

# Effectiveness of Principal Preparation Per the NELP Standards: An Assessment of One University's Performance

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*Quality preparation of school leaders is important for school success and improved student outcomes. The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions of principal alumni and superintendents about the quality of a university's principal preparation program in relation to the NELP Standards. Utilizing survey methodology, anonymous responses were collected from 74 practicing principals who are graduates of the program asking how well prepared they were for their school leadership roles. Survey responses were also collected from 38 superintendents across our state regarding their perceptions about the university's preparation of principals based on their experiences working with principal graduates hired within the last three years. Both principal and superintendent respondents agreed that program graduates were overall well-prepared per the NELP Standards, with 100% of principal alumni reporting they would recommend the program to others. Respondents also provided narrative suggestions and several areas were noted for further review and to inform program improvement. These results are useful in the pursuit of continued advancement of the field of leadership education by providing information beneficial in assessing and further developing university preparation programs for school leaders.*

**Keywords:** principal preparation, NELP standards, school leadership, building-level administrator training

In order to develop the skills, knowledge, practices, and commitments necessary for school leaders to meet the demands of today's increasingly diverse and complex school environments, it is essential that school principals be effectively prepared for their positions (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Theoharis & Scanlan, 2020; Young & Crow, 2016). Today's principal candidates should be able to demonstrate awareness, understanding, and application of many specialized skills, as outlined in the National Educational Leadership Preparation (NELP) Standards for Building-Level Leadership Preparation (NPBEA, 2018). Mastery of the NELP Standards promotes principal candidates' abilities to lead collaboratively and effectively with the goal of heightening opportunities and achievement for all students (Young et al., 2018).

In the Midwest state of this study (Indiana), candidates must be prepared by a university with a "state approved program" to be eligible for building-level administrative (principal's) licensure. Since licensure is the line of demarcation between whether a candidate is adequately prepared or not, great care must be taken to ensure that universities with approved principal licensure programs effectively perform their preparatory function. The ultimate test of whether this happens consists of assessing the actual field performance of the program's graduates. The research reported in this paper involved such an assessment. The research team evaluated the quality of their university's principal preparation program through a two-fold process. First, we surveyed program alumni currently serving as school principals with the goal of gathering graduates' perceptions on how well prepared they were by the university on seven NELP Standards for Building-Level Leadership Preparation (NPBEA, 2018). Second, we surveyed those who supervise and work with principals - their superintendents, regarding their perceptions of preparation adequacy by the university on the same seven NELP Standards.

### **Connection to Literature**

The principal's role is complex, demanding, and central to school effectiveness (Marzano et al., 2005; Seashore et al., 2010; Swensson & Lehman, 2021). A sizeable body of empirical evidence has revealed that principals make a significant difference in student achievement and overall school success (Grissom et al., 2015; Hallinger, 2011; Leithwood et al., 2010; Marzano et al., 2005). Studies have connected effective principal leadership with increased student learning (Branch et al., 2013; Grissom et al., 2015; Hallinger, 2011); improved teacher satisfaction (Rice, 2010); and a wide-range of more discrete school outcomes (Leithwood et al., 2010; Edition, 2013; Theoharis & Scanlan, 2020).

Studies have also examined the specific qualities or practices that make some school leaders more effective than others. In particular, strong instructional leadership by the principal has been found to be a significant variable in promoting student achievement (Drummond, 2019; Hallinger, 2011; Seashore et al., 2010). This includes creating conditions that strengthen teaching and learning school-wide, and also recognizing and commending individuals who demonstrate commitments to outstanding teaching and learning (Thompson, 2017).

In addition to instructional leadership, effective principals set high standards for student achievement and behavior, while developing positive and caring school climates (Louis et al., 2010; Swensson & Lehman, 2021). Effective principals understand how to create a vision that maintains focus on learning in a safe and cooperative environment while cultivating leadership in others, supporting teachers, and being a skillful manager (Edition, 2013). In sum, there is clear and mounting evidence that effective principals who emphasize instructional leadership, establish vision and high standards, employ best practices and strong management skills, and develop collaborative relationships; can improve school conditions, heighten student outcomes, and even turn around failing schools (Branch et al., 2013; Bryk, 2010; Drummond, 2019; Leithwood et al., 2004; Seashore et al., 2010; Swensson & Lehman, 2021).

As the body of research regarding the importance of quality school leadership has grown, so has

the call for higher quality principal preparation (Anderson et al., 2018; Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Perrone & Tucker, 2019). The quality of preparation that candidates receive makes a difference (Anderson et al., 2018; Young, 2015) and specific programs attributes, such as faculty quality, program rigor, program relevance, and internship quality, have been found to have a significant impact on graduates' standards-based leadership learning (Ni et al., 2019).

However, concerns have been raised that some principal preparation programs are mired in the past as expectations for principals have evolved in recent years and the role has expanded to include more responsibilities; generating new questions about how to define, prepare, and evaluate principals (Osterman & Hafner, 2009; Perrone & Tucker, 2019; Young, 2015). Also, a recent expansion in the number of principal preparation programs in the US has raised concerns about variations in the quality and rigor of some programs (Grissom et al., 2019; Perrone & Tucker, 2019). A report supported by the Wallace Foundation suggested that many district-level leaders were unhappy with the preparation of principals (Mendels, 2016). Furthermore, questions have been posed about some preparation programs being disconnected with the field and inadequate in preparing candidates for the authentic and inclusive school leadership needed in an increasingly complex and diverse society (Kemp-Graham, 2015; Theoharis & Scanlan, 2020).

