

Pathways and Pipelines – Research Review

Despite the well-established impact of school leaders on student achievement, there is limited research on how specific policies impact principal quality and availability. Much of the available research mirrors general findings on improving overall educator quality and/or is limited to survey and descriptive research from a handful of reputable organizations.

Research-Based Recommendations for Improving Principal Preparation Programs

- Based on a landmark four-year study of principal preparation programs, three overarching improvement strategies emerged ([Levine, 2005](#)):
 - Eliminate incentives (e.g., salary scales that award raises based simply on obtaining credits and degrees) that reward completion rather than improvement in quality, thereby promoting and sustaining low-quality programs.
 - Enact high standards for leadership preparation programs; evaluate programs based on their effectiveness, and close low-performing programs.
 - Redesign curricula and degree options to make them more relevant to current needs.
- Despite these recommendations from 2005, subsequent studies and reports (detailed below) indicate that little has improved with respect to school leadership programs.

Research Findings on Principal Pathways and Pipelines

State policies regarding leadership preparation need significant improvement.

- A 2013 report surveyed all 50 states and Washington, D.C., regarding principal policies and found that 1) states are not effectively using their authority to improve the supply of high-quality school leaders; and 2) in general, states lack key data on the supply and quality of school leaders ([Briggs, Cheney, Davis & Moll, 2013](#)).

States not collecting and utilizing data

- State principal policy is surprisingly uninformed by data. States lack basic information on principal supply and demand, including how many principals graduate from preparation programs each year, where they are placed, and whether they positively impact student achievement ([Campbell and Gross, 2012](#)). In fact, 19 states were unable to report on how many principals graduate annually ([Briggs et al., 2013](#)).
- States also are not tracking principal performance, and therefore are not linking it to training and preparation ([Briggs et al., 2013](#)).
- Without performance data, states cannot tell which programs are graduating the strongest and weakest principals ([Campbell and Gross, 2012](#)).

Pathways are narrow and do not produce a diverse candidate pool

- Principal preparation programs are not producing enough high-quality school leaders. Both urban and rural districts report difficulty finding qualified candidates ([Briggs et al., 2013](#)).
- According to a 2012 survey of 40 charter management organizations (CMO) in 14 states, 61 percent reported that their efforts to scale up were hindered by the limited supply of high-quality principals ([Campbell and Gross, 2012](#)).
- Even though university-based providers have demonstrated a lack of rigor and practical coursework in their programs (see below) and several alternative programs have demonstrated positive outcomes, programs run by nonprofits, districts, and CMOs often are not eligible for accreditation. As of 2013, 29 states did not have any accredited non-university principal preparation programs in operation; several of these states limited accreditation of principal preparation programs to university-based providers ([Briggs et al., 2013](#)).

- Diversity among school leaders does not reflect the public school population. In the 2011-12 school year, 80 percent of public school principals were white; yet white students comprised only 51 percent of public school students ([Bitterman, Goldring, Gray, and Broughman, 2013](#) and [NCES](#)).

Preparation programs are not rigorous and often lack practical experiences and training

- The Alliance to Reform Education Leadership identifies seven elements of an effective, research-based principal preparation program: (a) program purpose, (b) competency framework, (c) recruitment, (d) candidate selection, (e) coursework, (f) clinical leadership experience (practical/in-school training, like shadowing an experienced principal), and (g) program completion requirements. The [Briggs et al. 2013 survey of state policy](#) found that:
 - In 2013, only five states reported requiring preparation programs to include all elements.
 - Only 11 states reported requiring clinical leadership experience as part of training.
- In a 2007 analysis of 56 leadership preparation program course syllabi, researchers found ([Hess and Kelly, 2007](#)):
 - Limited emphasis on accountability in the context of school management or school improvement and limited instruction on managing school improvement via data, technology, or empirical research.
 - Limited focus on recruiting, selecting, or hiring new teachers.
 - Limited focus on building leadership culture, despite widespread recognition of its importance.
 - Many courses included no final assessment to ensure students mastered the content.
- Principals need training on teacher retention:
 - Research shows that principals can impact teacher retention through their actions ([Boyd et al., 2011](#)).
 - In a 2012 survey by The New Teacher Project (TNTP) of 90,000 teachers in four large urban districts, only 26 percent of high-performing teachers reported that their school leader identified career opportunities for them as teacher leaders within the school and only 37 percent reported that their school leader encouraged them to teach at the same school the next year ([TNTP, 2012](#)).
 - When using retention strategies, principals are not differentiating among teachers based on classroom effectiveness or overall value to the school; instead they encourage both high-performing and low-performing teachers to keep teaching the following year at similar rates ([TNTP, 2012](#)).

Preparation programs are not accountable for results

- Principal preparation programs are almost wholly unaccountable: re-approvals happen without data. Instead, decisions regarding programs are mostly based on whether the program is operated by a university rather than via evaluation of program characteristics and quality, meaning most programs are automatically renewed ([Briggs et al., 2013](#)).

Promising Alternative Models

- Although the number of alternative programs is growing, evidence of results is still incredibly limited, indicating that far more study is needed. In fact, of 60 alternative leadership programs identified by Bellwether in a 2014 study, researcher John Chubb found evidence of results for only a handful, including KIPP, New Leaders, New York City Aspiring Principals Program, and the Urban Education Leadership Program at the University of Chicago ([Chubb, 2014](#)).