

MEANINGFUL PARTNERSHIPS

*Lessons from Two Innovative
Principal Preparation Programs*

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01 INTRODUCTION

02 NORTHEAST LEADERSHIP ACADEMY

Elements of Success

**03 KANSAS CITY PATHWAY TO
LEADERSHIP IN URBAN SCHOOLS**

Elements of Success

04 POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

05 ENDNOTES

Introduction

Highly effective principals are critical to driving student achievement. School leaders are estimated to account for one-fourth of school-based effects on student achievement, making them second only to teachers.¹ With the onset of more robust teacher evaluation systems and the increasing importance of personalization and differentiation, the role of the school leader has shifted dramatically. Principals are stretched beyond their decades-old roles as building managers and disciplinarians as they work to foster school culture, serve as instructional leaders, and support leadership development among school staff. Recent research from the Wallace Foundation finds that effective principals shape a vision of academic success for all students, create a climate hospitable to education, cultivate leadership in others, improve classroom instruction, and manage people, data, and processes with the goal of school improvement.²

As the role of the principal changes, so too must principal preparation programs and the policies that guide them. In order to ensure that our schools have a strong supply of dynamic leaders who are adequately prepared for the demands of 21st century schools, there is a growing need for innovation and improvement in principal recruitment, preparation, and professional development. The functions that dominate the day of a modern principal – student affairs, instructional leadership, personnel issues, interpersonal relations, etc. – cannot be mastered through theoretical coursework alone. Modern school leadership preparation programs must offer aspiring principals an opportunity to practice these skills with robust supports.

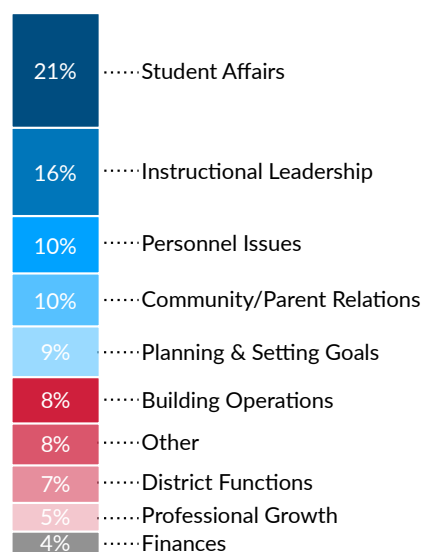
In order to ensure that our schools have a strong supply of dynamic leaders who are adequately prepared for the demands of 21st century schools, there is a growing need for innovation and improvement in principal recruitment, preparation, and professional development.

New principals who enter their roles underprepared are less likely to improve student outcomes and are more likely to leave their schools. An average of 20 percent of principals leave their schools each year, and in urban districts it can be upwards of 30 percent.³ High principal turnover results in a negative impact on student achievement and brings about higher teacher turnover.⁴ Additionally, there is a direct, negative relationship between principal turnover and school culture.⁵ These effects are more pronounced in high-poverty schools, which experience higher rates of principal turnover than

low-poverty schools.⁶ It is also worth noting that when principals move between schools, they tend to move into schools with less poverty due to the expectation that increased local funding will result in higher compensation and better resources.⁷

Nationally, efforts to measure the success of principal preparation programs have been inconsistent. As of 2013, 29 states did not collect or require principal preparation programs to collect data regarding the success of their graduates; while this statistic is dated, it highlights the fact that most states have not historically taken outcomes into consideration as a measure of program effectiveness.⁸ Significant research has sought to identify elements of a strong principal preparation program.

FIGURE 1 | Share of Principals' Time by Function



SOURCE: Sebastian, J., Camburn, E. M., & Spillane, J. P. (2018). Portraits of Principal Practice: Time Allocation and School Principal Work. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 54(1), 47–84.

These components include rigorous recruitment and selection, professional standards focused on instructional leadership and school improvement, strong partnerships with districts, integration and reinforcement of leadership models, and the provision of significant resources.⁹ Other studies cite rich internship or residency programs as well as support from an expert or mentor in the field as playing critical roles in building effective principal preparation programs.^{10,11}

This study will highlight two innovative programs – the Northeast Leadership Academy (NELA) in North Carolina and the Kansas City Pathway to Leadership in Urban Schools (KC PLUS) in Missouri. In creating programs to meet the unique needs of districts located in rural and urban settings, respectively, both NELA and KC PLUS have built rigorous, prac-

tice-based principal preparation programs with a focus on equity. We will take a closer look at each program, and will consider the policy conditions that both supported, and hindered, the programs' success.

