

IDEAS



NO PRINCIPAL IS AN ISLAND. Leaders need a solid base of support

BY GAIL PAUL

School principals are a vital but sometimes overlooked ingredient in education reform. Principals are schools' chief improvement officers — leaders uniquely positioned to strengthen classroom instruction, build cultures of high achievement, cultivate leadership in others, and

support teachers and other educators to boost student performance (Grissom et al., 2021). But extensive study into principal preparation and professional learning demonstrates the need for more intentional and systemic support for these leaders.

A suite of newly published reports supported by The Wallace Foundation

reveals the features and outcomes of high-quality principal learning and exposes disparities in principals' access to strong learning opportunities, especially in high-poverty schools.

These reports demonstrate how collaborating institutional partners — universities, school districts, and state and federal agencies — can address the

gaps to strengthen principal pipelines, and experts on a recent webinar offered insight about how to make those improvements sustained and systemic (The Wallace Foundation, 2022).

INCREASING DEMANDS

Recent research on school leadership articulates what many educators already know too well: The school principal position is increasingly demanding, and most university-led training doesn't fully prepare candidates for all of the position's challenges.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the problems. "Almost three years into COVID, it's a different world," said Daniel Domenech, executive director of the American Association of School Administrators. "So many things are changed so drastically. Whatever we were doing to train principals three years ago is out the window. It's a whole new ball game today."

Many university-based principal preparation programs have struggled with how to make the fundamental changes needed to prepare principals for today's schools and align leadership development to school districts' needs. A looming mass exodus of principals predicted by the National Association of Secondary School Principals (2021) provides greater impetus for districts to examine and refine the structures and processes that pertain to the leadership pipeline.

The new reports offer insights about how to address those challenges and strengthen the pipeline, drawing on years' worth of investment and study.

In 2016, The Wallace Foundation launched the University Principal Preparation Initiative, a multiyear initiative to support seven universities

A MULTIPRONGED APPROACH TO DEVELOPING PRINCIPALS

The University Principal Pipeline Initiative is one arm of a multipronged approach to develop the principal profession supported by The Wallace Foundation.

In 2011, Wallace launched a six-year Principal Pipeline Initiative, which equipped six participating school districts from across the U.S. to improve the ways they identify, train, hire, support, and evaluate principals.

The Principal Supervisor Initiative, launched in 2014, helped six districts refocus the supervisor role on helping principals support high-quality instruction.

In 2016, Wallace launched the University Principal Preparation Initiative based on the previous research and fieldwork, adding an emphasis on how preservice training at universities can foster it.

to upgrade their principal preservice training programs in line with research-supported practices.

Wallace enlisted RAND Corporation to evaluate the effort in its fifth year and broadly share findings through an independent study. In 2022, RAND released a report and three related briefs that distill the report's key takeaways to areas of specific interest to university, district, and state agency audiences (Gates et al., 2022; Herman, Wang, & Gates, 2022; Herman, Wang, Woo, & Gates, 2022; Wang et al., 2022).

Another Wallace-supported study brought into greater focus the common elements of high-quality principal preparation and development programs (Darling-Hammond et al., 2022). The study, conducted by Learning Policy Institute, finds that universities, districts, and states all play vital roles and should work together in developing strong programs and making them more accessible.

Together, these two reports highlight the specific roles of each of those entities and how collaboration among them can make a difference.

And the responsibility for collaboration should not fall entirely to universities.

For districts considering how to engage with university preparation programs to support quality school leadership, the University Principal Preparation Initiative provides insights on the commitment required to optimize mutual benefits from the relationships. Districts have to be prepared to share their expertise and insights into a program's leadership framework, coursework, instruction, and clinical experiences and partner on recruitment and selection (Wang et al., 2022).

For state education policymakers, the initiative demonstrates how states effectively used policy levers to enhance systems to develop and support principals. In sharing their experiences with RAND Corporation, policy leaders described the importance of offering clear state leader standards and then using those standards to promote coherent state policy (Gates et al., 2022).

RAND Corporation's Susan Gates, a senior economist and director of the Office of Research Quality

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Assurance, said RAND’s study of the initiative drives home the importance of engagement and collaboration among states, programs, and districts and also of ensuring coherence across policies that are grounded in standards. “Principal preparation is not something that happens discretely within the university. Rather, it is a process that extends across the entire pathway to the principalship in a district before an aspiring leader even enters a program,” Gates said.

