



EPISODE 3

Districts and Universities Work Together to Improve Preparation

Ed Pauly:

I'm delighted to welcome our guests today, Steve Tozer, the director at the Center for Urban Education Leadership at the University of Illinois at Chicago, and Liz Kirby, the chief of strategy and planning for Chicago Public Schools. Thanks, Steve and Liz, for joining me today.

To build the principal pipeline, high-quality pre-service training of aspiring principals is absolutely essential. That means university-based preparation programs need to be selective about who they admit. It also means the training should equip a new generation of principals with the real-life knowledge and skills to lead teaching and learning and to meet the needs of the school district. One of the findings of the Wallace Principal Pipeline Initiative is that the six participating districts were able to improve training programs they ran themselves. But it was a lot harder to influence area universities to make their programs better. Chicago Public Schools and the University of Illinois at Chicago, which were not part of the Wallace Pipeline Initiative but did receive some of the first Wallace grants on school leadership, have had a successful partnership for years. Currently, 60 Chicago principals leading high-need schools have come through UIC's program. Those schools have had better student outcomes than other schools. Let's find out more about how they did it.

First the challenge. Liz Kirby, you've been a teacher, an assistant principal, a principal, and now a district leader. From where you sit, why do so many university programs, even good ones, fall short when it comes to preparing people to lead schools?

Liz Kirby:

School leadership really is a complex endeavor, and principal preparation programs sometimes forget that you have to prepare participants both for the technical aspects of the job but also for the adaptive aspects of the job. The technical aspects are ever changing, but really incorporating a strong reflective piece, really ensuring that there are strong matches for schools made where people do their practice is really critical to having a really strong program.

Ed Pauly:

And that's been hard, you think, for some programs?

Liz Kirby:

It's been difficult. Some programs don't provide enough of a comprehensive program that really addresses all the different complexities of the principalship role.

Ed Pauly: Steve Tozer, from your vantage point at a major university, why do so many preparation programs struggle with this and too often seem to operate completely separately from the districts that will hire their graduates?

Steve Tozer: That's been a significant problem for universities now for a long time, and so the answer begins with a historical observation. We haven't funded principal preparation programs across the U.S. to do something as basic as having hands-on internships in public schools in order to learn what they need to learn about leadership. So it's a little bit like the medical profession 100 years ago when doctors could get their medical degrees without doing any kind of residencies or internships. But we now know that you can't learn to play a piano by reading about it. And historically, most of our principal preparation programs have conferred the certificate through almost entirely just classroom activities.

So this becomes a movement of change in staffing and a change in funding if we want to see universities support field-based principal preparation programs, which most observers believe is the necessary next step.

Ed Pauly: So Steve, how can university programs take the first steps to build a partnership with their local school districts?

Steve Tozer: I think that we're starting to see more and more state support for this kind of thing happening, for one thing. But I think also it's the case that universities are in a position to reach out to school districts and say, 'We can't do this job as well as it needs to be done unless we work together with you in the school district.' And this is how we started 15 years ago, by reaching out to the school district and saying, 'We can do a much better job of preparing the principals that our schools need if, in fact, we work together on this' and that's exactly what happened.

Ed Pauly: And can you give us some examples of how UIC became more responsive to the needs of the Chicago public school system?

Steve Tozer: Sure. I think the first thing was a mindset shift. We began to shift our understanding of who our clientele was. Instead of believing that our clientele was graduate students who wanted a certificate for the principalship, we began to believe that our clientele was public school students who needed a good principal in their schools. So with that mindset shift, the next step was to ask the question of what could each side, the university and the school district, provide that was distinctive?

And the school district, for example, has made an investment in supporting full-year, full-time leadership internships, which has paid off very, very well for the school district. A former HR officer for Chicago public schools said, 'This is an investment we can't afford not to make' because the quality of novice principals that come out of a full-year internship is a very different quality than someone who's simply read about it in class.

Ed Pauly: So you mentioned the payoffs. What difference does this make for student outcomes in the schools led by graduates of your program?

Steve Tozer: One of the things that we track, and I think it's important to put a disclaimer here: Not every one of our principals turns out to be a star. And that's a long discussion about how any field locates and predicts talent and success for the future. But nonetheless, by being highly selective at the front end, we're able to ensure that the folks that come into the program are those who can best take advantage of what we have to offer.

So what we're seeing in a school district that is now leading the nation among large school districts in student achievement gains over the past 15 years and leading the state of Illinois among the largest 55 districts in achievement gains over the last 15 years, in that school district, our principals are performing slightly better, not dramatically better but slightly better, than their sort of comparison schools on things like attendance, student achievement, high-school graduation, freshmen on track, and so on. And this incremental being better every year by just five or six percent on any one of those measures means that over time it adds up to a really significant hit.

Ed Pauly: Liz, how did the Chicago school district go about building its partnership with UIC? For example, how does the district shape the courses that are taught? Does your district report back to the universities about how the graduates are doing on the job?

Liz Kirby: Yes. We have a really deep partnership with UIC. From the beginning, we assessed the needs to identify strong principals who go into our schools. It's a strategy that I think has really paid off for the district in terms of achieving the gains, really being intentional around ensuring we have a large group of strong leaders to lead the schools.

In terms of our partnership, after assessing those needs, we really sought partners that could really customize a program to address the unique needs of leading an urban school. And we've been lucky over time to really have an open relationship where we're in constant communication around the progress of the graduates, around the adjustments that need to be made to the program, around placement of graduates of the program at particular schools. So a really systematic process where we're constantly assessing where we are in terms of the leadership program, making adjustments, identifying new needs, and asking UIC to respond to those needs in order to ensure we have a really strong bench of principals.

