

RESEARCH UTILIZATION BRIEFS:

DISTRICTS ENGAGED IN LEADERSHIP PREPARATION



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A critical goal of districts in hiring new principals is that they be well-equipped with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to effectively lead low-performing schools. Research on exemplary school leader preparation programs emphasizes the importance of district involvement in educational leadership preparation to develop better prepared graduates who are ready to lead schools (Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, Orr & Cohen, 2007; Orr, King & LaPointe, 2010).

A recently released report, *Districts Developing Leaders: Lessons On Consumer Actions And Program Approaches From Eight Urban Districts* (Orr, King & LaPointe, 2010), strongly supports the idea that districts can be more proactive in recommending candidates and shaping program content and applied learning order to improve graduate quality and performance. Specifically, the report profiles and compares the preparation initiatives of eight urban districts showing different preparation approaches and different types of program delivery. All had received funding from The Wallace Foundation to design, or influence the redesign of, their local leadership preparation to better match the leadership needs of their districts.

PROGRAMS TAILORED TO DISTRICTS

Each of the eight school districts profiled in this report, (Boston; Chicago; Fort Wayne, IN; Jefferson County, KY; Providence, RI; Springfield, IL; Springfield, MA; and St. Louis) had challenging school and leadership contexts and a continuing demand for highly qualified school leaders that exceeded the number of qualified and available candidates. These districts, like many others in the United States, needed programs that were specifically tailored to their school priorities and leadership expectations, including being able to improve

chronically low-performing schools. Generic leadership preparation simply would not suffice. According to Orr et al (2010) participating districts were encouraged to be more proactive as consumers—by defining their leadership expectations for selecting principal candidates, developing their own programs (as competitors to universities) or encourage universities to redefine their programs through contracts or collaboration. These district consumer actions—particularly setting standards and collaborating on program design—appeared to be associated with an increased commitment to the partnership by both the university and district personnel, more rigorous program curriculum and clinical experiences, and the development of leaders who fit the specific needs of the districts.

Of particular importance for university leadership preparation programs are findings specific to collaborative partnerships between districts and universities. Most comprehensive and sustainable were collaborations that resulted in the development of customized programs that met district needs by design—from start to finish. Thus, many program elements in the collaborative partnerships, including selection, curriculum development, internships, operations and follow-up, were collaboratively designed. In some cases the partnership programs were co-delivered as well.

The *Districts Developing Leaders* report underlines and extends existing research, which contends that preparation for school leadership in high needs schools requires content and field experiences that reflect both the state of the art in educational leadership research on leadership practice and are relevance to partner districts' schools and can be continued through added district leadership education, support and supervision. Although

conventional university-based preparation is an important foundation, it is not sufficient on its own. Rather, it should be coupled with longer, more extensive field-based preparation and additional leadership development experiences. In fact, some districts in this study would layer initial preparation, development and fieldwork into a three to four year preparatory experience.

THE INTERNSHIP

A key to any leadership preparation program is a high quality internship. This is defined as one that (a) is full-time and long-term, (b) gives interns instructional improvement and management responsibilities and enables them to exercise leadership, (c) authentic, in that interns receive payment and engage in high-priority tasks with appropriate guidance and mentoring, and (d) developmental, with staged increases in interns' responsibilities and roles throughout the internship.

These districts showed that while internships entail significant financial costs they could offset the expense using available funds for professional development or creating temporary leadership positions. A remaining challenge for high-needs districts is providing sufficient quality internship supervision and support, because the lack of highly effective principals is often the very reason why they create their own leadership preparation programs. Solutions to this problem include providing more training and mentoring of supervising principals, delegating more authority to the interns to try out instructional leadership responsibilities, and engaging university partners to provide additional mentor support for both interns and their supervisors.

UNIVERSITY-DISTRICT PARTNERSHIPS

Study researchers found that when districts approached universities as discerning consumers, they were able to develop higher quality programs, which led to leadership candidates who were tailored to the specific needs of these districts. Collaboratively developed preparation programs were also more sustainable than programs conceived and carried out by districts, acting alone.

Universities participating in these partnerships gained both candidates for their programs as well as organizational learning and system changing benefits, by adopting new content and program strategies, greater flexibility in partnering with these and other districts, and preferential status in the preparation field.

Sustaining such partnerships requires leaders and stakeholders in the district and university who will support the program's development and operations, and work to integrate the program into the institutions. Leadership turnover and changing priorities remain challenges.

In sum, the *Districts Developing Leaders* report validates and extends research findings indicating that collaboration between districts and preparation providers strengthens programs, better prepares aspiring principals for their school improvement work, and enables districts and preparation programs to learn from one another and foster continuous program improvement and relevance.

REFERENCES

- Darling-Hammond, L., LaPointe, M., Meyerson, D., Orr, M. T. & Cohen, C. (2007). *Preparing school leaders for a changing world: Lessons from exemplary leadership development programs*. Stanford, CA; Stanford University.
- Orr, M. T., King, C., & LaPointe, M. (2010). *Districts developing leaders: Lessons on consumer actions and program approaches from eight urban districts*. New York: The Wallace Foundation.



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