

Principal Preparation Project (A Wallace Foundation Funded Initiative of the Regents Research Fund) Quick Summary of Themes Emerging from 21 Focus Group Sessions Conducted August 15-29, 2016

What is the problem we are trying to solve?

1. Changing laws, technology, and demographics have created new demands on leaders and programs to prepare them.
2. Some say they are concerned that programs to prepare school building leaders have not kept pace with these changes.
3. Many are certified, few are ready to step into the job of building leader. Too often, they learn the job starting day one.
4. NYS has not revised program/certification requirements in light of 2015 Professional Standards for Educational Leaders.
5. Sparse and questionable data make it a challenge to gauge the effectiveness of programs to prepare building leaders.

What does it mean to be “ready to successfully step into the job of school building leader”?

1. When school building leaders are ready to step into the position, what we see is that schools improve on their watch.
2. When a school building leader is ready to step into the job, (s)he coaches teachers so they improve instructionally.
3. When school building leaders are ready to step into the job they unify people around a vision; ego doesn't get in the way.
4. School leaders who are ready have the emotional intelligence/skills to deal with conflict among parents, students & staff.
5. School leaders who are ready skillfully engage with culturally- and/or linguistically-diverse students, staff, and parents.

What did participants perceive are possible root causes of the problem we are trying to solve?

1. Current system for leader prep is highly variable when it comes to field experience; too often internship is a checkbox.
2. Regulations are sometimes complicated, conflicting, unenforced, or unenforceable.
3. Self-scrutiny can be in short supply; at times those associated with SBL programs reluctantly debate program quality.
4. At times, current system for school building leader prep lacks sufficient “off ramps” (opportunities for candidates to exit)

Considerations related to steps that might address the root causes identified by participants

1. Create a system that better emphasizes capacity-building rather than signaling. *
2. Consider ways to better capitalize on a competency-based (that is, project-based as opposed to an exam-based) system.
3. Flip the script; from the outset pair internship & coursework so students get an earlier chance to see if this is “for them.”
4. Consider coupling full-time paid internships with mentorships & proper incentives so “real mentoring” consistently occurs
5. Add earlier off ramps so candidates can determine whether they are cut out for this work
6. Be more-selective with respect to admissions into programs to prepare school building leaders.
7. Base program/certification requirements on most-current professional standards for educational leaders (CCSSO, 2015).

Consensus themes

1. Strengthen relationship between higher education & schools districts so they're more than “partnerships in name alone.”
2. A full-time (paid) internship would go a long way toward providing the kind of real-life experience that is needed.
3. Quality mentoring (during and following the program) would help candidates learn to apply knowledge and skill.
4. Too many are admitted; sometimes perverse incentives induce people to take classes with no plan to become principals.
5. State role is quality control (how many/which candidates should be certified and how many/which programs should).

Questions of secondary interest (they came up during focus groups but not with the same frequency as consensus themes)

1. Why is diversity not a bigger topic of consideration especially given the changing demographics and ELL?
2. How can organizations and people act not out of fear due to compliance but out of a commitment to “the right stuff?”
3. Are adjustments needed for some who seek/earn initial SBL (deans, athletic directors, etc.) but don't supervise staff?
4. What consideration might be given to those seeking to become SpEd directors, Assistant principals, Athletic dir, etc.?

* In this context, “signaling” means relying on an artifact that is a proxy for a desired set of skills and knowledge. For example, a diploma is a signal. A certificate is a signal. Those who hold a diploma or certificate are presumed to have acquired particular knowledge or skill. In this context, the term “capacity building” refers to developing human capital in a way that assures individuals have acquired and have demonstrated particular knowledge or skills. For instance, those who pass a flight test have demonstrated they can pilot a plane. Through their competency in flying, they show they have acquired and mastered the skills needed to pilot a plane.