ILLINOIS EDUCATION RESEARCH COUNCIL

UCHICAGOCCSR THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO CONSORTIUM ON CHICAGO SCHOOL RESEARCH

Restructuring Principal Preparation in Illinois: Perspectives on Implementation Successes, Challenges, and Future Outlook

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Brenda K. Klostermann,[1] Amber Stitziel Pareja,[2] Holly Hart, [2] Bradford R. White, [1] and Michelle Hanh Huynh [2]

In the past 20 years, many states have implemented rigorous standards and requirements to improve the quality of preparation and training for school principals, with the end goal of improving student achievement. These reforms have been focused on providing stronger training for principals to better equip them to direct instructional change and to lead schools that produce high levels of student learning.

Prior to the reforms, many in the education field argued that principal preparation did not adequately prepare principals to lead schools that were successful in reaching high levels of student achievement (Bottoms & O'Neill, 2001; Finn & Broad, 2003; Levine, 2005). Principal preparation programs were seen as having an irrelevant curriculum, low admission and graduation standards, a weak faculty, inadequate clinical instruction, inappropriate degrees, and poor research (Levine, 2005). In part, this was due to the programs' focus on the principal as school manager instead of the principal as instructional leader. Principals were traditionally seen as school managers whose jobs were supervisory and administrative in nature (e.g., ensuring that there were enough teachers in the classrooms and that the buses ran on time).

Over time, many in the educational field began to argue that in order to improve, schools needed strong principals and that principals are ultimately responsible for schools' success. Bottoms and O'Neill (2001) argued that in order to lead schools that are organized to produce higher student learning, school leaders needed to "have comprehensive understanding of school and classroom practices that contribute to student achievement; know how to work with teachers and others to fashion and implement continuous student improvement; and, know how to provide the necessary support for staff to carry out sound school, curriculum, and instructional practices" (p. 8). Thus, future principals needed to have better, higher quality preparation prior to entering the field in order to enable them to be transformational instructional leaders (Bottoms & O'Neill, 2001; Finn & Broad, 2003; Levine, 2005).

Over the past two decades, many states have responded to the call for better principal preparation. At least 46 states have adopted the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) standards (Shelton, 2012); however, not all of these states have implemented a statewide comprehensive reform of preparation programs. Illinois stands out in front with a handful of other states that have enacted legislation which requires a cohesive and comprehensive approach to preparing school leaders for today's challenging school environments. Recently, Illinois was recognized for its innovative policy, winning the 2014 Frank Newman Award for State Innovation from the Education Commission of the States. In addition, Illinois has been cited by the Center for Enhancing Early Learning Outcomes as the only state to include early childhood content specifically in their licensure, accreditation, mentoring, and evaluation processes (Brown, Squires, Connors-Tadros, & Horowitz, 2014).

Illinois' redesign of principal preparation was intended to represent a paradigm shift from "candidate as consumer" to "district as consumer," with the ultimate goal of improving student achievement. Rather than focusing on the candidates' possible goals—principal endorsement, middle leadership position (e.g., athletic director), salary increase—as with the prior general administrative certificate that principals and other school leaders used to receive in Illinois (Type 75), the new policy emphasizes meeting the needs of the district to ensure highly qualified candidates are trained to effectively lead their schools. It also emphasizes the critical role of the district in preparing their principals.

The goal of Illinois' new principal preparation policy is to ensure that the newly redesigned programs will "prepare individuals to be highly effective in leadership roles to improve teaching and learning and increase

[1] Illinois Education Research Council at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville

[2] The University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research

academic achievement and the development of all students" (Programs for the Preparation of Principals in Illinois, 2015). Under the new policy, candidates who complete a principal preparation program "obtain a principal endorsement on a Professional Educator License and are eligible to work as a principal or an assistant principal or in related or similar positions." Each program is required to:

- include partnerships with school districts in preparation program design and delivery;
- meet the Educational Leadership Policy Standards outlined by ISLLC;
- offer curricula that address student learning and school improvement and focus on:
  - learning at all grade levels (pre-K through 12);
  - the role of instruction, curriculum, assessment, and needs of the school or district in improving learning;
  - the Illinois Professional Teaching Standards (Standards for All Illinois Teachers, 2015);
  - learning needs of all students, including students with disabilities, English language learners, gifted students, students in early childhood programs; and
  - collaborative relationships with all members of the school community;
- include a performance-based internship that enables the candidate to be exposed to and to participate in a variety of school leadership situations in settings that represent diverse economic and cultural conditions and involve interaction with various members of the school community;
- admit candidates who meet specified minimum requirements and are selected through an in-person interview process; and
- provide collaborative support for candidates from both faculty and mentor principals.

