

# Promising Practices for the Design and Implementation of Equity-Centered Leader Pathways

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The **Comprehensive Leadership for Learning - Equity Centered Leadership (CALL-ECL)** research project is a multi-year effort to document the work of school districts as they create equity-centered principal pipelines. The CALL-OTL survey is an information tool to document, measure, and support the everyday work principals do to improve equitable opportunities to learn. The project is part of The Wallace Foundation's seven-year Equity-Centered Pipeline Initiative (ECPI) to support the development of equity-centered school leaders in eight urban districts.

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## Acknowledgements

During the first four years of this project, our research team has talked with hundreds of education leaders, traveled thousands of miles, and reviewed countless district documents. We have learned a great deal about how our district partners have gone about constructing their equity-centered principal pipelines. We hope that in sharing some of the most promising practices we have observed, others may be informed and inspired to build systems and structures that will create access to opportunities for all students.

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Comprehensive Assessment of Leadership Learning/Equity-Centered Leadership (CALL-ECL)

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# Introduction

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This report highlights promising practices that emerged as eight large urban school districts in the United States engaged in a multi-year, grant-funded effort to advance equity-centered leadership in schools. We highlight challenges the districts faced in working towards systemic change to promote leadership for equity, and the actions they took to address these challenges. For districts currently engaged in similar work and those planning for it, this report offers practice-informed strategies that can guide them in proactively addressing barriers that will likely emerge in the process.

The district efforts we document took place in the context of the Equity-Centered Pipeline Initiative (ECPI) funded by The Wallace Foundation. The foundation is supporting eight school districts in building comprehensive, aligned principal pipelines with the goal of developing school leaders who can advance each district's vision of equity. The initiative began in 2021 and is planned to continue for six years. The ECPI is informed by three bodies of research: (1) studies that demonstrate the promise of comprehensive and aligned principal pipelines to

improve student achievement (e.g., Gates et al., 2019), (2) scholarship that documents the positive impact of effective principals on important student and staff outcomes (e.g., Grissom et al., 2019); and (3) work that illustrates the key role that school leaders play in advancing equity in schools (e.g., Khalifa et al., 2016).

The ECPI work is led locally by each district in partnership with the state education agency, higher education institutions, and community organizations. The efforts of these district partnership teams encompass seven interconnected areas for developing high-quality school leaders: leader standards, pre-service leader preparation, leader hiring and placement, on-the-job leader support, principal supervision, leader tracking systems, and sustaining systems (see Figure 1). This report highlights promising practices that address all these areas.

We use the term *promising practices* to highlight the emergent challenges and solution strategies in each of our eight district partners. For the first four years of the initiative, our research

**Figure 1. The Pipeline Design Model**



team documented the efforts of the eight district partnership teams (DPTs) to lead the design and implementation of principal preparation and support pathways. Each DPT includes a project director, the district superintendent and cabinet members, leaders of district departments such as human resources and leadership development, principal supervisors and coaches, key school and community leaders, and representatives of universities and state agencies. Our research team participated in and documented over 400 meetings, and conducted 245 interviews and focus groups with DPT members. These data helped us to identify key challenges that emerged in the process of ECPI implementation and trace the promising practices districts developed in response.

As research partners, we identified three themes across the promising practices we highlight in this report:

- Challenges emerged throughout the process as *opportunities for design* aimed at transforming the conditions under which equity work is imagined and led;
- *Creating coherence within systems* was a persistent challenge and a key accomplishment;
- Districts *prioritized developing relationships and human capital* to create conditions for distributed leadership and local ownership of equity efforts.

**Table 1. Emergent Challenges and Corresponding Promising Practices**

Emergent Challenge	Initiative	District
1. How can a district develop a pipeline of equity-centered leaders?	Developing an internal principal residency program (iLEAD)	Baltimore City Public Schools
2. How can a district coordinate the roles of university partners in leadership preparation and support?	Expanding district-university collaboration beyond leader preparation	Columbus City Schools
3. How can a district facilitate community support for new principal leaders?	Engaging the community in principal selection	District of Columbia Public Schools
4. How can a district cultivate and sustain a vibrant community of leaders of color?	Establishing and sustaining leadership affinity groups	Fresno Unified School District
5. How can equity-centered leadership ideas be integrated into ongoing principal supervision efforts?	Focusing principal supervisors on equity	Portland Public Schools
6. How can the focus on equity-centered leadership development be sustained over time?	Sustaining the ECPI work	Jefferson County Public Schools; San Antonio Independent School District; Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Schools



The report highlights promising practices that the districts developed as they worked to expand their systems' capacities to support leadership for equity in schools. These practices emerged in response to challenges that arose organically as districts strove to transform their systems and promote equity-centered leadership. The practices we describe address all the areas of work in the pipeline model (see Figure 1). For reasons of space, we highlight one promising practice per district.

The eight districts that were part of the ECPI developed their own definitions of equity and equity-centered leadership. In this report, we define *equity* in alignment with the aims of the Equity-Centered Pipeline Initiative (ECPI) and current literature. Here, equity refers to the systemic effort by schools and districts, as well as leaders and educators, to engage in practices that remove barriers and create conditions where all students, especially those historically underserved, have meaningful opportunities to learn (Gutiérrez, 2009; Khalifa et al., 2016). These practices include providing access to rigorous, culturally relevant instruction, creating inclusive environments for students and families, and actively challenging deficit-based assumptions and institutional

practices that reproduce inequality (Ladson-Billings, 2014; Frattura & Capper, 2007; Diem & Welton, 2020). We recognize that definitions of equity – and by extension, equity-centered leadership – must be responsive to districts' histories and contexts. As such, our work aims to document how educators, leaders, and communities in eight large urban districts understand and enact equity in their practice.

# iLEAD: Developing a Principal Residency Program



"[iLEAD] was not created overnight. It emerged from a thoughtful, intentional, and strategic process. With support from The Wallace Foundation grant and insights from our comprehensive landscape analysis, where our own leaders clearly voiced the need, it became evident that the time had come to launch an internal leadership development program. Our goal was to cultivate the kind of leaders who are committed to City Schools and who will help drive meaningful, lasting change in student outcomes."

