

District Partnerships with University Principal Preparation Programs

A Summary of Findings for
School District Leaders

Elaine Lin Wang, Susan M. Gates, Rebecca Herman



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About This Report

This targeted report summarizes key lessons for district leaders about partnering with university principal preparation programs to improve principal preparation and principal quality from The Wallace Foundation’s University Principal Preparation Initiative (UPPI). From 2016 to 2021, seven university principal preparation programs, with their district and state partners, fundamentally reshaped their principal preparation programs under UPPI.

The RAND Corporation conducted a study of the effort. Initial implementation findings are reported in *Launching a Principal Preparation Program: Partners Collaborate for Change* (Wang et al., 2018; www.rand.org/t/RR2612), and findings on the state role in supporting change are reported in *Using State-Level Policy Levers to Promote Principal Quality: Lessons from Seven States Partnership with Principal Preparation Programs and Districts* (Gates, Woo, et al., 2020; www.rand.org/t/RRA413-1). Final findings are reported in a series of five reports:

- three reports targeting specific audiences:
 - school districts (this report)
 - principal preparation programs: *Collaborating on University Principal Preparation Program Redesign: A Summary of Findings for University Principal Preparation Program Providers* (Herman, Wang, and Gates, 2022, www.rand.org/t/RRA413-5)
 - state education organizations: *State Partnerships with University Principal Preparation Programs: A Summary of Findings for State Policymakers* (Gates, Herman, and Wang, 2022; www.rand.org/t/RRA413-7)
- a report in brief reporting findings for a range of readers: *Redesigning University Principal Preparation Programs: A Systemic Approach for Change and Sustainability—Report in Brief* (Herman, Wang, et al., 2022; www.rand.org/t/RRA413-4)
- and a full report: *Redesigning University Principal Preparation Programs: A Systemic Approach for Change and Sustainability—Full Report* (Herman, Woo, et al., 2022; www.rand.org/t/RRA413-3). The full report is primarily intended as a secondary resource for readers who would like more detail about the study’s findings and methods.

This study was undertaken by RAND Education and Labor, a division of the RAND Corporation that conducts research on early childhood through postsecondary education programs, workforce development, and programs and policies affecting workers, entrepreneurship, and financial literacy and decisionmaking. The study was commissioned by The Wallace Foundation, which seeks to foster equity and improvements in learning and enrichment for young people and in the arts for everyone.

More information about RAND can be found at www.rand.org. Questions about this report should be directed to bherman@rand.org, and questions about RAND Education and Labor should be directed to educationandlabor@rand.org.

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Contents

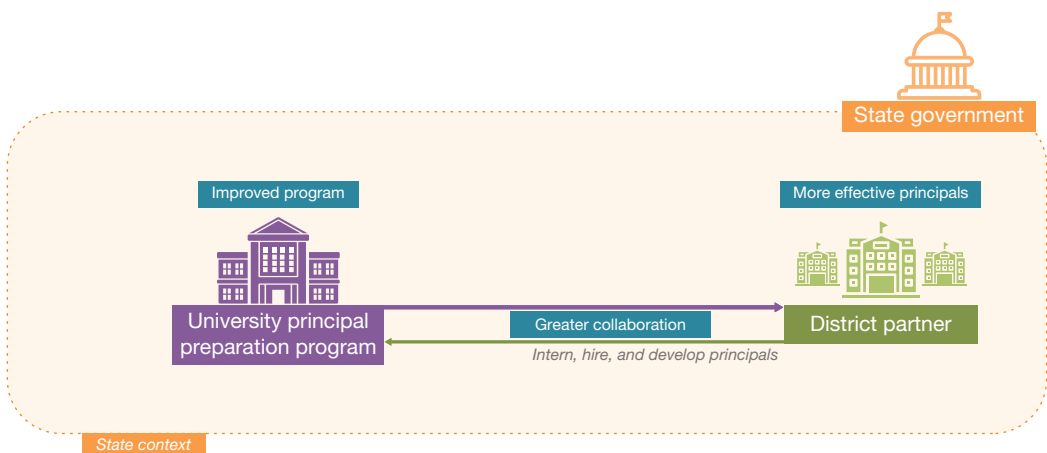
About This Report	iii
District Partnerships with University Principal Preparation Programs:	
A Summary of Findings for School District Leaders	1
Highlights of this report	2
UPPI districts reported three key benefits from partnering with principal preparation programs	2
Partnerships involved real engagement on the part of districts	8
Several factors facilitated and challenged UPPI districts' work and partnerships with preparation programs	13
Summary and implications	15
Abbreviations	19
References	21

District Partnerships with University Principal Preparation Programs: A Summary of Findings for School District Leaders

