





# Entrepreneurial Leaders

## Redefine the Principalship

In Philadelphia, a spirit of entrepreneurship is alive and well among principals—and it's reaping big rewards for schools and students.

By **Tim Matheny**

**T**he entrepreneurial spirit has been alive and well in Philadelphia for centuries. As any student of history knows, Benjamin Franklin was an outside-the-box thinker before there was even a box. Franklin and his compatriots shaped a spirit of innovation that persists today.

Philadelphia's thriving, tech-driven culture has proved enticing to many young adults, making it one of the fastest-growing cities in the nation for millennials.

But entrepreneurship isn't just appealing to the 20-somethings working in startups. Another group of entrepreneurial thinkers is making an impact on the city—and its schoolchildren. Spurred by necessity and their own creativity, a number of Philadelphia principals are finding ways through and around the challenges of school leadership in an urban setting, redefining what it means to be a principal.

Challenged by the lean budgets resulting from the Great Recession and the needs of students affected by generational poverty, Philadelphia principals have taken on some of the most difficult school leadership challenges in America. But some of them, like principal Sharon Marino of Alexander McClure School, still find a way to serve

students well with an entrepreneurial approach. Despite the Huntington Park neighborhood's relentless struggle with poverty, McClure is making significant strides in providing a safe, academically focused environment for students, ensuring that McClure's climate is among the best of comparable schools in the city.

### Leading With Vision

An entrepreneurial principal must build a clear, compelling vision of what he or she wants for the school—student success—and how to achieve it. “An entrepreneurial leader,” Marino said, “seeks out the resources, funding, partnerships, and relationships to realize the vision and ensures (those resources) are aligned to the vision.”

Consistent student attendance is a critical element of the McClure vision, and that focus has paid great dividends. In just one year, McClure reduced the number of chronically absent students by 7 percent. In 2015-2016, three-quarters of McClure students attended 90 percent of the school year.

Marino, however, wasn't satisfied with the progress; she continued to seek additional resources to help her students. For 2016-2017, McClure was awarded a team from City Year Philadelphia,



### IN THE SPOTLIGHT

Principals Sharon Marino, Pheng Lim, and Bill Griffin are Neubauer Fellows in Educational Leadership, a highly competitive program that provides best-in-class leadership development to principals in Philadelphia. The program seeks to enrich the leadership of principals in three key areas: vision, collaboration, and entrepreneurship.

which provides AmeriCorps members to high-poverty schools. City Year staff work directly with students to address the obstacles that impede their ability to get to school and learn. Marino and McClure teacher Sarah Bower-Grieco also applied for and won one of 13 Teacher-Leader Collaborative Grants awarded by the Philadelphia Academy of School Leaders. This \$14,000 grant provided funding for attendance initiatives such as mentoring and parent meetings, and incentives to support strong attendance.

### Finding the Right Partners

Another Teacher-Leader grantee for 2016-2017 is the Folk Arts-Cultural Treasures Charter School (FACTS). The school is recognized for having strong school vision supported by thriving partnerships. The school, which has strong ties to the city's Asian-American community, "was founded on the idea that the students, staff, and families of our school are cultural treasures" that inform our identity, curricula, programs, and community, said principal Pheng Lim.

The school is also grounded in the entrepreneurial spirit of its community and continues to thrive because of it. Living out the school's mission, FACTS teachers partner with community master artists to develop lessons that integrate African dance, Liberian storytelling, and Chinese shadow puppetry in content areas. These partnerships are supported with funding from various sources, including a matching grant from the Neubauer Family Foundation.

The school's success in pursuing its unique mission is clear: For 2015-2016, the school was rated the second-best K-8 school overall among the 138 schools on the citywide School Progress Report.

Essential to maintaining strong, productive partnerships like those at FACTS is a trait that might be overlooked by some entrepreneurial leaders—listening. Lim insists that an entrepreneurial principal needs to be the "messenger and ambassador for the mission of the school," one who listens intently to the stories of students, parents, community members, and staff—even those who "may have a differing approach to meeting the (school's) goals."

Marino and Lim emphasize the importance of making smart decisions about the right partnerships. You have to "know when to say 'No,'"

Marino said. "I'm learning more about how to say no to opportunities that may be great—but it may not be the right time."

### Focusing on Alignment

An entrepreneurial principal with vision and the right partners needs to find ways to make everything work together. Principal Bill Griffin, who leads The Hancock Demonstration School General J. Harry LaBrum Middle School campus in northeast Philadelphia, has embraced an entrepreneurial spirit in leading school redesign, one that's all about alignment.

Griffin has approached the redesign initiative with the belief "that our traditional middle school was not preparing our students for the 21st century. As a result, we choose to focus on fostering a community of caring, project-based learning, and inquiry learning."

After building a new vision for the middle school, Griffin and his leadership team "looked at resources, determined needs, and set goals." They then

vigorously advocated for resources within the school district, eventually winning a significant grant to pursue their vision.

Alignment of vision, resources, and implementation was critical to the success of the LaBrum redesign, which resulted in the creation of a new space that fosters student creativity. LaBrum students now benefit from a makerspace where they have the tools and materials for project-based 21st century learning in the arts, humanities, and sciences.

With compelling visions, strong partnerships, and alignment of goals, resources, and implementation, entrepreneurial principals are making a difference in the lives of students in Philadelphia and in schools across the nation. Innovative principals approach obstacles to student learning with the tenacity, creativity, and perseverance of the finest entrepreneurs. Ben Franklin might always epitomize Philadelphia's early spirit of innovation; but today, principals including Marino, Lim, and Griffin are proving just as entrepreneurial as they provide high-quality learning for their students, some of whom just might be the heirs to Franklin's legacy. 

**Tim Matheney** is the executive director of the Philadelphia Academy of School Leaders.



### REFLECT ON THIS

Want to become a more entrepreneurial leader? Answer these questions about your school and leadership style.

- What is the vision for our school? If there isn't one, how do we want to develop it?
- What kind of partners and resources will we need to help achieve the vision? Think big and get creative.
- What is the best way to get the word out so that the vision can be achieved?
- Are there areas in the school or community that could keep the vision, resources, and partners from being in alignment? How can we address these areas?

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