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# IMPROVING UNIVERSITY PRINCIPAL PREPARATION PROGRAMS

**FIVE THEMES FROM THE FIELD**

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This publication emerges from The Wallace Foundation's commitment to developing knowledge about both the role of principals in shaping better public school education and the actions that could be taken to ensure that these school leaders are as effective as possible. It draws on four reports commissioned by Wallace to gain greater insight into views on university-based training for aspiring school leaders as well as the state and university environments in which principal preparation programs operate. We appreciate the contributions of the four organizations that wrote the reports: the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education; AASA, The School Superintendents Association; the American Institutes for Research; and the University Council for Educational Administration.

In addition, we are indebted to Jacquelyn Davis for working with Wallace staff members to make sense of the four reports – and then synthesizing the findings and writing this publication.

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IMPROVING UNIVERSITY PRINCIPAL  
PREPARATION PROGRAMS

**F I V E   T H E M E S   F R O M   T H E   F I E L D**

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## INTRODUCTION

What is the state of university-based principal preparation programs? How are these essential training grounds of future school leaders viewed – by themselves as well as by the school districts that hire their graduates? Do the programs need to improve? If so, by what means?

**T**his publication seeks to help answer those questions by bringing together findings from four recent reports, one each by the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE), The School Superintendents Association (AASA), the American Institutes for Research (AIR), and the University Council for Educational Administration (UCEA). Written in early fall 2015, the reports draw from literature reviews, new field surveys, interviews with experts, focus groups and/or analyses of state regulations to shed light on matters including perceived strengths and weaknesses of programming, barriers to program improvement, and the role of states and school districts in shaping programming. Taken together, they provide fresh insights – and confirm some research the field has already known – about the landscape of university-based principal preparation today.

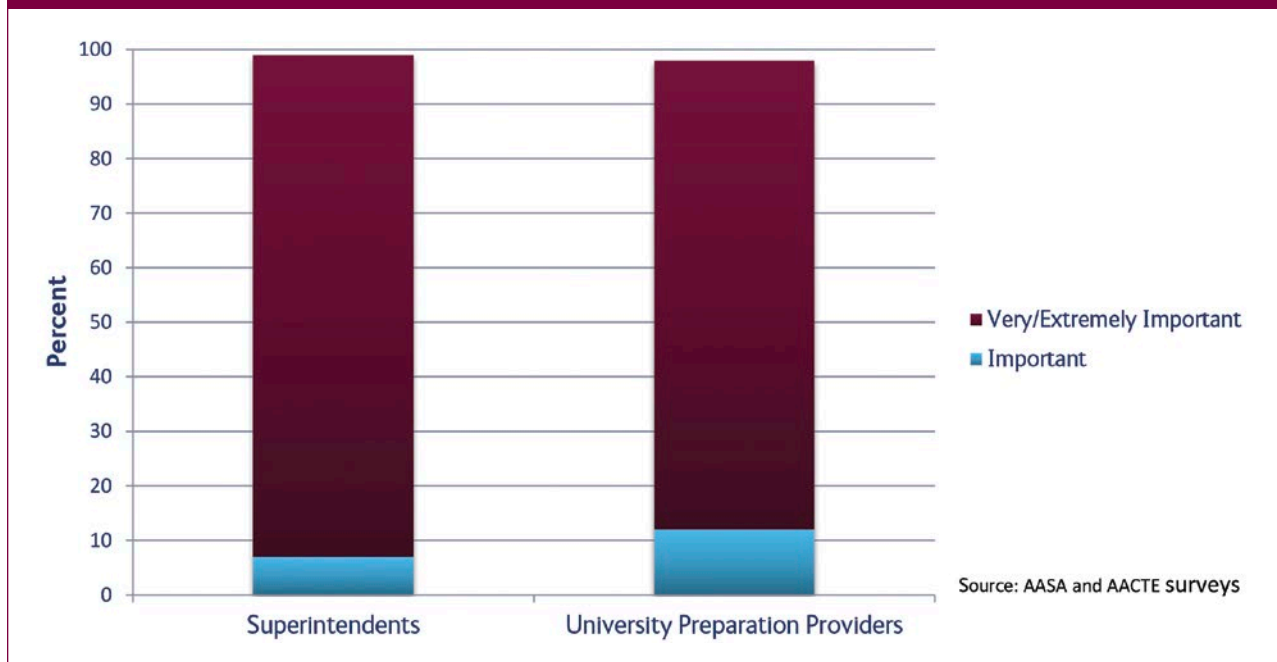
The Wallace Foundation, a national philanthropy, commissioned the reports to inform its development of a potential new university principal preparation program initiative. Wallace has worked on school leadership since 2000, driven by the idea that principals have a crucial role in fostering student achievement, a notion reinforced by a landmark study that found that leadership is second only to teaching among school influences on student success.<sup>1</sup>

Given the power of the principal to aid student learning, it is perhaps little wonder that the four reports found near unanimity among both those who train and those who hire school leaders of the job's significance, as shown in the chart on the following page.

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<sup>1</sup> Leithwood, K., Seashore Louis, K, Anderson, S. & Wahlstrom, K. (2004). *How Leadership Influences Student Learning*. Toronto, Ontario: Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement and Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.

## BOTH DISTRICTS AND UNIVERSITIES AGREE PRINCIPALS ARE IMPORTANT TO IMPROVING STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT



It would also stand to reason, then, that future school leaders should be receiving meticulous preparation for the job. And yet, as suggested in this publication, there is concern that many of the 700 or so university-based programs in the United States<sup>2</sup> may be falling short. A related concern is that efforts to improve programming on a wide scale would likely be complex, requiring changes in both state policy and the institutional workings of universities.

