

# EDUCATION WEEK

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## FOCUS ON: LEADERSHIP

# Critics Target Growing Army of Broad Leaders

By **Christina A. Samuels**

Billionaire businessman Eli Broad, one of the country's most active philanthropists, founded the **Broad Superintendents Academy** in 2002 with an extraordinarily optimistic goal: Find leaders from both inside and outside education, train them, and have them occupying the superintendencies in a third of the 75 largest school districts—all in just two years.

Now hosting its 10th class, the Los Angeles-based program hasn't quite reached that goal, but it's close. The nation's three biggest districts have Broad-trained executives in top leadership positions: Shael Polakow-Suransky, the chief academic officer in New York City; John E. Deasy, the superintendent of Los Angeles Unified; and Jean-Claude Brizard, who became the chief executive officer of the Chicago schools last month. In all, 21 of the nation's 75 largest districts now have superintendents or other highly placed central-office executives who have undergone Broad training.

But as the program has risen in prominence and prestige—758 people, the largest pool ever, applied for the program this year, and eight were accepted—it has also drawn impassioned criticism from people who see it as a destructive force in schools and districts.

They say Broad-trained superintendents use corporate-management techniques to consolidate power, weaken teachers' job protections, cut parents out of decisionmaking, and introduce unproven reform measures.

One of those critics is Sharon Higgins, who started a website called **The Broad Report** in 2009 after her school district in Oakland, Calif., had three Broad-trained superintendents in quick succession, each appointed by the state.

She said she grew alarmed when she started seeing principals and teachers whom she called "high-quality, dedicated people" forced out. She contends in her blog that Broad superintendents are trained to aim for "maximum disruption" when they come to a district, without regard for parent and teacher concerns.

"It's like saying, let me come to your house and completely rearrange your furniture, because I think your house is a mess," Ms. Higgins said, adding that other parents around the country have reached out to her to complain about their own Broad-trained school leaders.

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Likewise, James Horn, an associate professor of education policy at Cambridge College in Massachusetts, keeps up a drumbeat of criticism in the blog **Schools Matter**. In one post, he referred to the academy as “Eli Broad’s corporate training school ... for future superintendents who are trained how to use their power to hand over their systems to the Business Roundtable.”

In an interview, Mr. Horn said that school officials trained by the program graduate with a hostility to teachers. His critique goes beyond the Broad superintendents program to include many of the foundations that have emerged as major players in efforts to reshape education over the past decade.

Mr. Horn points not only to the Eli and Edythe **Broad Foundation**, of Los Angeles, but also to the Seattle-based **Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation** and the **Walton Family Foundation**, of Bentonville, Ark., as examples of what he sees as a worrisome trend of “venture philanthropy” in education. Venture philanthropists typically emphasize the imperative of getting measurable results for their investment and maintain close ties to the organizations they fund.

“What venture philanthropy is doing seems to me to be wielding influence not to help public institutions, but to destroy public institutions, or take control of them,” Mr. Horn said. “This is a dangerous place, where corporations and government get mixed up.”

The Broad Foundation has helped support *Education Week*’s coverage of school leadership and the **25th anniversary** of *A Nation at Risk*, but it is not a current funder. Editorial Projects in Education, the newspaper’s publisher, received a Gates Foundation grant for organizational capacity-building that expired May 31, and it was a recipient of earlier Gates funding.

Whatever the larger issues surrounding the role of education philanthropy, supporters of the Broad Superintendents Academy say the criticism of the training program is off base.

Erica Lepping, a spokeswoman for the Broad Foundation, says that the academy exposes program participants to many viewpoints, and that the graduates themselves come from a wide variety of backgrounds, including education, and hold different points of view.

The academy does promote a management model of “continuous improvement” that is used by successful businesses, nonprofits, and school systems, she said.

## **Pushing Change**

Thomas W. Payzant, a trainer and mentor for graduates of the Broad Academy and a former superintendent of the Boston public schools, says that the program’s graduates have to be willing to shake up districts that have been failing students for years—and that such change is going to be painful and sometimes resented.

“You don’t go into a leadership role with a notion that you’re just going to coast,” said Mr. Payzant, a professor of educational leadership at Harvard University and a member of the interview committee that evaluates potential academy participants.

“You want to be able to show improvement, and often improvement in the education sector means change that will make some people very uncomfortable and will not be popular,” he said. “That’s what leads to pushback. People say, ‘We were fine before you got here.’ But when you look at the data, there’s lots of room for improvement.”

When the superintendent-training program was first launched, it was billed as a bipartisan solution to a “growing leadership crisis” in public education. Mr. Broad, who made his fortune in home building and insurance and is a prominent contributor to Democratic political candidates, partnered with John Engler, a Republican who was then the governor of Michigan, to create the program.

