



ENHANCING EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP:

New York's Principal Preparation Project

By Kim M. Smithgall

Behind every successful student is a great teacher and behind great teachers are great school leaders. In fact, research shows that principal leadership is second only to teacher effectiveness when it comes to factors that affect student performance.

This maxim forms the foundation for New York's Principal Preparation Project, **an initiative focused on enhancing school building leadership** by reviewing current principal preparation programs and support for sitting principals, determining if improvements are needed in these areas, and then developing recommendations for the Board of Regents.

The project also involves designing a high-tech tool that will help school districts identify and place high-quality principals.

BROAD STAKEHOLDER INVOLVEMENT

The Principal Preparation Project work started in spring 2016 when the Board of Regents accepted a grant from the Wallace Foundation to fund the project.

“We initially tried to raise our awareness about principal preparation in the state and we did that in a variety of ways. For example, we conducted interviews and focus groups around the state to gather information and also collected about 85 different publications for a literature review,” said Ken Turner, director of the project.

Next, NYSED Commissioner MaryEllen Elia and Deputy Commissioner for Higher Education John D’Agati invited 37 individuals to join an advisory team. This team includes teachers, principals, school superintendents, BOCES superintendents, and parents, as well as representatives from community-based organizations, college/university principal preparation programs, and civil rights organizations. The team also has two outside experts who have been instrumental in providing insights into similar work under way in other states: a policy analyst from Illinois who helped guide that state through an initiative to improve principal preparation and the chair of a team that is creating the National Educational Leadership Preparation Standards.

New York’s advisory team members are enthusiastic participants. “When asked to serve on the committee, I immediately responded in the positive,” said Colleen Taggerty, superintendent of the Olean City School District. “I thought I would be able to learn from and with my colleagues and it allowed me an opportunity to have a voice at the table.”

Pamela Odom, principal of Syracuse City School District’s Grant Middle School, echoed Taggerty’s comments, adding that the strength of the team comes from its diversity. “We have a lot of very smart people at the

table and it’s been very interesting to hear all of the different viewpoints,” she said. “The whole process has been fascinating.”

This team began meeting in September 2016, when it developed and administered an online survey to gather feedback from educators, school administrators, and those in higher education on what was working well in school leader preparation and what could be improved. “We then started with kind of a blank sheet of paper and literally invited every member of the team to tell us in writing what they would like to have in an ideal program to prepare principals,” Turner recounted.

After the advisory team met for several months, Turner compiled the team’s recommendations and set out on a journey across the state to gather additional stakeholder input. He organized a whirlwind tour that included 22 focus groups held during a few short weeks in spring 2017. Each focus group comprised up to two dozen invitees, including teachers, parents, principals and/or those pursuing principal certification, local school board members, community education council members, school superintendents, BOCES superintendents, and deans of education schools.

EMERGING THEMES

Several common themes and strategies began to materialize during the advisory team discussions and within the focus groups. “The most prevalent theme that emerged was that many are certified, but few are ready,” Turner said.

Turner provided some context based on the stakeholder conversations. “The job of a principal seems a lot more challenging today than it was in the past for a variety of reasons. Technology advances are one thing – just look at social media and having to wrestle with those issues in a school. We also see changes in laws, especially as they relate to accountability and evaluation of teachers,” Turner commented. “We see changes in the demography of the student population: we increasingly have a population in which English is not the native language and there’s a remarkable

amount of poverty around the state. The social-emotional needs of kids appear to be changing, too.”

Taggerty observed that the political aspects associated with education are shifting, as well. “The respect for public education and the positions of teaching and leadership within public education has eroded. So we find ourselves more trying to defend ourselves and educating the community-at-large and our politicians and legislators rather than the focus being where it should be, which is educating our learners,” she said.

