

**IMPROVING PRINCIPAL
PREPARATION
A REVIEW OF CURRENT
PRACTICES &
RECOMMENDATIONS
FOR STATE ACTION**

New Leaders 

IMPROVING PRINCIPAL PREPARATION A REVIEW OF CURRENT PRACTICES & RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STATE ACTION

States across the country are making big bets on turning around the lowest-performing schools and on upgrading both the expectations for learning (e.g., Common Core) and for teaching (e.g., teacher evaluation). But too few are focusing their attention on the crucial role that principals have in making these reform strategies successful and, by extension, in improving student achievement. Principals have a multiplier effect. They attract, develop, and retain great teachers. They set the tone for school culture. And they are the catalysts to turn around low-performing schools¹. Given their potential impact and given the fact that many principals do not currently have the skills or supports to realize that impact, ensuring that every school has an excellent principal should be central to every state's strategy.

States are not solely responsible for increasing principal effectiveness. Indeed, much of the work to upgrade the principalship requires leadership and investment at the district level and would benefit from increased Federal focus. But there are discrete, high-leverage actions states can take to build the pipeline of leaders, increase rigor in preparation and licensure, help districts improve selection, promote good performance management, and build the capacity of the current pool of leaders. This memo focuses on one area of potential state action: principal preparation.

We focus here for three reasons. One: researchers have consistently decried the low quality of educational administration programs in the country². Two, the need for high quality programs is only going to increase as the implementation of new evaluation systems for principals and teachers exposes gaps in principals' readiness for the job as it is being envisioned today. And three, states have

authority to take action on this front. Specifically, as the agencies responsible for approving and monitoring principal preparation programs, states have the opportunity to rethink the approval process for these programs, the criteria for approval, and the monitoring systems to guarantee that programs continue to deliver highly prepared school leaders.

We should say at the outset that we are not alone in wanting improvement in this area. National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE³), the leading organization certifying programs, is in the process of revising its standards and certification processes. We are optimistic regarding their efforts to make the process more rigorous and outcomes-focused and will closely follow their progress. But as this new process will most likely be in place only in 2016, we hope states will continue leading this effort and take action in the near future.

This memo provides guidance and recommendations to states wanting to improve the regulatory environment for principal preparation programs. We developed these recommendations based on three sources of evidence: (1) Major findings from the extant research base on principal preparation programs, (2) A scan of publicly-available information on a subset of states; and (3) New Leaders' own experience running a principal preparation program and being approved as a certified provider in 5 states (Illinois, Maryland, Louisiana, North Carolina, and Washington DC)⁴. We start by describing the typical program approval processes, with some modifications noted for specific states. Then, we discuss concerns with current processes. And finally, we offer recommendations for states to consider in order to better align their approval processes and criteria with program quality.

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- 1 Leithwood, Kenneth; Louis, Karen Seashore; Anderson, Stephen; Wahlstrom, Kyla. (2004) How Leadership Influences Student Learning. The Wallace Foundation.
 - 2 Levine, A. (2005). Educating school leaders. Washington, DC: The Education Schools Project.
 - 3 NCATE is a national accrediting body for schools, colleges, and departments of education authorized by the U.S. Department of Education for educator preparation programs.
 - 4 The complete list of states reviewed is in the appendix.

The Typical State Approval Processes for Principal Preparation Programs

Typically, states embed the approval processes for principal preparation programs in their regulations and most of them tie their approval at least in some way to NCATE certification process. Many states only allow programs within institutions of higher education (IHEs) to apply for program approval.

Those states that link their program approvals to the NCATE process usually have at least two approval processes: the unit review and the program review. The unit consists of the school, college or department of education—the entity with the responsibility for designing, managing, evaluating, revising, and closing programs offered for educator preparation. The unit review determines whether the unit effectively carries out these responsibilities. The program review covers information such as the curriculum, courses, and field experiences related to the preparation program. The process includes the submission of several documents describing how the unit meets the six NCATE unit standards⁵, state standards and course requirements. A site review is conducted to evaluate the unit against the standards.

If approved, states require that institutions seek renewal for the unit approval within a certain number of years depending on the state. Program renewal often requires an annual report that may include data about the program’s overall structure, faculty, candidates, the number of program completers and the candidates’ pass rates on state exams.

Some states such as New Jersey implement their own approval processes, but then require that programs also be approved by a national accreditation agency such as NCATE or Teacher Education Accreditation Council (TEAC) in order to maintain state approval.

Concerns about the Current Approval Process

Based on research about principal preparation and our own experience, we have three general concerns about the typical process described above: (1) it is not rigorous enough to demand that programs adopt high quality, research-based practices, (2) it has too little accountability based on program results, and (3) it is overly-bureaucratic. The fact that few states seem to deviate in significant ways from the typical process heightens our sense of urgency in addressing these concerns.

