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The Partnership Imperative for Preparing Effective Principals in North Carolina Schools

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Introduction

Policymakers, researchers, and practitioners tend to agree on the importance of having a high-quality principal for effective schools and high student achievement. In what is perhaps the most widely cited study about principal influence on student outcomes, Leithwood et al. (2010) argued that second to teachers, principals are the most influential factor impacting student outcomes. Understanding the importance of highly qualified school leaders, educator preparation programs (EPPs) play a critical role in developing school leaders prepared to take on the multifaceted role of principals. Historically, however, principal preparation has occurred in a vacuum with university programs and alternative providers deciding curriculum and experiences with little meaningful input from the districts and schools that hire program graduates. The separation of principal preparation from the realities of schools results in candidates ill-prepared to lead. Successful public schools depend on effective, high quality school leaders at the helm. School districts and educator preparation programs both have a vested interest in bridging what we call the preparation-practice divide. Strong educator preparation program-school district partnership is a promising strategy to de-isolate principal preparation from the ivory tower of university programs or alternative credentialing programs in service to closing this divide.

Across the United States, aspiring principals can access a plethora of preparation programs that provide masters degrees, professional licenses and credentials to be considered for principal positions. These programs include offerings by public and private universities and alternative providers. The state of North Carolina has 20 educator preparation programs approved to provide a masters degree and/or principal credentials and include both public and private universities (NCDPI, 2019). In 2016, five additional providers received funding to implement principal preparation programs. The additional providers included a mix of public and private

universities and a “local education authority” (Sturtz-McMillen, Carruthers, Hasse, Dale, & Copeland, 2017, p.i).

In this paper, the authors argue that the needs of today’s principals suggest that their preparation in isolation from the current realities of schools shortchanges their experiences and leaves principals unprepared to lead schools. EPPs and school districts share the responsibility of principal preparation. Partnerships are a promising strategy to close the gap between preparation and readiness to lead. We begin by establishing the need for something other than traditional programs and approaches that focus almost exclusively on studying theories of educational leadership as a means of preparing principals. This is an important place to begin the discussion in order to understand the limitations of traditional preparation programs and how partnerships have the potential to fill in critical gaps. Just as importantly, the paper then explores the concept of preparation programs-district partnerships to better understand the possibilities and opportunities afforded to students prepared in such collaborative models. Finally, the paper concludes with an exploration of principal preparation models that leverage partnerships with school districts in the state of North Carolina.

Preparing Principals for a Changing Role

The changing role of the school principal over time complicates efforts to identify specific leadership behaviors that foster high-performance learning environments for all students. A more traditional role of school principals was that of a manager- handling buildings and facilities issues; supervising personnel; facilitating transportation (Wallace Foundation, 2013). The accountability and education reform era among other factors changed the role and expectations for principals over the last two decades from that of a manager to an instructional leader and school cultural broker. Principals became the centerpiece of effective schools.

Effective principals develop people in their recruitment and retention of high-quality teachers. Principal leadership in recruiting, supporting, and retaining high-quality teachers and

ensuring high quality instruction for all children often conflicts with other demands of the job but remains central to high-performing schools (Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, Orr, & Cohen, 2007; Howard, 2018). Researchers recognized the crucial role principals play in student achievement among school-level factors (Leithwood, 2010).The Wallace Foundation invested in efforts to illuminate the evolving role of the principal and sought to share lessons learned about what effective principals actually do in practice. The Foundation reported on five key practices of effective principals in these more contemporary times:

- shaping a vision of academic success for all students,
- creating a climate hospitable to education,
- cultivating leadership in others,
- improving instruction, and
- managing people, data, and processes to foster school improvement (Wallace Foundation, 2013, p. 4).

Additional research suggests effective principals set direction for schools, develop talent, redesign learning environments, and are the lead instructors. In setting direction, principals establish a vision for the learning environment and continuous improvement, informed by data. Principals influence the conditions that enable teaching and learning as part of redesigning the organization. Lastly, principals are lead instructors when they support teachers in implementing high academic standards in instruction; strengthen instruction through professional learning and feedback; and design collaborative learning environments for teachers to improve their craft in safe spaces (Sutcher, Podolsky, & Espinoza, 2017). With this emerging understanding of the crucial role of principal leadership comes the question of how we prepare principal candidates to be effective leaders for high-performing schools.