The synthesis of the four reports that follows echoes other recent research and practice studies to bear out the points above. In addition to confirming close-to-unanimous agreement about the important role of the school principal in advancing student achievement, it finds five themes:

- District leaders are largely dissatisfied with the quality of principal preparation programs, and

<sup>2</sup> “Data from the federal Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) show that in 2012-13, the latest year available, 706 institutions of higher education offered a master’s degree in educational administration (a common on-ramp for principal certification).” Manna, P. (2015). *Developing Excellent School Principals to Advance Teaching and Learning: Considerations for State Policy*, New York, NY: The Wallace Foundation. Nonprofit and district preparation programs account for 16 percent of principal preparation programs. Briggs, K, Cheney G., Davis, J., & Moll, K., (2013). *Operating in the Dark: What Outdated State Policies and Data Gaps Mean for Effective School Leadership*, Dallas, TX: The George W. Bush Institute.

many universities believe that their programs have room for improvement.

- Strong university-district partnerships are essential to high-quality preparation but are far from universal.
- The course of study at preparation programs does not always reflect principals’ real jobs.
- Some university policies and practices can hinder change.
- States have authority to play a role in improving principal preparation, but many are not using this power as effectively as possible.

The four reports prepared for Wallace were designed to gather information for which each of the author organizations has distinct access (for example, through a survey of the group’s members). Wallace recognizes that the organizations use differing methods and have differing practices for such information-gathering activities. For more information on the reports, please see the Appendix.

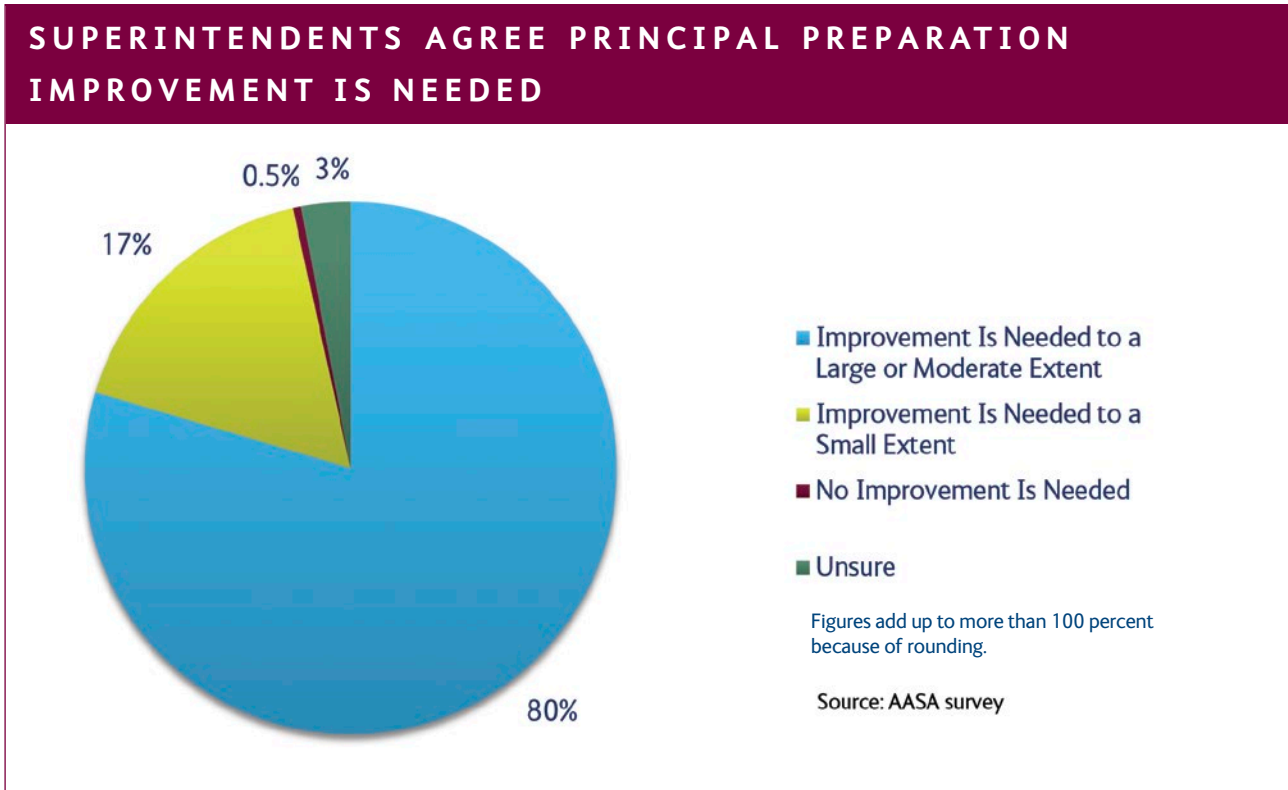
# DISTRICT LEADERS ARE LARGELY DISSATISFIED WITH THE QUALITY OF PRINCIPAL PREPARATION PROGRAMS, AND MANY UNIVERSITIES BELIEVE THAT THEIR PROGRAMS HAVE ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT.

Principal preparation is the pathway for aspiring principals to develop the knowledge, skills and dispositions they need to be effective school leaders. More than a decade of research finds, however, that university-based preparation can lack rigor and relevance.<sup>3</sup> All four reports suggest that university-based principal preparation is still, largely, not as effective as it needs to be to produce the leaders our nation’s schools and students require.

3 Elmore, R. F. (2000). *Building a New Structure for School Leadership*. Washington, DC: The Albert Shanker Institute; Peterson, K. (2002). “The Professional Development of Principals: Innovations and Opportunities.” *Educational Administration Quarterly* 38(2); Levine, A. (2005). *Educating School Leaders*. Princeton, NJ: The Education Schools Project; 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.

Superintendents from districts of all sizes strongly agree that principal preparation needs to improve. For its study, AASA surveyed superintendents and received responses from 408 of these officials in 42 states. Four out of five (80 percent) said improvement of principal preparation is necessary – 32 percent to a “large extent” and 48 percent to a “moderate extent.” Only two respondents said that improvement was “not at all” needed.

