

# Considerations:

## School Leadership



### **States as Leaders, Followers, and Partners: Lessons from the ESSA Leadership Learning Community and the University Principal Preparation Initiative**

by  
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## Executive Summary

**Overview:** This paper summarizes research on the ESSA Leadership Learning Community (ELLC) and the University Principal Preparation Program (UPPI). The Wallace Foundation created these efforts and supported them financially to test ideas for improving the work of principals and enhancing the supports they receive on the job. While the ELLC and UPPI embraced that same overall goal, each operated with different constellations of actors, organizing frames, and concrete purposes. The analysis in this paper discerns key implications of each effort and also broader lessons for policymakers and their partners interested in developing and supporting excellent principals who advance teaching and learning.

**Audiences:** Several themes flow from the ELLC and UPPI that can inform state policymakers, and also federal or local government officials in school districts, universities, and people from non-governmental organizations interested in principal development. Generally, though, the analysis in this paper focuses primarily on lessons for states. One reason is that states are the key pivot point in the nation's intergovernmental system as they interpret federal policy that local school districts then implement. Another reason is that state policy itself shapes the overall operational environments of school districts due to states' responsibilities, embedded in state constitutions, to educate their residents.

**Themes:** Four key themes for states and their partners emerge from the ELLC and UPPI.

- Choices across state institutions collectively shape the policy environments that enable or constrain initiatives designed to develop and support principals.
- State standards are a powerful cross-cutting policy lever that, when used in practice, shape specific decisions about training, developing, and supporting principals.
- When states foster networked partnerships they promote creative problem-solving that can enhance the likelihood of principal initiatives succeeding.
- States and their collaborators each have comparative advantages that, when realized, can make the most of networked partnerships that advance principal initiatives.

**Using the themes to inform future work:** As states and their partners examine ways to develop and support principals, they can consider the different comparative advantages they all might bring to future initiatives. State agencies and other governing bodies, local school districts, non-governmental partners, and other groups possess different knowledge and capabilities. Discussing the three following questions through the lenses of that knowledge and those capabilities can help states and their partners construct networks for action where contributing partners can leverage their strengths to advance collective goals.

- Policy agenda: How does the agenda frame the problem we want to solve?
- Policy levers: What is the configuration of the policy levers in play?
- Local contexts: What constraints and opportunities exist in local contexts?

**Conclusion:** Even though the ELLC and UPPI were two different efforts, the results convey quite clearly that state policymakers have invaluable roles to play in advancing the principalship, regardless of the particular model or models of action that might inform future work.

# 1. Introduction

Ensuring that all schools have excellent principals is more important than ever. Evidence from the last two decades shows that effective principals have powerful effects on school operations, culture, teacher retention, and student achievement.<sup>1</sup> Further, even though the best schools tend to distribute educational leadership roles across multiple people, including teachers and other school staff members, still, principals must identify and bring those leaders aboard the team. Principals groom them for these new responsibilities and support them as they lead.<sup>2</sup> With nearly 100,000 public schools in the United States facing greater pressures amidst the COVID pandemic and its enduring effects, public officials should redouble efforts to help recruit excellent candidates into the principalship and support them in their work.<sup>3</sup>

It is perhaps easy to overlook state governments in discussions about principal development because principals' daily activities and main employment arrangements are within the purview of local settings, not state officials. Still, states shape overall conditions and possess important formal and informal powers that influence principal success. Several state governing institutions, from legislatures to governors' offices and various boards and agencies, command crucial policy levers that develop laws, regulations, and guidance that affect principals, school districts, and principal preparation programs.<sup>4</sup> As such, addressing the challenges confronting principals requires much more than school district human resources offices or professional development units performing well. States are crucial partners.

In a report from 2015, I argued that state officials have much to consider about the specific roles they can play to support their aspiring and current principals. The report argued they should attend to three specific ideas: 1) how their policy discussions can elevate principals on state policy agendas; 2) the collection of policy levers they can pull to influence principal recruitment, training, and on-the-job success; and 3) the value of considering local school district and community contexts as they shape their agendas and pull those policy levers.<sup>5</sup> What might state processes that prioritize and advance the principalship look like in practice? In particular, what does recent evidence show about how states can foster conditions that identify new principals and enable them and their veteran colleagues to thrive in ways that support teaching and learning?

Fortunately, recent studies of two major efforts have revealed insights that state officials, along with their local and federal partners and other organizations outside government, can learn from as they try to address problems of practice that their principals engage each day. One effort is the ESSA Leadership Learning Community (ELLC) and the other is the University Principal Preparation Initiative (UPPI). The Wallace Foundation created these efforts and supported them with grant funds to test ideas for improving the work of principals and enhancing the supports they receive on the job. While the ELLC and UPPI embraced that same overall goal, each operated with different constellations of actors, organizing frames, and concrete purposes.

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<sup>1</sup> Grissom, Egalite, and Lindsay (2021).

