

# Leadership Institute

By Chris Neidenberg

Efforts to start a **Jersey City Leadership Institute** in early 2014-15 to initially train five principals, via applying some potentially controversial private sector concepts, has faced delays, district officials recently announced.

In separate emails sent to [jcea.org](http://jcea.org) over the summer, Superintendent of Schools **Dr. Marcia Lyles** and chief of staff/spokeswoman **Dr. Maryann Dickar**, acknowledged plans were delayed because the district was unable to find the missing funding pieces to provide it almost \$6 million of the estimated \$8.9 million in startup costs in time for the start of the new school year.

This delayed any full institute launch at least into the early months of 2014-15.

Still, the board earlier spent some money to initiate the program - before being able to ascertain all the donors needed to provide full funding.

At the board's Sept. 18 meeting, its controlling faction – still unable to identify all funding partners - awarded a contract not exceeding \$175,000 to Seton Hall University of South Orange; and it's Academy for Urban School Transformation, to service the institute and its enrollees.

The contract was recommended via competitive bidding among four companies based on "cost, effectiveness, experience and qualifications."

Lyles also intends to create a "Principal-Residency Program" for the institute requiring a separate contract award.

Earlier this year, billionaire hedge fund managers **David Pepper**, head of the Short Hills-based *Appaloosa Management LP*, and his former partner, **Alan Fournier**, who leads *Pennant Capital Management LLC* of Summit, announced with Lyles their \$3 million donation to help kick off the institute.

Fournier and Pepper also co-founded the organization, *Better Education for Kids (B4K)*. The group is well-known for helping fund school choice initiatives, including charter schools, and supports lobbying efforts in Trenton to turn such initiatives into law. One of their key allies is city resident Shelly Skinner, a former campaign manager of current Mayor Steven Fulop (while a council candidate), and current executive director of the Better Education Institute associated with B4K. Before joining Fournier and Pepper's organization, Skinner served as director of development and community relations for the Learning Community Charter School of Jersey City and was also a member of Gov. Chris Christie's education transition team upon his initial election in 2009. Skinner has been a long-time critic of the Jersey City Education Association.

Lyles and the board need to find the remaining \$5.9 million to launch the institute. To jump-start it, they must form a coalition of private foundation partners, with Fournier and Pepper, to supply the bulk of funding via a grant.

Initially, five teachers, already working in the district and possessing assistant principal certificates, would be mentored by senior administrators using institute curriculum. If successful, they will first earn promotions to assistant principals.

Thus, establishing the institute would see the district bypass traditional procedures the state requires for training would-be public school principals.

According to the New Jersey Department of Education's web site, state regulations now require principal candidates (**under N.J.A.C. 6A:9-B-12.5**) to "hold a master's or higher degree from a regionally-accredited college or university." And, under New Jersey's Licensing Code, the candidates are traditionally only required to take further coursework to earn mandated certificates through such schools.

Implementing the institute in Jersey City will dramatically change the traditional training procedures for those enrolled in it.

Dickar noted that none of the money launching the institute will come from the state budget, despite the DOE's active role in the private donor recruitment effort.

In clarifying a question asked by [jcea.org](http://jcea.org), Dickar explained, "The NJDOE was helping to bring the grant partners together but was not a funder."

The chief of staff noted during the summer that other potential funders "*cannot be identified at this point.*"

Lyles shot down a May published report stating that the institute will be directly modeled after the **SUPES Academy** – an Illinois-based *for-profit* company now training incoming administrators in the Chicago Public Schools (CPS).

SUPES has professional ties to CPS CEO Barbara Byrd-Bennett, who worked there as a consultant. According to Catalyst-Chicago, a website covering issues in the nation's third largest district, the CPS inspector general opened an investigation into the school board's awarding a \$20 million no-bid contract to SUPES late last year.

The report described the deal as the system's largest no-bid agreement in at least five years. The Chicago teachers union has been embroiled in a continuous struggle with school choice forces supported by Mayor Rahm Emanuel.

"We will not have a SUPES Academy," Lyles wrote, claiming her district only wanted to use "a component of" SUPES, while partnering with other districts, to support the institute's planned residency program, similar to where starting doctors must complete a one-year internship in a medical facility before beginning practices.

In a project outline posted on the district's web site, Lyles cited a five-year plan lasting through 2017-18. She said it is designed to "transition" the institute, from a startup solely dependent on private funding and use of "vendors" to manage it, to a permanent academy that can periodically train would-be principals funded via the local school budget and private donations.

By 2018, Lyles wrote in her description, she hopes the district can permanently fund and sustain the institute.

The superintendent explained this can be done by seeking program cuts in other areas, deemed "underperforming" or which can be "de-prioritized," obtaining "leadership grants" to help underwrite costs, and encouraging the district to seek additional monies through a "JCPS Foundation for Excellence and Equity" the board is overseeing in trying to generate even more revenue (such as the Tepper-Fournier donation) from non-public sources.

At the board's Sept. 16 caucus, **President Sangeeta Ranade** maintained the district will benefit from generating more private revenues, using the foundation, because they will not be subject to state funding cuts.

Lyles told [jcea.org](http://jcea.org) that neither Tepper nor Fournier, or other potential private funders, will have any role in developing institute curriculum.

As for her own role, she wrote, "I am not personally designing the curriculum but I am expecting it will be based on the precepts of effective leadership."

She explained that those tasked with creating it must align “leadership development with the Mission and Mandate of the Jersey City Public Schools and research-based initiatives.”

Asked if Lyles, a graduate of the controversial California-based **Broad Superintendents Academy**, would endorse using principles promoted by the academy, she would only say the institute will likely espouse some ideas the academy “reinforced” in her.

**The academy has drawn fire from proponents of traditional public education. They fear Broad teaches principles seeking to destroy it via methods such as encouraging privatization and empowering charter school organizations to the point where they can severely weaken public school districts.**

Yet Lyles described the ideas Broad reinforced as “concepts I learned years ago,” before enrolling in the academy.

“Leadership matters and it is important to collaborate,” she wrote, in describing some of the concepts. “How do you work with the various constituents involved in a child’s education? Think globally, not locally.”

Other principles Lyles said she hopes the institute will promote include how society can “work collectively to raise student achievement,” for which, she says, there is not a singular answer; identifying “the current instructional innovations” and what research has to say about them; along with, “How do you plan effectively?”