The State Role in Preparing School Leaders

Expectations for principals have changed dramatically with the advent of stringent state accountability systems that hold them responsible for the achievement of all students. In 1999, the National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE) issued a report on the changing role of the principal, noting that the “task of placing a high-quality principal in every school is more challenging than ever.” NASBE cited changing job expectations, a looming administrator shortage, and inadequate principal preparation, support, and professional development as impediments to providing an adequate supply of principals.

In recent years, the No Child Left Behind Act has further sharpened the technical requirements for leaders in steering school improvement, analyzing test score data, using research to inform instructional decisions and improvement strategies, crafting staff development, and providing specific feedback to teachers on improving instructional practice. The resulting press for equity and accountability implies new sets of roles and responsibilities around the dogged pursuit of powerful, equitable learning opportunities for all students.

Since the release of the NASBE report Principals of Change, significant research on leadership has been conducted that highlights the importance of school leadership in improving student performance. A landmark study supported by The Wallace Foundation reached the resounding conclusion that, “Leadership is second only to classroom instruction among all school-related factors that contribute to what students learn at school.” The study added that the positive effects of leadership are greatest in schools and districts with the greatest needs. The authors describe the influence of leadership on classroom learning as indirect, mediating teaching and learning by:

- setting directions to chart a common course;
- developing people by providing opportunities to increase their capacity and practice; and
- redesigning the basic organizational culture and conditions that exist within schools.

Yet, the ultimate impact of leadership across a state rests on the quality of its system in screening, selecting, preparing, supporting, and placing principal candidates. Too many principal candidates and existing principals are ill-prepared and inadequately supported to organize schools to improve learning while managing all of the other demands of the job. It is clear that merely holding a credential or professional degree says little about whether a candidate is actually prepared to lead the implementation of effective instructional practices that result in the level of student learning that current demands require. Researchers have found that despite the widespread adoption in more than 40 states of standards for school leaders established in 1996 by the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC), the policy frameworks for how leaders are developed continue to be ill-defined, irregularly applied, and lacking in rigor.

The leadership preparation institutions that bestow these credentials have been roundly criticized for years. In 2005, Arthur Levine, former president of Columbia University, led a study of the preparation and development of school leaders in education schools and found that the quality at a majority of these programs ranged from inadequate to appalling. Even as education administration programs are graduating an increasing number of certified school leaders, Levine reported, the conditions of these programs lead to thousands of principals across the country being ill-equipped for the job of promoting powerful teaching and learning. University-based leadership training, for the most part, remains inadequately connected either to state standards and unresponsive to the day-to-day realities and learning goals principals encounter. A national survey by Public Agenda found, in fact, that 80 percent of superintendents and 69 percent of principals think that the leadership training in graduate schools of education is out of touch with the realities of today’s school districts. So what can state policymakers do to address inadequate preparation of school leaders? How can states build coherent leader development systems to attract, train, and support highly qualified school leaders that have the knowledge and skills to promote powerful teaching and learning in our schools?

The State Role

The good news is that we have learned considerably more in recent years about effective approaches to recruiting, training, and supporting school leaders throughout their career. In 2007, the Stanford Educational Leadership Institute issued
the findings of a major research effort to determine whether some principal development programs were more reliably effective in producing strong school leaders, and if so, why and how. The researchers examined eight exemplary pre- and in-service programs that offered varied approaches and operated in different contexts. The authors triangulated multiple sources of data, derived largely from self-report data from candidates, principals, and program faculty in interviews and surveys, and compared the responses of graduates from the selected programs to those of a national random sample of principals. The findings point to common program elements that were linked to critical differences in principals’ attitudes, knowledge, skills, practices, and levels of success.

The study suggests that the most critical factor in preparing leaders well is the degree to which program features are integrated to reinforce a robust model of leadership. Programs must provide a coherent approach to ensure the linkage between coursework and clinical experiences that include analyses of classroom practice, supervision, and professional development using on-the-job observations connected to readings and discussions. See the accompanying textbox for the key elements of effective leadership programs.

