mapleton's cross-functional teams provide leadership stability during periods of change. When Phil Russell retired from Mapleton as chief operations officer in 2008, Chief Financial Officer Don Herman, who had been on the same team, was able to step into the position. Because the cross-functional team had helped to distribute expertise and build capacity across central administrative leaders, district operations

continued efficiently without a dip in performance after Russell's retirement.

While cross-functional teams have been core to developing Mapleton's central administrative leaders, Ciancio and her team recognized the developmental imperative was even greater at the school level. How could they draw from their own experience to grow a larger pool of leaders within and across schools and build a future pipeline into the central administration?

### Growing the Pool

Mapleton's approach to developing school leaders is a variation on its central-office playbook. Mapleton's administrative team hewed to the strategy of hiring the right person and developing his or her skill to match district needs, which has helped attract dynamic leaders from sundry disciplines. Recent school director appointments have included individuals who launched national nonprofit organizations, served in children's social services and led international schools abroad.

At the same time, the sheer diversity of Mapleton's school options poses challenges to the district's leadership recruitment and development strategy. Although all principals must strike a balance between attending to the priorities of their own schools versus district-level goals, the gap between the two can be particularly acute in distinction in a system with 17 unique choice options.

When two experienced administrators left their principalships after only a short time in the district, Ciancio reflected on how the central administrative team could find the right school-level leaders for the district. "I think we needed to ask different questions of candidates," she said.

The superintendent's goal was to cultivate leaders who were attentive to the needs of their schools without acting entirely as free agents. Behaviors of free agents range from purchasing Smart Boards without coordinating with facilities staff to install electrical outlets to purchasing textbooks that are neither district approved nor used by other campuses.

Ciancio and her team addressed the systems-level challenge by turning inward. What better way to cultivate systems thinkers than by working with promising candidates from within the system?

Beginning in fall 2007 following the LEADS summer session, the central administration team began a deliberate



**Harvard Professor Tom Payzant (second from left) and Ash Vasudeva (center), formerly of the School Redesign Network at Stanford University, with Mapleton, Colo., school district administrators (from left) Damon Brown, Jackie Kapushion, Jamie Kane and Mike Kirby.**

strategy to develop school directors from within the district. The central administration cast a wide net, including teachers who were enrolled in an administrative preparation program, those who had been volunteering to assist with administrative duties and those identified by directors as informal leaders at their school.

The group of approximately 35 aspiring administrators, led by Molinaro and Frank, met monthly with members of the central administration to learn what they needed to know and be able to do as a successful Mapleton principal. These seminars ranged from primers on district and school funding sources and budgeting responsibilities to discussions about instructional leadership and supervision.

By spring 2008, 25 people remained in the program. Each met individually with Ciancio to discuss professional goals and trajectories. By tapping into its own talent pool, Mapleton had identified a core group of internal candidates for future leadership openings and opportunities. Was this a pool that would ultimately be used?

### Early Success

With Ciancio firmly at the district's helm, the long-term verdict on Mapleton's executive leadership succession planning is yet to be delivered. However, the early results of the district's leadership development strategy show clear signs of success.

Mapleton's strategy has resulted in smooth central-office transitions, as three veteran administrators have retired and been replaced by staff members they had mentored. At the school level, in the two years of the aspiring administrators program, 10 members have been selected for assistant principalships or other school-level leadership roles such as mentor coaches. In 2009-10, the district's two new school directors were both internal candidates.

If Mapleton's leadership development strategy has been designed to sustain the district's overall academic trajectory, then it is important to note the recent trends have been positive. Mapleton's 2008 graduation rate of 60 percent was a 12 percent increase over 2007. Dropouts also declined

significantly, from 11 percent in 2007 to 5.5 percent in 2008.

Academic aspirations of graduates are also on the rise, with nearly 100 percent of 2009 graduates applying to college. On the Colorado Student Assessment Program, Mapleton was among the three most-improved districts in the Denver metropolitan area with respect to test score gains from the previous year.

The degree to which school board policy both guided and reflected the district's work can be debated. However, nearly two years after the board's resolution on executive succession, one thing is indisputable: Mapleton's overall direction — in both leadership development and academic progress — is one where nearly any school district would love to go. ■

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**Ash Vasudeva, formerly co-director of the School Redesign Network at Stanford University, is a senior program officer at the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation in Seattle, Wash. E-mail: [ash.vasudeva@gatesfoundation.org](mailto:ash.vasudeva@gatesfoundation.org)**