

KNOWLEDGE IN BRIEF

Findings You Can Use from New Wallace Research

WHEN URBAN SCHOOL DISTRICTS DEMAND IT, PRINCIPAL TRAINING AND PREPARATION CAN IMPROVE

Principals can make or break a school. But in cities throughout the United States, many candidates for the job are ill-equipped to tackle the work awaiting them¹. That’s because the university graduate-level education leadership programs that train principals too often fall short in giving would-be leaders the skills and knowledge necessary to improve teaching and learning in troubled urban schools.

A new report suggests there may be a way out of this. As the chief users of what preparation programs supply – i.e., principals – districts have the power to grab the programs’ attention and demand better “products,” thereby stimulating better training, according to the study. “By behaving as consumers, districts can improve the quality of program candidates and graduates, increase the number of qualified candidates for leadership positions, and ensure that program curricula address district needs,” the report says.

At the same time, although the district approach shows promise, it also faces obstacles. And, the report cautions, it’s too soon to say if the strategy can succeed in the ultimate goal of shaping principals who get teachers to teach better and students to learn more. Only time and further research can answer that.

THREE CONSUMER APPROACHES

The report, *Districts Developing Leaders*, commissioned by The Wallace Foundation, looks at eight urban school districts supported by Wallace in their work to revamp leader preparation programs: Boston; Chicago; Fort Wayne, Indiana; Jefferson County (Louisville), Kentucky; Providence, Rhode Island; Springfield, Illinois; Springfield, Massachusetts; and St. Louis. Each received funding for various periods starting in 2001, with the study charting the efforts’ progress through fall 2008.

The report’s chief finding is that the districts landed on three consumer-like approaches to promote higher-quality principal preparation:

ABOUT THE STUDY

Districts Developing Leaders: Lessons on Consumer Actions and Program Approaches from Eight Urban Districts is by Margaret Terry Orr, Cheryl King and Michelle La Pointe. The report looks at efforts by eight urban school districts to improve how people are trained to carry out the job of school principal, so they can meet the particular challenges of each district’s schools. The study was published by the Education Development Center, Inc., and commissioned by The Wallace Foundation. The report is downloadable free of charge at www.wallacefoundation.org or at www.edc.org.

- As *discerning customers*, districts defined what they were looking to “buy,” which alerted university preparation programs to what the market was demanding. In practice, this meant that the districts established clear, rigorous standards for principals. One result was that districts had to clarify for themselves what a principal needed to know and do so they could better select candidates for the job and give the hires the right professional development. Another outcome was that leadership training programs were put on notice about what skills and knowledge they needed to teach if their graduates were to meet the new district expectations. All eight districts developed new standards for principal selection, either from whole cloth or by adapting state and national standards. Chicago, for one, identified five “core leadership competencies,” including the abilities to assess the quality of

classroom instruction and help teachers develop their skills. In Louisville, professors, district officials and principals spent two years crafting leadership standards that later formed the basis of Kentucky state standards.

- **Collaborators** worked with selected universities to develop leadership programs centered on district needs. Often the four districts that took this route offered modest financial incentives to make the collaborations more attractive. Louisville students who enrolled in a university with a district-approved leadership program, for example, were eligible for reimbursements for two courses, a benefit that presumably encouraged them to direct their “business” to district-favored programs. The researchers found that Louisville preparation programs’ “faculty members were willing to adapt their programs’ focus, design, and content to meet the district’s expectations, in order to maintain this relationship.” Universities were willing to make a number of practical accommodations, too, such as reducing or waiving tuition fees and housing the programs in spots convenient for district employees. The University of Missouri-Columbia, for one, situated its new program for St. Louis right in the city – more than 120 miles away from the university campus.
- **Competitors** set up their own preparation programs to develop a pool of principal candidates. Four districts did this. Boston and Springfield, Massachusetts, took advantage of a change in state law that allowed districts and other qualifying organizations to train and license principals. Providence bypassed existing education leadership programs and worked with the University of Rhode Island – which previously had not been in the leadership business – to establish an 18-month, 36-credit, custom-tailored program. Fort Wayne, which previously had relied on management-minded staffers such as sports coaches to fill the principal ranks, turned instead to high-quality teachers with leadership potential and set up a series of required experiences wrapped around conventional training. Among these was a year-long series of school internships for leadership program graduates.

