**Pressure Mounts on Higher Ed. to Improve Principal Preparation**

States and universities are under pressure to revamp how principals are trained for the profession

**By** [Denisa R. Superville](http://www.edweek.org/ew/contributors/denisa.superville_7151043.html)January 24, 2017

Poor. Appalling. Inadequate.

It was a scathing assessment of how most of the nation's principals are prepared: in university-based programs too eager to admit candidates and too detached from the realities of the job.

And it's a critique that still holds true for some programs despite signs of progress, said Arthur Levine, the former president of Teachers College, Columbia University, who rendered that harsh evaluation of university-based principal preparation in a 2005 report, Educating School Leaders.

More than a decade since—and despite a mountain of research that makes clear the connection between strong principals and rising student achievement—the ways in which many university-based programs train future school leaders have not dramatically changed.

But pressure has been mounting from both inside and outside the halls of academia to revamp university-based preparation. And calls for states to play a more aggressive role in ensuring that principals are qualified and ready for the complex job that awaits them are amplifying. Some of that pressure has come from longtime education professors, philanthropic foundations, and school district leaders who say too many graduates of traditional programs are not qualified to lead schools.

The vast majority of school leaders are trained in university settings, even as alternatives have emerged to compete with traditional higher education in recent years. School leadership experts agree that if the nation is to succeed in producing the mass numbers of effective principals needed to lead schools, then university-based programs must become more rigorous and relevant to the demands of the profession.

"We have the capacity in higher ed to do this job right at scale, and really no other organization or agency does," said Steve Tozer, an education professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago, which overhauled its school leadership preparation more than a decade ago. But, he said, universities must do so "by working in collaboration with school districts to pull it off."

A Complex Job

In today's schools, principals are expected to be the lead teachers, coaching and supporting teachers in the classroom to improve their craft. And they can't just focus on the academics, they must be caretakers of the students in their schools. They set a school's collective attitude toward student and teacher success and sense of belonging. They are called on to be the chief spokespersons for their schools and ambassadors to the broader community, while still overseeing day-to-day operations.

Without a principal who can do all of this, the best teachers are not likely to stick around.

Many university-based programs, however, have not evolved fast enough to give principal-candidates the academic training and practical experience necessary to hit the ground running, according to some of the most recent research. But some education professors counter that the criticism of university programs dates back years, is often vague, and fails to give higher education more credit for changes it has embraced. And the key driver in all of this is not simply the universities, but the states, they argue.

In a 2016 review on some university-based preparation programs, the Wallace Foundation found some of the same deficiencies that Levine detailed more than a decade earlier. Among them: curriculum that does not mirror what principals were expected to do; not enough meaningful on-the-job experiences; a dearth of strong partnerships with school districts where their graduates will work; and too many professors who were not teachers or principals or have been out of a K-12 school setting for a long time. (The Wallace Foundation helps support coverage of leadership issues in *Education Week*, which retains sole editorial control.)

That same report included a survey from school superintendents showing that a majority of top district leaders were dissatisfied with the quality of the principals they were getting: 80 percent who responded to a survey from AASA, the School Superintendents Association, said that principal-preparation programs needed to improve dramatically. Only 0.5 percent of the 408 superintendents who responded said principal preparation needs no improvement.

But one critic of the Wallace report cautioned against inferring too much from the survey, especially with such a small sample size of superintendents.

Variation in Quality

Michelle Young, the executive director of the University Council for Educational Administration, an international consortium of about 100 education schools, acknowledged some of the concerns raised in the Wallace report. But she said drawing conclusions that all university-based programs are subpar is flat wrong.

"It's valid for some, and not valid for others," said Young, "and that's a really important thing to say, because otherwise we need to start all over again. ... No, actually we don't. There are some programs that know how to do this really well, who do a really high-quality job."

The UCEA's own review of programs run by its member universities offers a slightly different perspective. Drawn from surveys taken over 2013 through 2016, the UCEA's questions aimed to answer some of the more enduring criticisms of university-based programs, including those related to candidate selection, quality of curriculum, and experience of teaching staff.

While the majority of respondents provided positive feedback to the questions—60 percent said they looked for evidence that candidates had been effective teachers when making selections, and 99 percent said they used practitioners (individuals who worked as principals or teachers) as instructors as guest speakers and panelists—their answers also showed that they fell short in other areas.

Fifty-seven percent said practitioners were used "to a great extent" or "to a good extent" as the sole instructor for one or more courses. Only 20 percent of the universities said they offered mentoring and coaching to new principals after graduation. Only a small percentage collected data on job and their graduates' impacts in schools, including on teacher retention, school conditions, and other outcomes.