Based on these concerns, researchers and practitioners in P-12 administration have called for school leaders to be better prepared to improve schools and serve all students; including ethnically, racially, and linguistically diverse students (Osterman & Hafner, 2009); students living in poverty (Dudley-Marling & Dudley-Marling, 2020); students with disabilities (Theoharis & Scanlan, 2020); and students who identify as LGBTQ or otherwise gender diverse (Kemp-Graham, 2015). The NELP Handbook clarifies that "Strong preparation of school leaders includes attention to the learning and needs of all student sub-groups as well as individual students" (NPBEA, 2018, p. 7). Educational leadership faculty members can use the NELP Standards to guide curricular and pedagogical developments as this set of research-based knowledge, skills, and practices promote strong school leadership preparation designed to improve learning and school conditions for all P-12 students.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to investigate perceptions of the quality of principal preparation that our university offers pursuant to the NELP Standards. This information was sought in order to assess the department's implementation and delivery of standards-based curricula and to inform future program improvements. There were two research questions:

1. Per the NELP Standards, how well-prepared do principal alumni feel that our program prepared them for their roles?
2. Per the NELP Standards, how well-prepared do superintendents feel that recently hired principals from our program were for their roles?

### **Conceptual Framework**

As discussed in the "Connection to Literature" section, it has been theorized and demonstrated through research that effective principals make a significant positive difference for student achievement and overall school success (Grissom et al., 2015; Hallinger, 2011; Leithwood et al., 2010; Marzano et al., 2005; Theoharis & Scanlan, 2020; Thompson, 2017). The idea that effective principals are important "difference-makers" provided the groundwork for this study, while the NELP Building-Level Leadership Standards provided the conceptual framework because these standards, if implemented with fidelity, facilitate successful preparation of program graduates who have the knowledge and skills to begin making

a positive difference for their schools and students upon becoming administrators. The NELP Standards are grounded in decades of research and best practices in school leadership (Young et al., 2018). These standards "... represent the fundamental knowledge, skills, and practices intrinsic to developing leadership that improves student learning and well-being" (NPBEA, 2018, p. 7). The NELP Standards clearly specify what principal preparation program candidates should know and be able to demonstrate upon graduation. The standards' components provide connecting experiences between relevant theory, research, and effective leadership practices (NPBEA, 2018).

The NELP Standards serve as the framework for the principal preparation program at our university, which is nationally recognized and is the largest preparer of principals in our state. The NELP Standards 1-7 that were assessed in this study, included the following:

1. *Mission, Vision, and School Improvement* – Standard 1 contains two components that address the collaborative development of a school's mission and vision, and the ability of the candidate to plan and lead school improvement processes utilizing data.
2. *Ethics and Professional Norms* - Standard 2 consists of three components, which include professional norms, ethical behavior, and the candidate's ability to evaluate, communicate and advocate for legal and ethical decisions.
3. *Equity, Inclusiveness, and Cultural Responsiveness* - Standard 3 has three components that focus on the candidate's ability to create a supportive and inclusive school culture that promotes culturally responsive practices and equitable access to support and resources.
4. *Learning and Instruction* - Standard 4 consists of four components that promote the candidate's ability to provide high quality, equitable, technology-rich curricula programs that employ best instructional practices and data-informed assessment systems.
5. *Community and External Leadership* - Standard 5 contains three components that promote the candidate's ability to engage with and advocate for students and families, and to develop productive partnerships with school stakeholders and the community to meet students' needs.
6. *Operations and Management* - Standard 6 consists of three components that promote effective school management and operations systems, including candidate's appropriate use of data and resources, and the effective implementation of policies, laws, and regulations.
7. *Building Professional Capacity* – Standard 7 has four components focused on human resources management, creating a positive and professional school culture, facilitating ongoing professional learning for faculty/staff, and effective supervision and evaluation of faculty/staff.

## Methods

The goal of this study was to obtain information from principal alumni and our state's superintendents regarding their perceptions of our principal preparation program per the NELP Standards. Descriptive and inferential analyses of quantitative responses were conducted to provide an overall view of perceptions of program effectiveness and also comparisons of several demographic variables. In addition, an open-ended question was included to gather respondents' narrative suggestions on ways the principal preparation program could be improved.

### Study Design and Survey Instrument

We used an anonymous online survey approach to collect responses. The two surveys (one for principal alumni and one for superintendents) were developed by the research team and were assessed for both validity and reliability. To establish content validity, the NELP survey items were written to directly align with the NELP Standards. Experts in the development of educational surveys reviewed the

face, construct, and content validity of the surveys. After receiving feedback, several revisions were made to improve wording and flow of the instruments. Then, to establish internal consistency, Cronbach's alphas were computed utilizing the quantitative responses of the seven NELP items. The principal alumni survey scored an overall Cronbach's alpha score of  $\alpha = .87$ , and the superintendent survey obtained an alpha of  $\alpha = .85$ , with both values considered good for instrument reliability (Gliem & Gliem, 2003).

