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Coach-principals named

City unveils plan to support school leaders in new structure

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To support school leaders as they take on new responsibilities in the coming academic year, Baltimore education officials have assigned 15 accomplished principals to mentor and coach their peers.

The "principal coaches," who were publicly introduced yesterday, were selected on the basis of growth in student performance at their schools, their experience as mentors, and the respect they have earned among their peers and among parents. Not all of them preside over high-achieving schools; one is the principal of a school labeled "persistently dangerous" under the federal No Child Left Behind Act.

The coaches will receive a \$5,000 stipend on top of their salaries to lead a group of principals from between nine and 19 schools, organized by region and grade level. Middle and high schools will be grouped together.

Each coach will also be assigned an intern from the principal training program, New Leaders for New Schools. The arrangement gives the interns an opportunity to learn from knowledgeable leaders and gives principals the leeway to check in on their colleagues.

One coach, Delores Berry of W.E.B. DuBois High, said the experience will be a learning opportunity for her as well. "By being so focused on your own school, you don't have time to see other schools," she said.

As part of a major restructuring, the system eliminated the jobs of administrators who used to oversee principals. Schools chief Andres Alonso says it's not necessary to restore that layer of supervision, but he does want to provide principals with extra support. While other school districts bring principals together to collaborate, Alonso said he did not model the coaching initiative after another program.

Empowering principals has become a hallmark of Alonso's administration. This year, the CEO gave principals responsibility for crafting their own school budgets rather than having the central office make decisions for them. Some principals have said they felt overwhelmed by their new duties.



Jimmy Gittings, president of the city school system's administrative union, said he supports the coaching initiative even though he has been a vocal critic of Alonso in recent weeks. Fifty-four of the system's nearly 200 schools will have new principals in the coming year, which begins Aug. 25, and Gittings said many of those people will need help. Under the guidance of the coaches, he said, they are in "experienced and meticulous hands."

Gittings has complained that principals will be evaluated based on the results of how they spend their money, yet in some cases, schools have not received increased funding, just greater financial autonomy.

At a back-to-school conference for administrators yesterday, Alonso announced that he has identified an additional \$22 million, much of it federal grant money that wasn't spent last year. He is recommending to the school board that the money be given to elementary and middle schools, some of which had to cut staff. High schools have been disproportionately underfunded in the past and had their budgets expand significantly this year. Some small elementary schools had less money to spend.

If the school board agrees to distribute the \$22 million as Alonso proposes, he said, only eight schools in the city will end up with less money than they had last year - and most of them are schools that had received extra money in the past.

In prior years, the system had nine "area academic officers" to supervise principals. The area academic offices have been eliminated, and principals report to one of two people: the executive director of elementary schools or the executive director of secondary schools.

"I want a support role," Alonso said. "I don't need anybody to tell me, 'This person is doing a good job.' It should be evident" based on measures including test scores, attendance and suspension rates, and the results of parent, student and staff satisfaction surveys.

Alonso said he envisions the coaches helping their fellow principals to solve problems. They will also be involved in planning professional development activities and consulting with the executive directors.

The coaches will meet at least once a month, and likely more, with the other principals under their jurisdiction. All the principals in a network will be encouraged to call one another.

"Principals learn most from each other," Alonso said. "It's a recognition of how the field works."

As the coaches were introduced at yesterday's back-to-school conference, Alonso made a point of recognizing Berry, the principal of DuBois, which has been labeled "persistently dangerous." DuBois is located in the same building as Reginald Lewis High, which made national news in the spring when a cell phone video of a student attacking a teacher was aired online and on television.

Alonso is one of many educators who are dubious of the "persistently dangerous" label, which penalizes schools for honestly reporting violent incidents. By naming Berry a coach, he said, "I wanted to assert something and also recognize the fact that Delores is highly respected."

Berry said she's eager to swap ideas with other schools and look at how different policies and procedures are working. For example, she's interested in seeing what regulations principals use to keep their schools orderly in the morning as students arrive. Her school is trying a new procedure this year where students swipe an ID card as they enter.

Berry was walking out of yesterday's conference with her friend, Starletta Jackson, another coach and principal of Vivien T. Thomas Medical Arts Academy. Both said they're looking forward to getting

middle and high school principals together to better prepare students for the high school transition.

"It helps move the schools together as a whole," Jackson said, "as opposed to one school being successful."

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For a list of the 15 coaches, see www.baltimoresun.com/InsideEd.

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