The report describes differences between the experiences of graduates of the selected programs from those reported by principals in the national survey. For example, graduates reported far more participation in high-quality learning opportunities than principals in the comparison group such as school visits and peer observations; principal networks and conferences; mentoring and coaching; and collaborative or independent research on teaching, learning, and leadership. Graduates felt better prepared for all aspects of the principalship, ranging from leading instructional and organizational improvements to engaging with parents and the community. They reported more positive attitudes toward the position and indicated a stronger commitment to staying in the job despite working in more challenging urban environments. In comparison to principals with more conventional preparation, graduates reported they enacted more practices linked to school performance such as facilitating student learning; building a professional learning community; fostering teacher professional development; providing instructional feedback to teachers; working with teachers to improve teaching practices; and using data to monitor school progress, identify problems, and propose solutions.

The study also yielded policy case studies in the states represented by the program sample—California, Connecticut, Kentucky, Mississippi, and New York—that allowed state-level analyses of principals’ preparedness and practices in relationship to specific policy contexts. Accordingly, the Stanford report underscores the critical role of states in framing systems that leverage high-quality training and supports to ensure that principals have the knowledge and skills to be successful.

**Policy Implications**

States can play an important role in framing a leader development system that ensures a clear focus around a conception of teaching, learning, and leading that serves as the core mission of schools. The Stanford study found that differences across programs were related to systematic policy supports and the operation of powerful policy levers to drive program improvements. Although the design of a leader development system is an arduous undertaking, states cannot afford to be complacent with the quality of their current systems. What’s required is bold action to ensure that principals have the skills essential to achieve states’ goals for higher student achievement. Despite the critical need for strong and skilled leaders, a newly published report by the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) cites “a lack of urgency for refocusing the design, content, process and outcomes of principal preparation programs based on the needs of schools and student achievement and little will happen until there are committed leaders of change at every level—state, university and local school district.”

It is time for states to:

- Exert leadership to address university-based leadership training and to hold preparation programs and their graduates accountable for improving student learning;
- Use professional and state standards that spell out clear expectations about what leaders need to know and do to improve instruction and learning;
- Use standards and accountability measures in the design of a continuum of learning opportunities and in assessing the quality of candidates and training programs at multiple points (e.g., at graduation before initial licensure, following induction programs);
- Require universities to work with local districts on selecting the right people and on designing training that meets the needs of schools and students within those jurisdictions;
- Require local school districts to accept co-ownership of principal preparation and to put into place the working conditions that support their efforts to make real changes in school and classroom practices;
- Carefully review fiscal supports for recruitment, professional development, quality internships, and mentoring to ensure that programs with proven benefits are adequately funded; and

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*Inservice and preservice program sample: Delta State University (MS); University of Connecticut’s Administrator Preparation Program; Hartford Public School District; The Principals’ Institute at Bank Street College; Region 1 of the NYC Public Schools; Jefferson County Public Schools (KY); Educational Leadership Development Academy at the University of San Diego; and San Diego Unified School District.*
Features of Effective Preparation Programs

**Purposeful recruitment and selection** to target candidates who have the background to become strong instructional leaders. Programs must work closely with districts to design rigorous recruitment and selection processes to seek out expert teachers with leadership potential and who represent the local population of teachers and students.

**Collaborative partnerships** between universities and districts to design a career continuum of training and supports; ensure effective recruitment and screening processes; co-design courses, field experiences, and internships; and ensure ongoing support for principal networks.

**Coherent curricula** that links theory and practice and integrates coursework focused on instructional leadership, organizational improvement, and change management. Programs should align curricula to state and professional standards for school leaders.

**Productive pedagogy** that emphasizes problem-based learning, action research, and field-based projects; includes performance assessments; and features substantial use of feedback and assessment by peers and faculty and self-reflection by the candidates themselves. Faculty who are knowledgeable in their subject areas should include both university professors and practitioners experienced in school administration.

**Robust internships** that are well-designed and supervised, are grounded in theory and practice, allow candidates to engage in leadership roles, and are informed by a coherent view of teaching. The Stanford study found that full-year, paid internships with expert principals had the strongest impact on graduates’ program evaluations and practices.