**Dr. Tracey L. Durant,**  
Senior Executive Director of Equity  
Baltimore City Public Schools

## Emergent Challenge

# How can the district develop a pipeline of equity-centered leaders?

### Promising Practice #1: iLEAD: Developing a Principal Residency Program

District leaders in Baltimore City Public Schools developed a one-year, home-grown residency process for aspiring school leaders called the Intensive Leadership Education and Development (iLEAD) program. The iLEAD program supports aspiring leaders in developing the dispositions, knowledge, and skills they need to be strong candidates for school leadership positions in the district. Launched in 2024, the new residency program represents a three-year journey during which district leaders conducted extensive research, studied implementation practices from other districts, and gathered direct feedback

from principals in the district about their needs. The curriculum for iLEAD reflects the Baltimore City leadership framework (see Figure 2), which is aligned to the Professional Standards for Educational Leadership (PSEL) and the district's equity-centered leader dispositions.

### Why is the program worth highlighting?

Building a pipeline of equity-centered school leaders is a challenge faced by many large urban districts (Turnbull et al., 2015). Baltimore City responded to this challenge by designing a residency program developed internally by and for the district.

Figure 2. Baltimore City Principal Leadership Framework



This locally developed initiative not only ensures alignment with Baltimore's unique context and needs, but also increases the likelihood of sustainability beyond the scope of the ECPI.

## What does the program look like?

The iLEAD program is a 12-month residency that "equips candidates with the concept of equity-centered leadership through safe practice at a school with a mentor principal who models and provides authentic, ambitious school-based leadership practices and experiences" (School Board presentation, October 22, 2024). It is supported by four senior principal coaches and enrolls up to ten candidates annually. The program uses a multi-step selection process that includes a performance task and an interview. The program aligns the skills and leadership qualities of mentor principals with the needs of each resident.

iLEAD includes job-embedded leadership development, monthly professional learning seminars, and on-demand coaching. Successful program graduates will:

- foster effective instructional leadership to drive student achievement;
- promote equity and inclusivity by leading high-performing teams;
- build strong school communities by implementing systems and structures to drive schoolwide improvement; and
- use protocols and processes to drive continuous improvement.

iLEAD emphasizes the history of Baltimore City schools, equity-centered leadership practices, and mental health and wellness. Residents participate in a series of carefully curated experiences that include participation in expert panels, networking opportunities, professional development conferences, summer induction, and resident rotations. During the program, principal residents are expected to lead one academic and one non-academic team at their residency site. After completing iLEAD, residents are expected to commit to leading a traditional school in the district for at least one year.

## Motivation and Development Process

In 2022-23, Baltimore City conducted a landscape analysis to better understand the experiences and needs of its principals. This analysis informed the decision to create an internal leadership development program. iLEAD was born

out of necessity, careful planning, stakeholder feedback, and a commitment to context-specific leadership development. Prior to the launch of iLEAD, district leaders convened a district partnership team (DPT) consisting of partners from the Maryland State Department of Education, Morgan State University, Towson University, and colleagues from the Academics, Engagement, Equity, Human Capital, and Schools Offices. The DPT drafted a definition of an equity-centered leader and identified the values and dispositions necessary for transformative school leadership. The equity-centered leader definition and dispositions were then integrated into the modules for iLEAD.

## Emerging Impact

While the iLEAD Residency program is still in its early stages, it has already made a significant impact on the district's capacity to prepare equity-centered leaders. For 2024-25, there were 33 applicants, with five aspiring leaders selected and enrolled in the program. Out of these five, four were named as Principals and one Assistant Principal for 2025-26. For 2025-26, there were 58 applicants, and ten aspiring leaders were selected and enrolled in the program.

## Next Steps

Baltimore City Public Schools is focused on sustainability not just with iLEAD but with all efforts related to leadership development. The district's approach to sustainability includes the following main strategies:

**Building Internal Capacity:** developing leaders from within to sustain and expand the impact of the iLEAD Residency Program;

**Integrating Key Initiatives into District Operations:** ensuring leadership development remains a core component of the district's long-term strategy;

**Ongoing Collaboration with University Partners:** strengthening partnerships to enhance training, mentorship, and research-based practices;

**Strategic Allocation of Resources:** prioritizing leadership development through intentional investment in people and programs.

# Expanding the Role of University Partners Beyond Leader Preparation



"The partnership is different from anything we have done before. [Our university partners] were immediately interested in partnering on the grant but what was different was that they asked: What does CCS need and where are the gaps in the leaders' expertise? I can't say enough about their willingness to listen."

**Kathryn Moser**  
Deputy Superintendent  
Columbus City Schools

## Emergent Challenge

# How can the district coordinate the roles of the university partners in leadership preparation and support?

## Promising Practice #2: Expanding District-University Collaboration Beyond Leader Preparation

Local institutions of higher education play crucial roles in preparing future school leaders in any district. Through the Wallace project, Columbus City Schools enhanced partnerships with two local higher education partners: Ashland University and The Ohio State University (OSU). The district's vision for university partner engagement extended beyond aspiring leader preparation. While Columbus worked with Ashland on launching cohorts that enrolled *aspiring* leaders, the district invited OSU to provide professional learning experiences to *current* principals. This vision enabled the district to collaborate with university partners on both leader preparation and professional learning. Here, we highlight the partnership between the district and OSU that centered on supporting sitting leaders.

## Why is this practice worth highlighting?

University-district partnerships can enhance practical and responsive preparation for leaders in urban schools (Goldstein et al., 2024; Wang, Gates & Herman, 2022). However, university partners exist in an already established and complex professional and cultural ecosystem with the district and other higher education institutions in the state. Sometimes the partners invited to participate in the ECPI work were rivals for the same prospective students and placements; in other cases, the different sizes and program aims of the university partners resulted in preparation programs that did not fully address the district's equity priorities.

Columbus City Schools focused its work with OSU on leader professional growth. The district incorporated a framework for

culturally responsive school leadership, reviewed all syllabi to ensure a coherent and comprehensive focus on equity, and reworked the field experience for program candidates. These steps helped leverage the OSU faculty's extensive expertise in facilitating high-quality equity-centered learning for sitting school leaders.

