



by Michelle LaPointe

As the student population in the United States becomes increasingly diverse, principals and schools are struggling to meet the unique needs of each child. English language learners (ELLs) and students needing remedial educational services make up a larger portion of the student population. The old faculty model—each teacher in a classroom and the principal in the office—often created conditions in which students failed to reach their potential.

A new model is evolving in which teachers collaborate with each other and share instructional strategies and insights on students with whom they work. Principals coordinate that collaboration while also serving as coach and mentor to classroom teachers. Research shows that the team approach not only supports educator growth, but also creates an environment that supports powerful student learning.

Unfortunately, too many principals are ill-prepared for the coach and mentor role because too few universities offer the coursework and internships necessary to develop leadership skills. Few districts provide the ongoing training and support that enhance principals' understanding of teaching and learning, and even fewer have restructured the role of the principal so that he or she can spend time in classrooms working with teachers and students.

Until recently, little was known about how to develop the skills principals need in their new roles, but new research is shedding light on this crucial area. In the fall of 2003, the Wallace Foundation awarded a grant to a team of researchers at the Stanford University Educational Leadership Institute to conduct a nationwide study of programs that prepare aspiring principals for their careers or provide ongoing training and support for current school principals. This study, the Stanford School Leadership Study (SLS) was conducted by researchers at Stanford, The

Finance Project, and WestEd. The Finance Project is an independent, nonprofit organization that specializes in research, consulting, technical assistance, and training for business and nonprofit leaders. WestEd is a nonprofit research, development, and service agency that enhances education and human development.

The research team, led by Stanford professors of education Linda Darling-Hammond and Debra Meyerson, identified eight programs that contained many of the key structures, components, and methods linked to exemplary leadership development (see sidebar, "Seven Features of Exemplary Leadership Development Programs"). The team selected a range of programs in different regions of the country to highlight a variety of best practices.

Many of these programs are collaborations between universities and school districts, both formal and informal partnerships designed to enhance the learning opportunities available to principals and aspiring principals. For example, a university-based

The Evolution of School Leadership:

New Roles and Programs for Principals that Help Students Succeed

Seven Features of Exemplary Leadership Development Programs

Research on effective leadership preparation points to seven features of exemplary leadership development programs:

- 1 Vigorous recruitment and selection that seeks out expert teachers with potential for leadership
- 2 A coherent curriculum, aligned with state and professional standards, that is organized around teaching and learning, and that links program goals, learning activities, and assessments with a set of shared values, beliefs, and knowledge about effective organizational practice
- 3 Active learning strategies that integrate educational theory and practice, stimulate reflection (for example, problem-based learning), and feature substantial use of feedback and ongoing self, peer, and faculty assessment
- 4 Quality internships that provide intensive opportunities to apply leadership knowledge and skills under the guidance of an expert practitioner
- 5 Knowledgeable faculty, including practitioners who have had experience in school administration
- 6 Social and professional support in the form of a cohort structure as well as formalized mentoring and advising from expert principals
- 7 Collaborative relationships between universities and school districts that can create coherence between training and practice and strengthen pipelines for recruitment, preparation, hiring, and induction

preparation program might turn to local school districts not only to better understand the needs of local schools and students, but also to provide school-based internships to aspiring principals.

Over the course of two years, the researchers visited the programs and interviewed staff, district officials, and participants. The team surveyed principals served by these programs about their training and their current work, as well as visited a number of schools led by graduates of each program to see the principals in action. The team also surveyed teachers in the schools visited to get their perceptions of their principals. Other principals in the same state and across the nation who did not attend one of these exemplary programs were also surveyed to understand how these principals compare with those trained in the programs under consideration (see sidebar, “Programs Included in the Current Study”).

The research shows that these programs not only provide innovative training and give the support and tools needed to effectively lead schools, but also help cast a new profile of who a principal is. School districts and university programs are recruiting more women and minorities to ensure that school leaders better reflect and relate to the increasingly diverse student population and teaching staff. These entities provide financial and social support so that aspiring principals are able to complete the preparation program. None of the study programs recorded more than one or two dropouts over the years they have been in existence. As principals, program graduates are more focused on teaching and learning, spend more time in classrooms, and actively develop learning opportunities for both teachers and students. These exemplary programs are helping to recreate the pool of school leaders to match the real needs of public schools.

Principals educated in the exemplary programs studied had some strategies and values in common that fostered quality learning for their students. The following sections describe a few key approaches.

Classroom visits

The team’s interviews, observations, and surveys show that exemplary professional development for principals is anchored in the instructional work of schools. One increasingly common strategy is the use of “walk-throughs”—an activity initially developed in New York City’s District 2 and later introduced into a number of districts as “Learning Walks” by the Institutes for Learning at the University of Pittsburgh. Aspiring principals are trained to conduct

quick, systematic visits during their preparation program, and continue the practice when they lead their own schools. In other districts, principals learn to do walk-throughs as part of ongoing training for school leaders.

During Learning Walks, participants spend about 5-10 minutes in each of several classrooms examining student work and classroom artifacts, and talking with students and teachers to understand the classroom activities. Three of the districts in the study—San Diego, New York City’s Region 1, and Hartford—use this technique. These quick observations in many classrooms provide snapshots of daily activities so that a principal can stay abreast of what teachers and students are doing throughout the school. At Tompkins Elementary School (not its real name) in San Diego, researchers followed Principal Leslie Marks (not her real name) as she visited about 15 classrooms one day. Mrs. Marks participated in both the preparation program at the University of San Diego and ongoing training from the San Diego Unified School District. In each classroom, she took notes for planning of follow-up conversations with teachers, grade-level meetings, and schoolwide professional-development sessions.