School districts have a vested interest in ensuring that there are high-quality leaders in every school. Research suggests that a range of district efforts along the pathway to the principalship can yield benefits in terms of principal retention and student achievement (Gates et al., 2019). Increasingly, districts are working with principal preparation programs (PPPs) to improve principal quality. More than 50 percent of large U.S. school districts (those serving 50,000 or more students) work closely with one or more principal preparation programs (Gates, Kaufman, et al., 2020). Some states require PPPs to partner with districts as a condition of state approval (Anderson and Reynolds, 2015). Research indicates that such district-program partnerships can improve program quality and principal preparation (Anderson and Reynolds, 2015). District-program partnerships are critical because principal candidates will eventually seek leadership positions in schools, and districts expect program graduates to be ready to lead; retraining or providing supplemental training could be time- and resource-intensive. Moreover, within a partnership, districts can provide insights to program enrollees in the context of a preparation program into the specific needs and challenges of their schools and the qualifications of successful school leaders (see Figure 1).

There is currently little research-based guidance, however, on how to make these district-program partnerships deep and productive. Lessons from the University Principal Prepara-

FIGURE 1
The District–Preparation Program Relationship in the Principal Preparation System



tion Initiative (UPPI; see Box 1) provide insights into how districts structure and leverage effective engagements with PPPs.

Highlights of this report

The RAND Corporation conducted a study of UPPI for The Wallace Foundation. In this report, we highlight three critical and mutually reinforcing benefits to the UPPI districts of collaborating with their university-based preparation program partners:

1. the prospect of higher-quality principals
2. improved leadership development practices in the district
3. a leadership tracking system (LTS) to support and develop school leaders.

In brief, district leaders believed that such partnerships are demanding but worthwhile. They recognized that the partnership involved rethinking the larger professional growth and support system for leaders in the district. Note that because UPPI recently concluded and outcome data are unavailable, our findings are based on interviewees' (e.g., university-based UPPI project directors, district leaders program faculty, principal candidates) reports of perceived or anticipated benefits. In subsequent sections, we discuss how UPPI districts engaged with the initiative and the challenges and facilitators of the partnership and the work.

By presenting the work of UPPI districts, this report is intended to help districts consider the value of and also the commitment involved in initiating or participating in a partnership with a university PPP. The efforts we document can serve as examples that school districts can incorporate into their thinking and planning as they engage in such partnerships to improve principal quality.

For more information on UPPI and this research, please see the full report on which this brief report is based (Herman, Woo, et al., 2022),¹ and the other reports in this series, described previously in the "About This Report" section on p. iii.

UPPI districts reported three key benefits from partnering with principal preparation programs

Districts anticipate higher-quality principals as a result of partnering on preparation program design and delivery

District leaders noted at least three mechanisms through which they expect principal quality to improve as a result of partnering: more strategic preparation program candidate recruit-

¹ This report is designed to distill findings from the full report of special interest to district-based readers. Because of this, some sections include text taken directly from the full report.

BOX 1

The University Principal Preparation Initiative

In 2016, The Wallace Foundation awarded grants to seven public universities to redesign their principal preparation programs, with the help of partner districts and state agencies responsible for credentialing preparation programs and licensing principals, as well as mentor programs which have carried out similar redesigns. UPPI programs are located in states with policies supportive of improved principal development and had district partners that served a high-need population. The university programs and associated district partners were as follows:

University	District or Consortium Partners
Albany State University (ASU)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Calhoun County • Dougherty County • Pelham City
Florida Atlantic University (FAU)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Broward County • Palm Beach County • St. Lucie County
North Carolina State University (NC State)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Johnston County • Northeast Leadership Academy Consortium • Wake County
San Diego State University (SDSU)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chula Vista Elementary • San Diego City Unified • Sweetwater Union High
University of Connecticut (UConn)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hartford • Meriden • New Haven
Virginia State University (VSU)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Henrico County • Hopewell City • Sussex County
Western Kentucky University (WKU)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Green River Regional Educational Cooperative, with representation from five member districts: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Bowling Green Independent - Daviess County - Owensboro Independent - Simpson County - Warren County

UPPI programs were asked to redesign their programs with district partners to align with evidence-based practices, such as higher standards for recruitment and performance-based assessments to guide applicant selection; a comprehensive and coherent curriculum that integrates theory and practice; meaningful, well-supervised clinical experiences with opportunities to experience the real work of principals; and a cohort structure that facilitates peer-to-peer support. To catalyze continuous feedback, the grant funded districts to develop a leader tracking system (LTS) that could support the collection and sharing of information about program participants between programs and districts. UPPI also required the engagement of a state agency partner, to stimulate state-level policy changes (e.g., leader standards, program accreditation, principal licensure).

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 UPPI. For example, state-level partners worked alongside the programs and districts to align the program to national and state standards. Moreover, universities and their partners participate in professional learning communities facilitated by The Wallace Foundation.

ment and selection processes, program content aligned with district needs, and instruction and program delivery that reflect real-world responsibilities.