Not enough rigor

Existing approval processes do not do enough to ensure that programs have a high bar for entry and rigor throughout. With respect to entry, research points to the importance of a rigorous selection process. Exemplary programs recruit experienced teachers with strong instructional and leadership skills.⁶ To measure these leadership skills, these programs do not rely solely on educational credentials or review of candidate’s past experiences. Instead, candidates have to demonstrate their skill and leadership potential in realistic situations and activities.⁷

Unfortunately, most states do not require programs to implement rigorous selection criteria. Not only does this result in relatively easy entry, it results in a significant number of program participants who do not go on to become principals. There are many legitimate reasons for graduates not becoming principals, ranging from the availability of jobs to satisfaction in an assistant principal role to concerns about the demands of the principalship. But, there is also anecdotal evidence that many educators complete principal preparation programs as a means to secure salary increases as teachers, while never intending to become principals. This, we think, is a major concern: if the majority of their students do not intend to become principals, the institutions have fewer incentives to make the programs more rigorous.

5 The NCATE standards are: 1) Candidate Knowledge, Skills, and Professional Dispositions; 2) Assessment System and Unit Evaluation; 3) Field Experiences and Clinical Practice; 4) Diversity; 5) Faculty Qualifications, Performance, and Development; 6) Unit Governance and Resources.

6 Darling-Hammond, L., (2007). Note: New Leaders also requires candidates to be leaders of adults in their school, supplementing their instructional expertise in the classroom.

7 Cheney, G. R., Davis, J., Garrett, K., & Holleran, J. (2010). A new approach to principal preparation: Innovative programs share their practices and lessons learned. Fort Worth, TX: Rainwater Leadership Alliance.

With respect to the programs themselves, research shows that exemplary principal preparation programs have a strong conceptual framework, with a coherent curriculum that includes research-based practices and is aligned with professional standards.⁸ But a review of 54 certified programs concluded that the majority of programs have weak curriculum and lack an actionable conceptual framework.⁹ Current approval processes do not do enough to change this.

A notable example of the disconnect between programmatic rigor and the typical program approval process relates to clinical practice. Research on adult learning clearly indicates that best practices for leadership development programs include experiential learning components where participants are able to apply what they are learning and practice those skills in an authentic setting.¹⁰ Building on this research, *New Leaders* and other exemplary programs put clinical practice at the center of the preparation experience.

By contrast, many state approval processes do not require an authentic clinical component where candidates have the chance to apply theory and continuously develop and practice their skills. While the NCATE process requires that candidates participate in clinical and field experiences, the depth of those experiences is not specified. Unsurprisingly, states have different interpretations of what is considered acceptable clinical experience. A few states have adopted specific requirements about the types of experiences candidates must have. For example, in its program approval process, Illinois requires that aspiring principals work with mentors who have a track record of success as a principal and requires that program candidates observe, participate in, and take the lead in a list of tasks specified by the state. These are promising developments and could serve as a foundation for the comprehensive approach to clinical practice that is absent from most states' approval processes.

Not enough accountability and inadequate data systems

It is a real challenge to evaluate the results of principal preparation programs when many programs do not collect and analyze the data on important outcomes. The outcomes that states would need to assess the effectiveness of preparation programs include:

- Placement rates—the number and percentage of graduates who take positions as school leaders
- Retention rates—the number and percentage of graduates who remain in the principalship after a certain number of years
- District satisfaction—district leadership team's perceptions (as measured by surveys) of the quality of program graduates
- Leadership effectiveness—the number and percentage of graduates who are endorsed as being effective school leaders by district/state's evaluation systems
- Effectiveness and Impact on Student Outcomes—the number and percentage of graduates who improve the student achievement outcomes after three years leading a school

Some states are making progress in the area of data collection. Florida, for example, requires that its programs collect placement rate information. However, it is much more typical that states only require programs to collect candidate admission, enrollment and completion rates. The lack of accountability for reporting results means that: 1) states cannot make re-approval decisions based at least in part on program results; 2) aspiring principals do not know which programs are most likely to prepare them for the positions that they are seeking; 3) districts do not know how to weigh the relative quality of programs when making hiring decisions; and 4) programs cannot make decisions about program improvement that are informed by their results.

8 Darling-Hammond, L., LaPointe, M., Meyerson, D., Orr, M. T., & Cohen, C. (2007). *Preparing school leaders for a changing world: Lessons from exemplary leadership development programs*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University, Stanford Educational Leadership Institute.

