



## R3 Framework Evaluation Brief: Academy for Transformational School Leaders (ATSL)

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Prepared by Measurement Incorporated

### Background on ATSL

The Academy for Transformational School Leaders (ATSL), created by the Department of Excellence, Equity, and Leadership (DEEL) office, is an 18-month program that prepares current assistant principals (APs) in Pitt County Schools to become highly-effective 1st year principals. The Academy is designed for APs who are interested in transitioning to a principalship within 12-18 months.

The first Academy cohort began in June 2018. The program has graduated three cohorts to date, each with 5 to 8 participants. Current APs interested in participating in ATSL must complete an application form, which is reviewed by program directors and district senior staff. Any AP can apply to the Academy program, providing they meet four qualifications:

- (1) Successful completion of three prerequisite professional development trainings (*Adaptive Schools Foundations*, *Situational Leadership: Building Leaders*, and *Crucial Conversations and Accountability*);
- (2) At least one year of successful service as an assistant principal;
- (3) Proficient or higher on all elements and standards of the most recent Summative Evaluation; and
- (4) Principal sponsor and agreement for support for assistant principals.

The main components of the Academy are in-person professional development training (8-10 days), ongoing coaching (1-2 times per month), and a cohort structure that encourages networking and mutual support among participants. Some trainings are provided by external partners and others are developed and delivered internally by DEEL.

This edition of the *R3 Framework Evaluation Brief* focuses on participants' experiences with the Academy. It summarizes feedback from a group of Cohort 2 (2019-2020) and Cohort 3 (2020-2021) graduates in four areas: recruitment, training, coaching and the cohort structure.

In November and December 2022, individual interviews were conducted via Zoom with 11 Academy graduates. The interview protocol was developed in partnership with the DEEL office, and each interview lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. Of the 11 graduates interviewed, seven were from Cohort 2 and four from Cohort 3. As of December 2022, eight of the 11 had transitioned into a principalship since graduating from the Academy. The majority of interviewees (64%) had worked in Pitt County for at least five years.

### *Recruitment*

Interviewees reported learning about ATSL from different sources, including a colleague or principal (36%), districtwide emails to all APs (27%), and AP monthly meetings (27%).

When asked about what factors influenced their decision to apply to the Academy, the majority of interviewees (8 out of 11) stated that they desired to either build new skills, develop their leadership capacity, or access opportunities for professional growth and development. Over half of the interviewees (55%) mentioned that participation in ATSL was viewed as a clear step towards becoming a principal in Pitt

County. Other reasons included the observed success of previous cohort members (27%), the opportunity to network with colleagues (27%), and the opportunity to meet with district leaders and “get your name out there” (27%).

*“I had interest in becoming a principal, so I thought this would be a great way to get that professional development piece, and kind of hone in and sharpen my leadership skills.”*

### *Trainings*

*“They offer a wide variety of training that starts with you developing an understanding about who you are as a person and as a leader and building up to crucial conversations that you have to be able to have with the staff members.”*

When asked about their experience with the training components of the ATSL, interviewees discussed a range of benefits and key takeaways. In addition, the assistant principals identified specific training sessions they found most memorable.

For instance, the *Becoming a Coaching Leader* training, delivered by an external company called Building Champions, was mentioned by 73% of the interviewees as

a training that stood out. The coaching framework that was taught in this training provided participants with a skillset that they could use immediately with their teams, and one that they continue to use after their participation in the Academy. The majority of interviewees (64%) also mentioned the *Crucial Conversations* training as being particularly applicable to their work as APs, and later as principals. Other specific trainings that came up in interviews were *Outward Mindset/Leadership & Self Deception* (27%), *Managing Polarities* (9%), and *EQi* (9%).

Regarding the benefits they acquired from the trainings, the interviewees felt that they learned how to coach teachers and staff members (45%), and gained communication and relationship building skills that emphasized focusing on the whole person, not just the individual as a teacher (27%). They also felt that the training helped each AP to develop an understanding of who they are as a person and as a leader (36%), bringing awareness to areas of strength and areas of growth, which in turn helped them to be a better coach to others. Several interviewees mentioned that they still regularly use the resources and materials from ATSL training. As reported by one person, “I just had a crucial conversation with a staff member literally thirty minutes ago, and I can hear myself saying the things that we practiced in that training.”