District and program leaders reported in interviews that, in their view, partnering on recruitment and selection of program participants is likely to lead to stronger program graduates who are better prepared to work in the district. Districts leaders said they believed that by engaging in targeted recruitment and selection they improve the chances that the strongest aspiring principals participate in the program. In addition, they said that districts' involvement bolstered program graduates' likelihood of working in the district. District leaders reasoned that if they tapped an individual to apply to the program, the individual might feel committed to staying in the district and taking on a leadership role. One district leader remarked, "If you do a better job of recruiting those kinds of candidates, then as [they] move through the program, they come out with not only the knowledge, but they already have the fit."

UPPI district leaders further said that their contributions to preparation programs' framework, coursework, and the clinical component would lead to better prepared principals. District leaders anticipated that their involvement would help develop graduates who have the knowledge, skills, and dispositions prioritized by the district. This is because, through the collaborative redesign process, programs will be more attuned and responsive to the needs of districts. For example, programs may include course content and practical learning opportunities that help develop principals with a keen equity lens and who are knowledgeable about trauma-informed teaching, which are skills and dispositions that some districts particularly value in principals. One district leader said:

When we . . . gave [the partner university] input about . . . the curriculum, we talked so much about how administrators have to be problem solvers and foster collaboration and delegate . . . build teams and build culture, and be adaptive. . . . The [principal candidates] I've seen most recently come out of . . . the program, I am able to pick up on some of the differences . . . that we would hope that some of the tweaks we made in the curriculum would [lead to changes in] how they would hold themselves as a leader and function as a leader.

UPPI district leaders also said that they expect that their contributions with respect to shaping programs' thinking around instruction and program delivery will result in graduates who are prepared for the real work of principals. Specifically, when sitting administrators (i.e., principals and district leaders, such as superintendents) serve as adjunct instructors, they can engage program candidates in issues and tasks that reflect the work of current principals. District leaders expect that this will produce graduates who are better prepared to step into the principal role "on day one." Candidates recognized the advantage, with one saying,

Those have been some of the best parts, when . . . we're hearing from assistant superintendents, and principals, and directors-of-instruction talking about, "Okay, so this is great in

theory. What does it look like in person? What are some things we need to be really careful of? . . . Here's my experience." That feels very authentic.

Collaboration with programs inspired improved leadership development practices in districts

Principal preparation is just one stage of the pathway to the principalship. When districts partner with preparation programs, they have the opportunity to leverage the learning and momentum from the partnership to drive improvements in district-based principal development efforts.

Indeed, UPPI districts capitalized on learnings from their collaboration with programs to improve leadership development practices within their districts. In particular, in working closely with programs, districts saw opportunities to strengthen their in-house professional development (PD) offerings (see Box 2). In Connecticut and North Carolina, some UPPI districts offered PD for principal coaches in the district relating specifically to the key topics in the UPPI program's coursework, thus fostering coherence and continuity through ongoing PD as program graduates moved into administrative roles. UPPI helped the district move its agenda forward, with one district leader saying:

I feel like Wallace may have been . . . the catalyst to really put some organizational structures around leadership development. I think there was always the desire there, but just not sure how to navigate those waters. I think this has given us . . . clearer pathways to do that.

At least one partner district in California applied insights from the UPPI program redesign work to shape changes to principal and assistant principal performance standards, evaluation tools, and job descriptions (see Box 3).

Districts developed data systems to identify, grow, and track leaders

As part of their engagement in UPPI, districts committed to providing feedback about program graduates working in the district to inform ongoing program improvement efforts. To support this aim, UPPI explicitly required and provided funding for the development of a leader tracking system (LTS), a database with information about current and aspiring principals that potentially supports data-driven decisionmaking regarding principal selection, hiring, and support (Kaufman et al., 2017).² The primary purpose of the LTS is to support the collection and sharing of information about program participants between programs and districts. The system would provide university programs information on the outcomes of program graduates employed by partner districts (e.g., whether they have obtained an

² For more details and examples of LTS, see Anderson et al., 2017.

BOX 2

Henrico County Public Schools Built Out Professional Development Courses to Support Growth Along Every Step of Its Leadership Pathway

Henrico County Public Schools, in Virginia, credits UPPI for improving every step of its principal pathway:

I would say, it's all under one umbrella, but it was the development of a true, sustainable leadership development program in Henrico County. Beginning with teachers who aspire to be leaders, and now culminating [in] actually providing professional learning for our principal supervisors. So we have hit every level in preparation and building a true succession and pipeline in . . . four to five years.

Henrico built year-long PD courses, as follows:

- Aspiring Leader Academy for potential leaders, which was first offered within the district in 2016–2017, and which is anticipated to scale beyond the district through the region
- Assistant Principal Learning Series, first piloted in 2018–2019
- Principal Supervisor Academy, developed by Henrico, The Wallace Foundation, and the Center for Creative Leadership, which was initially offered to districts near Henrico because of the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2021) and planned to be statewide in 2021–2022.