9 Murphy, J., Moorman, H., McCarthy, M. (2008) "A Framework for Rebuilding Initial Certification and Preparation Programs in Educational Leadership: Lessons From Whole-State Reform Initiatives."

10 Cheney, G. R., et al (2010); Louis, K. S., Leithwood, K., Wahlstrom, K. L., & Anderson, S. E. (2010). *Investigating the links to improved student learning: Final report of research findings*. Learning from Leadership Project. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota., Levine, A. (2005).

One reason that states do not require programs to collect data on key outcomes is that there are substantial technical challenges to doing so. We know, for example, that many states lack the kind of data systems that would allow for this kind of information to be collected and monitored. Also, most states do not have access to reliable data to evaluate programs and struggle with numerous data gaps, including inconsistent data across districts and lack of historical data sets. Nor do states typically require districts within their jurisdiction to systematically report data on principal tenure, leaving them with limited options for obtaining reliable data for tracking placement and retention results.

Further, programs face challenges in obtaining useful student achievement results for schools led by their graduates. Although some states calculate value-add measures or student growth models for student achievement, many do not calculate these measures or make them publically available. Programs are therefore forced to rely on publically available school-level proficiency data. Since these measures do not measure individual student gains or isolate the school effect, it is difficult to attribute the results to the principals—and by extension—to the programs that prepared them.

While these issues speak to the need for comprehensive data collection solutions, the experience of Florida suggests that states can make headway on collecting meaningful data to evaluate the impact of programs and to inform districts looking to hire graduates. Including placement rates, at minimum, in the renewal certification process would encourage programs to really focus on selecting candidates with aspirations to become a school leader and to provide support for their graduates to find a placement.

One additional note on accountability: the typical approval process to become a certified program is much more rigorous than the review process to keep the certification. While states require extensive documentation for the initial approval, there are significantly fewer requirements to renew the certification and, as noted, very limited attention to outcomes.

Too much bureaucracy

The current regulatory processes are confusing and duplicative and diminish opportunities for innovation. Drawing on our own experience becoming a certified provider in several states,¹² we know that the regulatory processes are multi-layered, often requiring approval from more than one entity. For example, Illinois requires approvals from both the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) and Illinois Board of Higher Education (IBHE). There is no doubt that these processes could be simplified and streamlined.

The approval processes were built with university- and college-based programs in mind. As a result, the processes heavily favor such programs. In some states, only universities and colleges can receive approval to operate principal preparation programs. These circumstances effectively shut out non-traditional providers or relegate them to a second class status by labeling them “alternative routes.” The result is less innovation at a time when districts and states could benefit tremendously from innovation in program design and delivery. Indeed, even those states with an approval process for “non-traditional” programs still use input measures, rather than using track records or the strength of innovative ideas, as the basis for approval.

Finally, several states require a long list of documents which makes the process very long and labor intensive. But these requirements do not necessarily make the process more rigorous.

11 Burkhauser, S., Pierson, A., Gates, S., Hamilton, L., “Challenges in Evaluating School Principal Improvement Efforts.” The paper provides a complete list of the challenges with using student outcomes to evaluating school leadership efforts. It also discuss steps that states can take to address these challenges such as using interim measures to determine if efforts are on track and improving their data systems (2012).

12 New Leaders is a certified preparation program in Illinois, Maryland, Louisiana, North Carolina, and Washington DC.

Recommendations

States have the legal authority to transform how principal preparation programs are approved and reviewed and can use this authority to move toward better systems. But, as with any reform effort, states should be thoughtful in both the process for introducing change and in sequencing changes.

We recommend that states (1) create authentic opportunities for engagement by key stakeholders (including sitting principals, assistant principals, teacher leaders, deans of preparation programs, and district leaders), (2) begin with a vision of what can be accomplished through better principal preparation, and (3) take an honest and blame-free look at the current state of principal preparation. With these foundational processes in place, we think that states can act to make improvements at each step of the approval and renewal process. The recommendations below are an attempt to fully address the three problems listed in the previous section.

1) Approval and renewal processes.

States should remove barriers to innovative programs and make sure that there is accountability throughout the approval and review process.

- Streamline the approval process, eliminating any duplication. If there is more than one state entity currently responsible for program approval, change that.
- Focus initial approval on the institution's capacity to run a program and the rigor of its plans for selection, curriculum, clinical practice, and participant assessment.
- Allow institutions other than schools of education to apply—including non-profit organizations and school systems—and remove aspects of the process that require such institutions to create “university-like” structures and systems (e.g., the requirement that programs must have a library in their facilities, instead of requiring that programs give candidates access to relevant research).