<sup>2</sup> Spillane (2006); Spillane and Diamond (2007). See also research projects of The Distributed Leadership Study at Northwestern University at <https://distributedleadership.northwestern.edu/>.

<sup>3</sup> Woo and Steiner (2022); Superville (2021).

<sup>4</sup> Manna (2015; 2021).

<sup>5</sup> Manna (2021).

This paper considers research that examined the ELLC and UPPI,<sup>6</sup> along with the broader literature on state policy and principals that informed both. Analysis in the rest of this paper discerns key implications of each effort and also broader lessons for state, local, and even federal policymakers, and their non-governmental partners. The discussion unfolds as follows. The next section describes key features of the ELLC and UPPI, revealing some commonalities and differences. Then two ensuing sections extract specific lessons from the evidence that researchers have documented. One set of lessons describes common themes emerging from each effort about states and principal development. The other set notes how the ELLC and UPPI offer states two different organizational models for developing their principal corps and explains the conditions under which states might choose one or the other, or strategically leverage both, to address particular areas of interest. A final section briefly concludes.

## **2. Moving parts, participants, and assumptions of the ELLC and UPPI**

What did the ELLC and UPPI entail? Table 1 summarizes key dimensions, which the rest of this section unpacks in more detail. Before describing how the ELLC and UPPI worked, it is worth explaining why these two efforts provide valuable lessons about the role states can play in developing excellent principals.

Several reasons make the ELLC and UPPI compelling cases for close study. First, collectively across both efforts, participants came from seventeen of the US states, including states that vary across dimensions like geographic size and political orientation. That makes them reasonably representative of conditions across the nation. Second, researchers from well-respected organizations, Policy Studies Associates (PSA) and RAND, have studied the ELLC and UPPI's progress across time and documented their inner workings, results, and broader implications. As a result, this comprehensive body of quantitative and qualitative evidence provides numerous windows into the participants' experiences. Third, the nation witnessed several political, economic, and social changes during the time ELLC and UPPI operated, which gave researchers many opportunities to study them amidst several metaphorical "stress tests" that affected their work. Overall, that range of experiences and broad evidence base provide fruitful terrain for synthesizing lessons for states and their partners.

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<sup>6</sup> Herman, et al. (2022a; 2022b); Turnbull, et al. (2022).

**Table 1. Key dimensions of the ELLC and UPPI**

<b>Dimension</b>	<b>ELLC</b>	<b>UPPI</b>
<b>Timespan</b>	2016-2022	2016-2021
<b>Focus</b>	General: Use education leadership and flexibility in the Every Student Succeeds Act to improve schools, in particular high-need schools; teams added a particular emphasis on equity	Specific: Improve university principal preparation programs
<b>Core participants within each state</b>	State education agency (SEA)  Urban school district(s)  National Urban League affiliate	University principal prep program  School district partners  Mentor principal prep program  State government agency partner*
<b>Sources of additional support</b>	Partnering institutions (i.e., community-based, local or statewide non-profits, rural school districts, regional service agencies, universities)  Wallace Foundation support for facilitators, discussion drivers, and travel to model sites  Wallace Foundation professional learning communities (PLCs)	Technical assistance providers  Wallace Foundation professional learning communities (PLCs)
<b>Participants</b>	Maryland, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, New York, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Wisconsin, and Florida**	Albany State Univ. (GA) Florida Atlantic Univ. (FL) NC State Univ. (NC) San Diego State Univ. (CA) Univ. of Connecticut (CT) Virginia State Univ. (VA) Western Kentucky Univ. (KY)

Sources: Herman, et al. (2022a; 2022b) and Turnbull, et al. (2022).

Notes: \*The state government agency partner varied and could include the SEA, state professional standards board, or teacher credential commission or board. \*\*Florida was inconsistently engaged before 2020.

## 2.1 ESSA Leadership Learning Community (ELLC)

The ELLC began shortly after the federal government reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education act as the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA). That reauthorization was Congress's attempt to revise the law's previous iteration, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). In part, NCLB's critics had argued its testing and accountability provisions were too prescriptive, and that the nation's students would benefit if states had more flexibility. Some skeptics disagreed, given prior evidence that showed states were less likely to serve the nation's most vulnerable children unless held to strict expectations. Nevertheless, Congress rewrote the law to incorporate more flexibility, providing states a chance to prove the critics wrong.<sup>7</sup>

Some of ESSA's flexibility included making it easier to support principal development. For example, Title II of ESSA, which historically states and localities had used primarily to support teachers, included new provisions that more explicitly facilitated states and districts using those funds to develop principals and other school leaders. Further, the evidentiary standards in the law that defined the level of proof needed to justify using ESSA funds for school improvement purposes also opened the door more explicitly for investing in principals. The reason was the existence of a research base that met ESSA standards of proof and showed how effective principals are important for improving schools.<sup>8</sup>

The Wallace Foundation created the ELLC to encourage states and their partners to use the law's added flexibility to leverage what observers in 2015 called "the ESSA moment" for the states to demonstrate their ability to innovate.<sup>9</sup> With a "complex purpose and broad flexibility" from Wallace, the ELLC participants had much leeway to decide how they would address the project's core objective.<sup>10</sup> The overall goal was to leverage ESSA's flexibility to use education leadership to improve schools, especially schools with high needs. As the work developed, the ELLC teams used the lens of equity as a major theme to shape their work.