Beginning in 2018–2019, Henrico also offered a district-wide Learning and Leading conference for principals and some teachers.

According to the district leader, the UPPI work raised the visibility of school leadership in the district and created a window of opportunity where district leadership supported PD. UPPI funding supported the development of the academies, and guidance from a UPPI mentor program informed the design. Some of the topics addressed in the PD—such as leadership dispositions and equity—reflect VSU and partner district priorities discussed during the redesign. And at least one opportunity—the Learning and Leading Conference—paired a district leader with a sitting principal for each learning strand to incorporate both policy and practice.

administrative position, their performance) that programs could use for continuous program improvement. Generally, but not always, districts led the LTS work.

UPPI teams designed their LTSs to not only support program improvement but also to support district decisions related to PD and evaluation of principals, long-term principal pathway planning, and assistant principal and principal placement (see Box 4). UPPI LTSs incorporate a wide variety of information, such as school-level achievement data and prior training and preparation program assessment results on a range of individuals, including sitting and prospective principals. A few districts included assessments of leadership and soft

BOX 3

Chula Vista Drew on Learnings from UPPI to Revise School Leader Evaluation Tools, Job Descriptions, and Interview Processes

Working on UPPI prompted Chula Vista to take a closer look at district policies around school leadership. SDSU's revisions to its preparation program highlighted California's state leadership standards. Chula Vista appreciated the direction of the SDSU changes and wanted to align its own leadership policies to SDSU's approach, which meant aligning with state standards. Up to that point, according to one district leader, few administrators within the district were aware of California's state leadership standards, the California Professional Standards for Education Leaders, unless they had recently obtained a credential.

District leaders revised the district's leadership standards, job descriptions, interview questions, and evaluations tools to align to the state standards, even though there was no requirement from the state that districts create such alignment. Whereas Chula Vista's previous standards and evaluation tools were more focused on principals' roles as managers, these shifts allowed for a greater focus on instructional leadership. Overall, these changes helped to create greater alignment between the university and district and more consistency within the district.

skills (e.g., communication skills) of employees. Small districts tended to report that they did not need an LTS to identify aspiring leaders or place candidates in positions because they know the people in their system well; however, one leader of a small district noted that the LTS could help validate their hiring or placement decisions. Small districts also tended to include teachers in the LTS so they could "develop from within" and have insight into their long-term leadership bench.

The process of building the LTS had a deep impact on the districts. While the systems were initially positioned to "track" aspiring and sitting leaders, multiple UPPI teams came to refer to their system as a "leader *development* system" to emphasize the use of the data to support PD, as highlighted in the previous section. For example, while not all districts designed their LTS to be accessible to principals and aspirants, one district did, using the LTS as the platform for professional learning events for aspiring leaders. The district made learning materials available through the LTS and documented aspiring leaders' participation in professional learning through the LTS. Another district included leadership standards within its LTS, allowing leaders to self-reflect on their areas of growth and the district to provide more personalized professional learning. In LTSs that contained evaluation data, district leaders hoped to chart the performance of individuals over time to focus on mentoring and PD.

While there are numerous benefits to partnering, not all UPPI districts benefited equally. In weighing whether to form a partnership, districts may wish to consider their system's needs and priorities. Smaller districts, for example, mentioned that, for the number of principal positions they have available at any given time, they did not see a need for an LTS to

BOX 4

In Florida, District Partners Took Different Approaches in Developing Their LTSs, but All Emphasized Using the LTS to Develop Leadership Capacity

In Florida, each of FAU's three partner districts created its own district-based LTS, and the university also built its own university-based LTS to share information more easily between the districts and university. Two of the partner districts in particular demonstrate how districts took different factors into consideration in their approach to developing their LTS. Broward, a larger district whose existing data systems were operated by an outside vendor, largely relied on that vendor, while St. Lucie, a smaller district, did most of the development in-house. The districts experienced trade-offs in these decisions. St. Lucie's approach allowed it to integrate the LTS with existing software, and it was also able to build its own modules. Meanwhile, Broward faced more obstacles in customizing its LTS because it had to work with an outside vendor.

St. Lucie ultimately expanded its LTS to include data on not only principals and assistant principals but also teachers. In the words of the district leader, "We could have just stayed with just that idea of who are our assistant principals and principals, but being a smaller district, it is easier to say, 'Hey, let's open it up to our 2,600 teachers,' as opposed to another district that has triple the number of teachers." This would then allow the district leaders to examine their whole workforce capacity and leadership capabilities. In contrast, Broward's LTS focused on leadership roles at the school level and above (e.g., district leadership, principals, assistant principals, and principal supervisors). Broward district leaders did similarly emphasize the use of their LTS for leadership development purposes. It primarily uses the system to document the progress of leaders in the district and identify areas of strength and growth.

support hiring, PD, and placement practices. Similarly, some small districts expressed that they do not send enough candidates to a university preparation program to warrant a formal partnership. Other small districts, however, felt that the partnership improved their approach to leadership development.

