

NAVIGATING THE SHIFT

TO INTENSIVE PRINCIPAL PREPARATION IN ILLINOIS:

POLICY BRIEF



UCHICAGO Consortium
ON SCHOOL RESEARCH


*Bradford R. White, Amber Stitzel Pareja, Holly Hart,
Michelle Hanh Huynh, Brenda K. Klostermann, and Janet K. Holt*


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INTRODUCTION


In 2010, Illinois became one of the first states to legislatively require a complete redesign of all its principal preparation programs, with the goal of advancing statewide school improvement through strengthening school leadership. This effort was ambitious and sweeping, calling for radical shifts in previous practice, including:

- A targeted principal endorsement, instead of a general administrative certificate;
 - Formal partnerships with school districts in preparation program design and delivery;
 - More selective admissions criteria and processes;
 - Focus on leading all students, including students with disabilities, English Language Learners, and early childhood education;
 - Collaborative support for candidates from highly qualified faculty supervisors and mentor principals; and
 - A competency-based internship, with an emphasis on demonstrated leadership skills.
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For many decades prior to the redesign, principal preparation had typically consisted of administrative courses such as school law, finance, and educational theory, followed by an internship consisting of a set number of hours that were mainly spent shadowing a principal. Programs varied greatly in the quality of both course content and mentoring and generally had few, if any, selection criteria beyond what was required by the college or university. Meanwhile, a growing body of research evidence indicated that principals play a critical role in improving student performance and leading effective schools.¹ This research identified the importance of principals as effective instructional leaders rather than simply efficient building managers, and identified key components of effective principal preparation programs, including: targeted recruitment and selection, a rigorous curriculum focused on instruction and school improvement; integration of coursework and fieldwork; and robust, sustained internships that allow candidates to gain leadership experience working with an expert mentor.² As a result, traditional principal preparation began to be perceived as providing inadequate training, and principal preparation programs became the target of intense scrutiny.³

For the past two years, we have studied the implementation of Illinois' new principal preparation programs and the changes that have occurred as a result of the new policy. In this policy brief, we highlight key findings and implications from the second phase of the study. The full findings and analysis are presented in our final report, *Navigating the Shift to Intensive Principal Preparation in Illinois: An In-depth Look at Stakeholder Perspectives*.⁴



KEY FINDINGS



The redesign strengthened partnerships between principal preparation programs and school districts.

These partnerships have taken a number of different forms—from partnerships between a program and a single district or regional office of education (ROE) to partnerships between a program and several districts to a partnership board. In general, district representatives report that they communicate with programs more frequently and that programs are more responsive to their needs, program staff believe districts provided key input into the redesign and important feedback on program and candidate performance, and principal candidates value having access to the experience and knowledge of district superintendents and principals. Many partnerships focus primarily on the internship, whereas a few have been able to reach and sustain an even deeper level of ongoing collaboration. In these highly-engaged partnerships, districts share responsibility for curriculum design, candidate selection and evaluation, internships, and mentoring, and feel they have a stronger voice into the preparation of their future principals.

Almost all programs experienced a dramatic drop in enrollment, as anticipated by moving from general administrative training to a principal-specific endorsement.

In many instances these decreases were substantial, with several programs citing tenfold declines from the enrollment levels in their Type 75 programs. However, stakeholders generally view this as a shift from quantity to quality that has benefited principal preparation by providing more targeted and practical training that is squarely focused on creating the state's next generation of school leaders. Program staff viewed current principal preparation candidates as being stronger overall and more committed to

careers in the principalship than those in the previous programs. They described candidates as being no less diverse than their candidates prior to the redesign, although most programs acknowledge they need to improve in the area of diversity. However, this more intensive approach to preparation has strained program resources and stressed relationships with the broader university. In response, programs were forced to re-think and redouble their recruitment efforts.⁵ Although most programs coordinators who responded to our survey report that their current enrollments are sufficient to sustain their program, concerns about the system's ability to meet the demand for principals statewide over the next five years are more widespread.

Instructional leadership is a clear focus of coursework and the internship.