As Table 1 shows, the ELLC discussions in each of eleven states included state education officials, one or more urban school districts, and a National Urban League affiliate as partners. Additional partnering organizations also joined the work depending on the particular outreach strategies and focus of each ELLC team. That flexible approach widened the aperture on participation and even led to rural districts participating with some teams. The team facilitators and discussion drivers that Wallace provided worked to foster inclusive discussion from all members. Those arrangements generally led to egalitarian norms guiding team interactions, and allowed informal leaders to sometimes emerge from across the different organizations represented on each team. A formal state leadership role didn't really materialize until 2021. That happened when new follow-up funds from Wallace augmented the effort and the foundation required that the state education agency sign off on the use of those resources.

The ELLC's overall design meant that a diverse array of state participants and on-the-ground partners would collaborate. Their discussions would include new voices that previously

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<sup>7</sup> Hess and Eden (2017).

<sup>8</sup> The Wallace Foundation (2016); Herman, et al. (2017).

<sup>9</sup> Manna and Shober (2020).

<sup>10</sup> Turnbull, et al. (2022, p. 30).



had lacked opportunities to be heard. The ELLC’s flexible parameters enabled other non-governmental organizations, such as local or state non-profit groups, other state agencies or boards, and universities to participate as the teams moved the work forward. The Wallace Foundation created a structured professional learning community (PLC) for the effort, which met in person and also virtually after the COVID pandemic curtailed nationwide travel. The work occurred over the period 2016-2022.

## **2.2 University Principal Preparation Initiative (UPPI)**

In contrast with the ELLC’s flexibility, the UPPI was more focused from the start. Evaluators of the initiative characterized it as being designed to answer a specific question about principal development: “How can universities—in partnership with high-need districts, state agency leaders, and with the support of mentor programs that have already been redesigned—improve principal preparation programs to reflect the best available evidence?”<sup>11</sup> Instead of having a statewide focus, as in the ELLC, the UPPI was more centered on university principal preparation programs, which took the lead. Table 1 identifies the seven universities that participated and the states where they reside.

The UPPI, like the ELLC, embraced partnerships. The Wallace Foundation created a pool of mentor programs from which each UPPI site could choose. That pool of mentors brought diverse expertise to the table. The mentors were “traditional or alternative” programs that had “particular expertise in one or more areas” that the UPPI effort wanted to develop.<sup>12</sup> The district partners also could vary by size and relation to one another, as with regional consortia. The specific approach to education governance in each state also influenced the partnerships. In some places the SEA would be the right partner, but in others it might be a state professional standards or credentialing board. Also, as with the ELLC, Wallace provided technical assistance for support. Sometimes it focused on specific issues like developing leader tracking systems, but other times it was more flexible and geared toward topics that the UPPI sites identified. Finally, Wallace hosted PLC events that convened participants in person and then virtually after COVID emerged. These PLCs provided professional networking opportunities and space to share lessons across all the sites. The work occurred from 2016-2021.

## **2.3 Summary of ELLC and UPPI’s major similarities and differences**

Overall, the ELLC and UPPI shared some features and differed on others. Both efforts embraced a broad goal of improving principals. Both also had some overlapping core institutional participants and an explicit requirement to engage participants outside government. The two differed in that the ELLC sites had a more general mandate than the UPPI sites. Specifically, the UPPI focused on principal preparation, which meant work tilted towards a focus on new principals, whereas the ELLC could focus more broadly on leaders at all levels of experience as long as the approach paid particular attention to high-need schools. The common focus on equity that emerged in the ELLC work came organically from the team participants and was not an explicit mandate thrust upon them.

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<sup>11</sup> Herman, et al. (2022a, p. 4).

<sup>12</sup> Herman, et al. (2022a, p. 5).

These differences and commonalities, which played out across multiple years, provide numerous lessons for others interested in improving the work of principals and the supporting structures that enable principals to advance teaching and learning in their schools. The next section considers some common themes that emerged from the ELLC and UPPI.

### 3. Themes the ELLC and UPPI reveal about states and principal development

Several themes flow from the ELLC and UPPI that can inform state policymakers, and also federal or local government officials and those from non-governmental organizations interested in principal development. This section frames these themes by focusing primarily on lessons for states. One reason for that focus is that states are a key pivot point in the nation’s intergovernmental system as they interpret federal policy, like ESSA, that local school districts then implement.<sup>13</sup> Another reason is due to the policies that states themselves create that shape the overall operational environments of school districts due to states’ responsibilities, embedded in state constitutions, to educate their residents.<sup>14</sup>

Prior research has documented informal and formal powers states can use as they work with partners at all levels inside and outside government to develop and support principals.<sup>15</sup> State leaders wield much influence to set agendas and steer attention and resources toward topics that bear on principals. They also command formal policy levers, which Table 2 lists, that shape principals’ training experiences and their work. Notably, school districts rather than states employ principals and principals rarely have direct contact with state government officials. Still, the range of activities implied in Table 2 demonstrates that state policies touch all varieties of principals from recruits to novices to veterans. The common themes below, which emerged from the ELLC and UPPI, elaborate potential state contributions to principal development as state leaders pull these levers in ways that can foster partnerships.