Partnerships involved real engagement on the part of districts

Districts participated in steering and working groups in service of program redesign

UPPI districts were deeply involved in helping programs envision the redesign, build the new program features, and implement the redesigned program. In the first year of the initiative, each UPPI team worked together to envision the redesigned program, with district partners engaged throughout. The processes were characterized not only by sharing of information, but active co-design. The teams co-developed leader standards for what they wanted program graduates to know about and be able to do. Similarly, each team developed an overarch-

ing framework with broad themes that recur throughout learning experiences or courses and provided teams with a set of core beliefs and values around which to build the program. Developing the standards and framework brought teams together and helped identify where programs needed to change to address district needs. Teams also assessed the existing program using Quality Measures (QM; Education Development Center, 2018), a research-based program self-assessment tool and process designed to help PPP leaders and others assess pre-service principal training quality in six domains. The QM activity was conducted three to four times over the period of redesign. It helped districts and programs learn about one another's organizational perspectives; further, districts reported that they were more inclined to fully commit to the redesign partnership when they saw the programs expose weaknesses and actively seek suggestions for improvement.

District representatives participated in steering and working groups that offered both strategic and operational support to the redesign effort. These groups comprised leaders from each partner organization (university, districts, state department of education, and mentor program). Districts were typically represented by the superintendent or assistant superintendent/chief of schools (for larger districts). These formal steering groups were essential throughout the entire change process.

UPPI teams also tapped district expertise in working groups that emerged during the redesign process. These teams typically met more often (e.g., as often as every week) to work on specific redesign tasks. They dissolved when tasks finished and then reassembled as needed for new tasks. Depending on the team dynamics and the task, district partners sometimes had a more responsive role, such as providing feedback on the curricula drafted by the university or attending meetings to hear updates on the work the university was leading. Districts engaged relevant personnel as needed in the working groups, including the chief information officer, director of leadership development, human resources director, director of research and evaluation, and supervisor of learning and instruction, among others. Aside from the regularly scheduled meetings, partners met informally and communicated via texts and emails when the need arose.

UPPI districts also capitalized on opportunities to learn from their peers beyond their immediate team, made possible from their participation in UPPI. In particular, district leaders appreciated the chance to attend professional learning community (PLC) events alongside the rest of the UPPI team and learn with other districts at these events:

Most of those sessions have been profoundly helpful. . . . For the most part, those PLCs where you're able to listen to everyone's progress . . . and to interact and share ideas and learn from them, from others, that networking component of the PLCs, it's just been astoundingly helpful for me. . . . I'm so grateful for those opportunities. My only concern is, "Oh, my goodness, when the grant ends, we won't have that." But we do have universities that we know we'll stay in contact with.

Districts contributed and committed to supporting changes in program design and delivery

All UPPI district-university partnerships established a memorandum of understanding to formalize the partnership, and most UPPI districts played an active role in conceptualizing and implementing the changes to the recruitment and selection processes, curriculum and instruction, and clinical experiences.

Recruitment and selection

UPPI districts helped programs use more targeted recruiting strategies. Instead of generally recruiting applicants that met program prerequisites, for example, programs asked districts to identify educators in good standing who would be excellent candidates and could benefit from a rigorous preparation program. Programs also sought district input in recruiting candidates whose career goals aligned with the district's mission—for example, applicants seeking to be equity-driven leaders and whose goal was to become a principal rather than to stay in teaching. Indeed, some districts led the first round of recruitment, actively encouraging promising candidates to apply. Meanwhile, some programs obtained district input by requiring that program applicants receive district endorsement.

To identify people they wanted to encourage to apply, districts employed a range of strategies. Smaller districts tended to be aware of most of their educators with leadership ambitions. Larger districts with access to data systems and records that track information such as professional learning used such tools to identify promising applicants. Staff in UPPI districts also reported participating in candidate recruitment and assessments events or serving as selection-committee members.

Curriculum and instruction

UPPI programs also changed the nature of the curriculum. Prior to UPPI, most programs offered “standalone” courses, without a set sequence to the curriculum. As part of the redesign, each site developed an overarching framework and used it to guide the redesign of the curriculum. Most UPPI programs centered equity as a theme within the framework. The notions of collaboration, relationship-building, and developing others are also featured in nearly all of the UPPI programs' frameworks.

With respect to instruction and program delivery, UPPI districts encouraged programs to prioritize interactive and engaging forms of pedagogy—such as role-playing, simulations, and case studies—over more traditional activities, such as lectures, presentations, or readings. In response, UPPI programs also decreased their use of traditional research papers for formative assessments (i.e., assessments to evaluate candidate learning) and opted instead for field-based problems and action-based research. Similarly, for summative assessments (i.e., end-of-program assessments), UPPI programs increased their use of capstone projects and theses while decreasing their use of pen-and-paper exams. Overall, district input helped connect assessments more clearly to activities that principals actually undertake.