Stakeholders generally agreed on the central importance of instructional leadership and the primary role it is expected to play in the principal's job. However, this was viewed as part of an ongoing movement in the field, and was not necessarily attributable to the redesign. Many candidates and faculty representatives felt that organizational management has been overly de-emphasized in the new programs, and some programs are in the process of bringing back key management and finance courses. Our analyses of syllabi, however, show that organizational management remains a major area of instruction and is covered to a similar degree as instructional leadership in most programs.

Special student populations have received increased coverage in both coursework and internships.

Preparation program representatives generally felt that candidates will now be better positioned to work with students with disabilities, English Language Learners, and early childhood students these populations. However, whether this preparation is sufficient to prepare principals to lead in all contexts remains a matter of debate amongst both policymakers and practitioners. Of these student populations, special education coverage is the most universal, because students with disabilities are more widespread throughout the state and this content has traditionally been included in school law and other education administration courses. Early childhood (ECE) and ELL content, on the other hand, have proven more challenging to integrate into coursework and internship placements.

Stakeholders believe the competency-based internship will better prepare candidates for the principalship.

The new internship requirements—including instructional leadership opportunities, more direct leadership, and experiences working with many types of students—are generally viewed as deeper, more clear, and more authentic. Many also believe that mentoring from faculty supervisors and principal mentors has improved and further enhanced the internship experience. Although the format of the internship typically remained unchanged, many candidates believed a paid, full-time, year-long internship would provide better opportunities to prepare for the principalship in a more holistic, meaningful way. Challenges to successful internships included finding a sufficient supply of qualified principal mentors and faculty supervisors, and the intense time commitment required to implement the internship. In addition, some stakeholders felt that internship activities outlined in the policy were too prescriptive to allow programs to tailor the internship experiences to meet the needs of the candidate.

Most programs collect data on current candidates, but outcome data on graduates are lacking.

The majority of programs are collecting data on their current candidates (such as internship performance data and application, acceptance, enrollment, persistence, and completion rates) and utilizing it to modify and improve their programs. However, many programs noted the need to gather these data more systematically and to begin to collect and analyze data on program graduates' outcomes in the future.

IMPLICATIONS



High-engagement partnerships can be beneficial to both programs and districts, but they require high levels of resources and supports.

Stakeholders believe that more intense partnerships can benefit both programs and districts. However, these high-engagement partnerships require substantial investments of funds, time, and personnel, which may make them difficult to engage in and sustain over time. This study revealed that some programs and districts are more poised for high-engagement partnerships than others for various reasons, including capacity and resources, pre-existing relationships, and geographic location. This suggests that there could be a role for regional hubs (as suggested by the Illinois School Leadership Advisory Council [ISLAC])⁶ to help equalize and optimize resources, so that all districts and programs would be able to take advantage of the benefits offered by high-engagement partnerships.



Regional hubs could help ensure that all districts and programs can participate in and benefit from high-engagement partnerships.



Steps need to be taken to ensure that there are enough high quality candidates to fill principal vacancies in both the short- and long-term.

By design, the new policy requires more intensive and focused training for a smaller, more targeted population of candidates who specifically aspire to be school leaders. Although most of the programs responding to our survey indicated their enrollments were already at or above the levels needed for sustainability, it is important to ascertain the health and viability of all programs to be able to reliably predict future supply. Further, there are lingering concerns that too few candidates will be prepared under the new system, and worry that this could eventually lead to a shortage in the principal pipeline. It is crucial for the state to get a better understanding of the supply of and demand for both the new principal endorsement *and* the reserve pool of Type 75 certificate holders in order to assess whether we have enough high quality principals to staff our schools in the short- and the long-term.



It is important to better understand the supply of and demand for high quality principals in order to assess the adequacy of the principal pipeline in the short- and long-term.



Many argue that candidates need strong preparation in both instructional leadership *and* organizational management.