The principal survey first gathered respondents' demographic information (e.g., gender, years of experience, years since completed the program). Principals and superintendents were also asked to provide data about their schools including student enrollments and community type and size. Then, using a Likert-type scale (4=Strongly Agree, 3=Agree, 2=Disagree, 1=Strongly Disagree), "perception" questions were asked for each NELP 1-7 Standard employing language taken directly from that standard (NPBEA, 2018). For example, for Standard 1, principals were asked to respond to the item, "I was well prepared by Ball State University in my capacity to lead and successfully implement a school's mission, vision, and school improvement plan." For superintendents, the Standard 1 item was, "Ball State University graduates who have been hired in the last three years as principals have been well prepared in their capacity to lead and successfully implement a school's mission, vision, and school improvement plan."

After the NELP questions, we asked principal respondents their "overall" views on their preparation and whether or not they would recommend the program to others. We asked superintendents if they would hire other graduates from our program in the future. Then, an open-ended item asked respondents to provide narrative suggestions on how the program could be improved. These narrative responses were coded and categorized into emerging themes.

## **Sample**

To administer the surveys, 267 practicing principal alumni and all public school superintendents in the state ( $N = 314$ ) were surveyed in April 2021. The principal survey had 74 usable responses for analyses (27.7% response rate), and the superintendent survey had 38 usable responses (12.10% response rate). Demographic data on both groups will be presented next.

### ***Principals***

Of the 74 principals respondents, 67.1% identified as male and 32.9% as female. Most principals had spent 6-10 years as a principal (32.9%), followed by 3-5 years (27.4%), 11 or more years (23.2%), and 1-2 years (16.4%). The majority had completing the program 3 to 10 years ago (68.5%), with 26% completing 11 or more years ago and 5.5% 1 to 2 years ago.

Of the schools in our sample, schools in rural settings represented (38.4%), followed by suburban (23.3%), urban (19.2%) and small towns (19.2%). Most of the schools had student enrollments between 301 and 1,000 (83.5%). The percentage of students qualifying for free or reduced meals ranged primarily from 21-60% (72.6%), with 17.8% greater than 61% qualifying. Forty-nine principals reported less than 20% minority students at their schools (67.1%), with 18 reporting between 21-60% (24.7%), and six (8.2%) reported more than 61% minority students.

### ***Superintendents***

Of the 38 superintendent respondents, most had 6-9 years of experience as a superintendent (39.5%), with years of experience similarly dispersed at approximately 30% among other years of experience (1-5 years, 11+ years). Rural school districts were most widely represented (55.3%), followed by suburban (23.7%), urban (10.5%), and small towns (7.9%). The majority of superintendents were from

districts with 41% to 80% of students qualifying for free and reduced meals (59.5%), and from districts with 20% or less minority students (75.7%).

## Results

### Research Question 1: Principal Survey

Our first research question asked, “How well-prepared do principal alumni feel that the program prepared them?” The following sections describe the findings driven by this question with NELP Standards considered individually, and as a whole.

#### Quantitative – Principals

A grand mean representing average perceived preparedness to implement NELP Standards 1-7 was calculated. The grand mean of NELP scores was  $M = 3.44$ ,  $SD = .46$ , which rested between strongly agree and agree, and indicated a high level of preparedness in implementing NELP Standards as a result of the program. In addition to favorable preparedness, we found that 100% of candidates agreed or strongly agreed that they would recommend the principal preparation program to others ( $M = 3.64$ ,  $SD = .48$ ). Table 1 presents these data.

**Table 1**

*Principal Alumni Responses Regarding their Program Preparation Per the NELP Standards.*

Survey Item:	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Strongly Agree <i>n</i> (%)	Agree <i>n</i> (%)	Disagree <i>n</i> (%)	Strongly Disagree <i>n</i> (%)
NELP Standard 1	74	3.42	0.57	34 (45.9%)	37 (50%)	3 (4.1%)	0
NELP Standard 2	73	3.62	0.49	45 (61.6%)	28 (38.4%)	0	0
NELP Standard 3	74	3.39	0.64	34 (45.9%)	36 (48.6%)	3 (4.1%)	1 (1.4%)
NELP Standard 4	72	3.36	0.66	32 (44.4%)	35 (48.6%)	4 (5.6%)	1 (1.4%)
NELP Standard 5	73	3.44	0.58	35 (47.9%)	35 (47.9%)	3 (4.1%)	0
NELP Standard 6	73	3.59	0.62	47 (64.4%)	23 (31.5%)	2 (2.7%)	1 (1.4%)
NELP Standard 7	74	3.39	0.59	33 (44.6%)	37 (50%)	4 (5.4%)	0
Overall, I was well-prepared.	73	3.58	0.50	42 (57.5%)	31 (42.5%)	0	0
I would recommend the program to others	74	3.64	0.48	47 (63.5%)	27 (36.5%)	0	0

*Note.* Likert-Type Scale: 4=Strongly Agree, 3=Agree, 2=Disagree, 1=Strongly Disagree

To further investigate these data, potential differences in principals’ demographic variables were analyzed. First, an independent samples *t*-test was conducted to look for significant differences in NELP preparedness scores between men ( $n = 49$ ) and women ( $n = 24$ ) principals. The results demonstrated that significant differences were not present in perceived NELP preparedness across gender,  $p = .601$ , suggesting that men ( $M = 3.44$ ,  $SD = .46$ ) and women ( $M = 3.43$ ,  $SD = .41$ ) viewed their NELP principal preparation program similarly.