The partnership between UPPI programs and districts resulted in greater involvement of district-based administrators as adjunct instructors, although there was some variation across programs. One program leader said that the redesigned program was almost entirely using such district staff as instructors, which was a “100% reversal” from what the program had done in the past. Other programs had already been using district staff as instructors prior to the redesign, but their use changed as the result of changes in the program. For example, at SDSU, the program added multiple district-based cohorts and needed to engage additional district-based adjunct faculty. District commitment to providing adjunct faculty was especially important in programs that had district-based cohorts, as this staffing model allowed candidates to gain more training in the nuances of their own districts—for example, training that aligned with district priority for culturally responsive teaching and leading—and exposure to their own district leaders. All the UPPI programs provided support to adjunct instructors. Some paired practitioners with university-based faculty or engaged a program coordinator whose job was to collaborate with and oversee district-based adjuncts. Programs also developed “shells” for courses, thereby ensuring that practitioners were not burdened with developing courses from scratch.

Clinical experience

Finally, UPPI districts influenced program changes with respect to the clinical component that are expected to help graduates prepare for the realities of principalship. All UPPI programs increased the practice focus, consistency, and personalized nature of the clinical component. The increased focus on practice meant more use of problem-based, hands-on assignments, including those using actual school data. For example, most redesigned programs required that candidates conduct a school improvement project tied to a school’s specific needs and engage a team of school staff or facilitate PLCs to implement their plan. Programs also improved intentionality and consistency of the clinical component in ways that districts believed would contribute to more robust learning experiences for candidates. For example, pre-UPPI, it was typical for candidates to receive a long list of possible experiences and be asked to complete a certain number of them in coordination with their mentor principal. This resulted in variation in experiences among candidates because experiences depended on the placement context and what mentor principals were able or willing to offer. Redesigned programs typically required a core set of experiences, thus ensuring that all candidates had access to critical learning and leadership development opportunities. At the same time, UPPI programs also found ways to personalize clinical experiences to candidates’ needs. Drawing on available information—such as data collected during the candidate application and selection process and candidates’ personalized professional growth plans—and in conversation with candidates and mentor principals, programs tailored experiences to support candidates’ leadership development.

Districts have a significant role to play in supporting the changes to the clinical component. Partner districts commit to providing rich learning opportunities and mentoring for principal candidates in the program. This includes ensuring that candidates have adequate

release time, particularly those who continued serving in their full-time roles while enrolled in the program, and providing candidates access to the data needed to engage in the authentic clinical experiences that have been designed for them. For some partnerships, it also means that districts must work with the program to nominate, vet, select, and train mentor principals who have proven to be effective leaders, rather than permitting any interested sitting principals (or district leader) to serve. Moreover, as part of the redesign, most UPPI programs restructured, strengthened, or expanded the candidate support system and increased focus on clinical coaching. This shift entails a collaborative relationship with frequent touchpoints between the district-based mentor principal and university-based clinical coach, coordinator, or supervisor to best understand the development needs of the candidates. All these commitments represent a significant investment on the part of partner districts.

Districts took the lead on leader tracking system development

Most UPPI districts took primary responsibility of LTS development. By spring 2021, the majority of districts—14 of 17 districts plus one consortium of small districts—had at least begun developing district-based LTSs. This included a cross-district system shared among three small districts. UPPI districts collaborated with the preparation program and accessed other resources and supports in building their LTSs. For example, UPPI teams, with representation from universities, districts, and sometimes state partners, participated in a “visioning” event led by the School Superintendents Association (AASA) and IBM designed to help them conceptualize potential uses, data elements and sources, and users for their eventual LTS. Later in the process, teams also had opportunities to meet with universities and districts that had operational LTSs to ask questions about their system, their approach to building it, and their limitations. Program and district leaders alike reported that such experiences were pivotal to helping them take practical steps to build their system.

Most UPPI districts engaged not only their leaders but also information technology and human resources personnel in the LTS visioning work. UPPI districts considered capacity, sustainability, and flexibility in deciding whether to contract out the LTS work. Some districts issued requests for proposals for vendors to develop it, while others assembled in-house teams to do the work; still other districts opted for a combination of vendor and in-house teams. Most, but not all, small UPPI districts did not have the capacity to develop the LTS alone. They also did not have existing online databases to tap or resources to maintain it after launch. One option for small districts was to band together into consortia for the LTS. This worked for one set of small UPPI districts, which decided to develop a cross-district LTS, but did not work for another, which indicated that a single LTS would not meet the unique district needs.