Numerous individuals interviewed for this study—both faculty and students—spoke of the shift in focus that had occurred between “management” on the one pole, and “instruction” on the other, with some suggesting the new reforms had caused the pendulum to swing too far in the direction of the latter. There is no doubt that instructional leadership has come to the fore over the past decade, and is clearly a focus of educator preparation, not just in Illinois, but nationally. Recent research on principal effectiveness, however, argues for an *expanded* definition of instructional leadership that goes beyond the principal’s involvement with day-to-day instruction and includes elements of organizational management as they relate to improving instruction.⁷ In fact, several of these studies suggest that a principal’s time spent in day-to-day instructional activities may actually be detrimental to important school outcomes.⁸ Instead, this line of research suggests that more emphasis should be placed on making sure principals have the skills to organize their schools to support teachers and set the stage for good instruction by, for example, promoting positive learning conditions, creating a workplace that supports instructional practices known to be effective, and attracting, hiring, developing, motivating, and retaining better teachers.⁹ The extent to which Illinois’ new principal preparation policy incorporates this broader definition of instructional leadership—or, perhaps more importantly, the extent to which each program is able to embrace it—could go a long way toward determining the ultimate effects of Illinois’ redesign efforts.



Recent research suggests the need for an expanded definition of instructional leadership that includes effective organizational management.

Principal preparation must strike a balance between comprehensiveness and specialization.

One goal of the redesign policy which is still a matter for some debate among stakeholders is that of preparing all principals to lead in all contexts – from pre-K through high school, including students with special education needs such as students with disabilities and English-language learners. This debate is less about whether or not to include such training but rather about how much programs can adequately include in limited amount of time to best prepare candidates for the already complex and overwhelming duties of a school leader. One strategy for striking this balance between comprehensiveness and specialization could involve increased attention to the full continuum of principal preparation, acknowledging that professional development does not end when candidates enter the workforce. Requiring continual professional development throughout principals' careers—“from aspiring to retiring”—will provide additional opportunities to acquire specialized knowledge and skills that fit changing needs as they grow. Further, similar steps could be taken with the current pool of Type 75 certificate holders to help identify and fill gaps in their preparation and experience, and ensure that all new Illinois principals possess the competencies needed for success in today's schools.



Continual professional development could provide additional opportunities for principals to acquire specialized knowledge and skills.

Many argue for transitioning from a compliance mindset toward a focus on performance.

Many of the biggest challenges programs have had with the redesign have revolved around the volume and specificity of requirements in the policy. In concept, the new programs are intended to be competency-based, whereby candidates must demonstrate mastery across a comprehensive array of skills to earn endorsement. In practice, however, many programs indicate that the policy's prescriptive requirements do not allow candidates to skip over an area where they have already demonstrated expertise or receive credit for professional experience. So, although the policy may have been intended to be flexible about how candidates demonstrate competency, in reality programs are interpreting the requirements as quite rigid and inflexible. Numerous program representatives voiced recommendations for fewer specific requirements, reduced paperwork, and increased autonomy in implementation, and some have advocated for a move away from concerns of “micro-managing” inputs and toward a focus on holding programs accountable for outcomes. To help reach that point, the ISLAC and others have advocated for the creation of a state-level office of school leadership, charged with formally gathering feedback from the field and evaluating the state's performance and policy around principal preparation on a regular basis. One potential role for this office could be to assist programs with tracking candidates into the field and taking the lead in collecting a range of quality indicators to assist programs' continuous improvement efforts and the state's accountability system.



A state-level office of school leadership could assist in collecting a range of quality indicators to assist programs' continuous improvement efforts.

CONCLUSIONS

Illinois has been, and continues to be, a leader in the nationwide effort to improve principal preparation. Although there have been several challenges along the way and some aspects continue to need improvement, the majority of stakeholders expect this training will produce future school leaders capable of improving schools and student achievement.

There are lingering concerns, however, that the supply of principals prepared in the new programs will not be sufficient to meet statewide demand. In addition, this more intensive way of preparing principals has required programs to invest more resources into each candidate, which is particularly problematic given the state's current budget situation. What ultimately matters is having sufficient quantity *and quality* of principals to staff all schools successfully. Continued efforts and attention from policymakers, funders, practitioners, and researchers are needed to assess the extent to which the redesigned programs and partner organizations have the supports and resources necessary to engage in intensive principal preparation and the degree to which these programs are fulfilling the promise of preparing more effective school leaders. If these areas are addressed, our findings suggest the future of principal preparation in Illinois looks promising.





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⁵See White et al. (2016) for examples of these efforts.

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