**Table 2. State policy levers that shape the principalship**

Adopting principal <b>leadership standards</b> into state law and regulation
<b>Recruiting</b> aspiring principals into the profession
<b>Licensing</b> new and veteran principals
Approving and overseeing principal <b>preparation programs</b>
Supporting principals’ growth with <b>professional development</b>
<b>Evaluating</b> principals

Source: Manna (2015).

<sup>13</sup> Manna (2011).

<sup>14</sup> Dinan (2007); Zackin (2013).

<sup>15</sup> Manna (2015; 2021).

### **3.1 Choices across state institutions collectively shape the policy environments that enable or constrain initiatives designed to develop and support principals.**

Policymaking across sectors often operates in isolated, bureaucratized silos, which can challenge policy implementers on the ground to serve broad public purposes.<sup>16</sup> Education is not immune from this potential problem as researchers studying fragmented school wrap-around services and other topics have noted.<sup>17</sup> Grasping the aggregated effects of state decisions that bear on principal development and support is important for cultivating environments where principals can receive the best training and then thrive on the job. For example, state policy (including laws and state regulations or guidance that clarify implementation of federal law) increasingly calls upon principals to play specific roles in teacher evaluation, student discipline, and parent engagement. Collectively, these activities might involve connecting with different siloed organizations in the community or units of government outside the school district. The experience of the ELLC and UPPI teams demonstrates how state-level decisions shape the operating environment and can facilitate or hinder cooperation.

Several examples of how state choices shaped work in the ELLC and UPPI are apparent. In the ELLC, each state’s ESSA plan created an overall backdrop for the teams. In general, the actual ESSA plans themselves were rarely a focus in team discussions and teams did not play a major role in shaping the plans, although some members provided feedback on drafts.<sup>18</sup> The plans, however, created a broad landscape for the teams to explore, especially as they envisioned how they could use ESSA plan priorities to help principals lead with an equity mindset to ensure that all students, especially those who previously have been marginalized or left behind, have a chance to reach their full potential. As one example, the Maryland team focused on reshaping existing guidance or rules that state agencies had developed around school accountability, principal standards and licensure, and professional development. Seeing what states already were requiring or promoting gave the teams insights into how their work could connect to these policies by addressing key gaps such as equipping principals with tools to spot and then remedy school inequities.<sup>19</sup>

Findings from the UPPI revealed or suggested patterns that might be signs of potential state influence, as well. State requirements that allow low-quality programs to operate can conflict with statements from state officials affirming that principal quality matters. Programs in the UPPI, researchers showed, aspired to increase quality and rigor, but they recognized that in the competitive environment for applicants this could put them at a disadvantage against lower quality programs that cost less. States that expected more of all programs would reduce this problem.<sup>20</sup> Notably, researchers studying the UPPI found that states used “mandates with restraint and couple[d] them with supports” to alter the programs’ operational environments.<sup>21</sup> Using mandates that are evidence-based, but also exercising them with restraint, along with providing preparation programs and districts with support was more likely to create favorable

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<sup>16</sup> Froy and Giguère (2010).

<sup>17</sup> Cohen and Moffitt (2009); Brookings Institution Task Force (2021).

<sup>18</sup> Turnbull, et al. (2022, pp. 4, 20).

<sup>19</sup> Turnbull, et al. (2022, p. 5).

<sup>20</sup> Herman, et al. (2022a).

<sup>21</sup> Herman, et al. (2022a, p. 99). See also Gates, et al. (2020).

environments for success, especially where states were interested in oversight and accountability.<sup>22</sup>

### **3.2 State standards are a powerful cross-cutting policy lever that, when used in practice, shape specific decisions about training, developing, and supporting principals.**

Potentially the most powerful lever for state influence on principals is the development, adoption, and use of state standards to steer policy and practice. Certainly, the other levers in Table 2 contribute to shaping principals' experiences, from their initial recruitment and training to onboarding and daily work. Still, standards can be particularly influential when states and localities adopt them into policy and then use them to guide practice. The crucial word here is "use." Standards that emerge from working groups disconnected from practice or that live in metaphorical dusty binders on back-office shelves might look good on paper but have no real-world impact. When standard-writing itself becomes an end, rather than a means to an end, standards can proliferate and foster compliance work that fails to enhance quality or equity. In contrast, when states embrace well-crafted standards and make them relevant by tying them to other policy levers that bear on principal training, licensing, support, and evaluation (see Table 2) they can foster coherence and quality and increase the chances that all students are well-served. They also provide lighthouses to re-orient efforts that may be veering off track and require a course correction. The ELLC and UPPI offer much evidence of these ideas.

