

## Future principals lean on mentoring project

**DOVER** -- After revving up a few hundred adolescents in the Central Middle School auditorium during a recent homecoming pep rally, educators had to get the children out the doors and onto school buses idling outside.

And there wasn't much time to do it.

As the children began to get up, principal Darren Guido jumped to direct traffic. Moments later, outside, aspiring school leader Nakia Fambro noticed some students were dallying. She rushed to the office.

"If you are a bus rider, the buses are leaving in 30 seconds," Fambro announced over the intercom system, repeating the urgent message several times.

Soon afterward, as students thinned out after dismissal and the school buses drove away, Guido and Fambro met in the principal's office for a few moments. There was more work to do. They grabbed folders and headed to an after-school meeting with a teacher.

Guido is part of a new Race to the Top-funded initiative in Delaware that seeks to give potential school leaders an entire school year of real-world experience and

specialized training before they take on jobs as administrators. The Delaware Leadership Project has its first round of six aspiring principals placed in schools this year in the Red Clay Consolidated, Capital, Christina and Cape Henlopen school districts.

Participants go through a 15-month, full-time program and are partnered with mentors where they gain real-world experience. In return, those who participate must make a promise to work at the highest-need schools in rural and urban Delaware once they complete the program.

"This is an opportunity for a small cohort of folks to have a very powerful experience," said Christopher Ruszkowski, chief officer of the teacher and leader effectiveness unit for the state Department of Education.

### Seeking top leaders

The educators in the Delaware Leadership

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Project are called aspiring school leaders. They work an entire school year helping to lead a school in a position that's similar in scope to being an assistant principal. The hands-on training is compared to a residency-type setting that medical doctors complete before they practice. That might be a key to finding the best leaders for high-needs schools, Ruskowski said.

"When we think about that, that's potentially a best practice," he said, adding the department will study the results.

The program is being modeled after the New York City Leadership Academy's Aspiring Principal Program, which has improved student performance at low-performing schools, according to an independent study from the Institute for Education and Social Policy at New York University. Delaware created its own program, better-suited for this state's needs, but kept that model in mind.

Funding for the first year of the program comes from the state Department of Education; the private sector, including the Rodel Foundation; and districts. The leadership project is now recruiting for the second group of aspiring school leaders. The program is run by Innovative Schools, a Wilmington non-profit that aims to aid the public school system. In addition to spending a year in a school, participants also take part in a professional-development process.

"These people, more than anything, have to have a fire in their belly to help these kids,"

said Deborah L. Doordan, Innovative Schools' executive director.

### More than a shadow

At Central Middle School, Fambro works closely with Guido and other administrators, but she isn't just a shadow. She makes independent decisions and acts, just like when she hopped on the intercom to help shepherd students to the bus on a hectic Friday afternoon. She has taken the lead on a project to create a parent center at the school. And she's active in other areas, including teacher observations.

On a recent day, Fambro, Guido and a teacher sat at three student desks pushed together so they were facing one another. They were there to talk about a recent observation. Math teacher Jerod Phillips was eager to learn, and the principals praised him for many positives they saw in his classroom. But Phillips knew he was not perfect.

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"I'm my own worst critic," Phillips said.

"You did a great job," Guido responded.

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"I just want to get better," Phillips said.

"If you are open to critics, that's the only way to get better," Fambro said.



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Aspiring school leader Nakia Fambro (center) listens in while Dover Central Middle School principal Darren Guido (right) conducts a review with math teacher Jerod Phillips. Fambro and Guido praised Phillips for the many positives they have seen in his classroom. Phillips said he is eager to learn, and Fambro told him, "If you are open to critics, that's the only way to get better." / THE NEWS JOURNAL/GARY EMEIGH

### FOR MORE INFO

The Delaware Leadership Project is recruiting applicants for the next class of aspiring school leaders. The application deadline is Jan. 20, 2012. A number of information sessions will take place at various locations in Delaware. For those who cannot travel, there are webinars. Those who apply must have at least three years of teaching experience and a master's degree. For more information, including a list of information-session dates and places, go online to [innovativeschools.org/dlp](http://innovativeschools.org/dlp) or call Innovative Schools at 656-4737.

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