Next, we conducted a one-way ANOVA that compared experience levels of 1-2 years ( $n = 12$ ,  $M = 3.41$ ,  $SD = .32$ ), 3-5 years ( $n = 20$ ,  $M = 3.38$ ,  $SD = .60$ ), 6-10 years ( $n = 24$ ,  $M = 3.42$ ,  $SD = .40$ ), and 11+ years

( $n = 17$ ,  $M = 3.54$ ,  $SD = .38$ ). Total years spent as principal did not show a consistent upward trend in preparedness scores as one might expect. According to Levene's test, the homogeneity of variance assumption was not met in this analysis,  $F(3,69) = 5.19$ ,  $p = .003$ , and differences in NELP scores across the various experience levels were not statistically significant, Welch's  $p = .692$ . Therefore, the ability to uphold NELP Standards did not appear to rest on a principal's years of experience.

Moreover, we analyzed whether levels of NELP preparedness differed based on the time spent since the principal completed the program. A one-way ANOVA compared principals who completed 1-5 years ago ( $n = 26$ ,  $M = 3.33$ ,  $SD = .50$ ), 6-10 years ( $n = 28$ ,  $M = 3.55$ ,  $SD = .39$ ), and 11 or more years ( $n = 19$ ,  $M = 3.42$ ,  $SD = .43$ ). The homogeneity of variance assumption was met, as the Levene's statistic was not significant,  $F(2,70) = .50$ ,  $p = .608$ . The results of the one-way ANOVA were not significant,  $p = .177$ . This finding suggested that perceived NELP competence was similar regardless of the time passed since the principal completed the program.

Using a one-way ANOVA, we also explored how perceived NELP preparation might be influenced by the locality of the school. Reflected in our sample were 28 rural schools ( $M = 3.31$ ,  $SD = .35$ ), 17 suburban schools ( $M = 3.54$ ,  $SD = .45$ ), 14 urban schools ( $M = 3.47$ ,  $SD = .56$ ), and 14 schools in small towns ( $M = 3.53$ ,  $SD = .46$ ). The homogeneity of variance assumption was met, Levene's  $F(3,69) = 1.38$ ,  $p = .258$ . Although there were slight differences in NELP preparedness scores (i.e., rural schools had slightly lower scores than others), this difference was not statistically significant,  $p = .286$ . This finding suggested that the program resulted in similar perceived preparedness in upholding NELP Standards across different school localities.

Another potential relationship we were interested in investigating was whether principals working in schools with higher levels of poverty (as measured by percentage of students qualifying for free or reduced meals) differed in their perceived NELP competencies. Free or reduced meal percentages were collapsed into two relatively equal groups: 0-40% ( $n = 32$ ,  $M = 3.47$ ,  $SD = .51$ ) and 41-100% ( $n = 41$ ,  $M = 3.40$ ,  $SD = .39$ ). An independent samples  $t$ -test was conducted and results were not significant,  $p = .525$ , suggesting that principals' perceptions of their preparation did not differ across schools with varying percentages of students in poverty.

Lastly, we were interested in analyzing differences in NELP grand means across schools with varying numbers of minority students. However, the unequal dispersion of minority students made direct comparisons difficult. We compared schools with 20% or less minority students ( $n = 49$ ,  $M = 3.41$ ,  $SD = .42$ ) and schools with more than 20% minority students ( $n = 24$ ,  $M = 3.50$ ,  $SD = .49$ ) using an independent samples  $t$ -test. The result was not significant,  $p = .406$ .

### ***NELP Standards 1-7 Compared to Grand NELP Mean***

Next, we wanted compare the individual NELP Standard 1-7 means to the grand mean of NELP scores ( $M = 3.44$ ,  $SD = .45$ ) to identify areas in which principals felt most prepared. Each NELP Standard mean was compared to the overall grand mean using a paired-samples  $t$ -test. Out of the seven comparisons, two relationships were statistically significant. The mean preparedness of Standard 2 ( $M = 3.62$ ,  $SD = .49$ ) was significantly higher than the grand mean ( $M = 3.44$ ,  $SD = .45$ ),  $t(72) = 3.69$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = .43$ , suggesting that principals felt very well prepared in their "capacity to lead ethical and legal decision-making and to model professional norms." Also, the comparison of Standard 6 ( $M = 3.59$ ,  $SD = .62$ ) to the grand mean ( $M = 3.44$ ,  $SD = .45$ ) revealed that principals felt significantly more confident in Standard 6 when compared to the overall NELP grand mean,  $t(72) = 2.86$ ,  $p = .006$ ,  $d = .33$ . This finding indicated that principals felt especially well-prepared in their "capacity to effectively manage daily school operations." The remaining five NELP standards did not differ significantly from the grand mean.