A vivid example of standards providing guidance and consistency is the course redesign work in UPPI. Because the curriculum is the intellectual heart of any program of study, the UPPI teams invested much time working with program faculty to shape their courses to make them consistent with state standards and other related expectations. That helped foster program coherence in the curriculum rather than having faculty focus on their own interests that may be fascinating for students, but might not align with overall program objectives. State standards, considered alongside program-specific theories of action or frameworks that guided the UPPI work within each program, helped support alignment even down to the details on course syllabi. One faculty member, for example, taught a course that focused on a specific state standard and so course preparation involved going "through each element of that broad standard to make sure that within that syllabus and all of the assignments that all of those elements would be addressed."<sup>23</sup> The UPPI teams from San Diego State University and Florida Atlantic University relied on state expectations, as well, as they reconsidered their overall baskets of courses (in addition to learning modules and assessments within courses) to ensure that they aligned with state standards and licensing expectations.<sup>24</sup>

Related examples of how standards can shape new efforts come from the ELLC.<sup>25</sup> For example, the Oregon team focused its energies on developing a three-year leader induction academy, which began with a target cohort of 35 participants. The learning experiences of the academy were organized around professional standards that the state had adopted as well as additional specific standards reflected in the state's licensing process for administrators. Part of

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<sup>22</sup> See previous footnote.

<sup>23</sup> Herman, et al. (2022a, p. 24),

<sup>24</sup> Herman, et al. (2022a, p. 24).

<sup>25</sup> Turnbull (2022a, p. 9).

the Florida team’s work involved a pilot monitoring system for leadership preparation programs that aligned with state agency expectations for how programs should be preparing principals.

### **3.3 When states foster networked partnerships they promote creative problem-solving that can enhance the likelihood of principal initiatives succeeding.**

Wicked problems abound in education that principals must confront. Those daily realities can make state leaders feel powerless as they seek speedy solutions and field pitches from vendors willing to sell them the next shiny thing promising to solve problems writ large. Especially when challenges appear knotted up with local conditions, state leaders might find some comfort in stepping back and reaffirming their support for “local control” of schools so that people on the ground can address problems close to home. Stepping away often misses the mark, though, when local communities lack capacity or knowhow to solve problems strategically. How might states provide assistance while simultaneously avoiding making problems worse by imposing more bureaucratic rules or one-size-fits-all approaches insensitive to local contexts?

State leaders can recognize their role in bolstering networked partnerships, which are a source of energy, resources, and fresh ideas for improving principal effectiveness. Networked partnerships in education, which are sometimes called “policy networks” or simply “partnerships,” are comprised of multiple organizations connected together in some way to address a common problem.<sup>26</sup> Importantly, those organizations might be governments or government agencies (i.e., state education agency, local school district, county social services agency) and they also could be organizations outside government (i.e., non-profit organizations serving a community, leadership academies in another state, professional associations). Further, the connections between these organizations might be formal, as when a non-profit service provider becomes a subcontractor on a state grant that a local school district is implementing. They also might be informal and amount to shared lines of communication or common interest.

Abundant research across policy areas, and especially research on leadership in government, documents how public problems cry out for networked solutions involving a diverse array of groups.<sup>27</sup> When state leaders listen to participants in the field, they can leverage their positions to cultivate new partners. In turn, that can then help ensure that initiatives supporting principals’ work remain sustainable and informed by diverse ideas. As networks mature, previously unrealized capacities become visible, collaborative problem-solving fosters trust, and knowledge becomes “liquefied,” flowing across broad landscapes and into difficult-to-reach corners of a state.<sup>28</sup> Both the ELLC and UPPI demonstrate the power of networked partnerships and suggest key roles that states can play in fostering them.

Notably, as researchers studying the ELLC explain, true partnerships between state government agencies, school districts, and community partners that are grounded in common objectives and high levels of trust can be rare. Instead, these organizations “have historically and continually vied with one another...and rarely worked in concert.”<sup>29</sup> One of the great successes

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<sup>26</sup> Ostrom (1990); O’Toole and Meier (2011); Kapucu and Hu (2020).

<sup>27</sup> Goldsmith and Eggers (2004).

<sup>28</sup> The “liquefied” metaphor is from John Dewey, and is discussed in Moffitt’s (2014) contemporary application to public problem solving that involves constituent voice.