Academy organizers said they were making a point of seeking out skilled executives who might not have any experience in education. A press release announcing the program suggested it was a negative that the vast majority of superintendents were trained as teachers, without a background in “complex financial, labor, management, personnel, and capital-resource decisionmaking.”

In practice, though, most of the participants have had at least some background working in education. Seventy-one of the 139 alumni came from an education background before attending the program, and 25 have what Broad describes as “education hybrid” experience, which means a professional background that includes education in addition to some other field of work.

Over the years, the academy’s graduates have gone on to occupy influential education positions beyond district superintendencies. Thelma Meléndez de Santa Ana, the U.S. Department of Education’s assistant secretary for elementary and secondary education, went through the Broad Academy. So did state schools chiefs Christopher D. Cerf of New Jersey, Deborah Gist of Rhode Island, and Lillian Lowery of Delaware.

The academy is one part of a \$450 million investment in various education initiatives made by the Broad Foundation. Perhaps its highest-profile project is the \$1 million **Broad Prize for Urban Education**, which recognizes districts that improve student performance and close achievement gaps. The foundation also supports the **Broad Residency in Urban Education**, a two-year training program for high-level managerial positions below the superintendency.

### Basic Format

Ms. Lepping said the foundation often tweaks the academy curriculum to keep it up to date. However, since its inception, the basic format for the program is a 10-month fellowship that brings participants together for six extended weekends in different cities. Tuition and travel expenses are free.

The program is designed to be a concentrated introduction to the many issues that superintendents face, and Ms. Lepping provided more than two dozen content threads that are

### Academy by the Numbers

The Broad Superintendents Academy seeks senior-level executives from a variety of backgrounds, including national, state, and local government officials; managers of “complex businesses or business units” with revenues of more than \$250 million; senior military officers with command experience; and educational leaders with supervisory experience, such as regional or deputy superintendents, chief academic officers, and charter managers who oversee successful schools with multiple sites. The program has had 139 graduates.

### Professional Background and Total Alumni

**Education:** 71  
**Education Hybrid:** 25  
**Government:** 2  
**Higher Education:** 2  
**Military:** 24  
**Private Sector:** 10  
**Social Sector:** 5

### Where Are They Now?

**39** currently serve as school district superintendents  
**28** are cabinet-level executives in school districts  
**31** serve as executives in education nonprofits or private-sector education organizations  
**4** hold federal, state, or U.S. territory education policy positions  
**3** are state commissioners of education  
**10** are retired

revisited over the course of the fellowship year, including labor relations, targeted student interventions, data-management systems, management for continuous improvement, and school board relations.

Participants are also expected to read books on their own between sessions, such as *Leading Change* by management theorist James O'Toole, which argues for a values-based approach to leadership, and *Horace's Compromise* by Theodore R.Sizer, published in 1984 and considered a classic in the literature of education change. They also participate in webinars, read case studies on urban districts, and complete individual applied-learning projects.

"I worked as hard on that as most of the other degrees I've gotten," 2004 graduate John L. Barry, a retired U.S. Air Force general, said of his Broad training.

"It allowed me to be exposed to incredibly diverse, varied points of view," said Mr. Barry, now the superintendent of the 37,000-student Aurora district in Colorado, "and allowed me to clearly understand what I was getting into."

Broad fellows also get continuing, on-the-job mentoring from experienced professionals, can call Broad experts in to evaluate district issues, and are part of a network that allows them to reach out to one another for advice on thorny district-management issues.

"If you were to ask me, that's been the best part of the program. The fellowship has been tremendous," said Mr. Brizard, a 2007 graduate who was the superintendent in Rochester, N.Y., before he was chosen to lead the 409,000-student Chicago system.

What the Broad fellows see as a program that provides mentorship and continuing support, their detractors see as a sign of a takeover.

"What I see happening is that they colonize districts," said Diane Ravitch, an education historian who criticized education venture philanthropy in her 2010 book *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*.

"Once there's a Broad superintendent, he surrounds himself with Broad fellows, and they have a preference towards privatization. It happens so often, it makes me wonder what they're teaching them," said Ms. Ravitch, who co-writes a

**24** work in other fields

### The New Class

Eight Broad fellows were accepted in 2011:

**Robert Avossa** superintendent, Fulton County, Ga., public schools (Mr. Avossa was the chief strategy and accountability officer for the Charlotte-Mecklenburg, N.C., system when he applied.)