Moreover, when asked to rate the effectiveness of preparation for 15 common school-leader responsibilities – such as managing change, recruiting and selecting teachers, and using data – the superintendents rated all 15 below the effective level. Further, the authors of the AASA report write, “Preparation for four responsibilities thought to be critical for school





improvement – instructional leadership, team building, problem solving/decision making, and relationships/collaboration – [were] among the five lowest ranked areas.”

Representatives of the colleges and universities that oversee principal preparation also saw shortcomings in programming, according to a survey of 842 member institutions that AACTE conducted as part of its report. More than one-third (37 percent) of respondents said current programs prepare graduates “not well” or only “somewhat well.” In addition, the AACTE report suggests that the respondents’ own programs sometimes fail to fully meet the respondents’ expectations. For example, close to three-quarters (74 percent) of respondents answered “strongly agree” when asked whether a curriculum that “facilitates candidates’ capacity to increase K-12 achievement” is essential to effective preparation programs. Yet only 45 percent said they “strongly” agreed their own program (or one they might be able to implement)<sup>4</sup> had such a curriculum – a 29 percentage point gap.

Another finding is that many university-based programs are eyeing improvements. When asked about planned modifications to their principal preparation programs over the next two years, 96 percent of those surveyed by AACTE reported they would be making some level of change – with 56 percent making moderate to significant changes. It’s not known what kind of changes the university programs envision, but with more than 50 percent indicating they plan on making moderate to significant changes, the report says, “There are a large number of programs who are not satisfied with the current status quo of their principal preparation.”

It’s also of note, according to the report, that 30 percent of those who received the survey took part in it, an unusually hefty response rate, and that many were apparently highly engaged in the subject of improving principal preparation. “Based upon the overwhelming response to the survey request and the amount and detail given in the open responses, it is clear that institutions want to have a serious conversation about

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4 Eighty-three percent of respondents have an active program, 1 percent have an inactive program, 4 percent are looking to add a new program, 6 percent do not have a program and are not interested in adding one, and 6 percent did not respond.

the needs of principal preparation programs,” the authors write, adding the “comments and suggestions throughout the survey responses scream with frustration, passion, and pleas for help from external and internal advocates to have the capacity to help them effect change.”

The UCEA analysis also suggests an openness by many programs to change. UCEA, a consortium of universities whose mission is to promote high-quality education leadership preparation and research, based its report findings on data from two surveys to its 97 member institutions. Some 56 percent of UCEA respondents indicated interest in taking part in a program redesign. UCEA noted that the number would have been higher except that several programs had already recently undergone redesign.

UCEA’s report also identified a number of high-quality programs. Thirty-five programs were interested in serving as “exemplars,” that is, potential models for the field.<sup>5</sup> According to UCEA’s criteria, eight qualified. [Wallace found an additional 10 high-quality programs (university-based and other) operating in or near six large school districts taking part in a foundation education effort. All earned high scores on Quality Measures, an evidence-based assessment of principal preparation programs developed by the Education Development Center.]

In a literature review, AIR researchers found emerging consensus among experts on seven characteristics of high-quality programs. They also described “how to achieve scale with principal program improvement” as “a vexing policy question.”<sup>6</sup>

As a whole, the four reports indicate that many educators, both at universities and among school district leadership, believe that principal preparation programs need to change – and many programs show an openness to doing just that.

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5 Some respondents to the UCEA survey said they were interested in both redesign and serving as an exemplar program.

6 The characteristics are: Program alignment with research-based standards; rigorous selection using authentic assessments; induction support (such as mentoring/coaching) on the job; experiential learning (coursework and clinical); cohorts for learning (students progress through the course sequence together as a group, sharing experiences and learning); district-university partnerships; and evidence of effects/use of data for program improvement.

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# STRONG UNIVERSITY-DISTRICT PARTNERSHIPS ARE ESSENTIAL TO HIGH-QUALITY PREPARATION BUT ARE FAR FROM UNIVERSAL.

The four reports are in accord with previous research suggesting that university-district collaboration is important to effective principal preparation.<sup>7</sup> When they work with districts, programs can better harmonize their offerings with district needs and better serve their customer. Further, lack of collaboration hinders programs from providing learning opportunities cited in research as important, such as clinical experiences. Despite the benefits, however, meaningful partnerships between programs and districts are far from universal.

When asked on the AASA survey whether each of six possible university actions would raise program quality, superintendents gave “establishing formal partnerships with districts” an average score of 4.5 on a 1-to-5 scale with “5” indicating “definitely yes.” This ranked just behind courses taught by effective principals and a curriculum based on contemporary practices. Superintendents were also asked to rate the usefulness of five specific collaborative efforts. Respondents ranked all as either “valuable” or “highly valuable.” The top two were: including district personnel on a program advisory committee and providing courses taught by district/school administrators.

Still, superintendents reported that current university-district collaboration is limited: Nearly 89 percent reported that collaboration occurred only sometimes or almost never. Further, in focus groups the superintendents indicated they lack involvement in university decisions. “We don’t have conversations – we are not

at the table when the universities decide what needs to be offered,” was one comment.

For their part, fully 96 percent of respondents to AACTE’s survey agreed that strong collaboration between universities and school districts was an “essential” element of an effective principal preparation program (74 percent “strongly agree,” 22 percent “agree”). There was strong agreement indicated for the inclusion of collaboration between universities and school districts to foster the design of high-quality curriculum, resulting in greater candidate learning and program effectiveness. One respondent wrote, “Field projects advance initiatives in the district/school and both partners are fully invested in the success of the candidate and initiative.”

And yet, despite the importance the AACTE respondents ascribe to collaboration, more than a fifth (22 percent) “disagreed” when asked if strong collaborations were features of existing programs.

