

Research Utilization Brief:

Improving State Evaluation of Principal Preparation Programs



University Council for Educational Administration
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Ensuring principal preparation programs reflect best practice in the field is a central opportunity for state policy-makers looking to improve the quality of principal leadership. In particular, high-quality program evaluation is a critical tool for program improvement. Data collected through program evaluation provides evidence for identifying areas where programs could improve their design or execution.

This guidance contains five detailed design principles that can inform effective principal evaluation systems. The design principles are based on program evaluation generally and on the evaluation of principal preparation programs specifically, as well as in-depth conversations with a diverse group of academics, policy-makers, and practitioners. Two examples are provided of high-impact state policy surrounding principal evaluation. This brief concludes with lessons for states looking to improve principal preparation.

It is recommended that states be supported and encouraged to incorporate these design principles into their principal preparation program evaluation systems.

It is understood that state leaders interested in improving their systems for evaluating principal preparation programs will ultimately need solutions tailored to their specific contexts. It is also understood that states may face capacity constraints (e.g., with regard to their data collection and analysis capabilities) that push against these design principles. However, these five core design principles provide a solid foundation on which to ground their efforts. The principles represent a set of goals to which states can aspire and toward which they can work.

Design Principles for Improving the Evaluation of Principal Preparation Programs

1. Structure the review process in a way that is conducive to continuous program improvement

Effective program review encourages ongoing improvement

and innovation in program design and implementation in two ways. First, it provides programs with specific and actionable feedback about their practices and graduate outcomes. This feedback requires that the reviewers possess relevant expertise for making appropriate judgments, including content expertise in leadership, understanding of adult learning theory and practices, knowledge of current research about effective leadership preparation, and the ability to analyze curriculum and pedagogy. Second, an effective review system allows adequate time for improvement. To be truly focused on improvement, review cycles and processes provide programs with adequate time to make changes and assess their impact.

2. Create appropriate systems to hold programs accountable for effective practices and outcomes

An evaluation system is one of the key ways states can hold preparation programs accountable for their role in delivering high-quality preparation for aspiring principals. With approximately 700 programs currently in operation and new ones regularly emerging, states need to be able to confidently make consequential decisions such as whether to approve a program; when to put a program on an improvement plan; and, in the most serious circumstances, when to rescind program approval. To generate that confidence, states can consider the following characteristics of system design: (1) understand the limitations of the indicators being tracked as measures of quality, and ensure that there is sufficient and valid information for making consequential decisions; (2) develop a clear and transparent rating system that has enough levels to meaningfully differentiate performance across programs and that captures performance and improvement over time; and 3) develop a clear and transparent process and timeline for intervening in the event of unacceptable performance.

3. Provide key stakeholders with accurate and useful information

When consumers and partners—especially aspiring school leaders and school districts—have good information about key indicators of program quality, they can use that information to make more informed choices. For aspirants, a state evaluation system can provide concrete information about program features and outcomes (e.g., candidate learning and career outcomes) to inform enrollment choices. Ideally, systems would provide side-by-side, apples-to-apples comparisons of programs. For districts, evaluation systems can provide specific information about program characteristics and candidate outcomes to guide decisions concerning formal partnerships with programs and the hiring of graduates. To meet these goals, effective evaluation systems provide high quality, publicly available, reliable, and understandable data about programs.

4. Take a sophisticated and nuanced approach to data collection and use

Collecting and using data is central to program improvement, yet it presents significant challenges. Too often, data points can be misleading or misused. This design principle advises the triangulation of multiple data sources to arrive at more accurate judgments. Single types of data on their own are often imperfect; nevertheless, imperfect data can provide important and useful information when used appropriately.

What is true for physicians balancing complex medical data is also true for state education leaders looking at the graduation rate of a principal preparation program or the growth in student achievement in schools led by a program's graduates. By themselves, these indicators offer only limited insights, but combined with a deeper professional review, they can help state officials arrive at a full picture of program quality. The fuller picture can be the basis for states to make consequential decisions about program approval and can be the impetus for continuous improvement.