<sup>29</sup> Turnbull, et al. (2022, p. 23).

of the ELLC, then, was to demonstrate the viability of such cross-sector teams for creating shared spaces for collective problem solving. The teams further revealed the high value of including National Urban League affiliates, organizations typically omitted from these sorts of networked partnerships, that brought deep knowledge of local conditions that was especially valuable given the equity-focused work of the teams. Still, readers should not interpret these results as meaning that the networked partnerships that comprised each team instantly gelled. Far from it. The need to develop mutual trust not only through words shared at meetings but in actions taken to move the work forward was crucial. The power of the collective work on the ELLC teams was apparent to researchers studying them. In fact, PSA's final report, after its multi-year effort studying the teams, concluded that "*the single most innovative aspect* of the ELLC was the diversity of voices engaged in conversation" (emphasis added).<sup>30</sup>

The sorts of "ah ha" moments that the ELLC participants experienced as they recognized their strength in numbers and diverse perspectives also occurred in the UPPI. Consider two examples. First, states played a role in promoting networks via convening programs across the state to disseminate the UPPI work. Learning in those settings was "organic," organized around knowledge sharing and mutual engagement.<sup>31</sup> Second, partnerships within the UPPI teams, led primarily by the programs, fostered peer collaboration. One UPPI participant offered this observation that suggested how the large and complex work of improving principal preparation felt more within reach with many hands from many perspectives working in concert: "It just became really clear that it's not [the university] that's doing this work but it's [the university] with their partners with the state that's doing this work and I think that, I think people got really excited when they saw that."<sup>32</sup>

The added capacity that the UPPI networks created was particularly valuable as states leveraged their prominent positions to extend the work of the redesign efforts to other local communities and other parts of the policy process. That sort of liquefaction of knowledge revealed itself in a few ways that researchers observed: bringing aboard new school districts into the UPPI work as it unfolded; thinking about how a focus on principal preparation programs might provide insights for other stages of principal development, such as professional training for current principals; and transmitting findings across the larger system of principal preparation programs and other school districts in their states. These results are powerful because they provide a counter-narrative to the common view that because state education agencies (and other state entities in K-12 education) tend to suffer from low capacity they necessarily operate from a position of weakness rather than potential strength. When working to cultivate and amplify the work of networked partnerships, states can find collective sources of capacity that can help them advance their own goals and the goals of their partners. That final point aligns with the ELLC, too, in moments where states stepped out of their role as being the decider and learned by listening to other network partners.

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<sup>30</sup> Turnbull, et al. (2002a, p. 29).

<sup>31</sup> Herman, et al. (2022a, pp. 91-2).

<sup>32</sup> Herman, et al. (2022a, p. 59).



### **3.4 States and their collaborators each have comparative advantages that, when realized, can make the most of networked partnerships that advance principal initiatives.**

The examples in the previous section noted the power of networked partnerships to make principal initiatives effective and sustainable. However, states can't simply construct a large table, provide seats for numerous groups, and then assume that everyone will enjoy the meal. For one thing, different groups bring their own passions to networks and if those individual priorities contradict the overall goals that states hope to achieve then problems can persist and perhaps even worsen. Scholars refer to these scenarios as the "dark side of networks," as when groups come to the table but work with minimal transparency in hopes of bending the network toward their own preferred goals, whether they support broader network goals or not.<sup>33</sup> Making network construction an intentional process focused on building trust among partners and agreement on network goals, as the UPPI and ELLC teams did, is key for limiting the chance of these problems emerging.

Further, even if all groups in the network align around common goals, they might lack key knowledge or capacities to advance progress. In constructing or supporting networks to enhance the work of principals, state leaders can build better partnerships when they recognize the comparative advantages that various networked partners bring. Table 3 summarizes some of the comparative advantages that the ELLC and UPPI initiatives revealed. The rest of this section uses examples to illustrate these ideas.

A compelling example demonstrating roles that different network partners might play comes from the UPPI teams' experiences around developing leader tracking systems.<sup>34</sup> These computerized systems, which collate data across different dimensions about a school district's current and potential future leaders, create a one-stop-shop for officials interested in analyzing and making strategic decisions about a principal workforce at the school district level.<sup>35</sup> Specifically, they include data elements that might be valuable for many purposes: forecasting principal vacancies; understanding key background experiences or training that principals or aspiring principals have that would make them a good match for position openings; and steering development opportunities or mentors to principals who might be struggling with a particular set of issues in their buildings.

Envisioning the different roles that leader tracking systems might play suggests different comparative advantages of various participants in a networked partnership. Local school districts possess much granular knowledge of school and district needs down to the specific school, neighborhood, and in some cases family level. They also have specific areas of concern that they might hope to track, which include some that will vary by district, and so they will envision different uses for data that a leader tracking system might collate. In contrast, states will be in a better position than localities to influence the restrictions that might exist for data use, especially around federal rules and regulations that relate to student privacy. State budgets, especially if they are leveraging federal grants, might also be a source of revenue for jumpstarting the

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<sup>33</sup> O'Toole and Meier (2004); Ran and Qi (2018).

<sup>34</sup> Herman, et al. (2022a, p. 71), in particular, Table 3.4 and its accompanying discussion.

<sup>35</sup> Anderson, Turnbull, and Arcaira (2017).

construction of leader tracking systems or for building basic models that districts could adopt and then adapt if they lacked enough local resources for constructing their own or augmenting the state template. Principal preparation programs and non-governmental organizations can provide cross-cutting perspectives given that they often work with multiple school districts and can see how different districts leverage data in practice.

