

Executive Summary

A New Approach to Principal Preparation

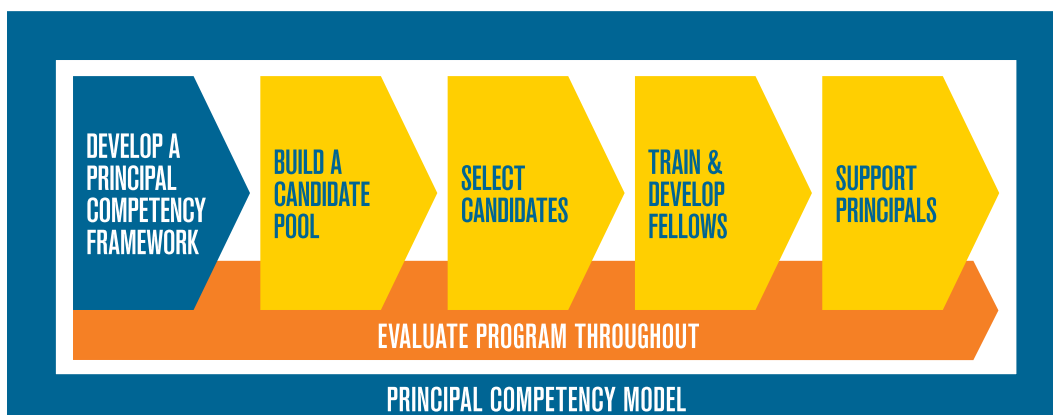
INNOVATIVE PROGRAMS SHARE THEIR PRACTICES AND LESSONS LEARNED

Rainwater Leadership Alliance

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To dramatically improve our nation's public schools, we must focus on the essential role of school leaders. Put simply, the principal is the best-positioned person in every school to ensure successive years of quality teaching for each child. *A New Approach to Principal Preparation* shares the experiences and lessons learned of entrepreneurial programs that are actively and successfully addressing this leadership challenge.



The Rainwater Leadership Alliance (RLA) is a coalition of innovative principal preparation programs that are committed to preparing leaders who can dramatically improve student achievement and sustain that improvement over time. These programs actively recruit talent, are very selective in admissions, emphasize practice-based training, engage closely with the districts and schools where their graduates are ultimately placed, and track their data to ensure that their graduates are effective in strengthening school and student outcomes.

The following RLA programs contributed to this effort: Gwinnett County Public Schools, Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP) Foundation, Long Beach Unified School District, New Leaders for New Schools, NYC Leadership Academy, Rice University’s Education Entrepreneurship Program, School Leaders Network, The University of Illinois at Chicago, and The University of Virginia’s Darden/Curry Partnership for Leaders in Education.

The RLA members have come together over the course of three years to share practices, distill lessons learned, and promote and scale successful methods to develop and support high-quality school leaders. *A New Approach to Principal Preparation* was inspired by those conversations. Its purpose is to provide a vision for making principal preparation programs more systematic and rigorous, and it offers a new path forward using illustrations of RLA approaches.

Our goal is to help principal preparation program architects—including districts, states, institutions of higher education, and

nonprofits—learn from the collective work and thinking of the RLA members. If there is one message that resonates with all of the RLA members it is that principal preparation is hard work. Leaders are difficult to find and develop in any field. But the school principalship takes a particular person who can be an effective leader in the context of today’s neediest schools.

Why We Need a New Approach

To dramatically improve our nation’s public schools, we must focus on the essential role of school leaders. While teacher quality is the single biggest factor influencing student achievement, strong principals are key to teacher development and retention. The fact is, principals account for 25 percent—and teachers 33 percent—of a school’s total impact on achievement.¹

Put simply, the principal is the best-positioned person in every school to ensure successive years of quality teaching for each child. Exemplary principals establish a climate that values effective teaching and ensures that the most promising teachers are selected, all teachers are developed and recognized,

and those teachers who are not doing well by children are released. **It is the combination of highly effective teaching with highly capable school leadership that will change outcomes for children in our schools—not one or the other but both.**

A 2006 study by Columbia University’s Teachers College then-President Arthur Levine concluded that the quality of most preparation programs for principals, superintendents, and other education leaders was “very disappointing,” especially at a time when high-quality educational leadership is critically needed for schools across the country.²

Traditionally, the processes and standards by which many principal preparation programs screen, select, and graduate candidates often lack rigor and do not adequately equip principals for the multifaceted role of effective instructional leader. Too many of them admit candidates based on educational background information alone, without probing for important qualities such as resiliency, results orientation, belief in all children’s ability to learn, commitment, and integrity required to do the job well. Upon enrollment, the focus is often on earning a credential through a series of courses without having deep school-based experiences that allow candidates to practice, make mistakes, and learn firsthand what it takes to run a school. Most programs do not provide the kinds of transitional supports needed to ensure that their newly minted principals succeed and stay on the job. Finally, most programs do not hold themselves accountable for the on-the-job performance of their graduates.