As for UCEA: Its standards say, “Member programs should have in place long-term formal relationships with one or more school districts, and other appropriate agencies, that create partnership sites for clinical study, field residency, and applied research.”<sup>8</sup> Thus, when identifying exemplary programs for its report, UCEA put strong university-district collaboration (where district personnel play a role in the selection of aspiring principal candidates, for example) among its markers of quality.

The AIR report places “partnerships for excellence” among the seven characteristics of high-quality principal preparation programs that AIR researchers found in their literature review. In addition, three of

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7 Orr, M.T. (2006). “Mapping Innovation in Leadership Preparation in Our Nation’s Schools of Education.” *Phi Delta Kappan*, 87(7); 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; Orr, M.T., King, C. & LaPointe, M. (2010). *Districts Developing Leaders: Lessons on Consumer Actions and Program Approaches from Eight Urban Districts*. New York, NY: Wallace Foundation; The Wallace Foundation. (2013). *Districts Matter: Cultivating the Principals Urban Schools Need*.

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8 Young, M. D. (2010). “From the Director: The Promise of University-District Partnerships.” *UCEA Review*, 51(1).

five experts interviewed by AIR concurred that university-district partnerships are necessary.<sup>9</sup>

Strong partnerships could be encouraged by policy in the 50 states. States could, for example, make program-district collaboration a qualification for program accreditation. But according to data collected by AIR, few states – far fewer than half – have policies

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9 Based on AIR interviews with five experts and a review of five influential reports: *Quality Matters: Principal Preparation Program Self-Assessment Toolkit* by EDC, AREL Network Program Characteristics by the George W. Bush Institute, *The National Commission for the Advancement of Educational Leadership Preparation, Principal Preparation Program Characteristics* by the Rainwater Charitable Foundation, and *Preparing School Leaders for a Changing World: Lessons from Exemplary Leadership Development Programs* by Linda Darling-Hammond, Michelle LaPointe, Debra Meyerson, Margaret Terry Orr and Carol Cohen at Stanford University.

regarding the development of solid partnerships: 16 states require alignment between district needs and program priorities; 13 require commitment from districts to support rich internship, residency or clinical experiences; and 10 require district and program collaboration on candidate admission.

Given all this, it's worth noting that in the AASA survey, superintendents rated "require universities to collaborate with districts" as the most valuable of 10 possible policy actions the state might take to improve principal preparation.

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## THE COURSE OF STUDY AT PREPARATION PROGRAMS DOES NOT ALWAYS REFLECT PRINCIPALS' REAL JOBS.

Effective principal preparation, according to research, integrates coursework about school leadership with practical experience in schools so that aspiring leaders learn what's needed for the job, exercise those skills and apply the knowledge in a meaningful way, and receive feedback from experienced practitioners.<sup>10</sup> A thread of agreement runs throughout the reports about the need to give candidates learning opportunities that reflect the principal's job. Doing so can take several forms, including having in place a curriculum that exposes candidates to today's best school leadership practices and providing courses taught by faculty members who themselves were effective school leaders and can therefore train from direct experience. The lack of adequate clinical experience – potentially the most powerful learning opportunity for aspiring principals – is the biggest agreed-upon shortfall.

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10 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; 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: The Rainwater Charitable Foundation.

### FACULTY MEMBERS WITH SCHOOL LEADERSHIP EXPERIENCE

Research suggests that high-quality programs include both faculty members knowledgeable in particular fields of expertise and practitioners. It's clear that superintendents believe programs in general have not achieved the right balance.

When asked about the top action universities might take to improve principal preparation, AASA survey respondents ranked "having most/all courses taught by current or former effective principals" No. 1. "Although many preparation programs have attempted to meld theory and practice via adjunct professors and clinical faculty, many courses are still taught by professors who have not been principals or superintendents," the report says. AASA focus group members remarked on this. "The people developing the curriculum are not teachers/principals and have not been in schools recently" was one remark.

In written comments, respondents to the AACTE survey, too, suggested a need for more faculty members who have been successful practitioners. One cited a

need for “principal preparation faculty with successful experience in P-12 leadership [to be] in program decision-making roles,” while another mentioned research faculty who “continue to teach theories that have little practical application in today’s [schools].”

At the same time, the AACTE report notes that institutions are often limited in their ability to attract faculty members with experience as school administrators because these professionals are likely to have to take large salary cuts to move into university teaching. Indeed, university respondents cited lack of financial/budgetary supports for qualified instructors and clinical experiences as the top barriers to program improvement and the two most in need of being removed.

### *A CURRICULUM STRESSING WHAT PRINCIPALS NEED TO KNOW AND DO*

A high-quality curriculum emphasizes the skills principals most need (the ability to be instructional leaders rather than, say, experts in school law) and enables candidates to practice important job skills, such as giving feedback to teachers. Research confirms the significance of relevant, experiential coursework and indicates that a number of principal preparation programs have not updated their curricula to match the responsibilities of school leaders today.<sup>11</sup> The reports found two common problems: a scarcity of skill-building opportunities and some mismatch between topics taught and the job.

Almost all (97 percent) of the respondents to the AACTE survey said coursework should allow for learning through case studies, role plays and simulations approximating the real work of principals (71 percent strongly agree, 26 percent agree). But only 60 percent strongly agreed that their programs are currently offering experiential learning (a gap of 11 percentage points between “strong” agreement that experiential learning is necessary and “strong” agreement that it’s in place).

Based on survey-takers’ written comments, the AACTE report concludes that a number of respondents cited a need for “course content that supports

the development of principals who can demonstrate both management skills and leadership skills needed to lead change and improvement.” When asked to describe barriers that may stand in the way of the development of a robust, clinically-based principal preparation program, survey respondents identified “the need for updated coursework and curricula that reflect the real-world skills needed by principals in 21<sup>st</sup> century schools,” according to the report.