Programs Included in the Current Study

Preparation Programs	Ongoing Training	Program Descriptions
Delta State University (Mississippi)		Delta State's program focuses on instructional leadership and features full-time internships and financial support so teachers can spend a year preparing to become principals who can transform schools in this poor, mostly rural region. The program benefits from support from local districts and the state of Mississippi.
University of Connecticut's Administrator Preparation Program (UCAPP)		The UCAPP program is transforming a high-quality, traditional university-based program into an innovative program that increasingly integrates graduate coursework with field experiences and prepares principals who can use data and evidence of classroom practice to organize change. Some candidates go into Hartford, where they receive additional, intensive, professional development.
	Hartford (Connecticut) Public School District	The Hartford Leadership Initiative has used leadership development to leverage reforms vital to moving beyond a state takeover. Working with the Institute for Learning at the University of Pittsburgh, Hartford has sought to create a common language and practices around instructional leadership.
The Principals Institute at Bank Street College (New York)	Region 1 of the New York City Public Schools	Working with Bank Street College, Region 1 has developed a continuum of leadership preparation, including pre-service, induction, and in-service support. This continuum aims to create leadership for improved teaching and learning closely linked to the district's instructional reforms.
Jefferson County (Kentucky) Public Schools (JCPS)		Since the late 1980s, JCPS has operated a leadership development program tailored to the needs of principals working in the district. Working with the University of Louisville, the district has crafted a pathway from the classroom to the principal's office and a wide array of supports for practicing leaders.
Educational Leadership Development Academy (ELDA) at the University of San Diego	San Diego (California) Unified School District	San Diego's continuum of leadership preparation and development reflects a closely aligned school–university partnership. The pre-service and in-service programs support the development of leaders within a context of district instructional reform by focusing on instructional leadership, supported by a strong internship and coaching/networking.

At a high school in Connecticut, the principal, a graduate of the University of Connecticut Administrator Preparation Program (UCAPP) explained what he expects to see when he visits classrooms:

“I’m looking for the rapport that exists between the teacher and the students, for a sense of organization and a clear understanding of what the goal is for that day, what the teacher and the students are exploring together. You have to make sure you’re doing what’s right for kids, obviously, and you’re teaching that teacher, hopefully.”

In many districts, a key to school improvement is observation and analysis of classroom practice. Systematic and frequent observations of classrooms by district administrators and principals have become the foundation for professional dialogue throughout these districts, keeping the focus on teaching and learning.

Evidence-based decision making

Exemplary programs push principals to use evidence to shape their instructional decisions. This evidence should be drawn from a variety of sources, including data from systematic, daily visits to classrooms; student scores on state tests; and the results of diagnostic assessments. Principals help teachers to understand the available data and use it to tailor instruction for each child. The teachers surveyed strongly agreed that their principal encourages teaching staff to use student evaluation results in planning instruction.

Well-prepared principals support their teachers in making informed decisions to improve the educational services for each student.

Parent engagement


As educators try to understand the needs of each student, they increasingly turn to parents to provide both background information and support to help students with particular challenges. By creating schools with a family atmosphere, principals foster the trust and engagement of students and their parents. Several of the programs in our study made parent involvement a focus of the training.

At Delta State University (DSU) in Cleveland, Mississippi, the Educational Leadership program has three pillars: (1) teaching and learning, (2) organizational effectiveness, and (3) parents and community. The so-called “Delta Triangle” frames the daily work of graduate students in this program. Each week, they must write a memo describing a situation at the school where they are interning and link the situation to one of the three pillars of the program. The development of leadership skills at DSU also includes the metaphorical notion that being a school principal is like being the head of a family. As head of the school family, the principal guides, encourages, supports, resolves conflicts, buffers family members

from extraneous or harmful influences, and envisions a better future. This concept was echoed both by graduates of DSU and by principals in other programs.

At Grant Elementary (not its real name) in the Hartford Public Schools system in Hartford, Connecticut, the principal and faculty see the school community as a family. As such, they have worked to gain the trust of the families and students served by the school. This trust is particularly important in a school community where two-thirds of the students are immigrants and 95 percent are poor. Most parents have had negative experiences with schools or no other experience with a public school in the United States. Trust is crucial in encouraging students to take risks and become engaged in their own education and development. Trust also is essential so that school staff can learn enough about each student’s background and abilities to provide him or her with the best opportunities the school can offer.

Grant Elementary has done a truly remarkable job. In the five years since Grace Cameron (not her real name) became principal, Grant has gone from being one of the lowest-performing schools in Hartford to being named a National Blue Ribbon School by the U.S. Department of Education. Grant Elementary has transformed itself into an inviting place for learning. The hallways are decorated with flags from the students’ countries of origin. The teachers and staff are deeply invested in the children in their school and have reached out to their families to build trust and to the business community to develop the school’s resources. Mrs. Cameron credits her school’s turnaround to focusing on the children, putting all other considerations aside as they try to make the best decisions for each of their students.

Grace Cameron and Grant Elementary are not unique. With the support of innovative university preparation programs and forward-thinking districts, the role of the school principal is being redefined across the country. Principals no longer are regarded as operations managers. More and more, schools are being led by principals with a deep understanding of teaching and learning. These principals are in the classroom to support teachers and students. They engage parents, understand the needs of each child and, ultimately, create schools focused on helping all students achieve their potential. 

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The reports from the School Leadership Study can be found at <http://seli.stanford.edu/research/sls.htm>