Leadership by the Illinois Board of Higher Education (IBHE), the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE), and the Center for the Study of Education Policy (CSEP) at Illinois State University, along with numerous education policy and practitioner organizations, provided the strong foundation needed to accomplish the ambitious goal of redesigning Illinois' principal preparation programs. Informed by research on the influence of school leadership on student achievement, a wide array of Illinois education stakeholders contributed tremendous amounts of time and expertise to identify the critical elements necessary in principal preparation to ensure candidates receive training to make a positive impact on student achievement. The Commission on School Leader Preparation in Illinois Colleges and Universities developed the recommendations for the significant shift in improving principal preparation (*School Leader Preparation: A Blueprint for Change*, 2006), followed by the work of the School Leader Taskforce to develop strategies for implementing the Commission's recommendations (*Illinois School Leader Task Force Report to the Illinois General Assembly*, 2008). In 2008, the Leadership to Integrate the Learning Continuum (LINC) Advisory Group called attention to the gap between early learning and the K-12 system and recommended that the new principal endorsement be broadened to pre-K-12. The Wallace Foundation and the Robert R. McCormick Foundation also supported these efforts by funding some of the numerous groups to convene in order to formulate action plans and recommendations for developing and implementing the new policy.

Goals of Research Study

The goals of the current mixed methods study, the Illinois Principal Preparation Implementation Review Project (I-PREP), are to describe how the new policy is being implemented, to learn which aspects of the implementation have been successful or challenging, and to see how programs are addressing challenges in the preparation of their candidates. The overall study includes three phases:

1. Statewide Scan of Early Implementation to learn how program representatives and stakeholders view the new policy, to learn what changes they expected to occur with the policy, and to learn what potential barriers they foresee might impede their vision of success (conducted fall 2014).

2. Site Visits with 12 out of the 26[3] approved programs and their district partners to gather in depth information about the implementation process, catalysts and challenges to change, and resources needed (being conducted spring and fall 2015).

3. Statewide Online Survey of preparation programs to determine how well the information gathered from site visits generalizes statewide to all of the 26 (see Footnote 1) programs (to be conducted fall 2015).

This report presents our findings from the first phase of the study, the statewide scan of 23 program representatives and 22 stakeholders. The final report will include findings from the site visits and statewide survey and will be available summer 2016.

Findings

Overall, program representatives and statewide stakeholders were largely familiar with and positive about the goals of the policy and had an overall positive view of its future impact on leaders and schools. However, some believed the redesign overstepped the need for statewide reform and that more limited policy changes would have been sufficient to address the issues. Regarding current implementation, respondents indicated they believe that the policy is bringing about many of the benefits it was intended to produce and improving the quality of principal preparation in Illinois. However, many respondents—both program representatives and statewide stakeholders—indicated that there are several challenges to successfully implementing the new policy. While many expressed optimism about the future of principal preparation in Illinois, one widespread concern is that lower enrollment in principal preparation programs will eventually lead to more constriction than initially envisioned of the principal pipeline, thus leading to shortages of qualified candidates.

Current Implementation: Benefits

The program representatives and statewide stakeholders generally indicated that the new policy has created higher quality principal preparation in Illinois. Overall, respondents indicated the new policy has been beneficial in five main areas:

- more rigorous selection of candidates, resulting in higher quality, more committed candidates;
- more rigorous programs with increased authentic and practical principal preparation, due in large part to a more extensive competency-based internship;
- better preparation to support all students across the pre-K through 12 continuum, including preparation to meet the needs of diverse populations;
- deeper, more collaborative partnerships between programs and districts; and
- consistently higher standards statewide.

Current Implementation: Challenges and Concerns

Respondents identified several interrelated challenges and concerns that impact the implementation efforts and buy-in of the new policy.

Reduced enrollments have affected nearly all redesigned programs

After an initial decline across nearly all programs, some programs have begun to experience a rebound in their enrollment, while others have not, thus potentially impacting their program sustainability. New admission requirements were often cited as a reason for lower enrollment. Some respondents

[3] Two additional programs were approved in June and September 2015.

expressed concern that potential candidates may be confused regarding the time required for internship. Also, some respondents were concerned that the increased selectivity would reduce racial diversity and possibly gender diversity among candidates and subsequently in the principal pool.

Resource limitations are felt at the program, district, and principal candidate level

Programs faced with decreased enrollment experience fewer tuition dollars, despite providing a more comprehensive principal preparation program with higher standards. Respondents reported that districts are being asked to do more under the new policy, including investing staff time and dollars to support internships, provide mentors, and complete considerable amounts of paperwork. Respondents also expressed concern that principal candidates experience challenges with increased out-of-pocket expenses.