Superintendents expressed concern about the content of preparation programs. As noted above, when asked about the most important steps universities could take to improve preparation, superintendents ranked “bas-ing curriculum on contemporary practice” high – 4.5 on a 5-point scale. The respondents “overwhelmingly recognized the importance of instructional leadership ... [but] they were not very confident that preparation programs sufficiently prepared [aspiring principals] for this role,” the report authors write.

Finally, the AASA survey found that superintendents support a state role in strengthening curricula; they ranked “increasing course requirements in leadership” as second (out of 11) interventions to improve principal preparation.

### *CLINICAL EXPERIENCES*

Survey responses showed consistent agreement that aspiring principals should have intensive clinical experiences structured to provide candidates with adequate time and opportunity to engage in authentic adult leadership work and reflective practice experiences. The AACTE survey in particular highlights a strong interest in clinical programming by preparation programs. University representatives ranked clinical practice as the top (tied with competency frameworks) essential element for effective principal preparation out of 14 elements: A full 99 percent said having “clinical practice/internships that are field-based, allowing for application of theory to practice and providing robust adult leadership experiences” is important (88 percent strongly agree, 11 percent agree).

A large number of respondents to the AACTE survey reported that their institutions were providing strong clinical experiences (71 percent strongly agree and 23 percent agree). At the same time, however, a number

<sup>11</sup> Hess, F. M. & Kelly, A. P. (2007). “Learning to Lead: What Gets Taught in Principal Preparation Programs.” *Teachers College Record*, 109(1).

## A DEFINITION OF CLINICAL PREPARATION

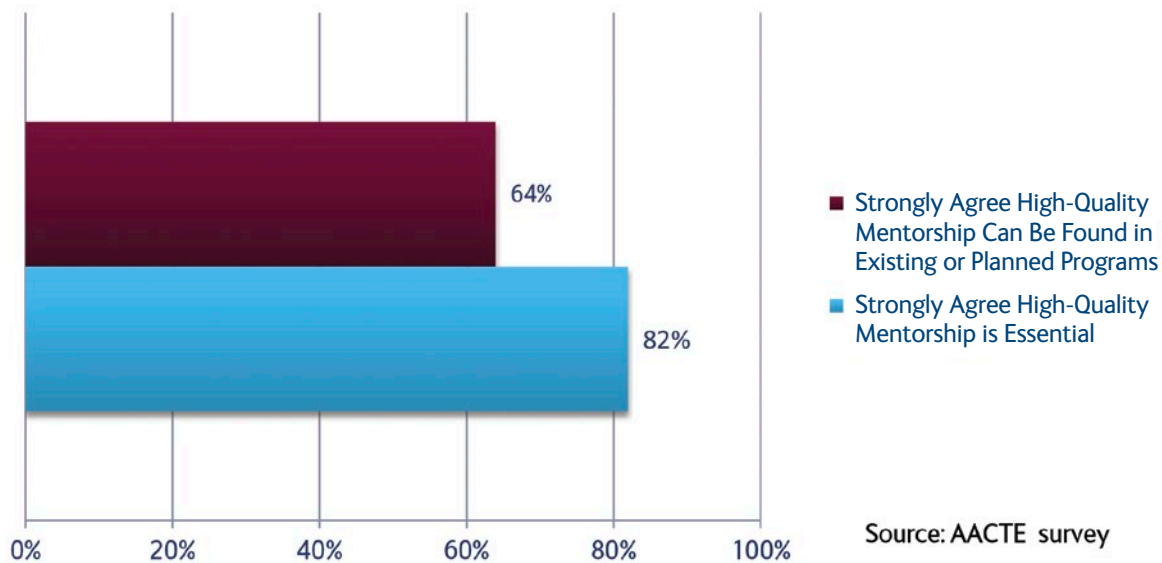
AACTE defined clinical preparation as “fully integrating a school-based experience throughout every facet of the program, providing candidates with adequate time and opportunity to engage in authentic adult leadership work and reflective practice experiences.”

of written comments from respondents indicated, in the words of the report, that “institutions are experiencing a range of barriers to achieving some of the key elements of clinical practice.” These include establishing clinical partnerships with districts, securing high-quality mentors for the candidates, and finding a way around the time and financial constraints faced by the candidates themselves, many of whom need to juggle job demands with the demands of an internship. The report suggests additional investigation to determine the extent to which the “hallmark elements” of strong clinical programming “are able to be authentically employed by preparation programs.”

In addition, a key feature of a strong clinical experience – mentorship – may be falling short. As the principals at schools where candidates carry out their internships, mentors guide their mentees by coaching, sharing their expertise, and helping them reflect on their practice. The importance of mentors is supported by research,<sup>12</sup> and 97 percent of AACTE respondents said that sound implementation of clinical programs entails having candidates mentored by both program faculty members and clinical practice/internship supervisors (82 percent strongly agree, 15 percent agree). Despite this, only 64 percent strongly agreed that high-quality mentorship was a feature of existing programs or one they could launch.

12 SREB. (2007). *Good Principals Aren't Born—They're Mentored: Are We Investing Enough to Get the School Leaders We Need?* New York, NY: The Wallace Foundation.

## GAP BETWEEN PERCEIVED IMPORTANCE OF HIGH-QUALITY MENTORSHIP AND ACTUAL IMPLEMENTATION



AASA's report connects the need for mentors with the need for university-district collaboration. "Once aspiring principals acquire knowledge, they need to work with mentors to hone their skills and develop constructive dispositions," the study says. "This reality, more than any other condition, is the reason why universities and school districts need to collaborate."

