

# 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. Many are certified, but few are ready to step into the job of school building leader and be successful starting day one.
2. Changing laws, technology, and demographics have created new demands on leaders and programs to prepare them.
3. It is widely perceived that programs to prepare leaders have not done all they can to keep pace with these changes.
4. Program requirements are out of step with the most current national standard for educational leaders (CCSSO, 2015).
5. The lack of sound data makes it difficult to gauge the effectiveness of programs to prepare building leaders.

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

1. When a well-prepared school building leader steps into the position, the school improves.
2. A well-prepared building leader has the knowledge, skill, and desire to coach teachers so they improve instructionally.
3. Well-prepared school building leaders unify people around a vision (and ego doesn't get in the way).
4. Well-prepared leaders have the emotional intelligence and skill to deal with conflict among parents, students, and staff.
5. Well-prepared building leaders skillfully engage with culturally- and/or linguistically-diverse students, staff, and parents.

## What did participants say are the root causes of the problem we are trying to solve?

1. The quality of the field-based internship is variable; sometimes it is good and sometimes it is not.
2. Regulations to govern certification are complicated or conflicting and are sometimes unenforced or unenforceable.
3. There is not enough healthy reflection and discussion about the quality of programs to prepare school building leaders.
4. The current system to prepare school building leaders lacks enough “off ramps” (opportunities for candidates to exit).

## Steps that might lead to improvement

1. Create a system that better emphasizes capacity-building rather than signaling. \*
2. Consider ways to better capitalize on a competency-based system (that is, project-based as opposed to an exam-based).
3. Flip the script; from the outset pair internship and coursework so people get a chance to see what the job is really like.
4. Couple full-time paid internships with mentorships and proper incentives so “real mentoring” consistently occurs.
5. Add earlier “off ramps” so school building leader 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 and certification requirements on the current professional standards for educational leaders (CCSSO 2015).

## Consensus themes that emerged from the focus groups

1. Strengthen the relationship between higher ed and school districts so they are more than “partnerships in name alone.”
2. A year-long, full-time (paid) internship would go a long way toward providing the real-life experience that is needed.
3. Quality mentoring (during and following the program) would help candidates learn to apply knowledge and skill.
4. Many who are admitted to the program have no plan or desire to become principals.
5. The state role should be quality control (which candidates should be certified and which prep programs should exist).

## 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 given the changing demographics and English language learning?
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 knowledge and skill needed to pilot a plane.