**Chris Barbic**, founder and chief executive officer, YES Prep Schools, Houston

**Mark Brown**, brigadier general, U.S. Air Force

**Penny MacCormack**, chief academic officer, Hartford, Conn., public schools

**Mike Miles**, superintendent, Harrison, Colo., public schools

**Michael Oates**, lieutenant general, U.S. Army

**Judy Pepler**, state president, Qwest Communications, Portland, Ore.

**Rick Richardson**, colonel, U.S. Army

### The Curriculum

Broad fellows are expected to study on their own when they're not meeting as a group. A recent reading list includes:

***Leading Change***, James O'Toole, Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1996

***How We Can Achieve Unprecedented Improvements in Teaching and Learning***, Michael J. Schmoker, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2006

***Bringing School Reform to Scale: Five Award-Winning Urban Districts***, Heather Zavadsky, Harvard Education Press, 2009

***Teaching Talent: A Visionary Framework for Human Capital in Education***, Rachel

**blog** on *Education Week's* website.

Some Broad superintendents have indeed had rocky tenures. In the 32,000-student Rochester district, the teachers' union held a vote in February on whether to support Mr. Brizard. Eighty-four percent of teachers participated, and 95 percent of them gave Mr. Brizard a symbolic no-confidence vote. Teachers complained that Mr. Brizard was ignoring their voices as he made major changes in the district.

Maria Goodloe-Johnson, a 2003 graduate of the training program who became the superintendent of the 45,800-student Seattle schools, was fired by the school board in March amid a financial scandal that roiled the district.

In Rockford, Ill., LaVonne M. Sheffield left the 27,000-student district in April after a difficult two years, during which she clashed with the school board and the community over budget cuts and her assertion in a "state of the schools" address that racism was at the root of some of the district's problems.

### **Tough Decisions**

But the superintendents say they were up against forces that were resisting necessary changes.

Mr. Brizard, a former classroom teacher and administrator, rejects the idea that his management priorities were instilled by the Broad Academy.

"All of my ideas come from my experience," he said.

From his work as an educator of teenage inmates at New York City's Rikers Island, "I got to see what happens when we fail," Mr. Brizard said. His aversion to such policies as "last in, first out" hiring practices came from seeing good young teachers placed on layoff lists while colleagues with longer tenures but poorer track records were retained, he said.

On that point, Mr. Brizard and Adam Urbanski, the head of the Rochester Teachers Association, agree. Mr. Urbanski, who has a reputation as a reform-minded union leader, said that focusing on the Broad Academy is an oversimplification.

"I think that's too tempting an explanation," said Mr. Urbanski, who has spoken to past academy classes. Mr. Brizard's work in Rochester, he said, "was more a function of his own personal convictions and his own worldview than some kind of irrepressible impact by the Broad Superintendents Academy.

E. Curtis and Judy Wurtzel (eds.), 2010

**"English Language Learners,"** Editorial Projects in Education Research Center, September 2004

***Urban School Leadership,*** Thomas W. Payzant, Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2010

**"Special Education in America,"** Christopher B. Swanson, Editorial Projects in Education Research Center, November 2008

***Horace's Compromise: The Dilemma of the American High School,*** Theodore R.Sizer, Houghton Mifflin Co., 1984

**"Choice,"** Editorial Projects in Education Research Center, September 2004

***What School Boards Can Do,*** Donald R. McAdams, Teachers College Press, 2006

**"Facing the Future: Financing Productive Schools,"** Paul T. Hill, Marguerite Roza, and James Harvey, Center on Reinventing Public Education, December 2008

**"Managing for Results in America's Great City Schools,"** Council of the Great City Schools, October 2008

***Execution,*** Larry Bossidy and Ram Charan, Crown Business, 2002

**"How the World's Best-Performing Systems Come Out on Top,"** McKinsey & Co., 2007

***Strategy in Action: How School Systems Can Support Powerful Learning and Teaching,*** Rachel E. Curtis and Elizabeth A. City, Harvard Education Press, 2009

SOURCE: Broad Superintendents Academy



[The academy] has its own point of view, but it has no army or navy to enforce it.”

Ms. Sheffield, the former Rockford superintendent, said she took over a district that was already unsettled: It went through seven superintendents in 10 years.

“The only constant is the union leadership, and they bankroll the board,” she said.

Ms. Sheffield said that, as superintendent, she was open to concerns from her community. “But at the end of the day, you hire a superintendent to make the decisions,” she said.

She added: “It’s always difficult when you close schools. It’s always difficult when you have folks who want everything for their children, and nothing for others.”

Peter C. Gorman, the superintendent of the 133,600-student Charlotte-Mecklenburg district in North Carolina and a 2004 graduate of the academy, has been singled out by Broad critics because of a controversial merit-pay proposal that would be based partially on newly created student tests.

Mr. Gorman says he understands that disagreement is part of the process. But “I don’t think I would engage in that debate” on the perceived influence of the Broad Academy, he said. “I think our community is focused on good things,” Mr. Gorman said. “We can’t spend our time and energy fighting things that aren’t true or that aren’t substantiated.”