Each approach had strengths and weaknesses. Districts that established their own programs exerted the most control over training future principals but also incurred the biggest costs, for example. The researchers concluded the combination of clarifying principal standards and collaborating with university-based preparation programs

HOW STATES CAN PROMOTE BETTER PRINCIPAL PREPARATION

- Hold universities accountable for building state standards into their programs in meaningful ways.
- Toughen standards for training-program accreditation with requirements for such things as program admission prerequisites and minimum internship hours.
- Make sure requirements for principal certification are specific and encourage on-the-job training for newcomers.
- Explore how to ensure funding for more expensive but crucial aspects of principal preparation, notably full-time internships.

to change training “had the greatest potential for broad-reaching, sustainable change in the quality of leadership preparation and graduates ready for school leadership.”

PAYOFFS

Higher-Quality Principal Preparation for Districts

Each district’s work resulted in leadership preparation that went beyond what the state required. The newly shaped training typically lasted longer than conventional preparation and placed more emphasis on matters important to school turn-around, such as adept use of data to improve instruction. The district efforts also saw the cooperating university programs adopt many of the features research has associated with sound principal preparation, such as rigorous admissions requirements, coherent curriculums, and – especially important – high-quality internships.²

Benefits for Participating Universities

Universities participating in the efforts reaped small financial rewards – through students being steered their way for leadership training, for example, or new enrollments from program graduates who returned for additional degrees. The universities reported that they’d applied some of what they’d learned in their district experience to other programs, such as discussion of urban education issues. Also, being selected to carry out what the field saw as important work offered programs “highly desirable enhancements of reputation,” that is, cachet.

SHORTCOMINGS AND CHALLENGES

The efforts encountered stumbling blocks, too.

A number of them struggled to find the right balance between theory and practice in training, and to create

a strong link between the new preparation and actual district hiring. Moreover, many districts failed to set up a mechanism to let the preparation programs know how their graduates were faring at work – an essential if these programs were to be tweaked and improved.

In addition, one hoped-for result did not materialize, according to preliminary research: that the district-prompted work would touch off change in education leadership programs as a whole. The researchers did not explore this in detail, but found in a handful of interviews that faculty members at universities unaffiliated with district efforts “were not able to identify any changes that the district programs had engendered.”

The efforts also faced notable challenges, including:

- A dearth of experienced professionals to serve as mentors to the budding principals.
- High superintendent turnover that disrupted the efforts; in two districts, in fact, the initiatives went on temporary hiatus after a new schools chief stepped in.
- Uncertain future funding for important aspects of principal preparation, especially internships, once Wallace support ended.

EFFECTS ON STUDENT LEARNING: TOO SOON TO SAY

The study ended before the new principals had been working long enough for a good comparison of their

effect on student achievement with that of peers from conventional training. Indeed, the researchers were able to collect only limited, anecdotal evidence about how the new leaders were doing so far. But early accounts from three districts suggested that these principals arrived at their jobs better prepared than others in areas including instructional leadership. “What we can conclude,” the report says, “is that the new approaches taken by district-university affiliated programs have potential for yielding better-prepared candidates. The more that programs use innovative strategies and integrate them coherently around a core set of principles as found here, the more likely it is that their graduates will be able to meet challenges in their schools.”

¹ Leadership is second only to teaching among school-related factors that affect student learning. Kenneth Leithwood, Karen Seashore Louis, Stephen Anderson and Kyla Wahlstrom, *How Leadership Influences Student Learning*, Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement, and Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, 2004.

“The U.S. Department of Education (2005) characterized conventional programs as lacking vision, purpose, and coherence; students could self-enroll without the program faculty’s consideration of their previous leadership experience, and progress through discrete courses without connection to actual practice or local schools.” *Districts Developing Leaders*, p.54.