Strict selection policies, faculty who have practical experience, and ongoing support for novice principals and data on how they perform are all key components among proposals that have been advanced by the UCEA, the George W. Bush Institute, and others to help improve preparation programs.

The quality of the more than 650 to 900 principal-preparation programs varies by state. About 500 of those undergo periodic accreditation review from the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation, or CAEP. But a poor showing on a CAEP accreditation review does not necessarily lead to program closure, and not every state has joined the national accrediting process.

States' Responsibilities

This is an area ripe for state action, critics say. States that submit to the CAEP reviews can write policies that bar programs from accepting students if they do not gain national recognition from CAEP. In this and other ways, state policies can lead to better university-based programs, according to the Wallace Foundation, which launched a $47 million initiative last year to redesign university-based preparation programs by teaming universities, school districts, and state education agencies in seven states— California, Connecticut, Georgia, Kentucky, North Carolina, and Virginia—to work together. In many instances, the state criteria for approving, reviewing, and renewing programs are not rigorous enough, and programs of middling quality are allowed to continue to operate, according to an array of school leadership experts.

But some education schools themselves have also been slow to make the kind of drastic changes that Levine and others have called for. Without state pressure, there is little incentive for them to do so and several disincentives for them not to. Making admissions selective, for example, can shrink tuition dollars, Levine said.

Few states, with some exceptions including Illinois and North Carolina, have mounted large-scale overhaul of their educator preparation programs, and so there is little or no risk to universities.

And for colleges of education committed to making changes, the process can be lengthy and arduous.

In some states, making changes to curriculum, for example, requires a multi-level bureaucratic process that can drag on for months, if not longer, before it reaches the classroom.

"In a sense, it's a careful vetting," Young said. "But it also means that it slows down the pace, and it makes it somewhat difficult to navigate if you don't know how the system works."

That lengthy process is in stark contrast to the flexibility that alternative programs such as the New York City Leadership Academy and New Leaders have to quickly amend their programs based district feedback and research.

Nimbleness an Advantage

When New Leaders launched in 2001, it included a rigorous selection process that, among other things, looked for evidence that candidates had a record of improving student achievement. Still, program directors noticed something troubling: Many of the aspiring principals struggled with how to lead teams of adults, a very different skill set. The group spent a year designing an initiative to address those issues before launching the following year.

Jaime Aquino, the chief program officer at New Leaders, said being smaller and closely linked to districts makes the program nimble. New Leaders' program directors participate in the districts' principals' meetings and spend two days a month in schools, observing and coaching candidates. The group and the districts also collaborate on curriculum. And there's a powerful accountability component built in: If their principals do not deliver results, districts can end the group's contract.

That degree of accountability is still largely absent from university programs. But districts have some leverage here, too, Levine said. Superintendents can refuse to hire graduates of programs that have produced subpar candidates. But that strategy is not as realistic for small and rural districts, which may draw from only one preparation program, or those districts that already struggle to attract strong candidates for principals' jobs.

To fill those types of gaps, districts have created their own programs or work more closely with universities. The University of Tennessee-Knoxville's leadership academy, which started as a partnership with the Knox County school district, is one that researchers are closely watching. The University of Illinois at Chicago, often cited as exemplary, has a long partnership with the Chicago school district.

While some of the alternative programs like New Leaders and the New York City Leadership Academy seem to be flourishing, they can't produce the large numbers of principals necessary to make a real impact on the nation's public schools, many leadership experts agree.

They also may lack some of the deep institutional knowledge that universities possess. At the same time, there's much that universities can learn from the alternative programs and more collaboration between the two sectors is starting to become evident.

But successes of university-district programs in places like Denver and Long Beach, Calif., demonstrate that universities can get the job done, said Tozer, of the University of Illinois at Chicago.

Prudence Daniels, a co-principal at Denver Green School, graduated from the Ritchie program, a joint principal training venture by the school district and the University of Denver. While Ritchie prepared her for school leadership, she still felt she lacked the expertise to help her teachers become better at instruction, she said.

That compelled her to participate in a one-year fellowship at Relay Graduate School of Education, a New York-based training program with chapters across the country.

Both programs helped her to become a better leader, she said.

"Relay taught me the importance of being in classrooms, being with teachers frequently, being involved with what kids are learning and how teachers are teaching. It was a beautiful extension for me.

"I really see [the programs] as building on one another," she said. "I would not replace either."

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