

State Partnerships with University Principal Preparation Programs

A Summary of Findings
for State Policymakers

Susan M. Gates, Rebecca Herman, Elaine Lin Wang



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About This Report

This targeted report summarizes key lessons for state education organizations about redesigning principal preparation 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:
 - state education organizations (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)
 - school districts: *District Partnerships with University Principal Preparation Programs: A Summary of Findings for School District Leaders* (Wang, Gates, and Herman, 2022; www.rand.org/t/RRA413-6)
- 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
State Partnerships with University Principal Preparation Program Providers:	
A Summary of Findings for State Policymakers	1
Insights	1
Implications.....	7
Abbreviations	9
References	11

State Partnerships with University Principal Preparation Programs: A Summary of Findings for State Policymakers

School leadership has a powerful influence on school and student outcomes. In all states, there are systems in place to prepare principals and support them once they are in the role. Programs—in universities and beyond—prepare principals; school districts employ principals; and a variety of other organizations, including state and county education agencies, professional associations, and education nonprofits, work with programs and districts to support and develop principals. State departments of education and professional standards boards are key actors in the system that shape principals by leveraging their funding streams, authority, and policy tools—especially but not limited to certification, licensure, and program approval (Manna, 2015).

Recognizing the important role that principal preparation plays in strong school leadership, The Wallace Foundation set out on a five-year effort, beginning in 2016, to support a systems approach to improving principal preparation through the University Principal Preparation Initiative (UPPI). By design, UPPI required the inclusion of a state agency partner (see Box 1 for a summary of the initiative). The RAND Corporation studied UPPI for The Wallace Foundation. In this report, we summarize key insights from our research about state policy efforts, drawing out lessons for state education agencies across the country that are working to improve the quality of principal preparation by influencing the behavior of aspiring leaders, districts, and especially preparation programs.¹ We begin by describing which policy levers UPPI states used most actively. We then describe how they leveraged leader standards to drive coherence across policy levers, emphasized supports over mandates, promoted collaboration across programs, and supported program-district partnerships.

Insights

State education agencies used standards—as well as program approval, licensure, and professional development—to promote program redesign

State policy organizations have an array of levers in their toolbox to promote principal quality: State policy can establish leadership standards, license individuals to be employed as public

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

BOX 1

The University Principal Preparation Initiative

UPPI provided resources to seven university-based principal preparation programs (PPPs), their partner districts, and the state agency responsible for credentialing preparation programs and licensing principals, as well as mentor programs which have carried out similar redesigns. The Wallace Foundation selected programs that were located in states that had policies supportive of improved principal development and district partners that served a high-need population.

PPPs were expected to redesign their programs 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 deliberately required the engagement of a state agency partner, to stimulate state-level policy changes (e.g., leader standards, program accreditation, principal licensure) to drive systemic improvement of PPPs within the state. The university programs and associated state agency partners were as follows:

University	District or Consortium Partners
Albany State University (ASU)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Georgia Professional Standards Commission • Georgia Department of Education • University System of Georgia
Florida Atlantic University (FAU)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Florida Department of Education
North Carolina State University (NC State)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • North Carolina Department of Public Instruction
San Diego State University (SDSU)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • California Commission on Teacher Credentialing
University of Connecticut (UConn)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Connecticut State Department of Education
Virginia State University (VSU)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Virginia Department of Education
Western Kentucky University WKU)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kentucky Education Professional Standards Board

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 and participate in professional learning communities facilitated by The Wallace Foundation.

school principals, approve programs that prepare aspiring principals, support the recruitment of high-quality candidates, guide professional development and evaluation of sitting principals, establish requirements for principal evaluation, and facilitate communication and engagement of players across the system (including through support of information or data sharing) (Augustine et al., 2009; Manna, 2015). Between 2016 and 2021, UPPI states made most active use of four of the policy levers: leadership standards, principal licensure, program approval and oversight, and professional development (PD) (Gates et al., 2020; Herman,

Woo, et al., 2022). No single model of policy change dominated—states led in different ways depending on their unique context, needs and opportunities.

A majority of program, district, and state leaders in all states identified state standards as an effective policy lever (Table 1), suggesting the central role of standards, irrespective of which other levers the state emphasizes. A majority of interviewees in five of seven states identified program approval as an effective policy lever highlighting the important role of states in influencing principal preparation.

All UPPI states have principal or **leadership standards**, and most are aligned with the national leadership standards, the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL). Between 2016 and 2021, five of the states revised leadership standards for some or all school leaders, with Kentucky and Georgia adopting or adapting PSEL as their state standards.