## What does the practice look like?

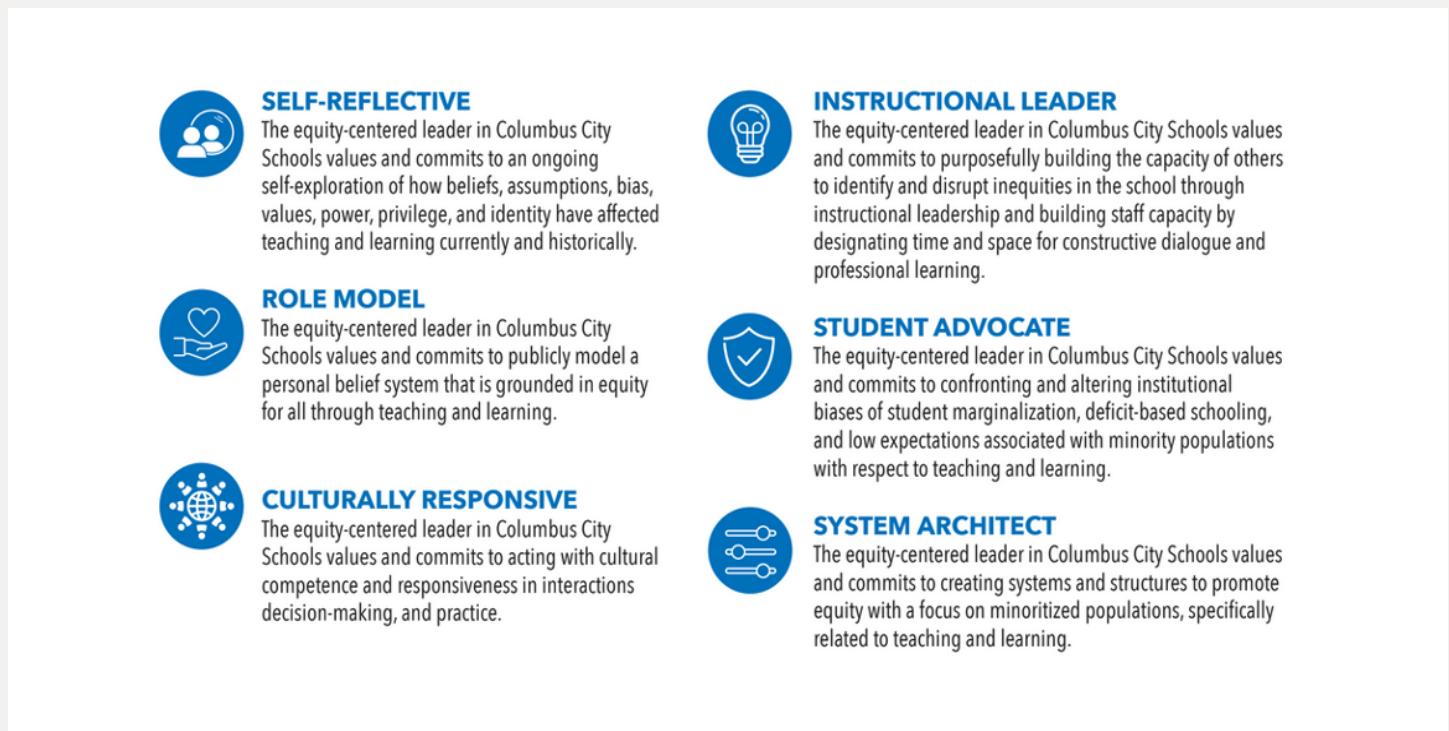
During the 2023-24 academic year, OSU engaged Columbus middle school principals and their leadership teams in a series of equity-focused professional learning sessions. The series offered school teams the opportunity to take an in-depth look at an equity issue at their respective sites. These professional learning opportunities helped to infuse the principles of equity-centered leadership into the work of current district staff.

In the 2024-2025 academic year, OSU established a new professional learning structure that was available to school leaders in Columbus: Learning Journeys. The school system is divided into six geographic regions, and five leaders in each region are selected to take part in a region-specific journey. OSU facilitates two of the journeys. The leaders share their learning with other principals in their region on a monthly basis, and all principals then take the learning to their schools. The journeys have expanded the scope of the partnership between OSU and the district, and also engaged outside partners.

OSU also designed a Leadership for Equity Institute<sup>1</sup> in 2023 for Columbus principals and assistant principals to learn about culturally-responsive leadership, community-based equity, vulnerable students, communication and brand development, and strategic planning. This event, which has expanded in impact

1 <https://edusummit.ehe.osu.edu/faq/>

**Figure 3. Columbus City Schools Portrait of an Equity-Centered Leader**



each year, is intended to be an annual professional learning opportunity for CCS school leaders that could be sustained beyond the grant by engaging district and school leaders from other districts. The middle school leadership teams that engaged in OSU-facilitated professional learning presented their equity-focused projects at the 2024 summer institute, and the leaders who were part of the Learning Journeys shared their learning with others at the 2025 summer institute.

## Motivation

Prior to the launch of the ECPI initiative, Columbus City Schools articulated its vision for student excellence through the district's Portrait of a CCS Graduate. In the initial stage of the ECPI project (2021-2022), the district adopted a new definition of equity focused on providing fair access to resources and opportunities by acknowledging individual student needs. They used this definition to inform a new Portrait of an Equity-Centered Leader (see Figure 3). District leaders integrated the leadership portrait in the leader preparation and professional learning programs.

OSU has long been recognized as a national leader in equity-focused research and professional preparation. Columbus City

Schools has already been part of an OSU initiative to provide districts leaders with first-hand experience of high quality professional learning. The partnership with OSU became a powerful way to develop the capacity of school leaders that aligns with the vision outlined in the district's portrait of an equity-centered leader.

## Development Process

District leaders in Columbus were inspired by the emerging literature on the important role of school leaders in improving student outcomes (e.g., Grissom et al., 2021). They invested in school leader professional learning as a lever for improving student learning and well-being. The district identified middle school principals as a group most in need of high-quality professional learning opportunities. This priority led to OSU's development of a professional learning series for middle school leadership teams in particular.

OSU designed its summer leader institute to provide a space in which all school leaders in Columbus could have access to equity-focused professional learning. District leaders and OSU faculty redesigned the institute each year based on feedback



they received from attendees. The district collaborated with the OSU team to develop the concept of Learning Journeys as a professional growth opportunity for principals to strengthen their practices, and share their learning with other leaders in the district as well as with staff at their schools. These initiatives helped district leaders to learn from one another and from other experts in equity-centered educational leadership.

### Emerging Impact

The partnership between Columbus City Schools and OSU has enabled the district to provide high-quality learning opportunities to all principals. These opportunities have been particularly important for school leaders with more than three years of experience who had not received targeted support from the district.