- Create a different process for renewal and focus it on two things: (1) outcomes measures such as placement rates, retention rates, districts' perceptions of graduate quality, and measures of graduate performance where possible and appropriate; and (2) the implementation of research-based best practices in leadership development.
- Implement a fast-track renewal process for high-performing programs whose graduates have high placement and retention rates and demonstrate evidence of effectiveness once they are placed as principals and have been leading the same school for 3 years.
- Require a clear plan from under-performing programs to deliver significant improvements in outcomes in order to renew their license.
- Revoke the licenses of persistently under-performing programs.

2) Program content and standards for entry and exit.

States should focus on ensuring programs are designed based on the best research and practice: rigorous selection of candidates, experiential in-school component, and strong processes to assess candidates' capabilities.

- Require programs to develop rigorous selection criteria focused on candidates that plan to become school leaders.
- Require institutions to demonstrate that programmatic content aligns with state's definition of leadership effectiveness.
- Require that all programs have a practice-rich clinical component in an authentic school leadership setting where candidates can be evaluated on the accomplishment of important leadership practices as a basis for program completion. Prioritize programs where candidates have substantial leadership responsibilities for other adults and to improve the quality of instruction of teachers.
- Evaluate the programs' participant assessment processes to ensure that graduates demonstrate their capabilities and skills in order to complete the program.
- Offer incentives to existing or new programs that address state priorities (e.g., specialized turnaround preparation programs).

3) Program outcomes.

States should invest in a data system that can track important outcomes and should require programs to collect relevant data on their students¹³.

- Require programs to collect placement data on their graduates (how many graduates become schools leaders and principals over time) and feedback from graduates' employers.
- Invest in and develop data systems that have the capability to capture program graduate tenure data and link that data with the state's human capital and student-level data system to determine program graduates' effectiveness.
- Publicly report data on program outcomes and use it to hold programs accountable for program improvements. Data transparency will be a useful tool for districts seeking to make better hiring decisions and for aspiring principals choosing the best programs.
- Once adequate data are available, use data as part of a continuous learning agenda to refine and improve state policies on principal preparation, evaluation and certification.

These changes will not be easy to implement. States might have to make difficult choices on the non-renewal of programs that don't deliver satisfactory results. To accomplish that, states need to set clear expectations for performance, build a broad coalition of groups interested in improving principal preparation including leaders from schools districts, higher education, business, and political communities. Finally, states will have to offer a combination of accountability and support to ensure principal preparation programs understand the changes that are being required and why they are needed.

States have a real opportunity to improve school leadership effectiveness by focusing on reforming the regulatory environment for principal preparation programs. Our recommendation is that states focus on creating a rigorous and outcomes-based process to approve and renew certification for principal preparation programs. Investing in better data systems will be a crucial step for states to implement these reforms.

As a result, states can expect the following results:

- School districts report having stronger principal candidates for hire
- School districts report having more school leaders rated as effective over time
- Better alignment between number of credentialed administrators and actual school leader vacancies

These changes can help states accelerate their ongoing reform efforts and accomplish their goals to improve student achievement. Great principals have a multiplier effect and states should leverage their power by making leadership effectiveness one of their priorities.

13 For more information on which data systems states should prioritize, please refer to "Principal Concerns: Leadership Data and Strategies for States." Center on Reinventing Public Education, September 2012.

APPENDIX: PRINCIPAL PREPARATION PROGRAM APPROVAL PROCESS STATE PRACTICE REVIEW

New Leaders examined state program approval processes in fifteen states. These states were chosen because they met at least one of the following criteria:

- They are participating in a new fellowship for state commissioners being convened by America Achieves, a new non-profit dedicated to closing national and international achievement gaps (AA)
- They are states that house a New Leaders core program (NL)
- They are doing innovative work to approve and evaluate principal preparation programs

The states are:

California.....	(NL)
Massachusetts.....	(AA)
Connecticut.....	(AA)
New Jersey.....	(AA, NL)
Delaware.....	(AA)
New York.....	(AA, NL)
Florida	
North Carolina.....	(NL)
Illinois.....	(NL)
Rhode Island.....	(AA)
Kentucky.....	(AA)
Louisiana.....	(AA,NL)
Tennessee.....	(AA, NL)
Washington, D.C.....	(NL)
Maryland.....	(AA, NL)



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New Leaders is a national nonprofit that develops transformational school leaders and promotes the system-level policies and practices that allow strong leaders to succeed. Founded in 2000, Over the past 10 years, New Leaders has trained more than 700 school leaders who are raising student achievement and graduation rates in high-need schools across the country. Beyond its signature principal training program, New Leaders conducts leadership development with existing school and district administrators, and designs effective leadership policies and practices for school systems nationwide.

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