In effect, the educational landscape is changing so quickly that it’s challenging for leadership preparation programs to keep pace. There’s good news, though, because educators and state officials are recognizing this and the accompanying need for improvement. According to the Council of Chief State School Officers, six states have already revised standards for principal certification and ten more are reviewing standards and moving toward modifications and updates. This puts New York in a good position: the state can benefit from the thorough process it’s currently engaged in with the Principal Preparation Project, while also drawing insight from the best practices implemented in Illinois and other states that have tackled the difficult work of improving preparation programs for school leaders.

POSSIBLE STRATEGIES

One improvement strategy that emerged in New York’s Principal Preparation Project discussions was updating the school leader standards. This approach worked well as an initial step in Illinois.

“We had two programs in Illinois that were evidence-based,” said Erika Hunt, senior policy analyst and researcher at the Center for the Study of Education Policy at Illinois State University. “We basically modeled our state policy off of the effective practices that we saw implemented well at the local level.”

In New York, educators discussed the option of adopting the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders 2015, which is an update to the 2008 Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) Standards for School Leaders (see sidebar article on page 9 for more details). “The point is, the standards around which principal preparation programs are currently organized are from 2008,” Turner said. “So, like many other states, New York is looking to possibly adopt more modernized standards.”

Many of the participants in New York’s discussions also favored the idea of having competencies accompanying new standards for school leaders – that’s one of the missing pieces of the puzzle.

“What is not included in any formal requirement is for aspiring principals to demonstrate in a real setting under real conditions that they can lead activities in a school that result in improved teaching, better functioning of the school, better community engagement or improved student performance,” Turner said, referencing comments from focus groups and other meetings throughout the state.

One comment, made by Regent Lester Young during a fall 2016 presentation to the Board of Regents, really stood out in Turner’s mind. Young observed, “Standards are important, but enacted competencies matter more.”

“It is this idea about enacted competencies that has really made an impact on the advisory team – especially as members think about the challenge we face in New York... [which is] to create preparation programs that equip aspiring school building leaders so they have what it takes to successfully lead a school,” Turner said.

“In Illinois, it’s all competency-based now,” Hunt said. “Candidates have to show that they’ve mastered each competency.”

The standards and required competencies were then used as the basis for reconfiguring Illinois’ principal preparation programs at colleges and universities. As part of

the state’s new requirements, each college/university program had to redesign its credentialing program to meet higher standards for school leaders.

“The rules also required each program to have a memorandum of understanding with at least one school district that showed their partnership involvement with every step of the process, including selection and admission, course design, internship clinical and continuous data collection,” Hunt explained. “So, really tight partnerships need to happen to make sure we’re preparing the types of principals who are school-ready and able to hit the ground running.”

This partnership approach has also meant that the competencies being promoted in principal preparation programs are well matched to school district needs. “Before the redesign, it was the principal who was the consumer, so they were choosing preparation programs based on what was most convenient for them,” Hunt said. “We shifted this to districts as consumers, so the programs are now not only rigorous, they’re relevant.”

Odom favors this type of close partnership approach as part of New York’s best case scenario. “I think really working closely and having that partnership with colleges and universities would be helpful – to share with them the strengths and weaknesses that we’re seeing in some of our principal candidates,” she commented.

MORE AUTHENTIC EXPERIENCES

In addition to considering standards and competencies, New York’s Principal Preparation Project stakeholders seemed to agree that principal candidates could benefit greatly from improved, more authentic internship experiences.

“We discussed having a principal candidate spend time for a year with another principal – actually having the time to grow and mature under an outstanding principal in a school setting,” Odom said, adding that the current administrative placements sometimes occur based on availability

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– Pamela Odom

rather than thoughtful consideration of potential growth experiences for aspiring principals. “I think it would really make a difference to have that time to work under a master principal – walking around the building with the principal on a daily basis and really understanding every aspect of the job. As a vice principal, you don’t typically get this kind of experience because you’re given select jobs to do rather than seeing the whole picture.”

Odom joked that she spent a lot of her first year as a principal wishing that she had known all the jobs that were expected of a principal. “Like many first-year principals, I found myself repeating, ‘Oh, I didn’t know that’s what the principal had to do.’ I said that a lot!” she mused.