Those who work with the academy say they’re aware of the perception that program graduates are subject to “groupthink” that reflects a business mind-set. But other districts’ leaders with no connection to the academy are making the same changes that have been linked to Broad graduates, said Laura Schwalm, the superintendent of the 48,000-student Garden Grove Unified School District in California and a Broad Academy faculty member.

“If Broad didn’t exist, charter schools would. I think they try to be very fair-minded in what they present,” she said. Plus, she added, “I would hope, as educators, we would be open-minded enough and have enough courage and wisdom to consider all ideas.”

And while Broad has had controversial graduates, others have been recognized by their peers as being at the top of their field. Mr. Barry, the Colorado superintendent; Ms. Meléndez, who was the superintendent of Pomona Unified in California before joining the federal Education Department; and Paula Dawning, the retired superintendent of the Benton Harbor, Mich., district, have all been honored as state superintendents of the year.

Thomas M. Brady, a 2004 graduate of the academy who plans to step down from the superintendency of the 23,500-student Providence, R.I., district July 15, suggests that some critics are not able to separate the work of the academy from the Broad Foundation’s other education philanthropy.

“The Broad Foundation works selectively in cities to further an agenda that Broad thinks is important,” said Mr. Brady, a retired Army colonel. For example, he said, the foundation supported a performance-pay program in the District of Columbia that was championed by then-Chancellor Michelle A. Rhee.

So, Mr. Brady said, observers end up thinking “well, here they are; [the academy graduates] must be doing the same thing.” But “there wasn’t any Kool-Aid that was passed out at graduation,” he added.

**Michael Klonsky**, an adjunct professor of education at Chicago’s DePaul University, says that while he

doesn't believe academy students are given explicit marching orders,"you don't have to be told to go in there and attack the union."

"People know basically what your reform line is: hard on the unions, pro-charter, pushing for a certain kind of accountability," said Mr. Klonsky, a chronicler of what he believes are Broad Foundation shortcomings in his blog Small Talk. "It's not just a coincidence they all have the same position, more or less."

## **Judging Performance**

There is little or no independent research evaluating the impact of Broad Academy graduates on all the districts where they are placed. The foundation itself looks at five measures of student achievement for academy superintendents who have been in place for three or more years, including students' academic-proficiency levels, achievement gaps, and graduation rates. The foundation then compares those measures with those of demographically similar districts in the state and with state averages.

Based on its calculations, 65 percent of graduates who have been serving as superintendents for three or more years are outperforming comparison groups on raising state reading and math test scores, closing achievement gaps, and raising graduation rates.

*Education Week* examined a small slice of performance in six districts with long-serving Broad superintendents: reading and math scores on standardized tests for 3rd graders and 8th graders. In most cases, the results on that measure were mixed, even within a district.

For example, the 31,600-student Fort Wayne, Ind., district has seen the longest tenure of a single Broad-trained superintendent. Wendy Robinson, who rose through district ranks as a teacher, principal, and central-office administrator, was in the first Broad Academy class in 2002. She was appointed superintendent in July 2003.

Indiana used to administer state tests in the fall, then switched to a spring test date. In fall 2003, the Fort Wayne district's 3rd grade passing rate in reading was 69.3 percent; it was 73.8 percent in spring 2010. For math, however, the passing rate fell from 75.9 percent in fall 2003 to 66.9 percent in spring 2010. For 8th graders, the passing rate in reading rose from 55.1 percent to 58.7 percent; math fell from 65.1 percent to 64.4 percent.

The 26,000-student Pittsburgh district, which underwent major restructuring under Mark Roosevelt's tenure from 2005 to 2010, showed growth in all those academic areas. Mr. Roosevelt, a former Massachusetts state legislator, is a 2003 academy graduate.

Between spring 2005 and spring 2010, the percentage of Pittsburgh 3rd graders scoring proficient or advanced on reading tests rose from 49 percent to 59.8 percent. For 3rd grade math, proficient and advanced scores rose from 67 percent to 74.2 percent.

Likewise, for 8th graders, the percentage of students scoring proficient and advanced in reading went from 49.4 percent to 72.2 percent over that five-year span. In math, the rates rose from 45.8 percent to 60.4 percent.

## **Different Ways**

Ultimately, student success is the yardstick by which the Broad training program must be evaluated,

says Richard F. Elmore, a professor of educational leadership at Harvard University. He is the co-director of the university's new, three-year **Doctor of Educational Leadership** program, which aims to train not only potential superintendents, but also other professionals who can take high-ranking positions in other sectors of the education market, such as charters or nonprofit and for-profit education management organizations.

Mr. Elmore says the Broad Foundation's attention to superintendent training has helped fill a void in an area that has been "a real disaster in this country"—with some exceptions—but that it should be just one of many training approaches available for aspiring education executives.

"I wish we had five or six different ways of training sector leaders," Mr. Elmore said. "That's the discussion we should be having, instead of these ideological debates."

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