Licensure also was an active policy area for UPPI states. All of the states require principals to have a license. Licensure requirements involve some combination of program completion, degree attainment, years of service, and assessments. Six of the seven states have an assessment as part of the licensure requirements (Gates et al., 2020, p. 30). Over the course of the initiative, some revised their principal pathway to differentiate and target licensure requirements. For example, Georgia instituted a two-stage licensure structure, in which candidates

TABLE 1

Majority (50% or More) of Stakeholders Agreed That Use of Lever in State Is Effective, by Lever and by State

Policy Lever	California	Connecticut	Florida	Georgia	Kentucky	North Carolina	Virginia	Total
Standards	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	7
Recruitment of aspiring leaders	–	–	–	–	–	✓	–	1
Licensure	✓	–	✓	✓	–	–	✓	4
Program approval and oversight	✓	✓	–	✓	✓	–	✓	5
Professional development	–	✓	✓	–	–	–	✓	3
Evaluation	–	–	✓	–	–	–	✓	2
Leader tracking systems	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	0
Total	3	3	4	3	2	2	5	

SOURCE: Gates et al., 2020, Table 4.1, p. 56.

NOTE: A check mark indicates that a majority of stakeholders we interviewed in the state agreed that the lever is effective. A dash indicates that the majority of stakeholders did not report agreement. Possible responses were: agree, disagree, neutral or no response. Stakeholders included representative of state government, educational cooperatives or county offices of education, districts, universities and not-for-profit or advocacy organizations. Based on data from interviews conducted in 2019.

complete stage 1 to qualify for school-level administrative positions below the principalship and stage 2 to qualify as principals. The structure specifies additional training requirements for aspiring principals after obtaining the first-stage license. Meanwhile, Kentucky opened another pathway to licensure that allows exceptional candidates to earn a license by passing a proficiency evaluation that is aligned with state leader standards. In addition, most UPPI states made or anticipated making changes to the licensure assessments. For example, California developed a state-specific performance assessment for its first tier of licensure, and Florida piloted a performance-based assessment for its second tier of licensure.

All states have a process through which the state approves and oversees the programs that prepare principals. Some UPPI states made changes to **program approval and oversight** that promoted research-based practices and encouraged the use of performance and outcome-oriented metrics rather than input-based criteria (e.g., a certain number of tenure-track faculty). Most states promoted the use of a program needs assessment as part of the program approval process. For example, the Georgia Professional Standards Commission recommended that, as part of the state's seven-year accreditation cycle, preparation programs conduct a formative self-assessment using the Quality Measures (QM) tool or a similar process.² This emphasis on program needs assessment reflected a shift in emphasis toward continuous improvement.

States supported this shift by encouraging programs to track and use outcomes of their graduates. North Carolina, for example, developed a statewide LTS to help preparation programs use information on their graduates' performance to improve their programs. Finally, most states transitioned from a paper to an online system for program approval as part of UPPI, partly to make the process more efficient and partly to make it easier for programs to continue documenting improvement efforts between official approval reviews.

Professional development (PD) was another active area for states throughout the UPPI process. Most states have PD requirements for licensure renewal, and all states support districts in supporting PD aligned with state standards by offering guidance, resources, or technical assistance. During UPPI, state education agencies reinvigorated their PD opportunities for aspiring principals, principals, preparation program faculty, clinical coaches, and mentor principals by providing new funding streams, creating new programs, or developing resource guides (see Gates et al., 2020, pp. 42–43).

Coherence across policies—grounded in leader standards—emerged as a best practice

Stakeholders emphasized that it is the use of standards, not their mere existence, that drives principal quality (see Gates et al., 2020, p. 63). All UPPI states made active use of the stan-

² Quality Measures (Education Development Center, undated) is a research-based self-assessment tool and process for principal preparation programs that can be used by programs independently or with facilitation from the developers.

dards in some way. They supported the implementation and use of standards by providing information, resources, and concrete tools, such as rubrics, that made standards actionable. UPPI states also advanced policy coherence by aligning efforts related to other policy levers with standards. For example, after adopting PSEL, Kentucky created a guidance document with a rubric for assessing each of the standards. Kentucky state officials leveraged the new standards in the program approval process by requiring all preparation programs in the state to demonstrate alignment between their coursework and the PSEL by late 2020. In North Carolina, state officials developed a new evaluation rubric for principals and assistant principals based on the updated leadership standards, with the goal of piloting the rubric in fall 2021 before adopting the rubric for statewide use.

Similarly, stakeholders emphasized that licensure requirements are effective in promoting principal quality when they are grounded in evidence-based leader standards and executed through rigorous assessments. In contrast, they mentioned that low passing standards for licensure examinations, weak connections between licensure and program approval or state standards, and the existence of licensure routes that are not aligned with current state leadership standards can weaken the licensure system.

As mentioned above, most states considered changes to their licensure assessments. These efforts involved a shift toward performance-based assessments better aligned to state standards.

States mainly aimed to support rather than mandate change

State leaders aimed to support—rather than mandate—change, contribute to a culture of collaboration among programs and districts, support program-district partnership, and use guidance from advisory groups and data analyses. For example, in response to district leaders' request for instruments to help identify potential leaders, the Georgia Professional Standards Commission created an online, 360-degree assessment of leaders' dispositions. The Interpersonal Leadership Disposition Assessment (ILDA) can be used to inform recruitment and selection into a PPP, or as a formative or summative assessment. It is available online for approved PPPs in Georgia to use voluntarily.