Taggerty had similar thoughts. “I think the theory is something that is necessary; we all need to go into leadership with certain background knowledge and information. However, what needs to happen along the lines with theory is authentic practice and, in my estimation, what would be ideal would be to have that authentic opportunity embedded in the course work. Then, theory-to-practice happens on continuum across the entire learning process,” she said. “For example, one of the courses is school law. Right now, you take the course in school law, you learn about school law and you read about school law and you discuss school law, but you never do anything with it. So, if we were broadening our knowledge and ideas about school law, how about having the principal candidate observe a superintendent’s hearing? Let’s observe what really happens during contract negotiations. Then you are given time to ask questions. That would be real, authentic opportunities.”

Taggerty added that these learning experiences could be credentialed

along the way and also occur over the full course of the principal preparation program. “We also started having conversations [in the advisory team meetings] about going deeper into practical experiences along the way, instead of waiting until the very end of the program to get your practical experience,” she commented.

Turner summed it up well, saying, “I’m sure you’re like me – you want to get onto an airplane with a pilot who has actually flown the plane rather than one who has simply taken a paper and pencil test.”

ONGOING SUPPORT

New York’s educators also indicated a need for ongoing support for new principals. “First-year principals were reluctant to say this, but they’re reticent to ask for help if they don’t have a mentor or coach available to them because they’re the new people on the block and they don’t want to appear to be less than fully competent,” Turner said.

And they’re even more reluctant to ask for advice if the mentor is the same person who will be evaluating them. “I feel it’s very important for new leaders to be with a coach along the way. When I think about how I found success, it was because I was comfortable enough to pick up the phone and call a colleague whom I trusted and that person would help walk me through what I needed to know,” Taggerty said. “I think it’s vital to have a coach that principals can reach out to so they can more readily self-assess – someone not affiliated with their district.”

NEXT STEPS FOR THE PROJECT

Among the next steps for New York’s Principal Preparation Project is the development of a leader tracking tool to use statewide.

“These actually exist for the New York City Department of Education and in other districts, including Denver Public Schools and Charlotte-Mecklenberg Schools,” Turner said.

The tool’s features might be thought of in terms of baseball cards. “Imagine aspiring principals with their photos on the front of the card

and their statistics on the back,” Turner said. “Districts could put in keywords or desired skills into an online search feature and then be given a list of the top 20 principal candidates. The goal is to build a better bench of talent.”

Syracuse and Buffalo have agreed to pilot the tool before it’s deployed statewide around the end of the year. This tool is being funded under an additional grant award from the Wallace Foundation, as is additional study of the merits of competency-based certifications for school leaders.

As for the advisory team, the group’s work is scheduled to conclude in May 2017, with the team forwarding their findings and recommendations to the commissioner and the Board of Regents. Turner strongly cautioned that the process isn’t finished and decisions on where to take principal preparation initiatives in New York remain the purview of the Regents. “The Regents will be the decision-makers and they’ll do what’s right for New York,” he said.

A THOUGHTFUL PROCESS

High praise was heard among the cautions. “All of the work the advisory team has done has been credible and earnest,” Turner said.

For both Odom and Taggerty, the broad representation was incredibly powerful.

“The state is definitely on the right track with the people who are around the table having these discussions,” Odom said. “I’m truly honored that I was asked to be part of this team.”

“It has really helped me to hear other voices and what the needs are within universities and colleges and at the parent level – whatever constituent groups were represented,” Taggerty commented. “Truly, the learnings, the readings, the conversations have all been so deep and at such high levels.”

**By the Numbers:
A Snapshot of School Principals**

The U.S. Department of Education released a “Stats in Brief” report in April 2016 highlighting data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) related to public school principals. This report compared statistics from the 1987-88 school year with those from the 2011-12 school year (the most current data analyzed). Below are some highlights, which show some shifting demographics.