UNIVERSITIES UPEND TRADITIONAL FRAMEWORKS

The Wallace Foundation designed the University Principal Preparation Initiative to provide a model for collaboratively redesigning university principal preparation programs with space for tailoring to context. As a group, the selected universities and their partners participated in a common process and had access to supports coordinated and funded by The Wallace Foundation that defined the initiative, including: Quality Measures, a research-based self-assessment tool and process; standards alignment; mentor programs; logic model development; technical assistance; and professional learning communities.

The program redesign journeys were different for each participating university, but they all focused on core components proven to matter most, including coherent curriculum, integration of theory and practice, active learning, supervised clinical experiences linked to coursework, active recruitment and selection, and cohort structure. They prioritized most-relevant content areas school leaders need now, such as instructional leadership, leading and managing school improvement, shaping teaching and learning conditions, and meeting the needs of learners.

While universities led the work, it was largely informed by district needs and bolstered by expanded efforts at the state level to support strong development of leaders. Each team was

paired with a mentor program partner providing technical assistance according to the needs of the university and its stage in the redesign.

Florida Atlantic University, a 30,000-student public university in south Florida, participated in the initiative. Daniel Reyes-Guerra, associate professor in that university’s Department of Educational Leadership and Research Methodology, said his institution went back to the basics evaluating every aspect of its programs. “New standards for leadership were coming out that were replacing the old national standards, and there was a movement toward looking at the role of the principal in schools, which has changed significantly in the last 15 years,” Reyes-Guerra said. “One of the things that we’ve seen is the move toward instructional leadership.”

The university brought together four districts representing over 523,000 students for the redesign work and began with a comprehensive assessment of leadership standards, then asked the districts to develop their own. The result: “Our programs became very district-specific,” Reyes-Guerra said. “(We are) meeting the ed leadership needs of the district’s context, as opposed to providing generic learning that meets the requirements of ed leadership but not necessarily ed leadership in a specific place.”

The structures and culture of higher education can make revamping principal preparation challenging. Reyes-Guerra said redesigning and resequencing coursework in collaboration with districts required disrupting traditions in which professors are used to having autonomy.

North Carolina State University associate professor Anna Egalite agreed. “It requires some work and also some courage to redesign programs to meet the needs of what the districts tell us they need,” Egalite said.

Despite the challenges, universities saw improvements. The evaluation report noted the following:

- Intentional collaboration with districts led to more targeted improvement;
- Curriculum and instructional changes improved program coherence;
- Clinical experience became more authentic, intentional, and personalized;
- Collaborative partners played an active role at all stages of the redesign process;
- Partnerships evolved to support implementation; and
- Teams took steps to institutionalize redesign features, as well as partnership and process of continuous improvement.

DISTRICTS’ ROLE

Districts played active roles in the university preparation program redesigns. They co-created curriculum, embedded district administrators within university systems as adjunct instructors, engaged as peers in steering and working groups, and co-created the development of leader tracking systems to catalyze continuous feedback.

The evaluation found that districts experienced key benefits from their collaboration with universities. Not only did districts anticipate higher-quality principals as a result of the increased communication with the universities, the initiative inspired districts to apply the principles from the redesign to improve their own policies, such as leader standards and evaluation. Partner districts reported creating new programs and professional learning for district staff aligned with the initiative’s program content, including courses for teachers, teacher leaders, recent program graduates, or principal supervisors.

Leader tracking systems played an important part in the university-district collaborations. Such systems had emerged as a key component of a previous Wallace-supported initiative. Districts participating in the Principal

Pipeline Initiative found that, as they compiled extensive data on principals and schools, they needed a system to automate data gathering and retrieval.

Wallace supported the development of leader tracking systems to turn raw data into useful information that addresses issues of school leadership, including selecting the right principal for a vacancy, improving on-the-job support, and improving pipeline components (Anderson et al., 2017).

Partner districts in the University Principal Preparation Initiative also employed these leader tracking systems, and the RAND evaluation found that they had a deep impact on the participating districts. Overall, the leader tracking systems helped districts and universities in five ways: preparation program continuous improvement, applicant and candidate support, hiring and placing principals, leadership development, and leadership pipeline planning.

Representing five school districts, Green River Regional Education Cooperative served as the district liaison within Western Kentucky University's University Principal Preparation Initiative partnership that also included superintendents, Kentucky Education Professional Standards Board, and Kentucky Department of Education. Priorities for their leader tracking system included creating a leadership pipeline at the district level and supporting data collection on leaders' and aspiring school leaders' experience, performance, competencies, and professional growth. The district unveiled the leader tracking system in 2018.