Partnering for Principal Preparation

While the principal's role continued to evolve as schools changed, principal preparation programs were slower to change their approach to preparing principal candidates. Research related to the principalship highlights that preparation programs generally fall short when it comes to equipping aspiring administrators with the tools necessary to be successful in the field (Sanchez et al., 2019; Figueiredo-Brown, et al., 2015; Reed & Kensler, 2010). Chief among the critiques of traditional principal preparation programs is the lack of opportunity to apply theory to practice (Darling-Hammond, 2007). As the role of the principal changed from that of a manager to instructional leader, preparation programs were slow to adapt curriculum and programming to meet the changing demands of practice for school principals. In what Howard (2018) described as the ivory tower, university-based preparation faculty were thought of as being removed from the realities of schools and surrounded by leadership literature and theories. Recognizing that these models no longer responded to the needs of program graduates entering new leadership positions, Howard admonished, "It is no longer possible, feasible, or desirable for universities to support educational leadership programs ensconced in obsolete ivory towers far removed from the daily existence of their graduates," (Howard, 2018, p. 10).

One strategy to close the gap in principal preparation and practice is the formation of intentional partnerships to collaboratively prepare high quality principals ready to lead. Collaboration between EPPs and public schools can be traced back to professional development school models (PDS) in the early 1990s. In such models, k-12 schools and EPPs partnered to renew programming and professional education for constituents in both institutions. More broadly speaking, the work in PDS was a shared intellectual and work endeavor. Formal projects and activities included representatives from K-12 public schools and higher education working towards resolving common problems of practice (Johnson-Parsons, 2000). In PDS models, school districts forged relationships with universities to equitably plan, implement, and evaluate shared initiatives. These models characteristically included both university faculty and K-12 practitioners on all

aspects of initiatives where the work focused on both real-world and theoretical problems. There was a mutual exchange of knowledge, ideas and respect for the work in which both research and implementation were equally valued endeavors. In effect, this joint work supported the collaborative inquiry and preparation of educators with support from both academia and practice (Johnson-Parsons, 2000; Haller, Hunt, & Fazekas, 2016). Even in its support of preparing educators, PDS models often left out the explicit preparation of principals. Moreover, Haller et al. (2016) found that many educator preparation reform initiatives rarely focused solely on the preparation and needs of principals. Often principal preparation and development were tied into other education reform efforts.

For the purposes of this piece, the authors define university-school district partnerships for principal preparation, in general, as the joint effort by EPPs and K-12 districts to selectively recruit candidates, plan and inform curriculum and experiences, and design internships and field-based experiences that bridge leadership theory and practice. Districts and principal preparation programs can bring together their respective strengths and capacities to inform curriculum and experiences for principal preparation. Both EPPs and districts play a role in jointly preparing a pipeline of school leaders who can respond to the rigors and reality of today's schools. Partnerships between principal preparation providers and schools/districts have the potential to de-isolate preparation. Such partnerships blur the lines between the existing silos where EPPs only concern themselves with curriculum and licensure while districts assume induction and professional development of school leaders on their own. Together, EPPs and districts design activities and candidate experiences that speak to the realities of leading district schools. Preparation programs and districts share in setting standards for practice and competencies, jointly inform curriculum, and jointly plan internship and field-based experiences.

As PDS models laid the groundwork for collaboration and partnerships between EPPs and school districts, the idea of sharing in the work of developing the school principal remained largely

absent until more recently. Partnerships enable an exchange of resources and expertise, recognizing the multitude of strengths from both entities. In doing so, partnerships provide multiple sources of learning for program participants. To illustrate the point, Padilla, Guerra, Menchaca, & Garcia (2020) adapted a teacher education framework that described the learning opportunities made possible from multiple learning sources when preparation programs and districts partner for teacher development. The framework called the intersection of these sources as the "leadership learning sweet spot" (p. 239).

Figure 1

School Leadership Learning Sweet Spot

Note: Obtained from Padilla et al., 2020

The framework was adapted from Saxena, Park, Bier, Horn, Cambpell, Kazemi, Hintz, Kelley-Petersen, Stevens & Peck (2012) in which the authors portrayed teacher learning within partnerships occurring where the work of pre-service, veteran, and university teachers intersect. The convergence of these learning opportunities was described as the "sweet spot" where participants collaborate and share learning around a common object or context , relying on socio-cultural learning theories to explain why this works (Saxena et al., 2012). In a study of a University of Texas Rio Grande Valley principal preparation program that partnered with school districts in

south Texas, Padilla et al. described a similar partnership as the leadership learning sweet spot whereby learning takes place when principal candidates:

- Draw on their life experiences outside of school;
- Interpret perceptions of leadership practices of school leaders and staff in schools and districts;
- Engage in direct conversations with and receive advice from practicing leaders; and
- Participate in discussions with university instructors around theory and clinical experiences (Padilla et al., 2020).