DATA COLLECTED	1987-88	2011-12
Number of school principals in the United States	103,290	115,540
Percentage of female principals	25	52
Percentage of white principals	87	80
Percentage of African-American principals	10	10
Percentage of Hispanic principals	3	7
Average age of principals	46.8	48
Average number of years of experience as a principal	10	7.2
Average age of new vs. experienced principals	42.1/50.8	43.8/57.9
Number of years of teaching experience before becoming a principal	11	5
Average annual salary for elementary-level principals (in 2012 dollars)	80,600	89,600
Average annual salary for secondary-level principals (in 2012 dollars)	87,700	96,300

While the NCES and other data don’t indicate principal shortages in terms of the overall number of educators who possess the required certifications to become principals, many school districts are reporting that fewer teachers are applying to be principals and that principal candidates who do apply often lack the skills necessary to excel as instructional leaders.

Hunt mirrored the sentiments. “It’s been a thoughtful process in New York,” she commented. “The group is large, but I like large groups because it brings everybody to the table and I feel like the more people you have involved in the process, the more buy-in you’ll have and the more ambassadors you’ll have. You want conversations – including the contentious conversations – during the policy process rather than during the implementation.”

IT’S ALL ABOUT THE KIDS

So, while final decisions about principal preparation programs are in



the future, some strong foundations have been laid for improving the systems that have some of the biggest impacts on New York students’ growth and success.

“Ultimately, we’re doing this work because we believe that children thrive in the presence of great teachers and great school leaders,” Turner concluded.

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“If you have ever spent time with principals, you know that they wear many different hats over the course of the school day. Over time, those hats have changed as a result of shifts in New York’s student population, advances in technology, and other factors. Given these changes, it is time for us to reexamine how we prepare our principals and, if necessary, make adjustments to our requirements to ensure we are setting up our future school building leaders to be successful on the job on day one. The Principal Preparation Project is affording us that opportunity and also allowing us to develop tools to help districts – particularly our neediest ones – find the right candidates to fill principal openings. Eventually, these efforts will lead to better prepared principals being placed in schools that need strong, effective leaders.”

– Commissioner Elia

The Shifting School Leadership Standards

While academic standards for students continue to evolve, the standards for school leaders are also shifting. The Council of Chief State School Officers and organizations comprising the National Policy Board for Educational Administration devoted more than a year to reviewing and updating the previous standards, which were known as the 2008 Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) Standards for School Leaders. The updated standards, which omit the ISLLC reference, are called “Professional Standards for Educational Leaders 2015.” While many themes from the 2008 document carried over, the new version has a much stronger focus on student success. In fact, each of the ten standards includes a reference to the academic success and well-being of each student.

Here’s an overview:

Effective educational leaders: (1) develop, advocate, and enact a shared

mission, vision, and core values of high-quality education and academic success and well-being of each student; (2) act ethically and according to professional norms to promote each student’s academic success and well-being; (3) strive for equity of educational opportunity and culturally responsive practices to promote each student’s academic success and well-being; (4) develop and support intellectually rigorous and coherent systems of curriculum, instruction, and assessment to promote each student’s academic success and well-being; (5) cultivate an inclusive, caring, and supportive school community that promotes the academic success and well-being of each student; (6) develop the professional capacity and practice of school personnel to promote each student’s academic success and well-being; (7) foster a professional community of teachers and other professional staff to promote each student’s academic success and well-

being; (8) engage families and the community in meaningful, reciprocal, and mutually beneficial ways to promote each student’s academic success and well-being; (9) manage school operations and resources to promote each student’s academic success and well-being; and (10) act as agents of continuous improvement to promote each student’s academic success and well-being.

Each of the standards has accompanying actions that educational leaders should take to ensure they understand and embrace the strong influence they can have on student success with every decision and every action they take. And with such a firm commitment to student success, it’s no surprise that many elements of the new standards are also emerging as part of the discussions taking place under New York’s Principal Preparation Project. To review the full text of the standards, go to: <http://www.ccsso.org/Documents/2015/>