

SCHOOL & DISTRICT MANAGEMENT

What Happens When Districts, States, and Universities Collaborate on Principal-Prep?




By [Denisa R. Superville](#) — June 11, 2022 ⌚ 6 min read



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What happens when the major players in university principal preparation—states, districts, and universities—get together to work on improving those programs?

Notable change can be the result, though some of it may be incremental, according to a [new analysis](#)  by the RAND Corporation of a five-year initiative to reform university-based principal-prep programs in seven states.

The nearly \$50 million Wallace Foundation effort aimed to spur states, universities, and districts to [redesign programs](#) and supports for principals to be more in line with emerging research on what school leaders need to know and the realities of the job. (The Wallace Foundation supports Education Week coverage of issues including education leadership.)

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In all, seven universities and more than two dozen districts in seven participating states worked on changing curricula, collaborating on how candidates gained entry into the programs, and on the teaching staff, for example. State agencies such as education departments or the boards that grant certifications and accreditation, also participated. The districts and universities were also matched with mentor organizations, such as the New York City-based Leadership Academy and the University of Illinois, Chicago.

Here are some of the major takeaways.

Districts got more involved in candidate selection

Selection and recruitment continue to be problem areas in the leadership field, even as research points to rigorous selection as a best practice.

Critics have long called for universities to be more discerning about who enters leadership-preparation programs and the candidates' goals. (Completing a leadership-preparation program can result in a salary bump, even if the graduate doesn't become a principal.) When districts are involved in the selection process, it also increases the chances that candidates who display leadership potential, who actually want to be principals, and whose goals align with the districts' are the ones in the programs.

RAND said that district involvement in the selecting candidates for university partners' principal-preparation programs grew by 21 points from 2019 to 2021, based on a survey used in the analysis. The report noted that districts that weren't part of the initiative were also getting more involved in the selection and nomination process for candidates during that period and the growth in those districts' involvement in the nomination process actually outpaced those in initiative.

At the same time, the universities became more selective about who gained entry, by, for example, requiring that the candidates' districts support their applications. Some, though not the majority, included more "performance-based tasks" in the screening process.

Changes are happening in curriculum and the teaching staff

A big worry in leadership research is that the curriculum that aspiring candidates are exposed to does not always reflect what they'll do when they become school leaders. According to the RAND analysis, six of the seven universities in the program have now aligned their programs to national education leadership standards, with the seventh ensuring that its program comported with its state's standards.

Many of the universities also addressed one of the key criticisms leveled against university-prep programs by reducing their reliance on lectures and presentations and upping aspiring principals' learning experience with real-world assignments, through things like role-playing, case studies, and simulations, the report said.

There was a notable difference in who was teaching some of the courses, with a bend toward former and current K-12 educators. Program courses taught by tenured or tenure-track faculty dropped from 59 percent in 2019 in the university programs in the initiative to 44 percent, while adjuncts and full-time clinical faculty and instructors (those more likely to have experience as current or former K-12 practitioners), rose from 34 percent and 18 percent, respectively, in 2019, to 51 and 36 percent, in 2021.

Progress remains slow on more-substantive internships

School leadership research has noted that internships longer than 20 weeks, where aspiring principals can practice being a school leader, should be the norm. That's still not the case. But the RAND report said that some program changes at the universities allowed aspiring-principal-candidates to have more "immersive" learning experiences. Candidates, for example, were asked to do things like run professional learning communities meetings or participate in hiring in the schools in which they were getting their clinical experiences.

Some programs also have ensured that principal-candidates completed their internships in a learning environment outside of the school where they worked, and provided explicit directions to the mentor principal on what was expected of the mentors and the leadership candidates during the clinical experience. Six of the seven programs added a "clinical coach" to assist candidates.

Networking with principal cohorts increased

Another key part of the research is the inclusion of cohort-based programs that allow aspiring-candidates to be part of a network of aspiring principals as they go through their training. By the end of the program, all of the participating universities offered a cohort model, RAND said.

Notably, however, the most recent RAND report on the University Principal Preparation Initiative did not look at whether changes in programs and policies improved student outcomes. Universities that were not participating in the initiative also made revisions aligned with school leadership research over the last two decades.

Time and turnover are hurdles

Despite the modifications, RAND said both universities and districts faced obstacles. Time—or the lack thereof—and turnover at the district, state, and university levels were major challenges.

And while the report touted greater partnerships between the universities and districts as a win, most of the participants said that some university faculty members were not always on board. Some were not keen on relinquishing control over designing and developing their courses to meet the needs of the districts. Some thought the

new process “impinged on their intellectual autonomy,” RAND said.

The universities in the program were Albany State University in Albany, Ga.; the University of Connecticut, Storrs, Conn.; Florida Atlantic University, Boca Raton, Fla.; North Carolina State University, Raleigh, N.C.; San Diego State University; Virginia State University, Petersburg, Va.; and Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, Ky.

One of the things that RAND noticed was that the universities did not necessarily stick to the districts with which they were originally matched. San Diego State University, for example—which originally partnered with San Diego Unified, Chula Vista Elementary, and Sweetwater Union High School—now has a principal-preparation partnership with Long Beach Unified.

The other districts in the initiative were Pelham City, Gwinnett County, Calhoun County, and Dougherty County school systems in Georgia; Broward, Palm Beach, and St. Lucie counties school systems in Florida; Johnston and Wake counties school systems and the Northeast Leadership Academy Consortium in North Carolina; Hartford, Meriden, and New Haven school districts in Connecticut; Henrico and Sussex counties school systems and the Hopewell City district in Virginia; and the Green River Regional Education Cooperative in western Kentucky.

The RAND report is the [second in recent weeks](#), both backed by the Wallace Foundation, to look at various aspects of principal preparation and one of a handful to be released in the next few weeks delving into principal-preparation and support.

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