As noted above, the AACTE survey uncovered a number of barriers to making principal preparation strongly clinically based. Almost half (49 percent) of AACTE respondents indicated that a lack of funding for clinical experiences could either "greatly" interfere

with (28 percent) or altogether "impede" (21 percent) the implementation or redesign/improvement of a principal preparation program. A particular challenge cited was a dearth of funding to compensate district mentors/coaches and supervisors, creating a shortage of site-based resources for programs.

The AIR report suggests that states could play a more assertive role in improving clinical training by making provision of rich internship experiences a program accreditation requirement. AIR found that today only 14 states require at least 300 hours of field-based experiences.

### **ACTION IN ILLINOIS**

The state of Illinois recently developed a five-year strategic plan for the improvement of school leader preparation that calls for "well-designed, tightly integrated courses, fieldwork and internships that provide experienced mentors and authentic leadership experiences," according to a forthcoming report.<sup>13</sup> The report notes the important role the state plays in building "a statewide architecture of preparation program support." One of the themes the plan emphasizes is the importance of clinical experience: "Site-based learning is as critical to the future of school leader development as internships and residencies are to the medical profession; therefore the State must build capacity within districts and regions to develop mentors and coaches, and to enable selection on the basis of demonstrated expertise, not merely proximity."

<sup>13</sup> Forthcoming report from Illinois School Leader Advisory Council. (2016). Springfield, IL: Report to the Illinois State Board of Education and Illinois Board of Higher Education.

## **SOME UNIVERSITY POLICIES AND PRACTICES CAN HINDER CHANGE.**

In general, respondents across the surveys reported that certain institutional aspects of university-based programs – their structure, regulations, incentives and faculty mindsets – can stifle efforts to improve the quality of principal preparation. The barriers range from a lack of understanding about the need for lead-

ership training to be practice-based and linked with current district/school needs to the tendency to hire faculty members who often have not served as principals themselves. The obstacles are hard to remove and can stand in the way of efforts by some to institute significant programmatic changes.

Perceived lapses in both university officials and faculty members are seen as roadblocks to improvement by the university preparation programs. When given a list of 17 possible barriers to principal preparation program redesign, AACTE survey respondents ranked “lack of support from university officials” as fourth highest; almost one-third of respondents agreed it was a significant obstacle. Fifth on the list, cited by more than one-quarter (27 percent) of survey respondents, was faculty members who do not themselves see a need for change.

Written comments from respondents put flesh on these findings. In discussing university policy and commitment, respondents wrote they perceived difficulties including “poor university administration and support,” “a lack of real commitment to the program by the university,” and “a lack of urgency for change.” In discussing the faculty, one respondent wrote of faculty members who “are more focused on compliance with state regulations ... than on what they should be doing to conceptualize leadership preparation and its enactment;” another wrote of “faculty who have not kept current with the contemporary issues facing today’s schools; these faculty continue to teach theories that have little practical application in today’s educational contexts.”

University respondents also noted the impact of academic and credentialing requirements on hiring power. The AACTE report included multiple narrative comments related to this point, which the authors summarized as: “Tenured positions require terminal degrees [doctorates]. Programs want practitioners to teach.” This relates to additional comments on funding barriers: “Low faculty salaries preclude obtaining the best practitioners to become faculty at the college/university level.”

The AASA study found similar concerns among school district superintendents. Only 29 percent of superintendents reported that preparation courses were always or usually taught by instructors who had been district or school administrators themselves, and the superintendents strongly endorsed the idea of having more courses taught by current or former effective principals. Focus group participants touched on the higher education structure as a barrier, with one per-

ception being that tenured faculties can be “hesitant to change.”

Money – or lack thereof – is seen as another barrier, and many programs report having insufficient funding for program change.<sup>14</sup> Some survey respondents connect budgetary constraints with the fact that university and college administrators often do not understand the needs for the programs to introduce better recruitment and more selective admission of students, adopt more experiential learning, and hire faculty members with practitioner experience. They therefore do not provide the necessary administrative and financial support to bring about change.

The No. 1 barrier that either greatly interferes with (32 percent) or impedes program start-up, redesign or improvement (22 percent) is lack of funding and other budgetary/financial constraints, according to the AACTE survey. Specifically, respondents reported that financial and budgetary support for qualified instructors (faculty) and for clinical experiences remains the top barrier. In analyzing written comments from the respondents, the report authors conclude that the survey takers attributed a “shortage of faculty with the breadth of experience needed” in part to university budget cuts; professionals with experience as former school administrators “would have to take large salary cuts to work in higher education.”

Further, respondents believe that tight budgets limit programs’ ability to compensate district mentors and coaches, creating a shortage of school-based resources for effective clinical experiences for their program participants.

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14 See also Darling-Hammond, et. al. (2007) and Manna (2015).

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## STATES HAVE AUTHORITY TO PLAY A ROLE IN IMPROVING PRINCIPAL PREPARATION, BUT MANY ARE NOT USING THIS POWER AS EFFECTIVELY AS THEY COULD.

A number of recent reports have highlighted the important but often under-used role states can play in improving principal preparation.<sup>15</sup> As political scientist Paul Manna notes in a recent report, state policymakers have a number of options for action, and he points to the work of Illinois and Kentucky as examples.<sup>16</sup> Both states have required programs to make changes, including developing closer collaborations with school districts, offering learning experiences that mirror the work of principals, and ensuring that candidates are paired with talented mentors.

The four reports reflect the belief that states could do more to foster higher-quality programs. The AIR report in particular focuses on the state role, noting that states “can contribute to the conditions for preparation program improvement through program accreditation criteria, program monitoring procedures, and minimum principal certification requirements.” AIR’s literature review and interviews with experts confirm that despite what Manna describes as states’ “unambiguous authority to oversee the organizations that prepare principals,” state government institutions (state education agencies, legislatures) traditionally have not flexed their muscle.