Other key decisions in the development process included which tools, software, or platforms to use, whether to embed the LTS in an existing system (e.g., human resources system) or create a standalone LTS, what data to include, how to gather the data, and how frequently to refresh the data. District respondents pointed out the efficiencies of having software and

platforms that can easily communicate with existing systems. Some also believed that embedding the LTS in an existing system would be more sustainable because the district maintains existing systems with ongoing budgets and because some updates will automatically feed into the LTS, thus not requiring staff attention, which could wane with turnovers. With respect to data, districts planned data collection, updates, and cleaning with an eye to managing costs. Automatic updates from district data systems occurred regularly (e.g., nightly or weekly); updates calling on data from state and university data systems were less frequent because the data changed less frequently. Overall, districts tended to minimize data requiring manual entry. (See the full report [Herman, Woo, et al., 2022] for more detail on the advantages of various design choices.)

Several factors facilitated and challenged UPPI districts' work and partnerships with preparation programs

Preexisting relationships and a focus on building a culture of trust and collaboration underlie successful partnerships

UPPI teams agreed that it is important to select the right partner organization. Most UPPI districts had a prior working relationship with their preparation program partner. The nature of the partnership varied. For example, the organizations may have partnered on a previous grant, the district may be the primary sender of principal candidates to the university, or the district may have engaged with the university on teacher preparation. Regardless, this prior relationship helped both sides commit to a partnership to improve principal preparation.

Districts established structures and routines that demonstrated commitment to the partnership

UPPI districts viewed their engagement with preparation programs as valuable and important; however, it can be time-intensive and complex work. To manage the work, each organization involved in a UPPI team, including districts, was led by an individual with a strategic perspective (e.g., superintendent or assistant superintendent) and at least one individual with operational capacity to execute the work (e.g., director of leadership development). The strategic perspective is needed to provide a vision of how each organization aims to influence or be influenced by the effort, to ensure organizational commitment to the initiative, and to ensure alignment between the work at hand and the broader vision and priorities of the organizations.

Team meetings and communication were important but logistically challenging

Regular meetings and communication helped maintain partner engagement and continuity in the redesign process. Partners credited regular meetings as a driver for partner engagement and a way to keep everyone on track in a formal and coordinated way. Yet, redesign teams, and particularly district partners, encountered challenges in ensuring regular communication. First, university and district staff operate on different annual schedules and are not always available at the same time. Respondents from both types of organizations noted that universities tend to organize meetings well in advance, while districts need flexibility to shift schedules based on real-time issues. Second, prior to the pandemic, district partners sometimes reported that commuting to and from meetings was time-consuming, especially when meetings were from their district location. Online meetings were considered more helpful, but better suited for check-ins than for more complex collaborative work, such as redesigning the curriculum. Some teams specifically chose to meet in person, despite distance, to build rapport and focus on the work, while others prioritized convenience, recognizing that district leaders are typically too busy to meet in person, particularly if the partner university was a distance away. Many combined in-person and virtual meetings. Turnovers in positions and inconsistency in the individuals attending the meetings can also hamper communication among partners, obliging partners to “[rewind] to catch people up.”

Districts built lasting partnerships with other districts as well as the university program

UPPI created strong partnerships, as reported consistently by team members, which were a significant driver of the redesign work. In addition to collaborating within the UPPI team, district leaders had many opportunities to share learning through PLCs. Both university and district leaders especially valued the opportunity to talk with their peers: “I think also being a part of the PLCs . . . and being able to communicate with our peer institutions has really helped us to not so much feel like we were on an island by ourselves, but to kind of gauge what we were doing, where we were.” District leaders consistently reported that they turned to their partner districts to discuss strategies including but not limited to UPPI work. One UPPI district leader shared that they have exchanged ideas ranging from projecting staff retirements to managing data systems with partner districts:

They’ve helped guide us. . . . The working relationship is outstanding. We meet monthly. And they are substantive discussions around the work. I think it’s even branched out farther past this work relating to Wallace to other things. First of all, it’s hard to find somebody in a job-like role, and then everybody’s so busy. It’s hard to find somebody who will take the time to answer questions as you have them.

District partners were keen to sustain the partnerships with the university and each other past the end of the grant. Institutional engagement between the programs and the districts

was baked into the redesigned program, especially in recruitment activities, cohort development discussions, candidate assessment day, mock interviews, instruction, and internship mentoring. Some programs also created new positions (e.g., full-time clinical director, program coordinators, cohort director) to ensure more touchpoints with district partners.