Other research on partnerships for principal preparation revealed two categories of partnerships: organizational partnerships and partnerships for learning (Campontta et. al, 2018; Darling-Hammond & LaPointe, 2007; Mendels, 2016; Sutcher et. al, 2017). Organizational partnerships promote close collaboration between districts and preparation programs beginning with targeted recruitment as opposed to program participants self-selecting into programs (Campanotta et. al, 2018; Darling-Hammond & LaPointe, 2007; Sutcher, 2017). According to Sutcher et al., organizational partnerships are characterized by recruitment opportunities for educators with high leadership potential from within districts (2017). Teacher leaders and other educators are tapped by district leadership in recognition of their leadership potential. Collaborative candidate recruitment and selection is more likely to yield a diverse pool of leadership candidates who are committed to the communities they plan to serve (Sutcher et. al, 2017).

Such collaborative targeted recruitment also assists districts in developing dependable leadership pipelines along with leadership tracking systems that identify leader characteristics for matching when vacancies open up in schools (Darling-Hammond & LaPointe, 2007; Gates, Baird, Master & Chavez-Herrerias, 2019). In a study of university principal pipeline initiatives, Gates et. al. found that such organizational partnerships pull together providers and K-12 districts where

standards, desired leadership competencies and skills are negotiated and inform curriculum (2019). The same study found that after three or more years, schools with new principals prepared through partnerships in the pipeline initiative outperformed comparison schools with newly placed principals (Gates et. al., 2019).

Other functions of operational partnerships include advisory councils in which district partners collaborate with university programs on everything from programs of study and course content to designing clinical experiences for interns. Advisory councils may include superintendents, program alumni, and even current students (Howard, 2018). Both districts and programs benefit from opportunities to inform programming and experiences. Such advisory councils are more than just good practice when programs are informed by the realities of the principal's job and student experiences of the program. For faculty teams made up of primarily tenured faculty with limited direct experiences as school-based leaders or faculty members who are many years removed from the contemporary needs of school leaders, operational partnerships help fill gaps with relevant experiences and knowledge which strengthens the program of study. University preparation programs often utilize retired or currently in-service principals and central office leaders as instructors for co-constructed courses which fills the experience gap (Howard, 2018). These instructors often come from districts where such partnerships are in place.

Partnerships for learning de-isolate the preparation of principals from tasks that used to solely belong to university preparation programs. Howard (2018) referred to this isolation as the ivory tower but argued that preparing principals for the realities of 21st century schools requires more "transformational pedagogies," (p. 14). Principal candidate learning is enhanced when such partnerships promote a coordinated curriculum and clinical experience where candidates engage in coherent, aligned coursework and clinical training (Campanotta et. al, 2018; Sutcher et. al, 2017). The collaborations provide real-life contexts for deeper learning through clinical practice

experiences. Perhaps most importantly and in answer to common criticisms of principal preparation, partnerships for learning connect theory to practice by way of clinical experiences (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007).

In what some call a residency, principal interns work in schools in partnering districts gaining just in time experiences within authentic contexts. Intentional and coordinated clinical experiences ease the transition to the principal role when candidates encounter familiar tasks and leadership opportunities they likely experienced during their residency, or internship (Sutcher et al., 2017). Internships or residencies and field-based learning experiences comprise a strong clinical preparation and ideally these immersive opportunities occur in the communities candidates seek to serve upon completion of the program (Darling-Hammond & LaPointe, 2007; Sutcher et. al, 2017). Such environments support the planning, practice, and reflection candidates should engage in to build leadership competencies and skills (Sutcher et. al, 2017). Herein lies the strength and opportunity of the "sweet spot" Padilla et al. referenced (2020). Candidates are immersed in environments where genuine collaboration provides projects that are focused on districts' real-world problems. Districts also contribute to program design, implementation, program and candidate assessment (Campanotta et. al, 2018). Partnerships for learning reach deeper into program planning, curriculum, and student learning than mere organizational agreements for placements and advisory councils.

University-K-12 partnerships provide many benefits for students, university programs, and districts seeking high quality school leaders. Partnerships allow school districts and principal preparers to work collaboratively towards improving principal performance (King, 2014). Improving principal performance means improved student outcomes in schools. Partnerships between university-based preparation programs and K-12 districts serve mutually beneficial purposes from targeted recruitment and candidate selection to informing curriculum of preparation

programs. K-12 districts and preparation programs share the benefits and are mutually accountable for preparing high quality leaders for dynamic schools.