**Table 3. Comparative advantages that different network partners can bring to initiatives that develop and support principals**

<b>Network partner</b>	<b>Key comparative advantages</b>
<b>State agencies</b>	<p>Speaking from the bully pulpit to put ideas on statewide agendas</p> <p>Wielding formal authority in the overall regulatory terrain</p> <p>Convening discussions and sharing information</p> <p>Mobilizing budgetary resources via new funding streams or altering how current funds can be spent</p>
<b>Local districts &amp; schools</b>	<p>Identifying problems of implementation practice</p> <p>Flagging pinch points where current policy assumptions or requirements hinder effective action</p> <p>Reflecting on past experiences and proposing future plans in light of those experiences that seem promising</p>
<b>Principal prep programs</b>	<p>Developing research-based options for addressing problems of practice</p> <p>Transmitting experiences and observations about patterns that cut across multiple school districts</p>
<b>Non-governmental organizations</b>	<p>Giving voice to groups that lack representation</p> <p>Checking assumptions of traditional institutions that often have dominated previous discussions</p> <p>Providing capacity in the form of ideas, personnel, and funding</p>

An overall finding from the ELLC work was that the teams developed a main focus on how to implement their ideas on the ground. Developing team priorities and work plans from the ground up necessarily meant that local school districts and National Urban League affiliates on the teams would have key perspectives to highlight pressing needs or opportunities the teams might engage. However, being the key intermediary between the federal government and local communities, state agencies in the networked partnerships could bring their knowledge and understanding of ESSA’s demands that they needed to fulfill. With that knowledge in hand they



could work to find ways to advance team goals and influence ground-level implementation around team priorities, such as principal recruitment and training to advance equity.<sup>36</sup>

### **3.5 Where might the federal government fit into this discussion?**

Although federal officials were not explicit members of the networked partnerships that drove the ELLC and UPPI, it is worth considering the federal government's relationship to the work. One might fairly characterize the federal government as an adjacent partner in both efforts. The "E" in ELLC, after all, refers to ESSA, the latest reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. Federal action to reshape that law's content and funding streams with ESSA created clear opportunities for states to energize their efforts around the principalship, such as expanding possibilities with Title II of the law to support principal recruitment, preparation, and training.<sup>37</sup> Similarly, interpretations of ESSA's language and its supporting regulations expanded the range of activities that states and local districts could fund, including investments in principals, to support school improvement.<sup>38</sup>

Overall, evidence from the ELLC and UPPI suggests insights for federal and state officials interested in supporting efforts focused on principals. Federal leaders can find in the ELLC and UPPI evidence of states and their partners meeting the "ESSA moment" by pushing forward with creative, evidence-based initiatives to improve teaching and learning. That evidence contrasts with several aspects of ESSA's implementation outside principal development where policymakers have taken less advantage of the law's flexibility.<sup>39</sup> The ELLC and UPPI examples provide evidence that with the right conditions and focus the states can leverage the law's components for positive change. Achieving these policy accomplishments has depended upon state leaders (in state education agencies, in particular) interpreting federal law and regulations in ways that support new approaches. Regulatory interpretations focused more on traditional understandings, which are sometimes incorrect or flow from mindsets focusing on bureaucratic compliance, can hinder the kinds of networked partnerships reflected in the ELLC and UPPI from gaining momentum.<sup>40</sup>

## **4. Weighing the ELLC and UPPI models as options for future action**

The efforts of the ELLC and UPPI participants produced some common themes, yet the contrasting approaches of each also suggest particular contexts where each approach might be most effective. Depending on the situation, there may be good reasons to choose the more open-ended approach of ELLC, the more focused orientation of UPPI, or some combination of the two, especially if a state develops a multi-pronged strategy to improve the principalship. For states interested in supporting principals' development and work, these options imply an important need to align the particular institutional design of their efforts with the goals they hope to achieve.

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<sup>36</sup> Turnbull, et al. (2022, p. 21).

<sup>37</sup> Herman, et al. (2017).

<sup>38</sup> The Wallace Foundation. (2017).

<sup>39</sup> Manna and Shober (2020).

<sup>40</sup> Junge and Krvaric (2019).

Under which conditions, then, might states choose between these two approaches, or draw on both simultaneously, as they support principal improvement? Table 4 offers one answer to that question. The table uses a framework that I offered in an earlier report on state policy levers and the principalship.<sup>41</sup> In that report, I identified three sets of considerations for states to entertain as they design initiatives so that all schools have excellent principals. The first set focuses on the *policy agenda* and how states understand the different frames associated with the problem, issue, or challenge they hope to address. The second involves reviewing the collection of state *policy levers*, which Table 2 outlined earlier, that are most salient to the frames that leaders are using to understand the task at hand. The final set engages the specific *local contexts* that will bear on the initiative and that states must account for to increase the chance that their efforts will succeed.