The increased number and specificity of requirements are challenging to implement

Although viewed as a benefit for statewide program consistency, some respondents believed increased requirements limited their ability to be flexible to meet local needs and viewed the new policy as a "one-size-fits-all" approach. Requirements pertaining to internship experiences, documenting competencies, and qualifications for mentors and faculty advisors were cited most often. The combination of multiple requirements (e.g., internship placements and mentor qualifications) creates additional burden for some programs. Finding placements with some student populations (e.g., early childhood,[2] English language learners, etc.) was also cited as a challenge by some programs, particularly those in rural and less diverse areas.

Future Outlook on the Policy

With the notable exception of concerns for a shrinking principal pipeline, most of the program representatives and stakeholders had a positive outlook on the short- and long-term impacts of the new policy—namely better prepared school leaders and improved student achievement. Some also expressed concern on whether progress would be sustainable given the tendency for funding and attention to dwindle over time. Others anticipated a gradually increasing role of the school district in principal preparation and a shift from academic to more practical, applied training for school leaders.

Implications

Based on interviews we conducted with 23 program representatives and 22 key stakeholders, we find most respondents believe principal preparation in Illinois has been improved through the new policy changes. At the same time, respondents discussed current implementation challenges and some concerns for the future. Although our study of the implementation of the new policy is still underway, we offer the following issues for consideration at this time:

- Although the recommendations and action plan from the Commission on School Leadership and the Illinois School Leader Task Force called for a more targeted recruitment approach to select high quality and more intentional candidates, the debate still continues whether the new policy is too constricting, creating a shortage of candidates in the principal pipeline, particularly in rural areas and in the gender and racial diversity of candidates. Further, there is disagreement whether the use of current Type 75 certificate holders would be a potential short-term solution. Since the intentions of current Type 75 certificate holders are unknown, further studies examining those who are more likely to pursue a principalship in the near future are needed to identify the regions where there

is a potential future shortage of principals so that principal preparation programs can serve these areas better.

- Another issue related to the principal pipeline, raised by several respondents, was whether the shift from a model that produced more candidates with broader training to a model producing fewer candidates with more defined and intense training will mean a decrease in available programs throughout the state, particularly in rural areas. Therefore, it will be critical to monitor the location and number of available principal preparation programs to determine if the new policy causes too much contraction in the supply of programs, particularly in regions of the state with fewer principal training options.
- Deeper and more collaborative partnerships between districts and preparation programs are seen as beneficial; however, this new role for districts which requires increased financial and personnel resources has been difficult for many, particularly smaller districts, given the current economic climate. The use of these partnerships to create pathways to identify high quality educators and train them for district leadership positions appears to be a promising avenue to decrease potential shortages in the pipeline.

Conclusions and Next Steps

Although there are concerns about the new policy's implementation—particularly involving the restricted pipeline, stretched resources, and "one-size-fits-all" approach—and many of the stakeholders emphasize the need for evaluations of both programs and other policy impacts to avoid unintended consequences, the majority of program representatives and statewide stakeholders indicated that they support the goals of the new policy and have a positive outlook on its impact in the future of principal preparation in Illinois. Most believe that the redesigned principal preparation programs will ultimately create better prepared school principals, as well as improved student achievement and more successful schools. Many program representatives and stakeholders groups, such as Illinois School Leadership Advisory Council (ISLAC) and the LINC Advisory Council, are working together to find solutions to the challenges and make plans for furthering the work. Additionally, CSEP is currently implementing a U.S. Department of Education five-year grant (Illinois Partnerships Advance Rigorous Training - IL-PART) to collaborate with three university/district partner teams to examine factors and mechanisms needed for effective partnerships and to evaluate the outcomes of two principal internship models. These research endeavors, along with continued conversations and work of statewide stakeholder groups, will help inform decisions regarding any improvements in the policy. The potential envisioned by policy proponents is great and many hope that, with continued work—including measuring intended outcomes and monitoring unintended negative impacts—principal preparation in Illinois will reach this potential.

Lastly, the remaining activities for this study, namely the site visits and survey with program representatives, will be carried out this fall 2015. The results from these activities will add to our understanding of the successes and challenges of the policy's implementation, particularly in terms of the extent these were experienced by all of the principal preparation programs. Our final report, due in summer 2016, will integrate the findings from the scan, site visits, and survey to provide research-based insights in how to improve the policy and its implementation.

This study was funded by The Robert R. McCormick Foundation and The Wallace Foundation.