The Quality Measures Partnership Effectiveness Continuum provides guidance about characteristics of strong, effective university- P-12 partnerships for preparation program providers. Although the instrument is designed as a self-reflection tool for organizational partnerships, the six dimensions and respective indicators illustrate the facets of effective partnerships that should not go unnoticed. Derived from an extensive search of the literature on school-university partnerships and exemplary principal preparation programs, Partnership Effectiveness Continuum (PEC) contains six dimensions: (a) partnership vision, (b) institutional leadership, (c) joint ownership/accountability for results, (d) communication/collaboration, and (e) systems alignment, sustainability, integration, and (f) response to local context (King, 2014). The instrument relied on research about best practices in principal preparation programs. The tool is useful in exploring facets of university-P-12 partnerships for principal preparation. Partnership structures differ and depend on the needs and capacities of the partners.

Principal Transformation in North Carolina

According to the "About Us" section of its website, "BEST NC is a non-profit, non-partisan coalition of business leaders committed to improving North Carolina's education system through policy and advocacy. [They] do this by convening a broad constituency; encouraging collaboration around a shared, bold vision for education; and advocating for policies, research, programs, and awareness that will significantly improve education in North Carolina" (http://best-nc.org/about-us/). Chief among the organization's work is an emphasis on the importance of highly effective principals in the state's public schools. Although there is no shortage of principal preparation programs (neither traditional or non-traditional) across North Carolina, including state-funded ones designed to train leaders to serve specific populations (e.g., rural communities, economically disadvantaged, etc.), the challenge of identifying qualified candidates to fill principal vacancies

persists. While there are generally more applicants than vacancies, many of those candidates are perceived to be woefully lacking in skill and talent.(Ash et al., 2013).

A policy brief produced by BESTNC (2018) notes, “Despite some investments in the principalship during the federal Race to the Top initiative, an analysis in 2015 found that North Carolina’s principal preparation statewide was inadequate for the significant demands of the job, particularly in high-need and struggling schools” (p. 1). The brief further summarizes additional research undertaken by graduate students in the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University wherein the following four trends emerged:

1. A large percentage of applicants are generally admitted into principal preparation programs in North Carolina (suggesting a lack of rigorous admissions criteria).
2. An increased number of alternative programs (e.g., fully online, fast-track, add-on, flex classes, etc.) are being designed with cost and time being the driving factors.
3. Full-time residencies are not typically required.
4. Formal collaboration/involvement between universities and districts is inconsistent at best.

In an effort to improve principal preparation in North Carolina, the North Carolina General Assembly appropriated $1 million in 2015 to support House Bill 902 (entitled Transforming Principal Preparation or TP3) with a goal of strengthening the development of school principals through grants that incorporated five evidence-based strategies that have shown success in other states. One of those components was related specifically to partnerships with an emphasis on marginalized/high-need schools and districts. Traditional and non-traditional programs alike were invited to compete for funding. The initial awards have proven to be so promising that the legislature recently allocated an additional $3.5 million, expanding opportunities for more preparation programs to avail themselves of the additional funding.

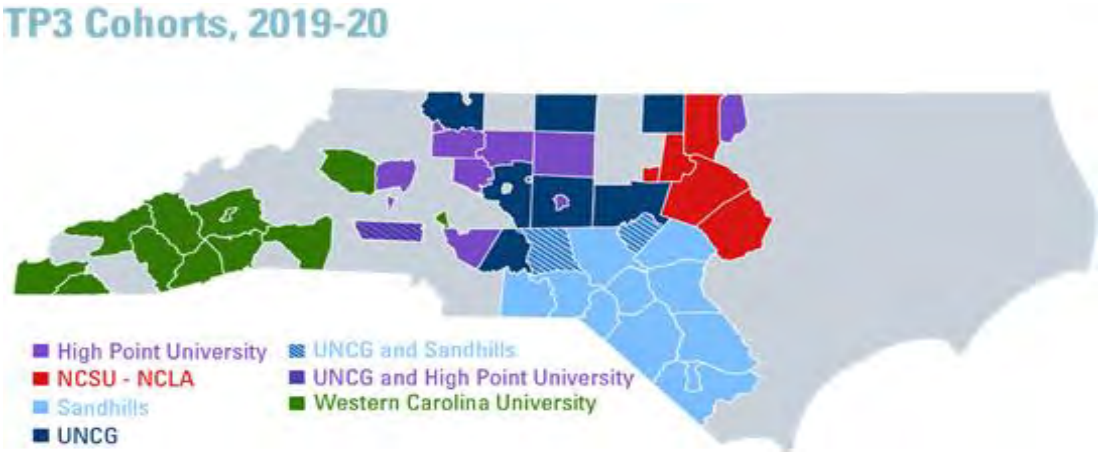
In 2019, by action of the North Carolina General Assembly, the TP3 Program and the North Carolina Principal Fellows Program (which began in 1993) were merged with a goal of combining resources to recruit some of the best and brightest into cutting-edge, research-based programs. This merger has the potential to provide a significant portion ("as much as 40%") of the pipeline (http://best-nc.org/tp3/). Five programs across the state partnered with nearly 50 local districts (see Figure 2) to identify and train principal candidates.