5: Adhere to characteristics of high-quality program evaluation

The Standards for Educational Evaluation, issued by the Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation, serve as a basis for judging best practices. These standards focus on utility (i.e., the extent to which stakeholders find processes and results valuable), feasibility (i.e., the effectiveness and efficiency of evaluation processes), propriety (i.e., the fairness and appropriateness of evaluation processes and results), accuracy (i.e., the dependability of evaluation results, especially judgments of quality), and accountability (i.e., having adequate documentation to justify results). These standards may often be in tension with one

another; for example, data gathered from first-hand observations of program processes may be of high utility but may also be restrictively expensive to gather, thus making them less feasible to include.

High-Impact State Policy Examples

Illinois

Illinois has worked for more than a decade to develop and implement policies focused on improving principal preparation. Formal conversations among stakeholders culminated in the passage of comprehensive legislation that replaced a general administrative credential with one specifically focused on preparation for the principalship, increased the rigor of selection into programs and program content, required programs to collaborate with school districts, and required programs to include an internship that gave candidates authentic leadership experiences. The law mandated that all preparation programs in operation be approved under these new requirements. Once regulations were finalized in 2011, programs had three years to fully meet new requirements. The state convened and trained a review panel consisting of teachers, principals, superintendents, university representatives, and members of the business community to provide constructive feedback in advance of consequential decisions about program approval by the Illinois State Educator Preparation and Licensure Board (ISEPLB). Twenty-six of 31 programs which previously offered a general administrative credential received approval from ISEPLB to prepare principals, and the policy requirements caused them to view districts, rather than individuals, as their primary consumers.

Illinois' approach is notable not only for a substantial increase in the rigor of expectations for programs, but also for a consistent effort to engage a wide array of stakeholders. Over the last 15 years, formal committees have had a hand in developing policy ideas, monitoring the quality of implementation on an ongoing basis, and suggesting tweaks to the rules and regulations. According to a case study on Illinois' principal preparation legislation, the involvement of stakeholders from the outset as well as their continued collaboration allowed the group to "capitalize on specific windows of opportunity" to advance their collective agenda.

Delaware

Delaware has also prioritized program evaluation as a means for improving principal preparation. Regulatory changes adopted by the Delaware State Board of Education in 2014 require the Delaware Department of Education to develop scorecards for teacher and leader preparation programs. The scorecards are based on data submitted by each program to

the state and calculated from state data systems and supplement each program's accreditation by the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP). Taken together, the scorecards and the CAEP accreditation process will allow Delaware to assess four critical dimensions of program evaluation. Delaware is currently working with stakeholders to finalize the indicators that will be used for the first year of assessing leader preparation programs.

Lessons Learned

Both Delaware and Illinois offer useful models and lessons for other states looking to improve their evaluation of principal preparation programs. One key lesson is the importance of state context. It is clear that each state's focus and pace necessarily will be influenced by current conditions in at least the following two areas.

- A. **Focus, alignment, and positioning of state leadership:** The extent to which state leaders have prioritized school leadership—and specifically school leader preparation—in the state's educational improvement agenda. Also, the extent to which the state education agency (SEA) is positioned to be an effective resource for local education agencies and leadership preparation programs.



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If state political leaders and relevant agencies have a shared commitment to improving principal preparation programs, there are a number of steps that can be taken, such as the modification of existing policies that support program review processes and the targeting of funds to support implementation of a program evaluation system informed by the guidance offered in this document. A meaningful improvement is more likely if the SEA is seen as a supportive partner interested in the improvement and innovation of preparation programs, and not just concerned with compliance.

B. **Technical capabilities of the state education agency:** The extent to which the SEA has crucial capabilities needed to support a new evaluation system, particularly those related to data collection and the analysis.

In order to implement a strong evaluation system, a state needs a robust system of current data that includes important data on individual educators (e.g., their role, licensure status, evaluation ratings, etc.), enables tracking over time, and allows for connections between school-level data on leaders and preparation programs. Where possible, states could invest in building a more robust data system.



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