Table 4 provides ideas and examples across each dimension to help draw out some ways that state decision-makers can weigh their choices. The policy agenda consideration is perhaps most important because how one conceptualizes a problem immediately screens out some options and privileges others. The UPPI embraced a more specific problem frame, focusing on principal preparation in university programs, whereas the ELLC was much more open-ended. The ESSA landscape gave teams much room to roam as they found a focus and then moved ahead with the work.

Once there is a clear understanding of the problem, then state officials can think about how that framing intersects with the specific policy levers they have at their disposal. It could be that certain levers in their current form already provide a solid foundation for re-imagining practice. The UPPI teams recognized this in finding strength in state standards and procedures for program approval, even as both evolved during the time that the teams did their work. The key challenge was to better connect up the local practice of preparation to the content of state expectations that the levers conveyed. Work in the ELLC and UPPI revealed examples of multiple ways for the work to engage with different levers. Although standards were a core element, other levers from preparation and licensing, to evaluation, to professional development also intersected with the work.

Local contexts were important in both cases, but for different reasons. Launching the UPPI initially depended upon Wallace identifying principal preparation programs interested in self-improvement. As the effort unfolded, those programs and their collaborators worked together and built trust in one another. State leaders can learn from that experience as they craft future projects of a similar scale or objective as the UPPI. Recruiting willing partners and attending to the different contexts that shape the partners' thinking can help states nurture the partnerships as they develop. Thinking broadly across a state, putting in the time to know which locales might be more open to certain approaches and which might resist can help states consider where to begin piloting or laying a foundation for such work. Demonstrating success in some local communities then might provide the state with proof points to help to win over skeptics elsewhere.

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<sup>41</sup> Manna (2015).

**Table 4. Considerations to weigh when assessing the UPPI and ELLC models for future action**

<b>Considerations</b>	<b>Amenable to UPPI model (example)</b>	<b>Amenable to ELLC model (example)</b>
<p><b>Policy agenda: How does the agenda frame the problem we want to solve?</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We have a fairly specific problem of practice to solve. (e.g., Training principals in university programs.)</li> <li>• The problem is centered in a specific or fairly specific institutional locale (e.g., University principal prep programs.)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We recognize that we need more work to conceptualize the problem or sub-problems in play because they are not obvious. (e.g., Fairly open-ended charge to the teams.)</li> <li>• We are working from a broad problem frame such that multiple solutions might be viable; we should avoid locking into a particular approach too early. (e.g., Variety of products and projects that emerged from the different teams.)</li> </ul>
<p><b>Policy levers: What is the configuration of the policy levers in play?</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Specific system-level policy levers can support reimagined practice that will enhance effectiveness. (e.g., State leadership standards and state licensing policies emphasizing performance were supportive structures.)</li> <li>• System-level policy levers set expectations, but accommodate or even support local choices. (e.g., Local universities and districts could craft working agreements about partnerships.)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The array of levers provides multiple entry points for creative thinking that can foster improvement without massive overhauls to multiple policies. (e.g., Effort around particular elements of levers in use that contributed incremental improvements, not major changes.)</li> <li>• Processes that guide implementation of the levers incorporate ways for stakeholders to provide input to improve them. (e.g., Team efforts that reframed interactions between state and locals over various dimensions of state policy.)</li> </ul>
<p><b>Local contexts: What constraints and opportunities exist in local contexts?</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Local knowledge, champions, networks, and capacities exist at sufficient levels to launch efforts for focused improvement such that outside partners can play supporting rather than dominant roles (e.g., Baseline level of enthusiasm and appetite for improving principal preparation that informed the selection of the UPPI sites.)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Constituencies across variable local contexts find problem frames and potential solutions relevant to their conditions because the frames and potential solutions are adaptable and cross-cutting (e.g., Leading for equity focus or state supported principal leadership development academies.)</li> </ul>

In contrast, when concrete deliverables for an effort are less-well-defined from the start, as they were with the ELLC, states' knowledge of local conditions could move states to be more eclectic in choosing local sites for implementation. This approach could be especially valuable if the state uses districts and community organizations as sources for implementation ideas. A theory of action in that context could be that trying ideas in a range of locales or a range of networked partnerships could help state leaders learn about how priorities, capacities, and challenges vary across their school districts.

## 5. Conclusion

The ELLC and UPPI provide several insights for state officials interested in developing and supporting their school principals. This paper summarizes important common themes and key differences that emerged from the teams that worked to help their states meet the ESSA moment in the ELLC or that redesigned principal preparation in the UPPI. Even though these were two different efforts, the results convey quite clearly that state policymakers have invaluable roles to play in advancing the principalship, regardless of the particular implementation model or models that might inform future work. Further, the rich accounts that researchers studying the ELLC and UPPI revealed in their more detailed reports and evaluation studies provide additional examples of the broad themes outlined here. State officials committed to this work should consider this paper an on-ramp to that larger body of research as they focus their own efforts to ensure that all schools have excellent principals who support teaching and learning.

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