Far too often, the university where principal candidates complete their coursework has little engagement with the school districts where the students are employed beyond clinical internship placements. In contrast, TP3 programs are intentional in their efforts to forge authentic partnerships with schools/districts (Carruthers, Sturtz, McMiller, Lovin, and Hasse, 2019). Table 1 links excerpts from Carruthers et al.'s report to the six PEC dimensions that are introduced at the end of the prior section, suggesting at a minimum that the partnerships happening among the TP3 programs move beyond a superficial level and could potentially yield favorable outcomes over time.

While the purpose of this article is not to evaluate principal preparation partnerships using the continuum, briefly exploring the TP3 programs through this lens arguably offers some insights into how innovative principal preparation programs utilize partnerships to achieve programmatic, state, and district goals.

Figure 2

TP-3 Cohorts, 2019-2020.



*Note***:** Obtained from Z. Hodges/BEST NC, personal communication, February 27, 2020.

Table 1

Evidence of Partnership Effectiveness Continuum Dimensions (PEC) in TP3 Programs

Partnership Effectiveness Continuum (PEC) Dimensions (King, 2014)	**Evidence from Technical Report Evaluation (Carruthers, Sturtz McMiller, Lovin, and Hasse, 2019)**
Partnership vision	A plan for ensuring proactive, cohesive, on-going collaborations was required as part of the proposal process.

Institutional leadership	Regular engagement between super-intendents and program coordinators university contacts
Joint ownership/accountability for results	Contracts, Memoranda of Understanding (MOU), etc., which articulate roles and responsibilities for the university and school/district
Communication/collaboration	"The [TP3] Programs all reported having frequent contact with LEA leaders where the program participants were employed, including with superintendents. GrantProse surveys of LEA administrators also indicated a high degree of contact" (p.84).
Systems alignment, sustainability, integration	Targeted recruitment, agreements with students/participants requiring service upon completion of degree, year-long residency
Response to local context	Joint recruitment, selection activities, mentor assignment, and emphasis on district needs

Conclusion

Today's schools require effective, well-trained principals. According to Drake and Roe (2003), "The principal can make a significant difference. In fact, the principal cannot avoid making a difference, one way or the other" (p. 204). In other words, those who are less-prepared and less-effective are just as impactful--albeit in a negative way--as those who are have favorable impacts. Furthermore, the sometimes stark realities that new (and even veteran) principals face in schools, increase principal turnover and burnout, adding to principal pipeline issues. As such, there is a compelling need, perhaps now more than ever, to solidify, expand, and sustain efforts to ensure that aspiring school leaders are immersed in the realities and complexities of leadership. Establishing meaningful partnerships between university preparation programs and P-12 schools

designed to bridge the gaps between theory and practice helps prepare principals for the complex dynamics of modern-day school leadership. More work is needed to understand how principal preparation programs and K-12 schools interpret and experience partnerships. Available research documents typical challenges in creating and maintaining relationships needed for such partnerships, but many questions remain (Fusarelli, Fusarelli, & Drake, 2019). How do university-district partnerships specifically benefit program candidates, schools, and programs? What partnership experiences influence principal decision-making and leadership behaviors, if any? How do specific partnership activities best support candidate learning in principal preparation programs? The notion of working alongside school and district partners to redesign preparation programs is arguably a move in the right direction (Reed and Kensler, 2010). Breaking down the walls of isolation that have historically existed among higher education institutions (Murphy, 2006) and building strong university-school partnerships are critical to improving outcomes for outcomes for students.

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