In 2021, the OSU summer leadership institute was relatively small and only around 30 to 35 district administrators attended. In the summer of 2024, the institute was much larger and became a part of the administrators' end-of-year meetings. There were approximately 225 local administrators who attended. In summer 2025, more than 320 district and school leaders attended the institute, including leaders from other ECPI districts. The institute was also positively received by Columbus school leaders: 70%

of respondents to a survey in summer 2024 strongly agreed that the institute content was applicable to them as a leader, and 71% strongly agreed that the institute provided relevant information related to equity. Some of the comments Columbus leaders provided include experiencing the institute as "a valuable learning experience," "excellent professional learning opportunity," and "a professional, considerate opportunity" that gave attendees access to "knowledgeable speakers." Some administrators commented about wanting more time to process and talk with their teams about the learning they are experiencing. OSU built that into the schedule for the 2025 summer institute.

### Next Steps

Columbus City Schools and OSU are exploring how their partnership can be sustained beyond the ECPI. In terms of the summer institute, this might mean opening the institute up to school leaders from districts beyond Columbus. District leaders are planning to collect data on the impact of the Learning Journeys, and then decide which journeys to sustain beyond the ECPI grant.

# Engaging the Community in Principal Selection



"Our families are vocal and engaged ... and we welcome that. As our Community Engagement and School Leader Recruitment teams guide schools through the principal selection process, it's critical that parents feel a new leader isn't being selected *for* them, but *with* them. We work hard to ensure that their perspectives are considered, and that the process reflects the diversity and needs of the entire community."

District of Columbia Public Schools

## Emergent Challenge

# How can the district facilitate community support for new principals?

### Promising Practice #3: Engaging the Community in Principal Selection

The process of principal hiring involves a two-pronged challenge: selecting highly qualified leaders, and ensuring a strong fit between the qualities of the new leader and the needs of the communities they will serve. DC Public Schools (DCPS) has taken a unique approach to addressing this common issue. The district built on an existing practice for engaging the community in the principal selection process and expanded it to include additional stakeholders. The current process gives students, parents, and community members the opportunity to make recommendations related to principal selection, and engages district staff from across departments. As one leader explained, “two-way learning happened: more people got to know the leaders in the pipeline while also understanding their strengths and areas of growth. [Everyone] had a better sense of who we had and how we could close gaps.”

### Why is this practice worth highlighting?

Principal hiring and placement are key components of equity-centered leader pathways. Inviting community members into the process of meeting and evaluating principal candidates strengthens trust, ensures cultural alignment, and helps surface local priorities that may be overlooked in traditional hiring processes. Research shows that when school leaders are selected with authentic community input, they are more likely to foster inclusive school cultures and sustain stakeholder engagement (Ishimaru, 2014; Khalifa et al., 2016). This approach also supports equity-centered leadership by aligning school leadership with the lived experiences and expectations of the families and communities they serve.

### What does the practice look like?

A distinguishing characteristic of the principal hiring process in DCPS is the inclusion of community voices through a community panel. The panel is a rigorous process that includes soliciting questions from community members, facilitating a discussion with principal candidates, and collecting feedback. Community panels enable families and community leaders to meet a range of candidates who may serve as their school leaders. Figure 1 provides an overview of the process.

The community panel consists of 9-12 stakeholders who are essential to the school community. They include parents, students, teachers, non-instructional staff, and other community members. Community and district leaders collaborate on identifying members for the panel. Once the panel is formed, community and district leaders solicit community input on the questions that the panel will ask the principal candidates. These questions address the six components of the DCPS Leadership Framework<sup>1</sup>: instruction, talent, school culture, operations, family and community, and personal leadership. The panel typically takes one day and includes interviews with three candidates. On panel day, district leaders take notes on the verbal feedback that panel members give about each candidate, and panel members submit individual feedback via an online survey. After the panel, district leaders synthesize the feedback received and share it with the Chancellor, who makes the final hiring decision.

This process develops a deeper understanding of the types of candidates that are vetted by district leaders and represent the district's standards for what it means to be equity-centered. The process is, in other words, an opportunity for the district to communicate its vision of leadership and hear community feedback on that vision.

<sup>1</sup> [https://dcps.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/dc/page\\_content/attachments/DCPS%20School%20Leader%20IMPACT%20Guidebook\\_Principals\\_0.pdf](https://dcps.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/dc/page_content/attachments/DCPS%20School%20Leader%20IMPACT%20Guidebook_Principals_0.pdf)



## Motivation and Development Process

As DCPS joined in the ECPI grant in 2021, the district was re-transitioning from a COVID-inspired fully online model for principal hiring to a revised process that included in-person components. The grant presented the district with an opportunity to revisit the existing process. Several district leaders called for a new process to ensure a better fit between principal candidates and the schools where they were placed. This priority was reinforced by an emphasis on community engagement as an important component of equity-centered leadership.

DCPS expanded the existing community panel process to include greater involvement by district leaders. This change enabled district leaders to engage more deeply with community voices and collaborate more closely across departments. More specifically, principal supervisors now work together with members of the DCPS Community Action Team to set up the community panels. Members of the DCPS School Leadership Recruitment and Selection Team facilitate the panels, collect panel feedback on the candidates, and share the feedback with the chancellor. The community panel process, therefore, is a valuable opportunity not only for the community to provide input but for district leaders to engage with the community and with colleagues across departments.

## Emerging Impact

The principal panels directly involve community voices in the principal selection process. The frequency of community

panels varies depending on the number of principal vacancies in the district. These panels complement the DCPS Leadership Framework and its Equity-Centered Leadership Principles as important tools for building shared understanding around what equity-centered leaders in DCPS are expected to know and do. The positive experience of the district with the community panels inspired district leaders to broaden stakeholder engagement in the principal hiring process. In particular, the district has expanded the role of principal supervisors to interact with candidates and provide feedback on principal candidates.

## Next Steps

Integrating community voice into the hiring process has opened up new possibilities for creating more equitable, participatory opportunities for equity in leadership. The principal selection process has served as a foundation for revising the process for hiring assistant principals in the district. Similar to the principal hiring process, assistant principal hiring now aligns more closely to the district's Leadership Framework and Equity-Centered Leadership Principles. District leaders are also considering the optimal size of the stakeholder group that can be engaged in the principal selection process. In addition, district leaders are exploring how best to communicate feedback from community panels to principal candidates such that the feedback is manageable and constructive.

# Establishing Leadership Affinity Groups



"Affinity groups are important voices for equity. Mentorship of our Black educators that we're starting, that's coming from our affinity groups. Designing structures and policies [in our system] that will support student outcomes, that comes from our affinity groups. Capturing a representation from each voice is instrumental to our district's improvement."

