

National Association of State Boards of Education

Preparing Principals through High-Quality Internships

By Jacqueline Muñiz

That first year of my assistant principalship was full of daily surprises that tested my knowledge, skills, and confidence. Was I doing a disservice to teachers, students, my community? I credit a principal internship with helping me complete the first year and continue on despite the daily challenges. Determined to do better in my second and third years, I leaned into my principal training, district coaching, and experience.

Eighteen percent of principals leave their posts annually, according to the most recent federal data. Principal turnover has been linked to lower student achievement and teacher retention and poorer school climates, most often in schools serving more low-income, low-achieving students and students of color.¹ One study of elementary and middle schools in California, for example, found that the odds of continuing to the next school year were 78 percent for a teacher in a school led by a principal who had low-quality preparation versus 89 percent for a teacher led by a principal with high-quality preparation.²

Departing principals cite inadequate preparation and professional development as a key reason for leaving.³ Yet principal preparation programs have been slow to keep up with the changing demands of the profession. By taking steps to strengthen these programs, state leadership can help equip and retain more school leaders.

MARKS OF QUALITY INTERNSHIPS

Internships are an essential feature of a comprehensive, high-quality principal preparation program, according to the Learning Policy Institute.⁴ Internships allow principals to focus

on clinical practice early in their careers. They are a high-leverage, evidence-based practice for preparing principals to meet the demands of the job and thus to limit principal and teacher turnover, increase student achievement, and promote equity.⁵

Internships are most effective when participants can apply the knowledge and skills from a coherent curriculum in real-life settings.⁶ Candidates in well-designed preparation programs practice these skills for a significant period under the mentorship of an experienced principal. A successful internship gives participants opportunities to lead and exposure to new schools and areas of responsibility. Field experience for aspiring principals is strongly related to their development of an ability to establish a vision for learning and leading instruction, motivate and monitor change, and shape a positive school climate by working collaboratively.

POLICY LEVERS

State leaders can strengthen principal preparation, though the levers available to them vary based on state contexts. In setting principal standards, state leaders can define what principals should know and be able to do.⁷ Thus a key role for state boards of education is adopting a framework for training and licensing that emphasizes relevant field experience.

States can increase the coherence of principal pipelines by ensuring alignment between licensing policies and principal standards. For example, state boards with licensing authority can make sure their policies require real-world skill application that in turn will incentivize preparation programs to include relevant training in their curriculum designs. According to Professor Paul Manna, states can also make standards relevant for school districts by differentiating among the roles of

principals, assistant principals, and superintendents. Otherwise, as districts attempt to align principal pipelines, the burden falls on them to make generic standards fit all types of school leaders.⁸

States also may require field-based placements for principals-in-training, which would require districts and programs to coordinate in establishing internships. And through their oversight and review of programs for approval, states would signal to the programs the qualities of the internships they would like to see.

Field experience is meant to provide aspiring principals with authentic, contextual opportunities to develop skills. Therefore, state principal standards should be flexible enough to allow districts to adjust them to their particular needs yet specific enough to be useful. Preparation programs also need flexibility as they partner with districts and adapt to the context, circumstances, and opportunities that arise.

LEADING STATES

Upon the recommendation of a legislative task force that included representatives from the Illinois State Board of Education and the Board of Higher Education, the legislature in **Illinois** passed a bill in 2010 to require principal preparation programs to adopt new standards, research-based content, and well-designed internships by 2014 in order to continue in operation.⁹ The principal endorsement requires a yearlong performance-based internship that includes leadership opportunities, including opportunities to demonstrate instructional leadership, and experiences working with many types of students.¹⁰ A Consortium for Chicago School Research and Illinois Education Research Council study of this reform found that principal preparation program staff and district representatives generally viewed the new internship requirements as deeper, clearer, and more authentic.¹¹

California changed its principal licensure and accreditation between 2011 and 2017 to adapt national standards in its new state standards.¹² Administrator performance ex-

expectations then became aligned with program approval standards and expectations for both preservice training and induction. In a survey of California principals, researchers found that “more recently prepared principals felt significantly better prepared than veteran principals in virtually all the areas that were integrated into the new standards.”¹³ The majority of the 68 percent who reported having had an internship said they took on more administrative responsibilities as a result, and they felt their internships adequately prepared them for their first year as principal (74 percent versus 46 percent nationally).

Through an Innovative Principal Residency grant, the **Pennsylvania** Department of Education experimented on a small scale with an extended internship to ensure new principals received more assistance.¹⁴ New principals in this program on average rated their preparedness around 4.5 on a 5.0 scale (between prepared and well prepared) for most of the 10 prioritized school leadership responsibilities, and 10 out of 15 enrollees completed the program and were hired in high-need districts.¹⁵ During the 2022–23 school year, the department is using Title II-A funds to expand its efforts. Using internships or residencies, approved educator preparation programs will partner with districts to tighten the linkage between school leaders’ preparation and practice.

North Carolina ran a program beginning in 1993 in which principal fellows in their second year received a salary equivalent to that of a first-year assistant principal along with a stipend while they complete a full-time, school-based internship under the supervision of a veteran principal. Graduates who then served in North Carolina schools saw better student attendance, teacher retention, and school working conditions than other North Carolina principals.¹⁶ This program has since merged with another to form the North Carolina Principal Fellows Program, a competitive state grant funded at about \$4 million over six years.¹⁷ Applying programs must demonstrate implementation of research-based practices, including hands-on, authentic learning experiences, fieldwork, and full-time internships that include administrative responsibilities under a mentor’s supervision. Aspiring principals accepted into the program receive a forgivable

loan, a 10-month paid internship, and assistance in paying for books.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

State leaders and principal preparation programs can support and advocate for effective field-based training for principals. To build effective coalitions to improve principal preparation, states can start by considering the distribution of power within the education governance system, diverse local conditions and needs, state and local capacities, and the overall web of state policies.¹⁸ Policies affect rural, suburban, and urban districts differently, with rural schools facing the greatest challenges in identifying principal candidates and funding to build principal pipelines. Moreover, state leaders need to be cautious about adopting principal standards, licenses, and oversight that may prevent districts and preparation programs from setting higher standards or expanding options for developing and sustaining principal pipelines.¹⁹

State boards of education can ask how changes in principal standards and licensure policy will shape district and preparation program partnerships. They also can ask what capacity gaps or strengths will help or hinder districts as they address the effects of such policy changes on principal certification and evaluations. Internships do require added funding, but several states already use their 3 percent set-aside under the Every Student Succeeds Act, as well as pandemic relief funds, for leadership development.

Intensive, high-value learning opportunities for principals can improve their readiness, teacher retention, and student achievement. State leaders have actionable options to create and shape opportunities to ensure that school leaders can lead effectively and stay in their schools.

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NOTES

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6 Ibid.

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8 Paul Manna, “How Can State Policy Support Local School Districts as They Develop Comprehensive and Aligned Principal Pipelines” (The Wallace Foundation, 2021), 12.

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18 Ibid., 41.

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