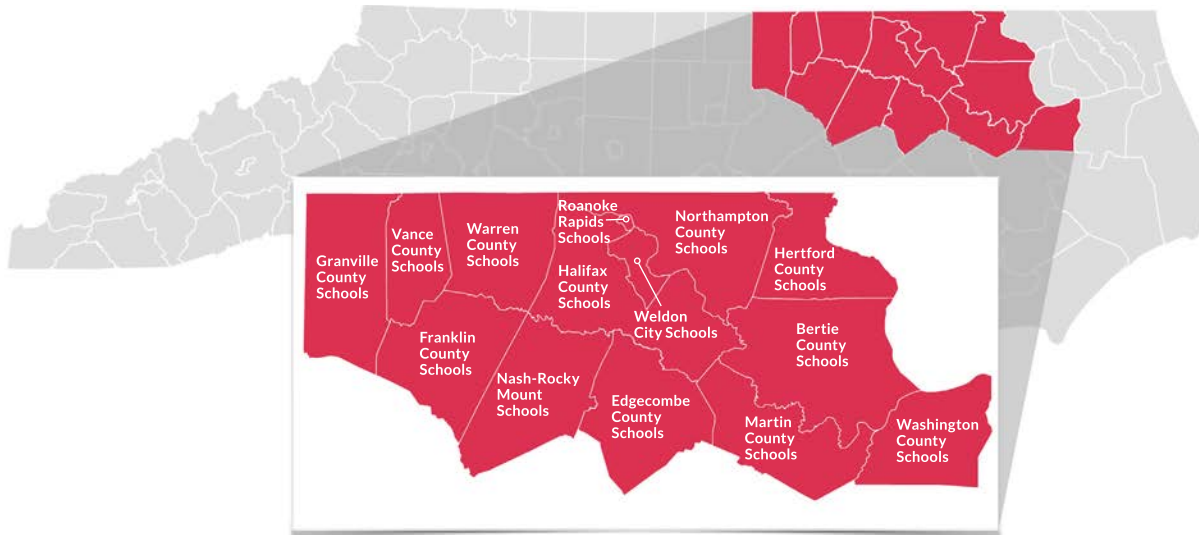
While certification and degree credentials are the tangible outcomes of each of these programs, they are more focused on refining the practical application of the skills required to be an effective school leader. For too long, teacher and principal preparation programs have had low barriers to entry and focused on theory over practice. In contrast, these two principal preparation programs have set high entrance standards and emphasized practice-based learning that equips graduates to be transformational instructional and cultural leaders in their schools, districts, and communities.

Northeast Leadership Academy, North Carolina State University

The Northeast Leadership Academy (NELA) is a two-year, alternative licensure principal preparation program offered by the College of Education at North Carolina State University (NC State). Citing high teacher turnover and chronically low-performing schools, the faculty at NC State created a principal preparation program that would serve the unique needs of 14 rural, high-need districts

located in northeastern North Carolina. Across the 14 districts served by NELA, an average of 84 percent of students receive free or reduced-price lunch.¹² NELA districts comprise seven of the ten lowest-performing districts in the state, and only one of the districts reaches the state's average graduation rate of 86 percent.^{13,14}

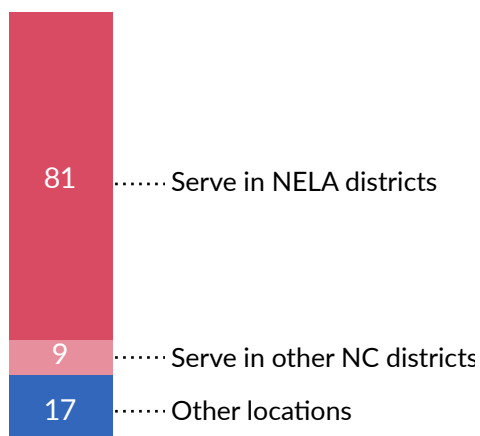
FIGURE 2 | NELA Partner Districts



Following a rigorous selection process, participants in NELA engage in course and field work over a two-year period, earning a school principal license and a Master of School Administration degree upon completion of the program. During the first year, principals-in-training continue to serve in teaching roles while taking courses; the second year is a principal residency with accompanying course work. Admitted NELA Fellows receive a full scholarship covering the cost of tuition and make a three-year, post-degree commitment to lead high-need schools in one of the districts served by the program.

NELA was initially funded by a design grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation in 2010 with subsequent grant funding from the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) and Race to the Top, along with two additional US Department of Education grants. Faculty leaders of the NELA program engaged in extensive partner and relationship development during the design stage. By convening town hall meetings with members of the local communities and school boards, and working closely with leaders at the school and district levels, the NELA faculty laid the groundwork for stakeholder engagement that continues today. NELA launched in 2010 and the first cohort graduated in 2012. Across five cohorts, NELA has graduated 107 Fellows, 81 of whom continue to serve in NELA districts, with an additional nine graduates serving in other districts in North Carolina. Of graduates who have completed their three-year post-degree commitment, 72 percent continue to work in NELA districts.

FIGURE 3 | Where are NELA Graduates Now?



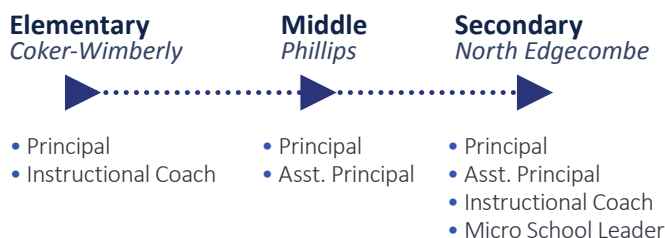
“From the beginning, we hoped to create a ‘critical mass’ of like-minded leaders in our partner districts.”