**Kim Villegas**

Executive Director, Leadership Development Department  
Fresno Unified School District

## Emergent Challenge

# How can a district cultivate and keep a vibrant community of leaders of color?

### Promising Practice #4: Establishing Leadership Affinity Groups

Highly qualified leaders whose racial and linguistic background closely mirror student demographics is an important feature of successful equity-centered leadership (Khalifa et al., 2016). The Fresno Unified School District has historically struggled to recruit and retain school leaders who reflect the changing demographics of Fresno schools. Systemic barriers in hiring, promotion, and access to leadership preparation programs along with cultural and economic challenges have made it difficult to recruit and retain a pool of racially diverse school leaders. In the first three years of the ECPI, Fresno leaders prioritized the identification of structural and cultural barriers that could be addressed in the design of new approaches to leadership recruitment and support.

Fresno has developed affinity groups as a strategy to bolster the recruitment, support, and retention of leaders of color (principals and assistant principals). An affinity group is a network of individuals who share common identities, backgrounds, or interests who come together to support one another's growth, belonging, and leadership development. Affinity groups foster retention and advancement by providing culturally affirming spaces, mentorship, and collective advocacy within organizations (Welbourne, Rolf & Schlachter, 2017). District leaders believe that building social and professional connections through designed affinity groups will help to support its teachers and leaders of color (Griffin & Toldson, 2012).

### Why is this practice worth highlighting?

Affinity groups provide unique opportunities for district and school leaders to connect, network, and support one another. They enable leaders to receive coaching that enhances the quality of their leadership practices and leverages their own culturally responsive practices and experiences to improve

student outcomes. In the affinity groups space, leaders affirm and clarify their commitments and priorities as leaders of color who are advocates for historically underserved students, families, and staff.

### What does the practice look like?

In Fresno Unified, affinity groups provide professional learning, mentoring, and other support to school leaders of color through formal spaces (supported by the district) as well as informal spaces (self-organized by school leaders). All groups meet regularly. Typically, district leaders invite educators to participate, though on occasion affinity groups may form organically. The district recruits and supports mentors for the affinity groups in collaboration with an external organization: Men of Color in Educational Leadership<sup>1</sup> (MCEL). Fresno Unified has affinity groups along racial as well as gender identities. Historically, Black educators have been underrepresented among Fresno administrators. After the school district formed a partnership with MCEL, the district created a parallel group for school- and system-level Black women leaders. Feedback about the initial affinity groups led the district to expand this structure to leaders beyond school principals and assistant principals.

### Motivation

Fresno Unified is committed to ensuring that its leaders reflect the demographics of the district's student population. Providing meaningful peer connections among leadership groups is seen as a promising pathway to support social networking and both formal and informal spaces for leaders to ask questions and develop professional relationships. The early successes with MCEL led district leaders to explore how this model could be extended to support a greater range of Fresno Unified leaders across levels of experience and professional roles.

<sup>1</sup> <https://mcelleaders.org/>

## Exhibit 1. Testimonials about Affinity Groups Facilitated by MCEL

**“As a new principal in Fresno Unified School District, being a part of an affinity group created a safe space for me to develop professionally. It gave me a sense of belonging and community to ensure my success in my role.”**

– Elementary school principal

**“MCEL has benefited me greatly professionally and personally. Professionally, it has been a breath of fresh air to receive professional development that acknowledges the additional challenges we face as men of color... Personally, the brotherhood that we have formed in Fresno Unified with MCEL goes beyond work. We have developed a network of support that cares for one another professionally and personally.”**

– Middle school principal

**“MCEL has been both inspirational and motivational in the area of professional advancement providing mentorship and guidance to me as a site leader. Also providing affirmation bolstering efficacy through educational excellence demonstrated by MCEL members and founders.”**

– High school principal

### Development Process

A key challenge for the district was how to design and support professional affinity groups so that they would be spaces for powerful professional learning, meet leaders' needs, and be sustained. With this goal in mind, district leaders dedicated time and effort to selecting experienced and dedicated mentors for each group. District leaders also made efforts to formalize and sustain affinity groups. During the 2023-2024 academic year, supporting the groups became a function of the Human Resources department. Affinity groups also work closely with principal supervisors in the district.

### Emerging Impact

Affinity groups are now an established structure for the support that the district provides leaders of color. The feedback district leaders have received has been very positive, and Fresno Unified has expanded the support for affinity groups over the years. We provide a small sample of testimonials in Exhibit 1 below.

Fresno was able to retain a higher percentage of its leaders of color over the first four years of the initiative. In 2023-24, for example, the district employed 141 principals of color. This number rose to 150 in 2024-25. Although it would be difficult

to attribute these increases to the affinity group infrastructure alone, district leaders said they believe that affinity groups play an important role in the recruitment and retention of school leaders who reflect the demographics of Fresno students.

Affinity groups have also shaped district thinking around providing mentorship for teachers of color and revising hiring practices to be more responsive to leaders of color. Feedback from affinity group members was one factor that motivated district leaders to revise the principal and assistant principal hiring process to reduce bias. The current hiring process is closely aligned to the district's new leader dispositions and the state leader standards.

### Next Steps

District leaders are designing professional learning and training opportunities to support site-based leaders in the application of equity-centered practices to improve student outcomes.

# Focusing Principal Supervisors on Equity Leadership



"I'll usually ask 'What do you expect to see when we go into this classroom?... What did you see in relation to what you were supposed to see? Okay, what are your next steps?' Some probing questions. 'What are you going to prioritize for this teacher? How are you going to plan the conversation?' And I want you and I to practice the conversation. I'm here for you to practice the conversation."

**Raddy Lurie**

Area Senior Director, Office of School Performance  
Portland Public Schools

## Emergent Challenge

# How can equity-centered leadership ideas be integrated into ongoing principal supervision efforts?

## Promising Practice #5: Focusing Principal Supervisors on Equity Leadership

Portland Public Schools in Oregon reshaped principal supervision in terms of the district's commitment to equity (see Exhibit 2).

The district created a leadership coaching framework and rubrics for observation, evaluation and growth to help define the equity-centered leadership coaching that principal supervisors provide for principals. The rubrics were designed to support principal supervisor understanding of equity-centered leadership and to build the capacity of principal supervisors to support school leaders in advancing equity at their sites.