### Qualitative Findings - NELP Standards

Principals were asked, “Based on my experiences as a graduate, Ball State University candidates could be better prepared in the following areas. . .” Thirty-three principal alumni provided a response. Open or axial coding (Saldaña, 2009) was used to analyze the responses with NVIVO software. Four major codes emerged as suggested areas for improvement, which included *curriculum and instructional leadership, overseeing counselors and counseling programs, managing legal issues effectively, and promoting social justice as an inclusive leader.*

Next, the major codes were connected to the NELP Standards they related to, where applicable. The Standards that emerged as considerations based on the number of references to concepts are represented in Figure 1 and indicate areas of suggested program improvement.

**Figure 1**  
*Alignment of Open-Ended Responses to NELP Standards*

<b>Subject</b>	<b>Number of References</b>	<b>Exemplar</b>
NELP Standard 2: Ethics and Professional Norms	7	“Being prepared for legal aspects of the job that you inherit is something I wish I would've had some exposure to in the coursework. It's tough in those waters. I'm not sure anything can be done to prepare for that...”
NELP Standard 3: Equity and Inclusiveness	6	“Having more powerful racial equity training and how we can address the issue with parents and students. Giving us some practice for these difficult conversations would be helpful.”
NELP Standard 4: Learning and Instruction	5	... “curriculum development and scheduling. There need to be a focus on the development of curriculum and everything associated with it. Also, a training on how to develop a schedule of classes would be helpful.”
NELP Standard 7: Building Capacity	5	... “and the ability to build and support the growth of teachers.”
Principal-School Counselor Relationships	8	“I didn't hear much about school counseling during my principalship programming. You are probably doing more now on talking about what excellent school counseling programming is and what it should be.”
Fiscal/School Finance	4	“Building Finances (building projects) and all the things that are incorporated with issues like that.”
Special Education	5	... “special education (IEP's and 504's)” ...

As can be seen in Figure 1, suggested areas for improvement were most frequently noted for NELP Standards 2, 3, 4, and 7. For Standard 2, candidates described that the legal aspects of the job was something they wished they had more preparation in. One said, “being prepared for legal aspects of the job that you inherit is something I wish I would've had some exposure to in the coursework.” Others wanted more preparation in specific laws (e.g., charter school laws, special education laws). However, one candidate shared that the program would benefit by “skipping all of the law junk that [they] can look up on [their] own.” Though worded oddly, this statement suggested the principal felt that legal issues addressed were thorough, which seemed to align with the higher mean found in the quantitative analyses for Standard 2.

Moreover, some respondents mentioned issues that related to Standard 3, which addresses the principal’s ability to “maintain a supportive, equitable, culturally responsive, and inclusive school culture.”



A number of these statements referred specifically to racial equity. For example, one candidate stated that, “having more powerful racial equity training and how we can address the issue with parents and students [would be beneficial].” The sixth response relating to this standard stated that more information regarding “school culture, social emotional learning, and trauma informed care” would be beneficial for program participants.

Next, several respondents suggested areas for improvement regarding Standard 4, which relates to the implementation and evaluation of curriculum and instruction. One response related to curriculum development, “There need[s] to be a focus on the development of curriculum and everything associated with it.” Another response simply stated, “Instructional leadership.”

Finally, Standard 7 describes an educational leader’s ability to support the growth of those employed by the school. A few suggestions in this category referred to leading professional development, while others related to improved preparation in the evaluation of teachers.

**Additional Suggestions.** Suggestions for improvement also addressed areas that are not directly assessed by NELP Standards, for example, *school counseling* and *special education*. It is important to note that many of the suggested areas for improvement were phenomenon assessed outside of NELP Standards, suggesting that greater preparation in the area of NELP Standards were actually not a main priority in candidates. Several of these suggestions related directly to working with school counselors. One candidate who participated in the program between 11-15 years ago shared that they “didn’t hear much about school counseling during my principalship programming. You are probably doing more now on talking about what excellent school counseling programming is and what it should be.” Moreover, issues related to special education (e.g., developing/monitoring IEP’s, 504’s) were brought up by some principals.

Even though the open-ended survey question elicited responses that were suggestions for program improvement, some participants instead provided positive or neutral responses. One respondent indicated, “I also appreciate the manner in which the program allowed for us to work with real world problems. The online program was extremely hands on.” Another stated, “The program was excellent. Thank you for it.” Another respondent shared their confidence in the program’s model of continuous improvement, saying, “I graduated from Ball State University’s building-level school leadership several years ago and the challenges administrators face today are greater than when I received my training. I am confident Ball State University is always evaluating (hence this survey) and meeting the needs of their students.”

**Time Lapse Considerations.** As mentioned previously, we gathered information on the number of years that had elapsed since the principal completed the program. Most principals completed between 6-10 years ago (38.4%), 3-5 years ago (30.1%), or 11-15 years ago (23.3%), with four (5.48%) completing 1-2 years ago. Connecting suggested areas for improvement to the time elapsed since completion of the program was an important, informative piece to our analysis, as many changes have been made to the program in recent years following other evaluation efforts. For example, all mentions of working with school counselors (a major code) were from principals who graduated three or more years ago. Notably, shifts in the curriculum with efforts to better prepare principals in this area occurred in 2018. Thus, concern about working with school counselors occurred prior to integrating school counseling information into the program. Although further assessments are needed, these findings suggested that graduates’ abilities to work with school counselors may have improved following recent curricula changes.