—Dr. Bonnie Fusarelli, Director, NELA

The largest number of NELA graduates work in Edgecombe County Public Schools (ECPS), a district located approximately one hour east of Raleigh that serves over 6,200 students in 14 schools. Sixty-six percent of students in ECPS are African American, 30 percent are white, and 10 percent are Latino. Additionally, 98 percent of students receive free or reduced-price lunch and the four-year graduation rate is 77 percent.^{15,16,17}

FIGURE 4 | NELA-Led School Feeder Pattern, Edgecombe County Public Schools

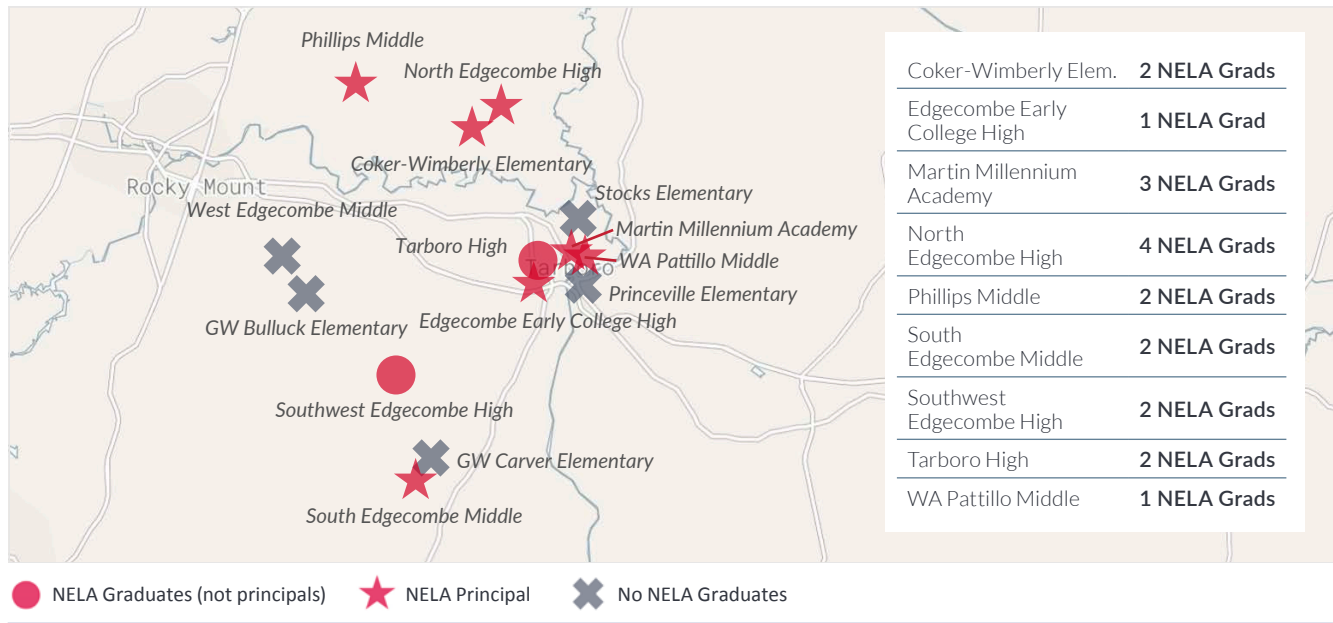
Through this feeder pattern, it is possible for students to attend all of K-12 under NELA-trained leadership.



Currently, 16 graduates from NELA and an additional five graduates from a later iteration of the program, the North Carolina Leadership Academy (NCLA), serve in ECPS. These 21 graduates serve in roles ranging from the central office to principals, assistant principals, multi-classroom leaders, and educators. When asked about the large volume of NELA-trained leaders in ECPS, NELA Director Bonnie Fusarelli explained, “From the beginning, we hoped to create a ‘critical mass’ of like-minded leaders in our partner districts.”

As is true in all districts, the strength of the individual superintendent plays a critical role in the recruitment and retention of principals. The saturation in Edgecombe County is reportedly due to the continuous support of former and current superintendents who have closely collaborated with the program and proactively hired Fellows. The success of NELA principals in Edgecombe County is due in part to the strategic placement of NELA-trained leaders. NELA

FIGURE 5 | Saturation of NELA Graduates in Edgecombe County Public Schools



has created and supported an “aligned vision” by having multiple graduates in a single school and in the same feeder pattern (i.e., a series of schools that students attend as they progress from one level to the next).

In describing the impact of such a large number of NELA graduates serving in the same district, one principal shared, “It’s easier to do this work when the people standing with you are going to stand for children, despite not having adequate resources, despite having students who are severely behind. People who share the same model for what our schools can be and what our schools can deliver for children.”

Another principal in the same district stated, “The presence of NELA graduates in my feeder pattern and district drastically impacts my leadership and success. Being in the same feeder pattern with two NELA principals and having a [NELA-trained] Director of Innovation has allowed us to collaborate in ways that result in great innovation. I’m part of a group of people with very aligned missions and values in my district. Having others to call upon who I trust when making a difficult decision or implementing something new has proven to be powerful.”

The success of the NELA program is evident in the results achieved by principals who have completed

the program. Despite research indicating that changes in teaching staff, policies, and practice can take up to five years to positively impact school performance, schools led by a NELA graduate have shown marked growth in the first year of new leadership, with continued subsequent growth.¹⁸

“I’m part of a group of people with very aligned missions and values in my district. Having others to call upon who I trust when making a difficult decision or implementing something new has proven to be powerful.”