### Exhibit 2. Portland Public Schools' Equity Definition

*Educational equity means raising the achievement of all students while (1) narrowing the gaps between the lowest and highest performing students and (2) eliminating the racial predictability and disproportionality of which student groups occupy the highest and lowest achievement categories. ([district website](#)<sup>1</sup>)*

## Why is this practice worth highlighting?

Principal supervisors play a critical role in supporting and transforming the practice of school leaders (Goldring, et. al. 2020). However, in a large urban district, the leaders who develop new standards for practice often do not work directly with the teams responsible for translating standards into day-to-day practices (Honig, 2006; Madda et al., 2007). In the ECPI

context, this work called on the district partnership team to include principal supervisors and coaches in conversations about new, equity-focused leadership standards and practices.

## What does the practice look like?

Portland Public Schools' Senior Directors of Schools (SDSs) are responsible for principal supervision and support. Their primary function is to "coach and provide differentiated support to building leaders to promote culturally responsive instruction, accelerated student learning, and student, staff, and family engagement" ([district website](#)<sup>2</sup>). In an effort to build the capacity of principal supervisors to offer high-quality support to school leaders and promote consistency in supervision across the district, Portland Public Schools developed principal supervisor standards and accompanying rubrics. These new artifacts communicate what equity-centered supervision and coaching look like. They serve as a foundation for discussions among principal supervisors about promoting equity-centered leadership, and build shared language around equity-centered leadership among district and school leaders. Principal supervisors' school visits and feedback to school leaders were aligned to these standards, using a common template focused on learning targets and success criteria.

## Motivation

Portland has engaged in a long struggle for educational equity for students and families of color. More specifically, the district prioritizes "improving student achievement and eliminating racial disproportionality with an emphasis on Black and Native students" ([district website](#)<sup>3</sup>). The ECPI created an opportunity

1 <https://www.pps.net/departments/racial-equity-social-justice/racial-educational-equity-policy>

2 <https://www.pps.net/departments/office-of-school-performance/department-main-page>

3 <https://www.pps.net/departments/office-of-school-performance/department-main-page>

to expand and strengthen the support that the district provides to principals for the purpose of advancing racial equity in schools. District leaders realized that new definitions of equity for teaching and learning developed at the district level called for a shared approach to supporting the principal supervisors work with current school leaders. The district needed to build a new kind of capacity to support principals' instructional and equity-centered leadership. A key lever for building this capacity was the crafting of documents that help articulate the district's vision for equity-centered school leader support.

## Development Process

In 2023-24, the Portland team developed new performance standards for principal supervisors to prioritize equity and instructional leadership support (see Figure 4). The design was informed by the district's equity-centered leader profile and the national Model Principal Supervisor Professional Standards.<sup>4</sup> The development of the standards was conducted as a deliberate, district-wide initiative engaging principal supervisors, representatives from Human Resources, the Office of the Chief of Schools, principals, and other key district leaders. This collaborative approach ensured that multiple perspectives were incorporated, fostering shared ownership of the standards and alignment with district goals for instructional leadership.

Central to the process was a structured professional learning series designed to deepen participants' understanding of diverse coaching stances—collaborative, instructive, facilitative, and transformative—and how these approaches could be strategically integrated to support sustained improvement in school leaders' practice. The series employed iterative cycles of dialogue, reflection, and applied coaching practice, creating opportunities for participants to test and refine their skills in real-world contexts.

Through this approach, the standards development process not only produced a comprehensive framework for leadership practice, but also served as a professional growth experience in its own right. With support initiated from Leadership Academy and continuing with Scholars First, participants gained both conceptual knowledge and practical expertise, equipping them to model and implement coaching strategies that drive meaningful, systemic improvements in school leadership and student outcomes.

Prior to the development of the new framework, principal supervisors used the same coaching protocol that school leaders used to coach teachers. The district collaborated with an external consulting organization to develop a district-specific coaching framework to differentiate equity-centered leadership from classroom coaching. The framework invited principal supervisors to personalize guidance based on the needs and interests of each leader and the context of the school. Supervisors concluded each coaching session with developing an actionable commitment for the principal to move towards an equity-focused goal. The series was a valuable opportunity for principal supervisors and coaches to learn and grow together, since in Portland principal coaches and supervisors work in different departments.

## Emerging Impact

The principal supervisor standards were included in the district's evaluation platform for principal supervisors. Principal supervisors have completed self-assessments and set professional goals that are aligned with the standards. The professional goals included 30-60-90 day benchmarks of metrics and including reflection on leadership strategies utilized. The standards development process provided important opportunities for principal supervisors to build common expectations of what equity-centered leadership practices look like in schools. The new coaching framework has strengthened alignment within the principal supervisor team and collaboration between principal supervisors and principal coaches. (Principal coaches in Portland support school leaders with one to three years of experience.) Additionally, the framework has promoted greater coherence between the preparation and support of Portland leaders. For example, one of the higher education partners for the school district, Lewis & Clark University, redesigned the internship experience for its district-focused cohort of aspiring leaders to include learning and practice around transformational leadership coaching.

<sup>4</sup> <https://wallacefoundation.org/report/model-principal-supervisor-professional-standards-2015>



**Figure 4. Portland Public Schools Principal Supervisor Rubric (Excerpt)**

Leads Strategic Change				
Standard	Emerging	Developing	Effective	Transformative
Senior Directors of Schools (Principal Supervisors) lead strategic change that continuously: elevates the performance of schools, develops and sustains high-quality educational programs and equitable opportunities across the district.	<p>Rarely focuses on developing and monitoring school-level goals and does not align plans with district priorities.</p> <p>Inaccurately or inconsistently communicates the district strategic plan.</p>	<p>Inconsistently focuses principals on the importance of developing systems, and may not monitor the implementation or effectiveness.</p>	<p>Consistently coaches principals in developing solid systems that can be articulated by all staff and are visible through actions and/or artifacts.</p>	<p>Schools in the SDS cohort consistently demonstrate effective systems and alignment with district priorities and are recognized as models of strong systems; Advocates and articulates the district strategic plan and graduate portrait across areas of their work.</p>
Indicators				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Support principals in developing and implementing school-level goals and plans aligned to district vision, goals, and strategies;</li> <li>Lead and coach principals (individually and within communities of practice) to design effective racial equity centered school-level systems;</li> <li>Lead and coach principals (individually and within learning communities of practice) to design high quality educational programs for improving teaching and learning, building strong school culture, and efficiently managing operations;</li> <li>Lead central office collaborations to receive appropriate support for schools as determined in principal supervisor and principal school improvement work</li> </ul>				

# Sustaining the Equity-Centered Leadership Work



"My vision of where this work should go is [to have] a policy, being fully funded, having an established office with a team. And then having mechanisms for program evaluation to demonstrate its effectiveness. But because of all this work, we're producing high quality school leaders, who are ready to hit a school from day one."