## Coaching

ATSL participants received regular coaching from Dr. Thomas Feller, Jr. and Dr. Seth Brown. Each participant received monthly coaching from one coach for approximately six months, and then switched to the other coach. Cohort 2 participants also received external coaching from Building Champions.

Feedback from interviewees on their experience of coaching was very positive. Almost all (82%) stated that coaching sessions allowed them an opportunity to set clear goals and follow up on their progress, which created a welcome sense of accountability. Many also pointed out that coaching enabled them to focus on current issues or specific situations they were facing as APs, and that coaches helped them to explore different approaches and potential next steps (73%). Several interviewees (45%) stated that coaching sessions were a great opportunity for reflection, where they could step back from their daily routine and get a “ten thousand foot view” of the issues they were dealing with.

*“It was nice because it was a personal one-on-one time where you really could talk about specific areas of growth or struggles or get specific advice. It was good to have that monthly follow up, if we discussed something one month, we would revisit it to next month and see what steps I had tried. It gave a sense of accountability.”*

Additionally, interviewees (45%) said that Dr. Feller and Dr. Brown were very open and approachable, creating a safe and confidential space for dialogue and growth. They got to know each ATSL participant as a person and provided a great level of support, always modeling the coaching model. Academy participants noted that this support was available from Dr. Feller and Dr. Brown, even after structured coaching ended (36%). The majority of Cohort 2 participants noted that they appreciated the outside perspective provided by the Building Champions coach (57%). A few participants felt that the level of coaching was too frequent at times (18%), but most were satisfied with the amount of coaching they received.

### Cohort Structure

*“What it has done for me the most is giving me a level of comfort and a level of trust that I can have with people who are transitioning just like me. I can honestly say that I want to see each and every one of my cohort members perform and do well. So, when we have questions or we are confused, we go to each other to try to work through them.”*

All ATSL participants spoke positively about the cohort model. One interviewee said the networking opportunities were “incredibly valuable”, and another stated it was “one of the biggest strengths” of the program. Almost all (84%) spoke of their cohort-mates as people they can go to exchange ideas and share perspectives. The cohort was also described as a group that provides overall camaraderie, trust, and friendship (55%).

Additionally, participants described their cohort as a true support network where they celebrate each other’s accomplishments (45%), rather than feeling isolated and in competition with one another. One interviewee stated, “It provided ongoing support in a job that can be very, very lonely, and very defeating.” For graduates who had already moved from AP to Principal, it was especially helpful to have peers going through the same transition at the same time, who they could lean on and talk through real situations with (55%). More than half of the interviewees (55%) stated that they were still in touch with their cohort-mates at the time of our interview. A few interviewees (27%) mentioned that they were not able to meet with their cohort as much as they would have liked because of online sessions due to Covid restrictions.

### Impact of the Academy

Discussions with ATSL participants revealed several key themes about the impact of their experience with the Academy. The first theme was *a sense of belonging and value* that is likely to solidify their commitment to Pitt County. Many interviewees described feeling grateful for

the investment the district had made in them (45%). Participants felt supported by their coaches and their fellow cohort members, both personally and professionally, resulting in a sense of belonging and support in Pitt County as a whole. Several interviewees also commented on the clear vision that Dr. Brown and Dr. Feller had for developing leaders in the county, and that sense of purpose resulted in very valuable and worthwhile professional development (45%). Participants felt that their time was respected and well spent, which they acknowledged is not always the case with professional development in general. Another important benefit was the opportunity to network and build relationships with other assistant principals (27%), which was especially appreciated for participants who were relatively new to the district.

*"In another district, looking back, we didn't have the opportunities that are provided to the staff members here in Pitt County schools, and I am grateful for all of the opportunities. The facilitating teachers, the MCTs, all of those because it allows our staff members and our future principals, the opportunity to better themselves."*

*"I feel like not only have I become a better leader, and it's really inspired me to want to be a principal, but I also feel like it's inspired and allowed me to grow leaders in the building."*

The second theme was the *opportunity to grow and develop leadership skills*. Many participants expressed their appreciation for the professional development opportunities that allowed them to develop new skill sets, build their capacity, and learn about new strategies and resources (36%). Others mentioned the importance of personal growth and awareness (36%). Participants had the opportunity to look within themselves to learn what type of leader they are and where their strengths and weaknesses lie in order to best use their unique and individual skill set. Another common skill set mentioned was improved communication and relationship building (27%). Interviewees acknowledged the great importance of the "people side" of their work, and felt they learned how to sympathize, empathize, and how to have those crucial conversations with their team. A few participants mentioned their motivation to grow other leaders in their building, as a result of the coaching and development that they received through the Academy (18%).