—NELA graduate

Analysis of six schools led by a first-year NELA graduate revealed that all six schools experienced an increase in student proficiency, including improvement in reading proficiency by 10-to-35 percentage points compared to the previous year.¹⁹ After two years of leadership by a NELA graduate, school achievement data from one high school showed the number of students who achieved proficiency increased by 20 percentage points, while scores taken from an elementary school revealed that student proficiency grew from less than 10% to nearly 50%.²⁰ Additionally, schools led by NELA graduates report decreased suspensions and improved school attendance.²¹

Elements of Success

Meaningful Partnerships with the Right Schools and Districts

During the initial design phase and continually throughout the year, NELA develops strong district partnerships to ensure that the program is serving the needs of each individual district. By working to define what makes a “good principal” for that district and incorporating these conversations into coursework and programming, trust is developed between superintendents and the NELA faculty. This trust allows for transparency in the selection process and thoughtful placement of Fellows both during residency and during their first year as school leaders.

“Our leaders know they are on the hook for this community. We understand the implications of trauma and poverty and how those manifest in our buildings. We have a heart for our students.”

—NELA graduate

One principal described the importance of strong relationships between the district and NELA when it comes to identifying strong candidates for the program, sharing, “Our leaders know they are on the hook for this community. We understand the implications of trauma and poverty and how those manifest in our buildings. We have a heart for our students.”

By developing a deep understanding of where principals will serve and who they will be serving, NELA prioritizes equity in leadership. In addition to coursework, NELA Fellows engage in an equity retreat in which they engage in deep reflection regarding their own experiences with inequality, as well as the experiences of their peers. In describing the critical nature of applying an equity lens both in training and in leadership, a graduate said, “You have to have people alongside you who believe what you believe: that another world exists, and we’re going to start building towards that world right here in this school.”

Rigorous Recruitment and Selection

Leaders of the NELA program rely on a variety of recruitment methods when preparing to begin a new cohort of Fellows. The recruitment process

begins with district-based recruitment nights and information sessions, in addition to recommendations from district and school leaders. The information sessions are designed to accurately represent the rigor of the program and time commitment it requires. Particular focus is placed on recruiting individuals who have successfully worked with historically underserved populations such as teachers in the areas of special education and English learners, as well as reading specialists.

Emphasis is also placed on identifying candidates who reflect the communities and populations they will lead, resulting in diverse cohorts. The recruitment and selection process has continued to be refined with each cohort of NELA. In reflecting on the growth of the selection process, Dr. Fusarelli shared that the faculty quickly learned that relying solely on grade point averages and recommendations from superintendents did not support identification of the candidates with the most potential to be great school leaders.

FIGURE 6 | Student Data: NELA

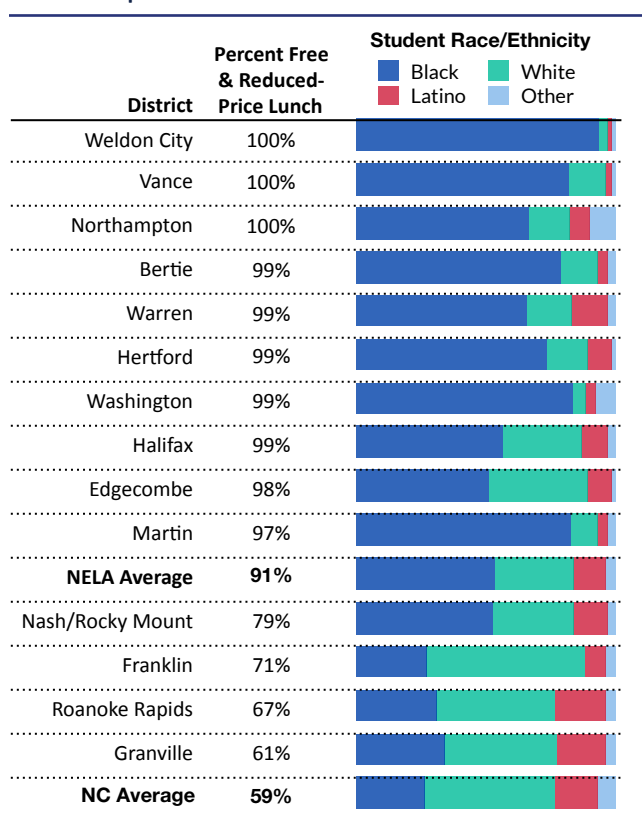


FIGURE 7 | Student Experience: NELA

RECRUITMENT & SELECTION	PROGRAM FEATURE	SUMMER 1	FALL 1	SPRING 1	SUMMER 2	FALL 2	SPRING 2	POST-GRADUATION
TARGETED RECRUITMENT & SELECTION PROCESS	PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT	Orientation	School Site Visit; PK-2	School Site Visit; 3-5	Full-time community internship	School Site Visit; 6-8	School Site Visit; 9-12	Continued Professional Development
		Racial Equity Institute	Digital Storytelling		Federal Policy Institute, Washington, DC	Principal Mentor & Executive Coach		Executive Coach for two additional years
		Ropes Course	Ron Clark Academy Visit			Equity Retreat		
	COURSEWORK		3 Graduate Courses	4 Graduate Courses		2 Graduate Courses	1 Graduate Course	
	RESIDENCY					Full-Time Residency in Leadership Role		

The initial step in applying to NELA is the completion of an enhanced NC State Graduate School application. NC State faculty carefully review the applications before selecting a group of finalists to attend a daylong Candidate Assessment Day. In order to determine which candidates are ready to engage in equity-focused leadership and foster relationships in schools, candidates participate in conversations with students and teachers, complete written exercises and a Grit Scale Survey, and take part in a video recorded feedback exercise. The day also consists of planned “serendipitous interactions” between candidates and on-site staff such as janitors in order to gather additional insight into interpersonal skills. The evaluation team extends beyond NC State faculty to include NELA coaches, current principals and NELA Fellows, current and aspiring teachers, representatives from Teach for America, and representatives from the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction.