Valerie Bridges, superintendent of Edgecombe County Public Schools in North Carolina, said the district's leader tracking system serves the district as a succession planning tool. "Oftentimes in school systems, that's not something that happens. We process and we move day to day, putting out those daily fires. Succession planning is helping you think two or three moves down the road."

State education agencies reinvigorated their professional learning for aspiring principals, principals, preparation program faculty, clinical coaches, and mentor principals by providing new funding streams, creating new programs, or developing resource guides.

Each of Florida Atlantic University's three partner districts created its own district-based leader tracking system, and the university also built its own university-based leader tracking system to share information more easily between the districts and university. Reyes-Guerra said Florida Atlantic University's leader tracking system helped his institution assess data on principals' progress and performance, which led to changes in preparation programs. "It provided a real avenue for data exchange between the university and the district," he said.

STATE AND FEDERAL POLICY

State policy contributes to the overall environment that affects how school principals emerge, develop, and lead their schools (Manna, 2021). The Wallace Foundation has explored the effectiveness of legislation to support school leader development as well as informal tactics states employ to broaden support for it.

RAND reported that the four most-activated policy levers promoting university program redesign during the initiative were principal leadership standards, principal licensure, program approval and oversight, and professional development (Gates et al., 2022).

During the University Principal Preparation Initiative, states strengthened their leadership standards, including Kentucky and Georgia, which adopted or adapted national

standards. To boost coherence across policies grounded in leader standards, Kentucky took a multiagency approach to creating standards guidance protocols and expanding requirements for university preparation programs to demonstrate alignment between their coursework and the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015).

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Reyes-Guerra said the initiative was effective at exposing policymakers to the ground-level needs for pipeline development that effected change. "In Florida, this led to creating a whole new set of educational leadership standards and educational leadership program approval standards for both the universities and the districts," Reyes-Guerra said.

Peter Zamora, director of federal relations and policy at the Council of Chief State School Officers, said that Florida, Illinois, and Kansas have leveraged federal COVID-19 relief funds to support school leaders outside of the initiative, but in fundamental alignment with its core principles.

"The research described today will inform ongoing efforts to promote effective principal pipelines, including federally funded initiatives, and will serve to influence future federal policy development," Zamora said. "As Congress considers legislation to strengthen educator pipelines such as the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act or the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, we will encourage it to learn from the research and from the practical experience in the field as it considers making changes in this space. We really need to build on these improvements moving forward."

THE EQUITY FACTOR

In *Developing Effective Principals: What Kind of Learning Matters* (Darling-Hammond et al., 2022), Learning Policy Institute reported that access to high-quality learning for principal candidates and principals has measurably improved over the past decade. Over two-thirds of principals surveyed had access to important content areas associated with leadership, including instructional leadership, staff development, managing change, creating collaborative work environments, and helping teachers improve and meet the needs of all learners.

In addition to the content, the format of these learning opportunities is important. Especially critical are applied learning opportunities, such as inquiry and field-based projects that take place in schools, internships where preservice principals take on leadership responsibilities, access to expert coaches and mentors, and participating in cohorts or peer networks.

However, opportunities for principals and aspiring principals to access authentic job-based training are not readily available to all. Only about one-third of principals have experienced peer observation at least three times in the previous three years. A little over half participated in a principal network three or more times in the previous three years, which is not a high rate of intensity, according to Linda-Darling Hammond, Learning Policy Institute president and CEO.

Principals' access to high-quality learning varies across states and by school poverty level. "Strong principal preparation is not equitable," said Marjorie Wechsler, principal research manager at Learning Policy Institute. "And it's critical that we as a field, as practitioners, as policymakers, as university faculty, as researchers, pay attention," she said.

Expanding access to high-quality learning for all principals and aspiring

UNIVERSITY PRINCIPAL PREPARATION INITIATIVE PARTICIPANTS

The Wallace Foundation selected university programs in states with policies supportive of improved principal development and had district partners that served a high-need population. Participants include:

- Albany State University (Georgia)
- Florida Atlantic University
- North Carolina State University
- San Diego State University
- University of Connecticut
- Virginia State University
- Western Kentucky University

principals requires commitment to robust partnership and access to tools that support program design, implementation, and continuous improvement.

"Thanks to two decades of research, we now have a much better idea about content and learning approaches that are especially effective for developing excellent school leaders," said Frederick Brown, Learning Forward's president and CEO. "A strong learning community has many partners, and, as a collective, we must expand access to excellent learning opportunities for all who aspire to lead our schools into a brighter future."

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