Teams explored strategies to manage leadership turnovers

Although district-preparation program partnerships are intended to be institutional partnerships, the reality is that, often, partnerships depend on the relationship between individual leaders from each organization. Throughout UPPI, teams experienced turnover in multiple key positions, including district superintendents, program personnel, and university administrators. In one case, the preparation program leader expressed concern that, given turnover in the district, the district may not prioritize UPPI or invest time, effort, and resources in the partnership. In circumstances involving turnover, it is critical for the incoming member to take the time to learn about the nuances of the partnership, their role, and the tasks at hand, and for others to onboard the newcomer, apprise them of the purpose and benefits of the partnership, and build new trusting working relationships. Teams developed strategies to ease turnover transitions. Most of these strategies were preemptive, including engaging in redundant staffing, cross-training team members in different roles and tasks so knowledge about the initiative would not be lost if an individual left the team, and maintaining clear documentation of timelines, objectives, and achievements.

Summary and implications

The experiences of UPPI districts suggest that collaborative district-university partnerships focused on principal preparation are demanding but worthwhile for districts. One district leader recalled a conversation with a colleague:

I remember thinking, “You’re really burning the candle at both ends. You’re a superintendent . . . you’re a professor [in a university principal preparation program]. What are you doing?” And he said, “You know, the additional work I put in at [the partner institution] gives me a leg up on identifying and recruiting the best candidates [for principal positions].” And I’ll never forget that because the reality is, yes you put in a little bit more work teaching a class, but if you hire an ineffective leader, you’re going to work ten times more than if you would just identify the right person and hire the right person.

Such partnerships are not a one-way street. To be sure, the partnerships involved districts sharing their expertise and insights into a program’s leadership framework, coursework, instruction, and clinical experiences, and partnering on recruitment and selection. According to districts and university representatives alike, these contributions were meaningful and valuable. Districts anticipated they would benefit from prepared principals who have the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that the district needs. But the benefits of the

partnerships did not end there. For districts, participation in these efforts prompted further reflection about their own initiatives to improve leadership development and management practices within their districts. Through the process of working collaboratively with university preparation programs, districts saw opportunities to strengthen their own professional learning offerings, as well as their hiring and evaluation practices. Critically, districts recognized that the partnership involved rethinking the larger professional growth and support system for leaders in the district.

The UPPI collaboration also involved districts providing feedback to the university program about their program graduates—how they fared in the hiring process and their performance on the job. Districts created leader tracking or development systems to collect systematic information about program participants and support sharing with the programs. These systems were designed to support district objectives as well—providing information that could inform decisions about the PD and evaluation of principals, long-term principal pathway planning, and assistant principal and principal placement. The process of building the LTS had a profound impact on the districts.

Effective partnerships required time and effort on the part of district officials. UPPI district superintendents and assistant superintendents spent time at strategic meetings—time they could have spent elsewhere. Senior staff members devoted time to working groups to help the university programs revise and implement their curriculum and program processes. District leaders served as adjunct faculty in the program and/or mentors in clinical practice. Interviewees reported that the relationship they developed with the program and the expected dividends in terms of improved principal quality provided a major payoff for their time and effort.

How can school districts that are interested in engaging in such partnerships make it worth their while?

- Find a willing university partner. This means a university partner that is not just checking a box to say it elicited district input, but one that has a real desire to listen and respond to feedback. Districts should consider whether the university program would be willing and able to incorporate the district as a full partner in shaping and delivering the program. Often, successful partnerships are based on existing relationships. Before diving into a partnership, districts might start building relationships—perhaps by allowing district staff to teach or supervise students or by meeting one-on-one with the program director to assess interest.
- Districts should consider their own system's readiness. This includes to what extent they can be a committed, responsive partner, which includes senior district leaders have time to participate in meetings and provide the necessary input. UPPI districts made a commitment to the partnership for at least the duration of the initiative. Other districts considering something similar might also assess whether they can, as an organization, make a similar commitment.

- Promote communication between those engaging with the university program and others in the district who have a role in hiring, supporting, and evaluating principals. Visibility into the collaboration can facilitate handoffs in the event of district turnover and can enhance the district's ability to leverage insights from the partnership.
- Commit to examining and refining the structures and processes in the district that pertain to the leadership pipeline. Think of the collaborative partnership with the university program as just one piece of a broader effort to support quality school leadership.

Abbreviations

ASU	Albany State University
FAU	Florida Atlantic University
LTS	Leader Tracking System
NC State	North Carolina State University
PD	professional development
PLC	professional learning community
PPP	principal preparation program
QM	Quality Measures
SDSU	San Diego State University
UCONN	University of Connecticut
UPPI	University Principal Preparation Initiative
VSU	Virginia State University
WKU	Western Kentucky University

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The job of the school principal has become much more complex and demanding over the past several decades. Many university-based principal preparation programs—which prepare the majority of school principals—have struggled with how to make the fundamental changes needed to prepare principals for today’s schools. To test a path forward, The Wallace Foundation provided grants to seven universities and their partners to redesign their principal preparation programs in line with research-supported practices. This targeted report shares findings from the RAND Corporation’s five-year study of The Wallace Foundation’s University Principal Preparation Initiative (UPPI), with an emphasis on findings for school district leaders.

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