## Research Question 2: Superintendent Survey

Our second research question addressed the question of whether superintendents felt that recently hired principals who had completed our principal preparation program were well-prepared for their leadership roles within schools, particularly in upholding NELP Standards.

### Quantitative Findings – Superintendents

Superintendents were asked whether they felt our program graduates hired within the last three years were well-prepared in NELP Standards 1-7. Table 2 portrays these results.

**Table 2**

*Superintendent Responses Regarding Principals Hired Recently that were our Graduates.*

Survey Item:	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Strongly Agree <i>n</i> (%)	Agree <i>n</i> (%)	Disagree <i>n</i> (%)	Strongly Disagree <i>n</i> (%)
Program graduates hired as principals in the last three years were well-prepared in their capacity to lead in...							
NELP Standard 1	38	3.42	0.64	18 (47.4%)	19 (50%)	0	1 (2.6%)
NELP Standard 2	37	3.46	0.65	19 (51.4%)	17 (45.9%)	0	1 (2.7%)
NELP Standard 3	36	3.53	0.51	19 (52.8%)	17 (47.2%)	0	0
NELP Standard 4	37	3.32	0.67	15 (40.5%)	20 (54.1%)	1 (2.7%)	1 (2.7%)
NELP Standard 5	36	3.31	0.62	14 (38.9%)	19 (52.8%)	3 (8.3%)	0
NELP Standard 6	37	3.51	0.51	18 (48.6%)	19 (51.4%)	0	0
NELP Standard 7	38	3.34	0.59	15 (39.5%)	21 (55.3%)	2 (5.3%)	0

*Note.* Likert-Type Scale: 4=Strongly Agree, 3=Agree, 2=Disagree, 1=Strongly Disagree

As with the principal respondents, we were interested in analyzing superintendents' demographic factors in relation to NELP ratings. However, after conducting these analyses, no significant differences were revealed across demographics, which included the number of years the respondent had been a superintendent, district locality, district size, percentage of minority students, or percentage of students qualifying for free or reduced meals,  $ps > .05$ .

### NELP Standards 1-7 Compared to Grand NELP Mean

A grand mean of all NELP Standard 1-7 scores was calculated,  $M = 3.40$ ,  $SD = .46$ . This mean fell between strongly agree and agree, suggesting that overall superintendents perceived our graduates to be well-prepared per the NELP Standards. Alike the analysis completed with principals, we were interested in comparing each Standards 1-7 mean to the grand mean. Individual standard means ranged from  $M = 3.31$  to  $M = 3.53$ . Paired samples *t*-tests were run to test whether individual means differed from the grand mean, but unlike the principal survey, none of the tests were significant,  $ps > .05$ . This indicated that the grand mean (3.40) was a good indicator of program graduates' overall NELP preparedness based on superintendents' ratings.

### **Qualitative Findings – Superintendents**

On the survey, an open-ended item asked superintendents to provide suggestions regarding areas in which our principal graduates could be better prepared. There were only 10 narrative comments and three of these responses were not suggestions but were positive comments towards graduates of the program. One superintendent stated, “We always hire the person prior to considering the university they attend but always know that Ball State University students are well prepared. We appreciate Ball State University and the job that is done preparing the graduates.” Another stated, “I really cannot think of any [areas for improvement]. All of the administrators I have worked with who trained at Ball State University are top notch.”

Several superintendents did note areas in which they believed candidates could be better prepared and four of these comments had to do with communication and discussion, which was the only theme that emerged. One said, “Younger principals need to have a better understanding of how to communicate effectively. Understanding how to efficiently and effectively handle stressful conversations with stakeholders and personnel.” Next, a superintendent indicated that candidates would benefit from greater proficiency in public and media relations. Lastly, a superintendent stated that principals should be better prepared at “observing, navigating, and managing the dynamics of mandatory subjects of discussion,” which is referring to our state’s teacher association’s contract negotiation and discussion process.

### **Comparison: Principal to Superintendent Ratings**

In this study, principals that graduated from the principal preparation program ( $n = 74$ ) were asked to self-report their perceived NELP preparation resulting from the program. To gain another perspective, superintendents who have worked with recent graduates ( $n = 38$ ) were asked to rate the program graduates on their capacity to uphold NELP Standards. Independent samples  $t$ -tests were conducted to compare NELP Standards 1-7 ratings from principals and superintendents. Each of these tests were insignificant,  $ps > .05$ , demonstrating that average ratings of NELP preparedness were similar. Furthermore, comparing the grand means of the ratings of the principals ( $M = 3.44$ ,  $SD = .45$ ) and superintendents ( $M = 3.40$ ,  $SD = .46$ ) using an independent samples  $t$ -test made sense to address whether NELP ratings differed when considering standards 1-7 altogether. The  $t$ -test indicated there was no significant difference in grand NELP means amongst principals’ and superintendents’ ratings,  $t(62.05) = .29$ ,  $p = .771$ . Both means resting between “strongly agree” and “agree,” suggested that principals from the program felt adequately prepared per the NELP Standards and superintendents concurred.

