Studies have determined that providing advanced training and leadership development skills for principals is one of the most effective ways to improve education in the public school system. The Cahn Fellows Program seeks to provide exemplary school leaders in large urban public school systems with advanced professional development and recognition to increase leadership skills, retention in education and student outcomes.

The program was founded by Charles & Jane Cahn in New York in 2003 to support excellence in education. They found that high performing principals receive very little professional development, recognition or collegial peer engagement. As a result, the most valuable public education leaders often lose their passion and leave their positions. Research has confirmed that effective principals who remain in their schools deliver outstanding student outcomes and it is therefore imperative to retain quality principals and build a pipeline of future leaders.

The program began with a cohort of 16 fellows. Chicago joined the Cahn Fellows network in 2012 and 37 Fellows from Chicago have now participated in the program. In the 2019-2020 school year, a total of 49 fellows participated in the program from around the country.

The Fellows engage in a 12-month professional development program delivered by Teachers College, Columbia University (TC) faculty and other leadership experts. There is an intensive schedule that begins in July with a two-week intensive Summer Leadership Institute and ends with a project presentation 12 months later. There is a fall retreat that includes sessions with Teachers College faculty and other expert speakers as well as interactive sessions with Alumni Advisors, and four study sessions through the year which provide intercity school visits as well as additional content delivery.