Leadership in Action
Charter Network Leader
Taking advantage of a rare moment to sit at her desk and catch up on a few emails, Laura Robell, Chief of Schools for Envision Education in Oakland, California, is interrupted by an incoming text message. She looks at her phone, visibly relaxes, and smiles.

“It’s a student letting me know she just submitted her college application,” Robell shares.

As a teacher, Robell never considered pursuing a school leadership position. It was her principal who first planted the seed, though Robell was less than enthusiastic.

“Absolutely not,” she recalls saying. “I didn’t want to be away from kids. And, to be honest, I didn’t appreciate the power of the principalship. It’s not that my principal wasn’t good. I just didn’t have a model in front of me that showed me what it could look like for me to have the kind of impact that was worth leaving my classroom.”

Yet Robell knew in her heart that what she wanted was to make a difference, as big a difference as she could, for children furthest from opportunity. “I didn’t have a very well-developed equity lens,” she reflects, “but I knew that I wanted to spend my days making the world a better place.” Eventually, this drive, combined with encouragement from her principal, led her to Aspiring Principals, the principal preparation program offered by New Leaders, whose mission and values spoke to her.

As a resident principal, Robell recalls being treated as a co-principal, a true partner to her mentor principal with real responsibilities and opportunities to exercise leadership. She understood how fortunate she was to have such an authentic learning experience and she was committed to carrying that model with her as a school and, now, system-level leader.

“This job is so hard and it can be so lonely,” Robell shares. “As leaders, we are the ones who see and hold the needs and vision for the entire community. The work is so important and it is taxing. We have to rely on each other. We can’t do it alone.”

Sharing or distributing leadership as a principal over the course of seven years was a natural extension of her training. It was also a response to the environment she stepped into. The previous school leader was well-respected and committed to engaging the school community in shared decision-making through an immense set of structures and procedures. Despite the intent, teachers did not feel like their voices mattered.

“It’s not just about systems, though those matter greatly,” Robell shares. “The issue was that staff understood clearly that they were not in the driver’s seat. They wanted to feel like their input and ideas were really making a difference and they needed to see that difference. I got that. I had been on both sides, feeling like I wasn’t part of decision-making and having experienced a real sense of efficacy as a teacher and leader.”

For Robell, the key to building a strong culture of leadership—at the school and system level—is having a clear, shared vision and strategic plan, and reinforcing both consistently and concretely with the school community.

“You have to start with the why,” she shares. “Even if the reason for a certain initiative is compliance, there’s still a why and it’s important for everyone to understand that piece. And that why needs to be supported by a strong strategy that you’re reinforcing in big ways and small on a daily basis. I talk about our top priorities again and again, to help keep everyone focused and energized about the work. This is especially important as you bring more people into leadership, helping them see their place, their leadership within the larger purpose or goal. It can be so easy for people to feel siloed in their work. You have to be really intentional about keeping everything and everyone connected.”

“This idea of connection was also a big lesson for a principal resident I supported,” Robell adds. “During one of our many, many planning conversations, she had this ‘aha!’ moment where she reflected on the fact that I had a strong relationship with everyone in our building. She didn’t know how I did it, but she recognized how important it was. We talked together about how I spent my time. I wasn’t in my office—I was in classrooms, I was in hallways. Honestly, it can be one of the reasons principals burn out, but being able to keep and maintain open lines of communication is so important for the work.”

“In my current role, I take a similar approach,” she says. “I never want a principal to not ask me something because of power dynamics or because they’re worried about getting in trouble. I have to exercise strategic vulnerability, sharing crazy stories from my time as a school leader or from the other leaders I support so they can see how universal so many of their challenges are. And these strong relationships help me communicate my why and our strategic priorities over and over again in a safe, supportive space.”

She says the need to establish and maintain lines of communication is especially important at the system level, where building
coherence is a top priority and can be especially challenging. Overseeing the principals of five schools and a team of three subject-matter directors, it would be easy for the work to feel siloed. But Robell regularly reinforces network priorities with school leaders, both formally and informally, to help them see how their slice fits into the whole. She is also working to increase consistency across schools to maximize the value of network support while balancing the need for each school to maintain the right amount of autonomy.

Because, as a practical matter, expanding leadership does require real resources—time, money, and support. And those things aren’t always readily available.

“About half of Envision teachers serve in leadership roles and we see this model as crucial to our success,” Robell notes. “Yet a real pain point for us is ensuring they have the necessary skills. Leading a group of adults is fundamentally different than leading kids in a classroom—it requires different strategies. As a principal, teachers came to me and said, ‘We wanted more say, to be more involved, but how do we do all of this?’ At the network level, we are continuously grappling with how to balance the need for more leadership training with the reality that many of our teachers are also still working on strengthening their instruction. There’s only so much time in the day. We’re still figuring out that balance.”

Despite the challenges, one thing is clear to Robell: “The answer is not to scale back on distributed leadership. It is essential and absolutely worth it. At the end of the day, it’s always, always, better to have stakeholders, especially teachers, at the table making decisions.”

“We aren’t going to get the results we need for our schools and students if we leave important expertise untapped.”