The third theme was *becoming more knowledgeable about and prepared for the next steps to principalship*. Several interviewees said their participation in ATSL led to an increase in their confidence (27%), and by the end of the 18 months they felt ready to move forward in their career. Many also spoke of the benefit of having access to the superintendent and the opportunity to network with other senior leaders in the district (45%), which put Academy

participants “on the radar” when a principalship opportunity became available. One interviewee mentioned receiving help to prepare for principal interviews, which increased her comfort level and confidence in those interviews. Another stated that their participation in the Academy helped move them from an AP mindset to a principal mindset.

*“Honestly, I feel like I don't think I could be where I am right now without that level of support. It's hard to put into words, the comfort that I have in the relationship with everybody, like Dr. Brown and Dr. Feller, and my cohort mates, it makes me feel much more confident and much more ready, so to speak, because I have all these people that I know are position for me to do well, and we're all pushing for each other to do well.”*

### *Recommendations for the Future*

In addition to sharing about their experience and the many benefits of participation in the Academy, we also asked interviewees if they had any suggestions for the future of the program. These suggestions are summarized below.

- **Practical skills:** include more of the “nuts and bolts” of the principal role within the Academy training, such as discussions of managing a school budget, working with Human Resources, and navigating district policies and procedures (27%).
- **Training practice:** include a problem of practice or project-based learning into the training sessions to demonstrate strategies and coaching framework (9%).
- **Cohort size:** continue the cohort model at the current size, around 8 participants. Larger groups wouldn't receive the same level of personal support, and people may not feel comfortable opening up to a larger audience; if the group is too small, the opportunity to create a support network would be lost (9%).
- **Cohort experience:** offer an opportunity for cohort members to attend something together outside of the work environment, such as an outing or a team building event. The intention was both to build camaraderie and model how participants can grow and build teams in ways outside of standard professional development (9%).
- **Cohort continued:** convene past cohorts annually for an opportunity to continue their leadership development together (9%). One example offered was to do a book study, especially if there is new material being studied by current cohorts that was not available to past cohorts.
- **Path to principalship:** establish a clear process for those who wish to become principals (18%). A few participants requested that more information be shared with ATSL

participants about how to apply for a principalship when there is an opening. They felt that the process of becoming an AP was clearly outlined by the district in steps to be taken, but the same process for becoming a principal could be improved.

- **Principal shadowing:** offer an opportunity for ATSL participants to shadow current principals at a different school level than where the participant is currently an AP in order to gain exposure to how a different school level operates (9%).
- **Alumni connection:** invite alumni to speak to new cohorts about their experience in the Academy and their journey after they graduated (9%), or pair current academy participants with academy alumni for support and learning (9%).
- **ATSL for principals:** one interviewee faced difficulty putting the strategies they had learned in the Academy into action because their principal was not familiar with those strategies. The resulting suggestion was to offer an opportunity for current principals to participate in leadership training similar to what APs receive (9%).

## Summary

Interviews with assistant principals who graduated from the Academy for Transformational School Leaders provide ample evidence that the program is of high quality and value to the district. More specifically, all graduates provided positive feedback on the training and coaching components of the program. Of note was the applicability of the content and feedback to their work as an AP and to their principalship for those who eventually transitioned. Equally noteworthy, the participants found that the cohort structure of the program provided much-appreciated camaraderie, support, and thought partnership.

The Academy positively impacted participants in several important ways including firming up their commitment to Pitt County, improving their leadership skills, and preparing them for the next steps to a principalship. Participants' reflections on feeling valued by the district as well as applauding the DEEL office's vision for developing leaders in the county have been echoed by teachers who participated in the Advanced Teacher Roles that are part of the R3 Framework. This converging feedback bodes well for the district in terms of attracting and retaining effective educators who desire to learn, grow, and inspire future leaders, by building internal capacity and sustainability.

Lastly, the participants shared valuable recommendations for improving the Academy that included enhancements to the training content and participants' experiences, the cohort component, and connections to the principalship.