Following the completion of Candidate Assessment Day, the faculty consult with district leaders and the superintendent. Strong district partnerships have laid the groundwork for honest dialogue between faculty and superintendents as final selections are made.

“It is only by being highly selective in credentialing individuals to fill the important public role of principal that we can best serve the communities in North Carolina. It’s a disservice to the public if schools have ill-prepared leaders.”

—Dr. Bonnie Fusarelli, Director, NELA

Practice-Based Learning

After completing the first year of coursework, participants create and engage in a full-time Summer Community Internship. Participants gain valuable experience in community engagement and grant-writing by participating with local community organizations, such as a 4-H program or food bank, where they develop and fund programs ranging from professional development for teachers to programming for students. This experience prepares future school leaders to establish deep connections within their communities and gain insight into diverse funding avenues.

During the second year of the NELA program, students participate in a paid, yearlong principal residency. During the year, Fellows engage in the daily work of serving as a school leader under the guidance of a principal mentor. Fellows are paid as first-year assistant principals, resulting in a salary decrease for Fellows who have advanced degrees and have taught for three or more years, as well as those who have bachelor's degrees and have taught eleven or more years. Throughout this year of residency, Fellows continue to participate in weekly, daylong training sessions, specialized training experiences, and addressing problems of practice (i.e., observable, actionable areas for improvement in a school or district). Fellows also engage directly with their NELA Executive Coach and document their experiences and learning over the course of the year. Fellows undergo formative assessment throughout their principal residency, including reports from coaches and mentors and the creation of a digital portfolio.

“My coach supported me when facing new barriers and pushed me to think more deeply about my decisions. I feel comfortable asking for real, quality feedback on my work which has been profoundly impactful.”

—NELA graduate

Personalized Coaching

Beginning with their principal residency year and continuing through the first and second years as school leaders, Fellows are paired with a school-based principal mentor and an executive coach.

Executive coaches are individuals with extensive experience as education leaders and include former superintendents, state education leaders, and faculty members. Fellows are carefully matched with an executive coach based on personality, background, and specific areas for growth. This intensive support and its continuation through their first years of school leadership was cited by many of the NELA graduates we spoke with as being a key part of both their decision to pursue the program, and their success as they transitioned into leadership roles.

“The faculty have continued to make adjustments to the program based on our feedback, making the learning incredibly rich. The coursework provides a deep theoretical approach to the work, then applies the content within the context of our internship and school experiences.”

—NELA graduate

Alignment & Implementation

In creating NELA, faculty at NC State worked to ensure that professional standards in principal preparation were embedded and reinforced throughout the program. The first year of coursework is intentionally designed to prepare students for their year of residency. In describing the alignment of their coursework one Fellow stated, “We weren’t just reading a book and then writing a paper, we were creating a real artifact that could be lifted and piloted in our own schools. We were almost making prototypes before rolling it out with students.”

In 2016, NC State University was selected as one of seven principal preparation programs to participate in the Wallace Foundation’s University Principal Preparation Initiative (UPPI).²² Over four years, NC State will redesign its Master of School Administration program and work in partnership with local districts and the NC Department of Public Instruction to better align coursework, residency, and principal preparation policy in the state. Partnerships with private entities are also included in the grant in order to develop a leadership development dashboard to track outcomes of graduates with the long-term goal of utilizing this data to measure the quality and success of principal preparation programs.

Kansas City Pathway to Leadership in Urban Schools

Kansas City Pathway to Leadership in Urban Schools (KC PLUS) describes itself as “a two-year, practice-based principal certification residency and master’s program that helps talented educators become capable school leaders.” The program employs a rigorous selection process to identify high-achieving teachers who are prepared to make the step up to administration and provides robust training and professional development that is grounded in practice. At the end of the two-year program, successful residents will graduate with a principal certification from KC PLUS as well as a Master of Arts in Educational Administration from a university partner.

“We developed the PLUS program to build a strong pipeline of leaders and to improve teacher retention through leadership,” said a member of the PLUS staff. “The rigor of our program has caught the attention of schools in the area, with some requesting a second resident.”

Kansas City PLUS is operated by TNTP, a national nonprofit that has worked since 1997 to improve the teacher workforce through a combination of research and direct teacher training. Though the organization developed the PLUS programs as a means to strengthen the principal pipeline, it recognized the critical role that principals play in recruiting, retaining, and supporting teachers. TNTP created the PLUS programs to develop strong leaders who are prepared to effectively manage teachers and foster school culture.

In addition to Kansas City, TNTP operates PLUS programs in Philadelphia, Camden, and San Francisco. While programs in other cities are older – Philadelphia’s first cohort was in 2013-14 – the Kansas City program is unique with its approach. Now engaged with its second cohort of residents, the program has partnered with two local universities – the University of Missouri-Kansas City (UMKC) and Park University – and its students are concurrently

enrolled in a two-year Master in Educational Administration program while serving in a leadership role at a local school. The other three PLUS programs are one year in length and that do not require the completion of a master’s degree.