States have two particularly strong policy levers: program approval and candidate licensure. For the former, states can consider increasing the frequency and depth of their program reviews and oversight, as well as require programs to have certain elements in

place (such as strong admissions or district-university partnerships). For the latter, states can consider more closely matching candidate licensure requirements to the principal’s actual responsibilities to ensure that licensed principals have demonstrated competency in the skills needed to perform the job well.

Currently, many superintendents do not believe that state licensing processes are effective in this regard. Sixty-two percent of superintendents in the AASA survey said state licensing requirements were only moderately relevant to principal responsibilities. Further, superintendents responded on average that none of seven responsibilities considered important to the job was addressed “to a large extent” in licensing.

In fact, more than half (57 percent) of the superintendents identified state licensing requirements as a liability to ensuring an adequate pipeline of strong principal candidates for districts, compared with 32 percent who said the requirements were an asset. It was unclear whether respondents viewed licensing as too stringent, too loose or just not relevant. The AASA report suggests: “Further study could reveal whether this opinion is focused on restricting the number of applicants, focused on the nature of the requirements, or both.”

A noticeable number of university representatives, too, harbored concerns about state policy. Some 33 percent of AACTE survey respondents indicated that state requirements greatly interfered with or altogether impeded program start-up, redesign or improvement.

Part of the superintendents’ and university representatives’ frustration may stem from a sense that policymakers lack the depth of understanding needed to design and implement effective policies on their own.

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15 Council of Chief State School Officers. (2012). *Our Responsibility, Our Promise: Transforming Educator Preparation and Entry into the Profession*; Briggs, K. Cheney, G.R., Davis, J. & Moll, K. (2013). *Operating in the Dark: What Outdated State Policies and Data Gaps Mean for Effective School Leadership*. Dallas, TX: The George W. Bush Institute; Manna, P. (2015). *Developing Excellent School Principals to Advance Teaching and Learning: Considerations for State Policy*. New York, NY: The Wallace Foundation.

16 Manna, P. (2015). *Developing Excellent School Principals to Advance Teaching and Learning: Considerations for State Policy*. New York, NY: The Wallace Foundation.



While the vast majority of superintendents (95 percent) in the AASA survey agreed that the state should play a role in redesign, most said it should be a supporting role, not a lead, and there was some sentiment in AASA focus groups that superintendents who understand principals' jobs need to be at the table when policymakers create licensure rules. Meanwhile, university representatives responding to the AACTE survey gave state policymakers a relatively low ranking for their importance in advancing program improvements, and in written comments questioned state expertise: "Many respondents felt that the state legislators and policymakers have very little knowledge or investment in education, let alone principal preparation, leading to bad and un-actionable policies," the report says.

### ASSESSING THE POLICY ENVIRONMENT OF STATES

Figuring out whether a state policy environment is favorable to principal preparation program improvement is complicated. Both AIR and UCEA set out to do this by reviewing state policies and regulations and determining the extent to which they reflected research-based indicators of best practices in principal preparation.

UCEA first identified five "high-leverage" policy indicators – four regarding preparation program oversight and program attributes for consideration in state approval, and one regarding candidate licensure:

- Explicit selection process that includes targeted recruitment and performance-based assessments;
- Clinically rich internship that, among other things, is tightly integrated with the curriculum, extends for 300 or more hours and provides mentor supervision;
- University-district partnership that includes commitment from district to provide a clinically-rich internship experience, collaboration on candidate selection, and alignment between district needs and program design;

- Program oversight that requires state review at specified intervals, documentation and/or site visits, an experienced oversight team, and a feedback mechanism to improve practice; and
- Licensure requirements including three or more years of teaching, a master's degree in educational leadership or related field, and completion of an approved preparation program.

UCEA reviewed state policies and regulations to decide how many of the high-leverage policies are currently in place. It then coupled this assessment with information on the ease of getting change approved in a state (as reported by the preparation programs there) and the communications and other capabilities of state agencies. According to UCEA's analysis, almost half of the states (44 percent) had no high-leverage policies or only one, indicating a lack of active state support for fostering high-quality principal preparation programs or improvement.

For licensure, most states emphasize candidate experience; 36 states require candidates to have completed an approved preparation program, have more than three years of teaching experience and hold an advanced degree. According to UCEA, research shows that states would have greater leverage in effecting change by strengthening oversight of the principal preparation program approval process.

AIR used the same database that UCEA reviewed to scan for a more extensive set of 18 weighted indicators, most aligned with conditions to foster effective principal preparation based on AIR's literature review and interviews with experts. Those indicators fit into the following categories:

- Increased program oversight, including collection and use of state data on matters including graduates' job placement, and review process for program improvement;
- Targeted recruitment and improved candidate selection using performance-based assessments and consideration of evidence of candidate effectiveness as a teacher;

- Cohort structures;
- Evaluations based on standards attainment rather than course completion;
- Clinical internships that last at least 300 hours and expose candidates to multiple school sites and students with diverse learning needs;
- A formal process for continuous program improvement based on graduate impact data; and
- Competency-based candidate licensure and licensure renewal based on evidence of the principal's effectiveness in areas including student learning improvement.

UCEA's five high-leverage indicators are mostly embedded in AIR's list, indicating general agreement and overlap between the approaches taken by the two groups.

An examination of the UCEA and AIR reviews finds that few states appear to have in place state conditions and policies to support improvement in principal preparation. The two groups agree that three states (Illinois, Kentucky and Tennessee) have the most favorable policy conditions. Other states with conditions considered conducive to improving principal preparation are California, Connecticut, Florida, Georgia, Iowa, Massachusetts, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island and Virginia.

AIR found that program accreditation review is required in all states, but few specify in-depth reviews of program quality or results. Three recom-

mended program accreditation policy levers were not addressed by very many states: candidate selection criteria, high-quality learning approaches and results-oriented processes for continuous improvement. Additionally, few states required programs to provide evidence of having aligned their coursework, assessments and other program activities with standards for effective school leadership.