² Linda Darling-Hammond, Michelle LaPointe, Debra Meyerson, Margaret Orr, *Preparing School Leaders for a Changing World: Lessons from Exemplary Leadership Development Programs – Final Report*, Stanford University, 2007.

UPDATE: A SAMPLING OF DEVELOPMENTS SINCE THE RESEARCH ENDED

- **ILLINOIS: District Innovation Influences State Action**

In early 2010, Illinois legislators passed a law requiring all principal preparation programs in the state to reapply for accreditation using new standards recommended by a state task force – standards based in part on reforms that the Chicago and Springfield, Illinois, school districts had spearheaded with partnering universities and nonprofits.

“We had some universities that were very vocal” in opposition to the changes, says Erika Hunt, who supervises Wallace Foundation education leadership grants through a policy center at Illinois State University. “They said anything we proposed could not be done. To show that yes, it can and is being done, not just downstate (in Springfield) but also in Chicago was huge. It’s key to have demonstration sites so we can test innovation and try to scale it up through state policy.”

- **FT. WAYNE: District Offers Training for Veteran Principals, Too**

Indiana’s second-largest school district designed an academy to recruit new leaders and then supplement their administrative training after they become certified as principals. About 80 new leaders have undergone the more rigorous preparation requirements and almost all have been hired into administrative positions.

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Although a comprehensive review of the initiative has not been completed, promising early results prompted the district to spread the post-certification training to veteran administrators too. “The internship process taught us that you can’t assume a person has a certain skill level,” said Superintendent Wendy Robinson.

In 2010, the district for the first time reached all its achievement targets under the 2001 federal No Child Left Behind law, and Robinson believes the new principal preparation played a key role in that.

- **CHICAGO: Tougher Standards Mean Lower “Pass Rate”**

To be considered for a principal position in Chicago, candidates today must pass a four-step review that includes an exam, created by current and former principals and assessing judgment about real school situations, and a half-day of personal interviews along with the candidates’ observing and critiquing teachers’ instruction.

Since the new standards were enacted in January 2009, the “pass rate” has dropped from 75 percent to 32 percent.

The changes have not been universally popular. Some school councils, the hiring authorities in the city’s 655 schools, have fought for preferred candidates, such as a long-time assistant principal who has not passed the new standards. And district officials say some preparation programs were disappointed with lower-than-expected pass rates. But other principal preparation programs have rallied. For example, the University of Illinois-Chicago shifted its course schedule and content to give aspiring principals a better shot at passing the district’s leadership assessments.

“It’s taken incredible organizational will to stand by the eligibility standards,” said Monica Rosen, acting officer of leadership development and support for the district. But she added: “We have 120 schools changing leadership this year. In every single one of them, the leaders have passed this process.”

- **SPRINGFIELD: District Plans to Track New Principal Performance**

With 80 percent of its principals preparing to retire and few strong candidates emerging from state universities, Springfield (Massachusetts) Public Schools set up a new leadership certification program that included paid internships and a summer institute where participants created school turnaround plans. Springfield also worked with the University of Massachusetts to provide graduate credit for participants, and the district developed a leadership institute for veteran principals.

“We saw a shift to participants understanding that the main role of a principal is instructional leadership,” said Kate Fenton, Springfield’s chief school redesign officer.

Many district officials believe that the 56 graduates whom they’ve hired as principals or assistant principals are better prepared for urban school leadership, according to Fenton. Still, nearly all district’s schools remain below the bar on the state’s achievement measures, and Alan Ingram, who became superintendent in 2008, says some new principals do not seem to have a strong enough sense of urgency about how or why they must do better.

Springfield has begun using longitudinal data to track and compare the outcomes of administrators whom the district has vetted and trained. The district’s efforts to improve school leadership also recently led Massachusetts to add a fourth standard for principal preparation, focusing on “resiliency” and professional development.



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