When UPPI states did use policy mandates—often directed at preparation programs—they did so with restraint and coupled them with supports. University and district leaders perceived state mandates more favorably when the requirements were evidence-based, when the state provided support to programs and districts to meet them, and when there was oversight and accountability regarding the requirements.

California's implementation of its new administrator performance assessment is an example of how state agencies coupled a significant new mandate with structures of support. Because the new assessment was required for program completion, programs had an incentive to seek guidance, which the state facilitated by hosting events, webinars, and office hours where programs could learn from outside experts and one another.

States contributed to a culture of collaboration across the principal preparation system

A culture of collaboration across the state—where preparation programs, school districts, state and county government officials, and representatives of other education-oriented organizations share best practices—helped spread lessons learned and support changes to state policy cultures. All the UPPI states promoted collaboration, using approaches such as hosting stakeholder convenings, office hours, and professional learning communities; highlighting or communicating examples of practices used in UPPI programs such as QM; and creating state-level task forces or working groups. For example, the Georgia Educational Leadership Faculty Association (which includes all 16 universities in the state with a PPP) has provided opportunities for ASU to share learnings from the UPPI redesign across the state. In another example, the Connecticut State Department of Education convened the Connecticut Association of Public School Superintendents, representatives from PPPs, and representatives of education nonprofit organizations to strategize on providing services to districts and schools and better understand district needs and areas of expertise across the state with respect to leadership development.

Our research surfaced potential barriers to collaboration stemming from competitive pressures among universities for grants and applications, as well as a sense of complacency with the current program. One state leader explained how state encouragement for cross-program collaboration has promoted program revision beyond the UPPI grantee:

We also have other higher ed institutions that are very interested in doing the best work for their principal prep program . . . so we're trying to work with them and share the experiences that [grantee] is learning with them . . . So, I think the work is being propelled by the fact that they like this network, they like working together on things, they like communicating. There's still going to be competition, I mean, I can't get rid of all that competition, but they're talking with each other and they're getting these "a-ha's."

State organizations leveraged their authority to support program-district partnerships

Nearly all the UPPI states promote a policy of program-district partnerships. Most require preparation programs to partner with districts and other organizations to guide program improvement. However, practical guidance about what those partnerships or structures to support them could look like has traditionally been lacking. UPPI team members consistently reported that UPPI facilitated strong partnerships and that those partnerships were beneficial. States took the opportunity to share information about these program-district partnerships at conferences or office hour sessions and encouraged the sharing of lessons learned across the state. Some UPPI states encouraged use of a formative assessment tool, which provides a structured process for programs to engage with districts.

Implications

State education policymakers seek effective principals—and they have policy levers they can use to enhance systems to develop and support such principals. Other states can learn from the experiences of the UPPI states.

Although the UPPI states do not offer a single model for other states to adopt, their experiences illustrate the importance of **offering a vision in the form of clear state leader standards** and then **using those standards to promote coherent state policy** across the pathway to the principalship. One state official noted, “If you’re changing standards, you’re going to change the evaluation system, you’re going to change the testing. Everything in leadership is governed by those standards. So, if you change the standards, it’s going to have repercussions down the line, because everything has to be based off the standards.” States can further support policy coherence by **providing information and resources** that promote the implementation and use of standards. Concrete tools such as rubrics make standards actionable for programs and districts alike.

Under the umbrella of coherence offered by state leader standards, the UPPI experience suggests that states have options in deciding what levers to prioritize and whether to implement them through mandates. **When using mandates that affect programs to drive policy change, states should ensure that they are evidence-based and come with the support needed for the program to achieve the mandated change.** In crafting strategies to support programs, states need to consider their capacity and the size of the state in planning their strategies to support programs. For example, the Connecticut State Department of Education was able to offer intensive hands-on support to programs because the state has very few administrator preparation programs. In comparison, while the California professional standards board provided numerous supports to preparation programs to implement the new statewide performance assessment, it could not offer the same depth of technical assistance to all of the state’s roughly 60 programs. Instead, the board encouraged learning networks, including organizations such as SDSU, that provided intensive supports and resources to other programs seeking guidance. States differ, too, in how centralized principal preparation policy is. In Kentucky, the Education Professional Standards Board (EPSB), Kentucky Department of Education (DOE), and Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education were all separate. When EPSB moved into the Kentucky DOE, the consolidation created an opportunity to have face-to-face conversations about an integrated plan for P–20 education. There is now intentional collaboration, communication, and relationship-building within the department.

Given their access to stakeholders and data across the school leadership development system, state policymakers are uniquely positioned to promote evidence-based policy to improve school leadership. While UPPI states began this project, other states can contribute to this knowledge base by collecting and using data and evidence to better understand what is or is not working in principal preparation in their state.

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 state policymakers.

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