State licensure requirements are similar across states. For example, AIR found that 46 states require a minimum of two years of teaching experience, but only four (Arkansas, Illinois, Kentucky and Tennessee) require an "effective" rating of teaching quality to verify the candidate's competency in instruction. Seven states (Georgia, Louisiana, Maine, Rhode Island, Tennessee, Washington and Wisconsin) link licensure renewal to performance evaluations, but no states link licensure renewal to school performance, such as measures of improvement in student learning and school quality. This finding indicates that few states are using principal evaluation results for licensure renewal decisions.

This analysis confirms previous research that most states are refraining from an active role in requiring rigorous principal preparation and setting competency-based licensure requirements.<sup>17</sup>

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17 Cheney, G.R. & Davis, J. (2011). *Gateways to the Principalship: State Power to Improve the Quality of School Leaders*. Washington, DC: Center for American Progress; Briggs, K. Cheney, G.R., Davis, J. & Moll, K. (2013). *Operating in the Dark: What Outdated State Policies and Data Gaps Mean for Effective School Leadership*. Dallas, TX: The George W. Bush Institute; Manna, P. (2015). *Developing Excellent School Principals to Advance Teaching and Learning: Considerations for State Policy*. New York, NY: The Wallace Foundation.

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## CONCLUSION

While the research is clear that school leaders matter to teacher effectiveness and student achievement – and there is an emerging consensus on the components of high-quality preparation – the field has not kept pace with the need for change. The four reports explored in this publication reaffirm that message loud and clear, both from the perspective of deans, faculty members

and other program insiders as well as the superintendents who are responsible for hiring school leaders.

Taken together, the reports suggest the need for action in:

- Redesigning principal preparation by building on what we know from research and high-quality

program models, including the provision of learning experiences that reflect the job of the principal;

- Building stronger connections between universities and districts. Districts are the ultimate employers of program graduates and should have more say in program offerings and continuous improvement efforts that are informed by evidence of graduates' effectiveness on the job; and
- Ensuring that state policymakers create the structures that not only support the proliferation of high-quality programs but also actively encourage it.

The university respondents identified a number of barriers standing in the way of progress, including funding for clinical experiences. But the good news is that many programs seem to be open to change. In fact, they are looking for ways that program and university leaders as well as state policymakers can raise the bar. Further, the field benefits from a number of strong programs. These beacons are showing the possibilities for a future in which every public school in the nation is headed by a principal trained to meet the demands of the job in the 21st century – a school leader able to improve teaching and learning so that all children receive a first-rate education.

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## APPENDIX

This synthesis publication draws from four reports written in August and September 2015 by the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE), The School Superintendents Association (AASA), the American Institutes for Research (AIR), and the University Council for Educational Administration (UCEA) at the request of The Wallace Foundation.

### AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF COLLEGES FOR TEACHER EDUCATION (AACTE)

AACTE is a national alliance of university-based educator preparation programs dedicated to high-quality, evidence-based preparation. AACTE issued a survey to its 842 member institutions to gain insight into university-based preparation programs, the context in which they operate, the degree to which various program elements are seen as important, the implementation of these program elements and the challenges programs face. A total of 255 surveys were completed sufficiently for data analysis, yielding a high, 30 percent response rate. Most of the respondents were university faculty members, deans or department chairs. Eighty-three percent of respondents have active principal preparation programs.

### THE SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENTS ASSOCIATION (AASA)

AASA is a membership association for school system superintendents. AASA sent a survey to 10,340 superintendents to determine their viewpoints on existing conditions for preparing, licensing and employing school principals. Their perceptions are critical not only because superintendents employ and often supervise principals but also because many superintendents have themselves been principals. A total of 408 respondents from 42 states completed the survey. Additionally, AASA held two focus groups in July 2015 with more than 135 superintendents and executive directors of state superintendent associations, bringing in additional input.

### AMERICAN INSTITUTES FOR RESEARCH (AIR)

AIR is a nonprofit research and technical assistance firm. AIR collected and analyzed data with the goal of identifying states with the highest prevalence of indicators that experts believe create conditions amenable to fostering high-quality principal preparation programs. Its analysis was based on reviews of literature, interviews with experts and a state-by-state policy scan to locate policy levers conducive to high-quality principal preparation programs.

### UNIVERSITY COUNCIL FOR EDUCATIONAL ADMINISTRATION (UCEA)

UCEA is a consortium of higher education institutions committed to advancing the preparation and practice of education leaders. UCEA applicants are required to undergo a quality screen for membership. UCEA analyzed data on programs from its INSPIRE survey, used for program evaluation, and what it called an “interest and capacity” survey on program redesign. Both surveys were completed by 59 out of 97 UCEA member institutions (a 60 percent response rate). UCEA’s goal was to identify programs in two categories: 1) those with an interest in and the capacity to engage in redesign, and 2) those that could serve as exemplars for others across the United States to support redesign. UCEA looked at key program features as well as contextual factors, such as university and state environments, that would support or hinder a preparation program in undergoing a redesign. It also conducted a state-level analysis, similar to AIR’s work, to identify state rules and regulations that promote research-based practices identified as high-leverage policies for high-quality principal preparation and certification.







The Wallace Foundation is a national philanthropy that seeks to improve learning and enrichment for disadvantaged children and foster the vitality of the arts for everyone.

Wallace has five major initiatives under way:

- School leadership: Strengthening education leadership to improve student achievement.
- Afterschool: Helping selected cities make good afterschool programs available to many more children.
- Arts education: Expanding arts learning opportunities for children and teens.
- Summer and expanded learning: Better understanding the impact of high-quality summer learning programs on disadvantaged children, and enriching and expanding the school day in ways that benefit students.
- Audience development for the arts: Making the arts a part of many more people's lives by working with arts organizations to broaden, deepen and diversify audiences.

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