### **Discussion**

An administrator’s ability to uphold NELP Standards in practice is crucial to positive school outcomes (Young et al., 2018). Several demographic factors (e.g., experience, locality) were considered in addressing the question of whether perceived NELP Standards preparation differed across variables. Our analyses did not yield significant results, suggesting that the principal preparation program was successful for a wide-variety of settings and circumstances. It was encouraging to note that all principal respondents indicated that they were well prepared to promote NELP Standards and would recommend the program to others. Digging deeper, the qualitative data supplemented the quantitative data by demonstrating that although respondents felt the program well prepared candidates, there were several areas for suggested improvements. The next section is divided by each NELP Standard to paint an overall picture of the findings.

### **NELP Standard 1**

The first NELP Standard addresses whether an educational leader can “lead and successfully implement a school’s mission, vision, and school improvement plan.” Ratings by principals and superintendents were high in this area (both  $M = 3.42$ ), and qualitative statements did not seem to directly address a need for better preparation in this area.

### **NELP Standard 2**

NELP Standard 2 addresses abilities in leading ethical and legal decision-making and modeling professional norms. As noted by the paired samples  $t$ -test, it was discovered that principals felt especially prepared in this area as principals reported preparedness significantly higher than the grand mean ( $M = 3.62$  vs  $M = 3.44$ ). However, as seen in the open-ended piece of the survey, some principals mentioned specific legal issues that they wished they were more prepared on (e.g., special education law, charter school law), which are topical areas for consideration as additions in future revisions to our school law course.

### **NELP Standard 3**

NELP Standard 3 refers to the principal’s capacity “to develop and maintain a supportive, equitable, culturally responsive, and inclusive school culture.” Program alumni felt overall prepared in this area ( $M = 3.39$ ). Superintendents rated principals from the program highly in this area as well ( $M = 3.53$ ). Despite their perceptions of capacity with this standard, several respondents shared suggestions related to this standard (i.e., inclusive school culture, racial equity). In recent years, several program changes have been made in this area, which will be discussed in the “Limitation” section. Nevertheless, upon reviewing the qualitative responses, program faculty members believe that the principal preparation program could benefit from heightened attention on school leadership training for social justice, inclusivity, equity, and cultural responsiveness. This is a targeted area for ongoing program improvement. For example, all department faculty members recently completed a book study of Verschelden’s (2021) book *Bandwidth Recover for Schools*, and have been discussing and sharing with program candidates implementation ideas for school leaders to help P-12 students regain cognitive resources depleted from marginalization, trauma, and poverty.

### **NELP Standard 4**

Standard 4 handles capacity to evaluate and improve curriculum and instruction. Of principal respondents, 93% ( $n = 67$ ) reported they were prepared and 94.6% ( $n = 35$ ) of superintendents rated principals as prepared in this standard. These results indicated the program was successful in this area for most candidates. Regardless, a need for increased preparation in evaluation and curriculum development were mentioned in narrative comments. In order to further develop graduates’ capacity, moving forward, program faculty intend to ensure that evaluating and improving curriculum and instruction are areas of increased focus and practice.

## **NELP Standard 5**

Standard 5 addresses whether principals are “well prepared in their capacity to engage families and the community to support student learning.” Most principals (95.8%) self-reported high confidence in this area and their responses to the qualitative portion of the survey were not centered on this standard. However, issues related to this standard were cited qualitatively as an area for growth by superintendents. These centered around effective communication and handling public relations, which are areas that could be given increased attention during the two-semester internship experience, which culminates candidates’ principal preparation programs.

## **NELP Standard 6**

Standard 6 addresses capabilities in effectively managing daily school operations. Our analysis showed that principals’ mean for Standard 6 ( $M = 3.59$ ) was significantly higher than the grand mean ( $M = 3.44$ ), suggesting they felt exceptionally well prepared in this area. Seventy out of 73 principals (95.9%) agreed or strongly agreed that they were prepared in their capacity to uphold this standard, and all superintendents agreed or strongly agreed ( $M = 3.51$ ) that our graduates were well-prepared in this area. The qualitative responses supported these findings.

## **NELP Standard 7**

The ability “to build and support the professional learning and growth of teachers and staff” is addressed in Standard 7. A high majority of principals (94.6%) and superintendents (94.8%) agreed that the program well prepared graduates in this area. But, several principals suggested that they could benefit from more education on topics related to this standard. As an example, some principals shared that they would benefit from more preparation in teacher evaluation, supporting teacher growth, and leading professional development. Thus, we feel the preparation program would benefit from increased emphasis on best practices for supporting teachers and methods of providing effective professional development. For example, instructing future principals on how to organize and facilitate Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) within their schools is an important topic to be included in the program moving forward.

## **Limitations**

Although careful measures were made to ensure the usefulness and accuracy of the data at hand, this study was not without limitations. One of these limitations was a fairly small sample size (principals  $n = 74$ ; superintendents  $n = 38$ ). Also, our principal survey only captured principal alumni currently listed in our state’s school directory. Therefore, we likely missed some principal alumni and we also missed those alumni serving in other school leadership roles, for example, as vice or assistant principals, deans of students, or serving in directors’ positions.