The decision to incorporate a master’s degree program was a direct consequence of Missouri law, which requires the degree for principal certification.²³ The result is a comprehensive program that offers two years of practice accompanied by personalized support with the same theoretical training that traditional principal preparation programs have offered.

KC PLUS is funded through philanthropic support, including national funders the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation and the Walton Family Foundation, as well as local funders the Hall Family Foundation, the Sherman Family Foundation, and the Hallmark Corporate Foundation. This philanthropic support allows KC PLUS to offer its services to residents cost-free. Residents do, however, have to pay for their graduate courses. The program has been able to secure reduced tuition costs, but the coursework still costs students more than \$10,000 at the partner universities absent other financial aid.

“The complementary effects of the graduate program and the professional development I receive from KC PLUS have been instrumental in my development as a school leader.”

—KC PLUS resident

FIGURE 8 | National PLUS Programs



The program is currently in its second year, making it difficult to quantify outcomes; however, early results are promising. Evaluation measures from the first cohort revealed that 90 percent of residents were rated as “principal ready” after their first year, well ahead of the two-year target. Ninety percent of Mentor Principals rated their residents as effective/exemplary on a variety of leadership domains, including Vision and Supporting Systems, Drive Results, Authentic Leadership, Rigorous Instruction & Learning, and Strategic Talent Management. Additionally, the program has evidence of resident leadership bringing improved teacher performance.

Elements of Success

Meaningful Partnerships with the Right Schools and Districts

In order to identify qualified candidates and offer its residents meaningful learning experiences, KC PLUS prioritizes partnerships with schools and districts that will appropriately support the learning and development of its trainees.

KC PLUS has placed a strict emphasis on practice-based learning coupled with intensive personalized coaching that is tailored to the specific needs of each resident and their school context.

They first sought to identify a philosophically-aligned university partner, followed by schools and districts where residencies could occur. UMKC’s experience training urban principals was a valuable asset and the university created a separate track to allow each KC PLUS cohort to take all of their courses together, independent of other students.

“The relationship between KC PLUS and university partners has been fruitful for both partners,” said a member of the PLUS staff. “The partnership has helped boost recruitment and raise the profile of our program, while providing opportunities for alignment and growth for both.”

FIGURE 9 | Student Experience: KC PLUS

RECRUITMENT & SELECTION	PROGRAM FEATURE	SUMMER 1	FALL 1	SPRING 1	SUMMER 2	FALL 2	SPRING 2
TARGETED RECRUITMENT & SELECTION PROCESS	PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT	Four-Week Summer Institute	Monthly Learning Labs			Monthly Learning Labs	
			Biweekly one-on-one coaching and development sessions at resident’s school			Biweekly one-on-one coaching and development sessions at resident’s school	
			Externship: Site visit to high-performing school (one visit per year required; three total visits offered)				
	COURSEWORK		2 Graduate Courses	2 Graduate Courses	1 Graduate Course	2 Graduate Courses	2 Graduate Courses
RESIDENCY		Full-Time Residency in Leadership Role			Full-Time Residency in Leadership Role		

The program has developed partnerships with a parochial school, charter schools, and Kansas City Public Schools (KCPS). KCPS has placed half of the residents, with most of the remaining residents placed in a variety of charter schools. Despite gains in recent years, KCPS students have persistently performed below the state average on a number of measures, including third grade English language arts proficiency, seventh grade math proficiency, and graduation rates.²⁴ Most of the partner schools predominately serve students of color, with high rates of free and reduced-price lunch eligibility.

The program will only accept partner schools that are equipped to provide residents with appropriate mentorship and significant opportunities to apply what they are learning.

The program will only accept partner schools that are equipped to provide residents with appropriate mentorship and significant opportunities to apply what they are learning. This can be a challenge and has led to potential recruits being unable to participate in the program because they are unable to find a suitable placement. However, successful partnerships have grown and some schools have offered residencies to candidates from both cohorts, indicating their satisfaction with the program.