Steve Tozer: Let me jump in on that because CPS, Chicago Public Schools, did something that no other major district did. It got state legislative approval 21 years ago to establish its own eligibility exam for principals and it's a much higher bar than the state certificate is. And the consequence of that is that for the last dozen years approximately 60 percent of those state certificate holders applying to be Chicago principals failed that district bar exam, so to speak. And part of the

reason that's powerful [is] because it forces those of us who want our principals hired in that district to pay attention to what the district is expecting. So it goes back to one of your earlier questions about partnership. So the district establishes its set of competencies and standards, which are thoroughly consistent with national standards, but as Liz says, paying attention to the urban environment. And if we want our principals to succeed on that eligibility assessment, it means our curriculum has to prepare them to succeed.

Ed Pauly: Liz and Steve, you co-teach a year-long doctoral course to develop principal supervisors to move them away from being just compliance officers and more toward being managers who really help school principals grow. Liz, why did your district believe this was needed?

Liz Kirby: Each of the chiefs oversees 30 to 40 schools and they're tasked with improving or sustaining strong achievement at those schools. That means that they have to both coach their principals, but also push their principals and that really takes a unique skill set. We make assumptions that if you've been a strong principal you can automatically jump into an assistant superintendent or a superintendent role. And that's really not true. There really are other things that strong principal supervisors need to learn and adapt in order to really support and push and assist their principals of schools in improving their schools.

So it's really new work I think nationally. People are really starting to look at their principal supervisor role, and we want to make sure that the same strong research-based practices that were used to inform principal preparation programs are also being used to inform the work that we're doing with principal supervisors, or in Chicago, we call them network chiefs.

Ed Pauly: Steve, what Liz just told us about principal supervisors is very unusual. Why is it important?

Steve Tozer: For us, I think it's important because we are so intentional about our principal preparation programs in the pipeline that we have to be just as intentional about how those principals are supervised once they get in the district. And if that's misaligned, if the district aligns its principal preparation programming partnerships with universities like UIC, as compared to what they're expecting of principals once they're in position and how those principals are coached, then that misalignment isn't going to help develop the talent. New principals have a whole lot of development left to do, and we're all acutely aware of that. And so the task for network chiefs – each of them supervising the size of a sizable district, 30 to 40 principals each – the task for the chief is first and foremost to develop these principals because if they don't develop these principals we won't get the results that we're all looking for.

Ed Pauly: Liz, the Chicago district is getting nationwide attention these days for impressive gains among low-income students. What role do you think school principals play in this notable performance?

Liz Kirby:

The principal is the lead learner in the school but also the lead teacher of a school. Their classrooms are the teachers that they support and the teachers that work with students. The principal sets the vision and the agenda, aligns it to the district, and assures that teachers are supported toward reaching that vision. They make adjustments to strategy based on trends that they see. They are encouragers. They're cheerleaders. They're coaches. We would never have been able to get the gains that we have experienced without strong, dedicated principals leading their school communities and really supporting teachers who are doing that day-to-day work and getting student achievement outcomes.

And again, I want to say we've been so serious. I remember when I became a principal, when I did my first training program, I first did a very traditional, not terribly rigorous program. I started one. And when I saw what I was getting, I thought this isn't what I need to be a principal. This was around the same time that UIC and New Leaders were starting to do principal prep work in the city. They really worked, they were really dedicated to a high-quality principal preparation program which really helped me to develop the skills to lead my school.

That investment in principals and the leadership of principals to me is a key factor around the success. We couldn't do the work without strong principals. You've seen time and time again, the difference in a school is the leadership that is at the helm of the school.

Ed Pauly:

For our last question, Liz, is there a piece of advice that you have for other districts that want to build a strong partnership with their local universities?

Liz Kirby:

Yes, I think districts first have to get really clear about their need as it relates to principal leadership. We're engaged in a process where we're predicting vacancies one year, two years, three years out. We're looking at the types of schools that we need strong leaders for, the characteristics of leaders that we'll need for that. And then using that to inform the types of partnerships that we have with universities.

But it doesn't just stop with an RFP and having organizations apply to provide that leadership training. We want to continue to check in quarterly, even more frequently, to see how the participants in those programs are doing, what adjustments need to be made, what we're seeing in the field. One thing that we do in Chicago is that we don't just leave it up to UIC and other partners who do the training. We actually go out and we visit the residents ourselves. We see what's happening on the ground. We communicate that back up to the partners and make any on-the-ground adjustments that are really needed.

I would also say that districts not only think about the principal prep program, but start thinking about those soon-to-be principals. How do you engage with teacher leaders who, at some point, will probably become assistant principals or principals, to really start that pipeline work very early in the process.

Ed Pauly: And Steve, what's the best advice you would give other universities that want to start better programs to prepare principals?

Steve Tozer: I would say a couple things. I'm going to start with the following fact that underscores Liz's remarks. This week, the eighth chief executive officer for Chicago Public Schools was installed as interim since today's high school seniors entered the school system. Tremendous churn at the top is all too frequent in large urban districts in America, and small districts too, for that matter. And so one of the things that universities and districts can recognize is that by working together, they can be a force for stability. We've had eight CEOs since our program started, but the university has been a source of stability in its partnership with the school district. And as a consequence, instead of eight CEOs being a recipe for disaster, Chicago Public Schools has continued to improve throughout that entire time.

Ed Pauly: I'd like to thank our guests today, Steve Tozer of the Center for Urban Education Leadership of the University of Illinois at Chicago, and Liz Kirby, from Chicago Public Schools. Thanks to both of you for giving us a picture of how university training programs and school districts can together strengthen how principals are trained and made ready for leading schools and for talking with us today.

Steve Tozer: Thank you.

Liz Kirby: Thank you.