**Communities of practice** that provide collegial and professional network support organized around a cohort structure. Preparation should include formalized mentoring and advising by expert principals and foster strong relationships with mentors and advisors to provide ongoing support.

★ Create an infrastructure for ongoing principal and professional development that focuses on specific skills of instructional leadership.

**State Actions**

Investments by philanthropic organizations have contributed in recent years to altering the educational landscape. In the specific area of education leadership, The Wallace Foundation has committed considerable resources over the past six years in its work with two dozen states and scores of districts to help develop effective approaches, policies, and practices aimed at improving leadership. As a result, key lessons have emerged as states have instituted substantial changes that anchor the design of their development systems around a robust vision of learner-centered leadership embedded in professional standards. The states have carefully examined the overall integration of critical features within preparation programs in addition to crafting new approaches to hold universities and districts accountable for designing and implementing more powerful programs.

For example, Delaware, beginning with a task force in 2001, designed a blueprint for strengthening school leadership that includes new State Board of Education regulations for accrediting preparation programs in alignment with the Delaware School Leader Standards. The state expanded the Educators Data System that tracks educators’ credentials, as well as where administrators complete their pre-service training. The state plans to fully implement the Delaware Performance Appraisal System that has been piloted as a performance evaluation of school leaders in four areas: leader standards, goals and priorities, school or district improvement plan, and measures of student achievement.

Connecticut uses data from the state performance assessment of principals to review and accredit programs as well as assess the readiness of individual school leaders. Connecticut’s Administrator Test uses performance tasks, including videotapes of teaching and samples of student work, to evaluate principals’ abilities to evaluate teaching and guide professional development and to design school improvements processes based on research and knowledge of specific school contexts. The state holds preparation programs accountable for graduates’ performance by requiring 80 percent of the programs’ graduates to pass the test in order for the university program to keep its accreditation.

A number of states have strengthened their program approval requirements in recent years by incorporating new elements and structures with greater coherence around coursework and field experiences. Alabama’s new regulation includes: requiring potential candidates to provide evidence of ability to improve student achievement and leadership potential; provision of
strong leaders. For example, institutional improvements that produce better programs and practices appropriate for a particular context, and reciprocal candidate pool, expanded resources, continuity in developing along with state supports, these academies ensure a strong durable partnerships between districts and universities.

Iowa developed statewide standards of effective leadership for principals and focused on ensuring that training programs and evaluation criteria are based on those standards. To that end, the state instituted a rigorous new review process two years ago for university- and non-university based principal training programs, with accreditation approval based on whether or not programs were aligned with Iowa's standards for School Leaders. As a result of this rigorous process, only five out of nine programs were approved.

In order to ensure an adequate supply of qualified administrators, Massachusetts took the bold step of allowing school districts to certify aspiring school leaders. Springfield Public Schools requested this authority in order to better train and hire principals suited to the differing needs of its schools. This use of district-specific principal preparation ensured that university programs would respond to the particular culture and context of the district. Working in collaboration with the University of Connecticut, the Springfield program places strong emphasis on classroom instruction, internships, and mentoring—all with a focus on the specific needs of Springfield schools.

Other states are beginning to launch state academies that foster durable partnerships between districts and universities. Along with state supports, these academies ensure a strong candidate pool, expanded resources, continuity in developing practices appropriate for a particular context, and reciprocal institutional improvements that produce better programs and stronger leaders. For example, Georgia is working with universities and school districts to prepare principals to work in low-performing schools. They have developed a model training program that is being replicated in three regions of the state, including Atlanta, as part of the redesign of their leader training program at Georgia State University.

The Kentucky State Board of Education approved the launch of a new Institute for School Leaders as part of its broader initiative to redesign principal preparation programs. Beginning in the fall of 2007, the Institute will target high quality candidates through rigorous recruitment and selection, provide a continuum of professional growth involving extensive field work and internships, strengthen partnerships with school districts and universities, and transform leadership to meet the state's educational goals.

Resources


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