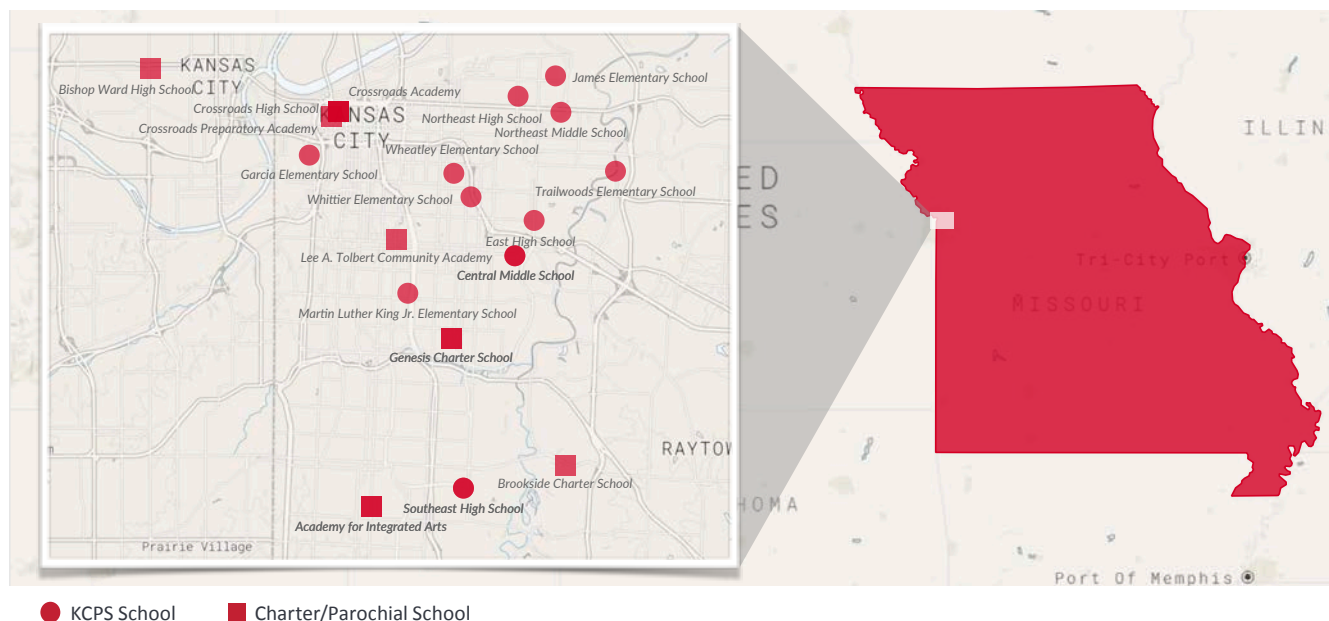
Rigorous Recruitment & Selection

Finding the right educators who have a track record of improving student achievement and are capable of successfully transitioning into administration is critical, and KC PLUS has prioritized rigorous recruitment and a three-stage selection process. Applicants complete a comprehensive application that assesses their fit for the program, participate in an interview, and then attend a group interview. The half-day group selection event incorporates a variety of practical application activities that allow staff to assess instructional expertise, strategic use of data, relationship building, and self-awareness. The rigors of the selection process necessitate a thorough recruitment process. While the program does recruit nationally, it seeks to have at least 70 percent of its residents come from the Kansas City area.

Practice-Based Learning

Every component of the KC PLUS program is focused on practice-based learning to supplement the theoretical underpinning residents receive from their university partner. In particular, the two-year residency places candidates in a leadership role in an urban school, typically as an instructional coach, where they receive normal full-time salaries and benefits. Additional KC PLUS residents come to the program having already received a master's degree, but in need of practical training. These residents are

FIGURE 10 | KC PLUS Partner Schools



often placed as assistant principals and receive the same coaching and support as those enrolled in graduate school. Through this experience, residents get hands-on practice in a leadership role as well as the daily support of a mentor principal. The focus on practice-based learning begins with the Summer Institute, which includes opportunities to actively participate in role-play and real-world situations, and carries through all of the program's professional development.

Personalized Coaching

KC PLUS has developed a particularly robust approach to personalized coaching for its residents. Throughout the two-year program, residents receive highly-personalized coaching that is tailored to the unique professional development needs of the resident and their school-based circumstances.

"The level of intensity that we are able to engage with our residents sets our program apart from other leadership development programs," said a member of the PLUS staff. "We are able to get to know our residents, their schools, and their teachers so that we can tailor our coaching to their unique circumstances. This has led to significant and rapid improvement among our residents."

"I can trust my coach to give me experience based advice on how to be an effective instructional leader and how to manage diverse employees."

—KC PLUS resident

KC PLUS coaches work closely with residents throughout their two-year residencies, meeting with them every two weeks during the school year. These meetings take place at the resident's school, allowing the coach to observe the resident in action. For example, the coach may strategize with the resident about how to have a difficult conversation with a teacher, observe the conversation, and offer feedback to help the resident improve their practice. The coach will also observe interactions with teachers and the resident and then discuss what each saw, ensuring that residents are skilled at identifying quality teaching as well as how to address areas for improvement with the teachers.

"My coach has been instrumental in my improvement as a school leader," said one KC PLUS resident. "I can trust my coach to give me experience-based advice on how to be an effective instructional leader and how to manage diverse employees."

Coaches also work with residents to track teacher performance, analyze data, and develop improvement plans. In addition to the formal supports, residents regularly communicate with their coaches at all hours, whether it is a late-night text or a phone call about a challenging situation. These types of meaningful interactions on a regular basis set the KC PLUS program apart from most principal preparation programs.

"The level of intensity that we are able to engage with our residents sets our program apart from other leadership development programs."

—KC PLUS staff member

Alignment & Implementation

KC PLUS works to ensure that its standards are both rigorous and implemented with fidelity across its programming. Program leaders spent the first year mapping the KC PLUS curriculum to Missouri standards and focusing on aligning residents' work to those standards. To verify that residents are reviewing teachers consistently, program leaders use videos and ongoing training during residencies.

Similarly, residents are required to ensure that their teachers are measuring and improving student performance against high-quality standards in core math and English language arts courses. The monthly Learning Labs, which are delivered online, help equip residents with the requisite knowledge and skills to be able to ensure this alignment.

The relationships with its university partners have also been grounded in fostering alignment. The programs work closely with each other to confirm that the instruction students receive in university courses is aligned to their field experiences, as well as the coaching from KC PLUS.