**Faith Stroud**

Director, Leadership and Professional Development  
Jefferson County Public Schools

## Emergent Challenge

# How can the focus on equity leadership development be sustained over time?

### Promising Practices #6: Sustaining the Equity-Centered Leadership Work

The Equity Centered Pipeline Initiative was designed to spark systemic change across district offices to improve leadership preparation and support. Understandably, as districts moved past the middle of the grant period, leaders turned toward the question of sustaining the changes they had initiated. In this section, we discuss three approaches to sustainability that we have observed thus far:

- Jefferson County Public School leaders sought to *revise district policies* to prioritize equity-centered leadership and support;
- San Antonio Independent School District integrated the leadership preparation and support work in *the district strategic plan*; and
- Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Schools brought senior leaders from seven district departments together to *foster shared ownership of the work* around equity-centered leadership.

### Why are these practices worth highlighting?

Sustaining innovation is a persistent challenge for grant-supported initiatives. Typically, new initiatives support activities, roles and partnerships outside the status quo priorities of the organization. Focusing on sustainability while the new program is being implemented can reveal opportunities to ensure that desired changes remain in place and take root in the organizational culture (Durlak & Dupre, 2008; Fixsen, et al., 2005). These opportunities for sustainability design emerge for each organization in the course of program implementation and take different shapes depending on context. The three districts we highlight are taking different approaches to engage in sustainability efforts that influence policy, planning, and people.

Hopefully, other districts facing similar challenges with new equity-centered leadership initiatives can use these insights to guide their own sustainability pathways.

### What does the practice look like in each district?

**Policy development.** Jefferson County Public Schools offers an example of how a district aims to sustain the ECPI work through policy development. Prior to the ECPI, Jefferson County leaders were already explicitly focusing on advancing racial equity along with culture, climate, and student success skills. The focus on racial equity was supported by the adoption of the district's racial equity policy in 2018, which was a "transformative policy ... created to address the needs of students traditionally underserved and ensure that our own workforce is as diverse as the community we serve" ([district website<sup>1</sup>](#)).

In the spring of 2024, the district built on its experience with the racial equity policy and shepherded the successful adoption of a leadership development policy by its board of education. The school system's leadership development policy specifies that the district will develop and implement "a comprehensive leadership development program" ([district website<sup>2</sup>](#)). This program, which the district calls Jefferson County Leadership Academy, is intended to serve a range of district employees, including aspiring and current assistant principals, principals, and central office leaders. The program provides "multiple pathways for a certified employee to become an effective educational leader" and includes both training for new leaders and support for leaders currently employed by the district.

**Strategic planning.** The San Antonio Independent School District builds sustainability through *strategic planning* and a district-wide leadership definition. The [Always Learning<sup>3</sup>](#)

1 <https://www.jefferson.kyschools.us/page/about>

2 <https://www.jefferson.kyschools.us/o/jcps/page/jefferson-county-leadership-academy>

3 <https://www.saisd.net/o/alwayslearning/page/always-learning-plan>

planning document is student-focused and represents the district's promise to its students. The leadership definition is aligned with the strategic plan, specifies three core attributes of all leaders (always grow, always model, and always achieve), and describes the leadership styles that can help create the types of environments in which students thrive. The definition of leadership "serves as the foundation for connecting every individual across the district, from students to teachers to bus drivers and administrators, emphasizing that leadership is not tied to a title or position but is a responsibility shared by all" (Interim Report, January 2025). More specifically, the leadership definition guides the work of the district in supporting the growth of aspiring and current school leaders. The strategic plan and leadership definition helped to create system coherence and to ensure that efforts directed at leadership preparation and support are strongly aligned with district priorities.

**Engaging Senior District Leadership.** The Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Schools superintendent prioritized *engaging senior leaders* in the ECPI as a cross-departmental and cross-division strategy. This strategy involved inviting members of the superintendent's cabinet to take an active role in work related to school leader hiring, development, and support. The cabinet is instrumental in advancing the district's student-centered vision for equity. To integrate equity leadership work in the ongoing cabinet-level conversations, district leaders created a Talent Development and School Transformation Department led by the Chief of Schools. The department oversees professional learning and support for both school leaders and teachers. This structure has enabled the district to build leader pathways that include growing the district's own teachers to become leaders. Embedding teacher and leader development into a single department that connects the two invited cabinet members to participate directly in the district's equity vision is critical to ensuring the sustainability of the work.

## Development Processes

Each district adopted a collaborative design approach to creating pathways for sustainability. In JCPS, district leaders crafted a policy that requires the district to develop and implement "a comprehensive leadership development program," called the Jefferson County Leadership Academy. The writing and successful passage of the policy involved collaboration with the superintendent and among the equity, policy, human resources, and leadership departments. In addition, JCPS leveraged a number of partnerships external to the district to

support the policy development. The district consulted with the Council of Great City Schools on the language of the policy, and collaborated with the Hatcher Group to communicate about equity more broadly. District leaders are already noticing a positive "difference in the preparedness for folks who are applying for the principal role" (district leader interview, July 2023), which they attribute largely to the professional learning available through the academy.

The San Antonio *Always Learning* plan calls on its schools to "demonstrate an urgent and relentless commitment to love, nurture, and teach all our students as if they are our own so that they realize their power to shape the world." The commitments of the strategic plan are brought closer to leader practice through the leadership definition. The development of the definition involved multiple stakeholder groups. For example, a group of San Antonio principals drafted descriptors for the school-leader skills and look-fors. The district gathered feedback on the descriptors and look-fors from all principals using structured protocols and made adjustments. The expansion of the leadership definition with descriptors and look-fors "provides clarity, sets clear expectations, and ensures a shared understanding of what effective, equity-centered leadership looks like in practice at the campus level" (Interim Report, January 2025). San Antonio leaders also designed a new Administrator Coaching Handbook that clarifies the district's coaching expectations and explicitly connects to the San Antonio equity-centered leadership model and leadership definition. District leaders use the look-for system to onboard new coaches. Building the coaching capacity of principal supervisors and leadership coaches is an essential step in ensuring the sustainability of the equity-focused work in the district.

When Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Schools was awarded the ECPI grant, the superintendent and her cabinet asked themselves: Who are the people that would be critical to the work and need to be members of the district partnership team? The cabinet identified senior district leaders whose work was related to equity-centered leadership, including the district's Chief Equity Officer, Chief Academic Officer, and principal supervisors, among others. The superintendent led by example and regularly participated in the team meetings, making it difficult for others to say that they do not have the time to be engaged. The ECPI project director ensured the vision for the Wallace work was clear and consistent, and that decisions that were made during the meetings reflected district priorities and shaped district practices. The focus and facilitation of the



**"It takes a relentless commitment to saying, 'We are doing this work together.' "**

**Paula Wilkins**

Chief Academic Officer

Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Schools

meetings thus helped cabinet leaders see a clear connection between the ECPI and their responsibilities.

### **Emerging Impact**

Designing for sustainability offers districts a powerful opportunity to design for lasting change while momentum and stakeholder engagement remain high. By the midpoint of the ECPI project, the districts were beginning to identify what works, where alignment is needed, and how to build structures that endure.

- Jefferson County Public Schools is leveraging this midstream moment to institutionalize equity-centered leadership by using its 2018 racial equity policy as a foundation for establishing a leadership development policy. The district is creating anchor policies to embed racial equity at every school—an effort the superintendent described as one of the project's most significant contributions to long-term systems change.
- San Antonio is using its *Always Learning* strategic plan to define equity-centered leadership and align the ECPI initiative across departments, coaching systems, and university partnerships. This system coherence gives the ECPI work a central role within the district's strategy for improvement.
- Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Schools's approach focuses on building professional relationships among

leaders to sustain the commitment to leadership development and support. District leaders pay careful attention to how leaders come together to do the work and communicate about the work to others.

These decisions—building artifacts, aligning with strategic plans, and developing shared ownership through leadership networks—can help to ensure the work of equity-centered leadership is not a temporary program but a sustained transformation embedded in the daily life and policies of the district.

# Summary and Conclusion

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The implementation process in a large, complex organization like an urban school district typically creates new challenges as educators seek to adapt general plans to local circumstances. Well designed plans do more than chart a course—they trigger cycles of design, problem-solving, innovation, and negotiation as actors attempt to reconcile abstract design principles with the lived realities of local contexts (Weick, 1995; Honig, 2006; Spillane et al., 2002). Tracking this “design as a result of implementation” process reveals unanticipated adaptation challenges as local leaders interpret, stretch, and adjust the theory of action to better meet the needs of their communities.

This report explores several promising practices that emerged from the complex, multi-year efforts of eight large urban school districts engaged in the design and implementation of equity-centered leadership pathways. Supported by The Wallace Foundation’s Equity-Centered Pipeline Initiative (ECPI), the participating districts worked across seven interconnected domains: leader standards, pre-service preparation, hiring and placement, on-the-job support, principal supervision, leader tracking systems, and sustainability. Each section of the report surfaces a challenge and highlights how district teams responded with design strategies that adapted the pipeline model to local needs:

- Baltimore City developed a district-owned principal residency program with a strong focus on context-specific equity leadership.
- Columbus reimaged university partner roles to prevent duplication, and expanded district-university partnerships to encompass professional learning.
- D.C. Public Schools built on existing practices that incorporate community voice in school leader selection and engaged a wider range of stakeholders.
- Fresno Unified expanded the use of affinity groups as a strategy to support and retain leaders of color.
- Portland Public Schools reshaped its coaching

infrastructure and developed a new supervisory rubric to bring equity into principal supervision.

- Finally, districts like Jefferson County, San Antonio ISD, and Winston-Salem/Forsyth County developed strategies to sustain support for equity-centered leadership through district policy, strategic planning, and senior leader engagement.

Three major themes emerge across these varied efforts:

- First, *challenges emerged throughout the ECPI process as opportunities for design*. Districts reformed existing initiatives and designed new strategic plans, policies, and cross-role infrastructure to transform the conditions under which equity work is imagined and led. For example, the iLEAD residency program in Baltimore City and the use of community panels in principal hiring in the District of Columbia were re-designed through the ECPI initiative, and new structures, such as the JCLA in Jefferson County and the use of affinity groups in Fresno, were designed to meet the needs of equity-centered leaders. These opportunities emerged as a result of careful reflection on existing district-level practices to identify new structures and routines that might strengthen the district’s capacity to advance equity in schools.
- Second, *creating coherence across systems* was a persistent challenge and a key accomplishment. Many promising practices advanced not because they were innovative in themselves, but because they sought to connect previously separated systems to share a vision of equity-centered leadership across departments, roles, and external partnerships. The clearest example of this is in San Antonio, where a shared leadership definition, coaching handbook, and performance indicators now span preparation, supervision, and professional learning.
- Third, districts *prioritized developing relationships and human capital*—through affinity groups, district-led

academies, and leadership shadowing routines—to create the conditions for distributed leadership and local ownership of equity efforts. These strategies seek to support preparation and retention through identity-affirming, mission-driven spaces for leadership learning and support.

This report contributes to the broader field by documenting how promising practices can emerge from the tensions and adaptations that accompany local implementations of an external model. We illustrate that district engagement with the complex problems of implementation can reveal opportunities to make the guiding program theory of action more robust, flexible, and responsive (c.f. Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Coburn & Penuel, 2016). For districts currently engaged in similar efforts—or those seeking to launch their own equity-centered leadership pipelines—this report offers practical, practice-informed strategies they can use to anticipate and navigate the challenges that inevitably arise in this kind of work.

Many of the practices discussed in this report represent vital steps toward deepening district-level capacity to support equity-centered leadership preparation. However, as this work moves forward, each district will need to address the “last mile problem” to ensure that their efforts bring about meaningful change in the everyday interactions between educators, students, and families (Gaias et al., 2023). Putting in place policies, plans, and pipelines is essential but their success depends on how district leaders are able to articulate and support school-level connections—through teacher conversations, student voice, family engagement, and formative assessment tools (Cohen & Hill, 2001; Honig, 2006). Sustaining equity-centered leadership will ultimately require systems that not only support leaders but also shift the culture of learning and relationship-building within schools as well as within districts.

The promising practices documented here demonstrate that progress toward systemic approaches to the preparation and support of equity-centered school leaders is not only possible—it is already underway. The districts featured show what it looks like to move from abstract commitments to tangible systems that support equity-centered leadership. The report highlights how district leaders, policymakers, funders, and preparation partners see the principal pipeline model as an organic, multi-dimensional design process for building structures to ensure that the tools, language, and commitments of equity-centered leadership are fully visible, usable, and lived by educators and students across their schools.

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