The RLA represents a portfolio of promising principal preparation programs that are on the forefront of innovation, exploring a new path forward. What sets apart these programs is that they are organized for the express purpose of preparing leaders who can dramatically improve student learning and close the achievement gap. Most are focused on urban schools and improving the achievement of underserved students, but some serve a broader population.

While many of the programs are still nascent, early results are promising. Many of the programs are conducting their own evaluations internally and three (KIPP, New Leaders for New Schools, and NYC Leadership Academy) have engaged third-party evaluators.

Studies have shown statistically significant positive results on student achievement.

Lessons from the Rainwater Leadership Alliance

Almost out of necessity, the RLA programs vary in their design specifics and approaches to implementation. No program has unlimited resources and program architects are constantly evaluating the best way to use scarce funds and staff time to accomplish their ultimate mission: graduating principals who have the ability and stamina to produce lasting change in our nation’s schools. The circumstances and contexts in which they work also drive programs to make different decisions about program design.

However, the RLA members share many common beliefs and principles, the most important of which is that they **see students as their clients**. They hold themselves accountable for improving student achievement results.

The RLA programs also have similar design elements:

1. RLA programs start by defining a Competency Framework—the *set of skills, knowledge, and dispositions* that a principal must have in order to drive high levels of student achievement for all children. This set of standards uses the school as the lens to identify the most important things high-performing principals must know and be able to do. The program then takes responsibility for finding candidates who can master these competencies and preparing them to be effective school leaders.
2. RLA programs rely on *strategic, proactive, and targeted recruiting strategies* to ensure that they have strong candidate pools and pipeline programs from which they can select candidates most likely to thrive in the program and grow into effective principals.
3. RLA programs are *highly selective and establish clear criteria and rigorous processes* to evaluate applicants’ dispositions, skills, and knowledge. RLA programs require candidates to demonstrate their skills and dispositions through experiential events, as they find it hard to assess these qualities using only paper-based applications.
4. RLA programs believe that *training and development need to be experiential, giving*

trainees authentic opportunities to lead adults, make mistakes, and grow. The development sequences are intentionally coordinated and integrated and include coursework; school-based residencies that take into account trainees' strengths and weaknesses; meaningful assessments; and ongoing coaching and feedback.

5. RLA programs believe that *ongoing support for graduates* to help them transition and grow on the job is important. RLA programs are clear that their interest is not only serving the individual but supporting the leader to drive change school-wide to improve student achievement results.

6. RLA programs are committed to the notion of *continuous improvement and using data to assess the effectiveness of their principals and the programs.* Several of the programs have engaged third-party evaluators to help them examine their results and all of the members are collecting data to better understand how to make their programs more effective in preparing strong principals on behalf of students.

A New Approach to Principal Preparation is organized around each of the important areas on the principal preparation continuum, beginning with the *Competency Framework* that undergirds all of the work, to the specifics of *building a candidate pool, selecting candidates, training and developing fellows, and supporting principals* post-graduation. The importance of *program evaluation* is stressed throughout and the final chapter addresses the topic specifically. In each of the chapters, we attempt to capture what the RLA programs are doing in each of these critical areas, the key lessons they have learned, and why they engage in the important work of preparing leaders for our nation's public schools.

RLA programs acknowledge that program design and implementation is only part of the equation. Districts and states play a major role in establishing the operating conditions in which a principal works. The policies, practices, and overall infrastructure of districts and states have a large impact on a principal's ability to do the job effectively. Issues range from a principal's autonomy regarding staffing within the school, to

incentives for individuals and schools that demonstrate success, to the organization of staffing supports and resources within the district, to the availability of high-quality student data reports.

While *A New Approach to Principal Preparation* is primarily aimed at program architects and operators who are launching and designing new programs or revising and strengthening existing programs, it can also inform conversations at the state and district policy level. This is particularly relevant considering the U.S. Department of Education's current focus on strengthening the outcomes of principal preparation programs. If we are to do this work at scale, we must devise systemic approaches to prepare, place, and retain high-quality principals.

The job of school principal may be one of the toughest in our nation—and one of the most valuable. High-quality school leaders are in great demand and there are strong calls for principal preparation programs to meet the need more effectively. If we want to turn around our schools and improve student achievement for all children year after year, we must address this leadership challenge.

It is our hope that *A New Approach to Principal Preparation* will be informative in assisting programs in strengthening their own practices and in producing a new generation of school principals who are ready to tackle the challenging and rewarding work of improving and running our nation's neediest schools. Effective leaders are essential to accelerating and increasing student achievement.

1. Leithwood, K., Louis, K. S., Anderson, S., and Wahlstrom, K. (2004). *Review of Research: How Leadership Influences Student Learning.* Wallace Foundation; and Marzano, R. J., Waters, T., and McNulty, B. (2005). *School Leadership That Works: From Research to Results.* Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

2. Levine, Arthur (2006). *Educating School Teachers.* Washington, D.C.: The Education Schools Project.

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