Policy Considerations

A number of policy areas have affected the development, growth, and subsequent success of NELA and KC PLUS. Both programs are governed by state policies regulating principal preparation, principal pay, and broader education policies in their respective states. Some policies have enabled program growth, while others have hindered the programs' abilities to succeed. As states consider ways to build the principal pipeline through innovative principal preparation programs, the success of NELA and KC PLUS provide state leaders with a number of policy considerations to encourage the sustainable growth and development of similar programs.

01 HIGH BARRIERS TO ENTRY

Policymakers need to **encourage program leaders to set high standards for entry** into principal preparation programs. The programs included in this report have developed rigorous selection processes that have identified high-caliber individuals who are capable instructional leaders. In North Carolina, the State Board of Education requires all principal preparation programs to engage in a rigorous selection process to ensure that high-quality candidates are identified and admitted, but leaves individual programs with flexibility to work closely with districts to create a competitive selection process that reflects the specific needs of each community.²⁵

02 COMPETITIVE RESIDENCY SALARIES

When legislating principal pay, policymakers should **ensure that principals-in-training are paid a competitive salary commensurate with their options**. Experienced teachers may be reluctant to move into administration if they are asked to take a temporary pay cut during their residency year. Policies enabling principal residents to maintain the previous year's salary level would remove this financial barrier and incentivize excellent teachers to enter administration. Competitive salaries as graduates enter principalships will also drive recruitment of high-quality candidates.

03 MEANINGFUL FIELD EXPERIENCES

Aspiring principals need **meaningful field experiences that offer opportunities to practice and receive mentorship and support** so that they continuously improve their work. Though 37 states require a field experience, these internships are often low in rigor and quality.²⁶ North Carolina and Missouri both require principal preparation programs to include an internship in order to allow for professional experience under the supervision of current principals and academic faculty. North Carolina policy does not mandate the number of hours required, but NELA includes a full-time principal residency for the length of an academic year. Missouri requires a minimum of 300 residency hours, which KC PLUS far exceeds. During the internship, participants in both programs receive support from principal mentors as well as coaches. The robust residencies found with NELA and KC PLUS provide clear examples of what field experiences can offer.

04 EXECUTIVE COACHING

Access to **individualized direct coaching**, tailored to the specific needs of participants, enables principals-in-training to grow their practice. Through role-play of critical conversations, joint observations and debriefs, and feedback meetings, coaches provide a sustained program of support. KC PLUS bring this coaching into the resident's school and NELA provides access to executive coaches for an additional two years beyond the completion of the degree program; this additional support is critical for first-year principals as they complete the transition to leadership roles.

05 POST-DEGREE SUPPORT

Principal preparation programs should include **post-degree support** such as professional development and coaching. This continuing professional development will support new principals as they grow in their practice and reduce early burnout and turnover. NELA offers a variety of opportunities for post-degree professional development including participation in conferences, courses, and sessions with expert speakers. Effort is made to ensure that sessions and seminars are accessible by providing them free of charge and selecting locations within the NELA region.

06 FINANCIAL SUPPORT FOR SUSTAIN- ABILITY

The programs reviewed in this report require significant human resources, which is costly. Currently, the programs are able to offer the full suite of preparation thanks to philanthropic support. **Policymakers need to identify ways to efficiently support high-quality preparation programs that produce principals who are ready to lead on their first day on the job.** University funding streams do not allow tuition dollars to fund experiences beyond tuition, requiring use of grant funding to support these critical program components. Policies funding innovative principal preparation programs should consider providing flexibility in distribution of funds beyond tuition alone in order to allow for experiential learning opportunities. Philanthropic support has been vital to providing the requisite research and to piloting innovative approaches, but for these programs to be long-term successes, state leaders will need to find ways to fully support them.

07 ROBUST AND INTENTIONAL UNIVERSITY- DISTRICT PARTNERSHIPS

Principal preparation programs are often required to solicit memoranda of understanding from district partners, but it is critical that district relationships include genuine engagement and incorporation of **district needs into the recruitment, training, and internship processes.** Both NELA and KC PLUS invested heavily in district engagement and establishment of relationships, building their programs to serve the unique needs of individual districts. In doing so, they have created a pipeline of principals who are specifically prepared to serve and lead in high-need districts. Additionally, local school boards and districts should think about leadership succession models within their schools and use this to inform recruitment of candidates to principal preparation programs.

08 FLEXIBILITY TO INNOVATE

Institutions of higher education can be drivers of innovation and can bring that innovation to local districts. **Flexibility to engage in innovative, continuous improvement** is critical for the success of principal preparation programs. As one program director shared, “NELA’s responsiveness and ability to adapt to meet emerging needs has made it an asset to our district partners.” Policies seeking to create program norms and scaling may stifle this innovation. Continued flexibility provides programs with the ability to respond quickly to current research and incorporate this into programming.

09 STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

Licensing bodies should **engage multiple stakeholders in assessment of principal preparation programs** in order to maintain public accountability and informed decision-making. This includes academic faculty, district partners, parents, and graduates of principal preparation programs. Faculty engagement should reach beyond deans of schools of education to include faculty who work specifically in principal preparation.

10 MEASURE OUTCOMES & BASE POLICY ON EVIDENCE

States should **measure both short- and long-term outcomes** of principal preparation programs and draft responsive policy based on evidence. Data systems should link teacher evaluations and student outcomes back to preparation programs so that both policymakers and university leaders can identify successful practices and growth opportunities.

Endnotes

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