Furthermore, many of the narrative responses on the qualitative portion of the survey, which asked for areas in which program graduates could be better prepared, tended to focus on prior areas that have since been addressed by the department. For example, the course on supervision and evaluation of teachers had been taught for years by a different department at our university. Based on consistently negative feedback from past students, the course was returned to the Educational Leadership Department in 2019, and we are now providing rigorous standards-based content and practice in this area. Therefore,

we believe our program candidates are receiving improved leadership-explicit instruction in supervision and evaluation since 2019.

In 2018, our department received a grant from Lilly Foundation, Inc. to revise our principal preparation program to better prepare principals to collaborate with school counselors to create successful comprehensive school counseling programs in their schools (Boyland et al., 2019; Geesa et al., 2020; Lowery et al., 2018). In addition, we recognized the need to embed more social justice and culturally responsive practices content in our principal preparation program. We began revising all core course content to include culturally responsive practices and principal-school counselor collaboration information in 2018. Also, we adopted a “core reader,” *Leadership for Increasingly Diverse Schools* (Theoharis et al., 2015; Theoharis & Scanlan, 2020). We have integrated several chapters into each core course throughout the program so that by the end of the program, all candidates have read and discussed the entire book. This core reader guides candidates in discussions about a variety of social justice topics. However, candidates who graduated from our preparation program before 2018 would be unaware of these curricular additions and changes.

In regard to curriculum development, we have recognized a need for educational leaders to gain skills, knowledge, and competencies in ways to foster interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary learning experiences. Based on research, we identified nine domains of leadership development to promote STEM-literacy and college and career readiness (e.g., equity and inclusion, professional learning, extended learning) (Geesa et al., 2021; Geesa et al., 2022a; Geesa et al., 2022b). Then, faculty created a graduate-level course related to these domains titled “Integrative STEM Education: Principals and Pedagogy” that is now a core option for students in the principal preparation program. This course began in Summer 2019 and runs each semester. Nevertheless, candidates who completed the program before 2019 would be unaware of this course offering.

### **Implications for Practice**

Overall, our survey results revealed that the principal preparation program at Ball State University was effective in preparing candidates per the NELP Standards. Quantitatively, both program graduates and superintendents reported high levels of preparation in abilities to uphold the standards. Qualitative responses revealed substantive suggestions, but upon considering the timeline of program completion and recent changes that had already been made to the program, we were able to validate the notion that some areas for improvement from earlier graduates were not shared by more recent graduates. Nevertheless, we have several areas to consider and work on based on respondents' suggestions.

In sum, while we were pleased with the overall findings that indicated our program was preparing principals well in their capacities per the NELP Standards, there were some important areas for additional attention and program improvements that were highlighted by this study and outlined in the Discussion section. We look forward to working towards these improvements and continuing in our efforts to prepare highly effective school leaders. We realize the seriousness of this role as principals are in key positions to shape supportive school cultures, improve learning opportunities for all students, advocate for marginalized youth, and even influence state and district policies (Khalifa et al., 2016; Sergiovanni, 2009). But, new principals will have difficulty meeting these goals if they are not well-prepared for the demands of the position. In recent years we have gained a much deeper understanding of the importance of high quality school leadership training (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Ni et al., 2019; Young & Crow, 2016), and the value of essential research-based expectations for principal preparation, as found in the NELP Standards (Young et al., 2018). The NELP Building-Level Administrative Standards can be used to facilitate bridging experiences between theory, research, and best practices in school leadership (NPBEA, 2018).

It has been asserted that some principal preparation programs focus too much on theory and not enough on practical application (Guerra et al., 2017), that some programs do not provide the rigorous standard-based learning experiences necessary for effective preparation (Grissom et al., 2019; Perrone & Tucker, 2019), and that some programs are disconnected with the current context of school leadership and the many societal changes reflected in schools (Kemp-Graham, 2015; Mendels, 2016). In order to prepare leaders for today's highly complex school environments, it is critical that faculty members and others who are responsible for preparing principals evaluate their programs, be open to change, and strive for continuous improvement. We realize that high quality principal preparation promotes effective leadership practices, like strong instructional leadership, which makes a measurable positive difference in student achievement and school success (Augustine-Shaw & Reilly, 2017; Drummond, 2019; Grissom et al., 2015; Hallinger, 2011; Leithwood et al., 2010). We want our graduates to be "difference-makers" for their schools and communities and we also want them to be lifelong learners who are open to change and strive for continuous improvement. Faculty members should model continuous improvement for their program candidates.

Therefore, an important implication for practice is the need for universities with principal preparation programs to conduct assessments of the effectiveness of their programs both during and after program completion, and then use these results to drive program improvements. Although candidates are typically asked to evaluate courses and instructors during their programs, soliciting graduates' feedback after they have left the university and are working in the field is highly valuable because it provides evaluative data from a practitioner's lens.

In addition, assessing educator preparation programs in alignment with professionally-endorsed and research-based standards is crucial. The examination of program strengths and weaknesses from a nationally validated framework ensures programmatic content objectivity. Furthermore, doing such a study becomes a forcing function to examine whether all of the standards are included in the existing program and with fidelity. A continuous improvement cycle requires regular evaluations such as the one found in this study and program candidates deserve our ongoing attention to providing the highest quality preparation.

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