



## **Will New Illinois Principal Preparation Programs Fix Illinois Public Schools?**

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In July, 2010 Illinois Governor Pat Quinn signed into law Senate Bill 226 requiring new and more stringent requirements for certification and endorsement of Illinois principals. This Illinois legislation followed other states in adopting widespread educational reform measures aimed at improving student achievement, connecting the responsibility for student achievement to the quality of building principals. Illinois institutions offering programs to certify or endorse Illinois principals were required to redesign programs to meet the requirements of the new law and to have new programs approved by the state. The bill charged the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) with drafting the rules by which the institutions would design their new programs. Newly approved principal preparation programs began accepting candidates in the fall of 2012.

### **The Path to Principal Preparation Reform in Illinois**

The redesign of Illinois principal preparation programs was inspired to some degree by authors such as Levine (2005) who conducted a four-year study of the nation's school leadership programs, resulting in the report titled *Educating School Leaders*. Levine asserted No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation had placed demands on educating school leaders. He suggested NCLB increased the need for a number of new administrators to replace those expected to retire, wanting to escape the demands of the new legislation. Also, NCLB presented new legislative challenges: increased accountability, choice for parents and students, possible corrective action and restructuring, and the consequence of reduced financial resources. Levine suggested that administrators replacing the retirees needed to be a new breed of program graduates held to much higher standards of preparation assuring their capability of effectively leading schools and districts through the challenges of NCLB. Levine's study found fault with the preparation administrators had received. His conclusions directed criticism at preparation programs for producing too many administrators, too poorly trained (Levine, 2005). He recommended higher admission and graduation standards (2005). He found poor preparation related to shallow curricula, weak faculty, and limited and meager clinical experiences (2005). While NCLB had focused on student academic outcomes, Levine's report linked the preparation of school administrators and their role in school leadership to that outcome. The question had been posed: would reforming the nation's administrator preparation programs fix the nation's low student achievement levels?

The national attention generated by Levine's (2005) report led to the formation of an Illinois commission to study school leader preparation. The Commission on School Leader Preparation in Illinois Colleges and Universities (2006) examined the quality of school leadership programs and evaluated their focus on ensuring higher levels of student achievement. The Commission's 2006 report titled *School Leader Preparation: A Blueprint for Change*, recom-

mended improvements to the implementation and structure of these programs. What needed fixing in Illinois education was student achievement with more students reaching higher levels of Adequate Yearly Progress. The Commission's (2006) report maintained:

Several national studies have shown that the quality of school leaders is directly connected to student achievement, which is why increased attention is now being placed on the excellence and structure of training provided to our school leaders. America's administrative preparation programs are under pressure to justify their current practices and programs, transform the way school leaders are prepared, or close. (p. 2)

Following the lead from Levine (2005), The Commission asserted new standards of accountability in Illinois principal preparation programs would lead to improved student achievement. The Commission (2006) found shortcomings in Illinois preparation programs similar to those Levine found in the national study: failure to recruit and admit only the best qualified and committed candidates, "outdated curriculum," and "inadequate clinical instruction" (p. 8).

In 2007 the Illinois General Assembly established the Illinois School Leader Task Force (ISLTF) (Illinois School Leader Task Force, 2008) to detail an action plan for restructuring school leadership preparation in Illinois. Action steps in the ISLTF report included developing formal partnerships between school districts and preparation programs so the best qualified candidates are mutually selected to enter programs and so mutual support is present throughout the candidate's development. The ISLTF report further proposed (a) admission standards described as highly selective focusing on many skills including the ability to analyze data leading to school improvement and academic achievement, (b) a full-time residency or internship with assessment aligned to performance in leadership roles, and (c) state support of the recommendations with increased funding to support residencies, partnerships, and supervisors. The ISLTF recommendations were submitted in February 2008, months before the fall 2008 national economic collapse, a significant blow to an economy in Illinois that was already struggling. State money to support costs related to restructuring school leadership preparation would be unlikely.

These state reports had set the stage for Illinois legislators to propose and pass, in the spring of 2010, legislation to improve principal preparation programs in Illinois. The Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) began working with the Joint Committee on Administrative Rules (JCAR) shortly after Governor Quinn signed into law Senate Bill 226, the Principal Preparation Act. Final rules were approved early in 2011. The law's purpose was "To prepare individuals *to be highly effective in leadership roles to improve teaching and learning and increase academic achievement and the development of all students*" (Public Act 096-0903, 2012). The purpose followed the assertions made by Levine (2005), The Commission (2006), and the ISLTF (2008): highly qualified administrators will lead to increased student achievement.

All principal preparation programs in Illinois wanting to continue redesigned their programs to meet new rule requirements. The rules included (a) a general program requirement of partnerships between districts and institutions, (b) internships aligned to Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) leadership competencies and monitored by trained mentors, (c) assessments aligned to SREB, to work with teachers of students with disabilities, IEPs, IFSPs, or Section 504 plans, ELL students, and gifted students, (d) coursework requirements, (e) staffing requirements, and (f) candidate selection requirements. New programs needed approval from the Illinois State Board of Education to begin accepting candidates.

## Implied Fixes and the Consequences

### Reducing Numbers Will Produce Highly Effective Principals

Levine's (2005) report and The Commission's (2006) report noted too many principals were being certified or degreed and not enough of them were of the quality to become the instructional leaders needed for today's schools. Levine found that programs admitted students and produced certified principals based on three enrollment persuasions: to become a principal, to move on the salary schedule, or to become a researcher. He maintained that a program of coursework easily accomplished in order for teachers to gain hours to move on a salary schedule is not rigorous enough to prepare high-quality principals (Levine, 2005). The Commission (2006) identified a "surplus of certified individuals in Illinois (ISBE, 2004; 2005)" (p. 17) to meet market demands for future principal positions. Recruitment and admission of anyone able to pay tuition contributed to this surplus. Levine characterized such programs as "cash cows" (Levine, 2005, p. 24) raking in substantial tuition revenues from candidates of dubious quality who skate through a slipshod program and become members of a large pool of candidates considered to become instructional leaders in schools.

One way to reduce the number of certified principals would be to reduce the number of institutions or programs certifying principals. Illinois' new rules assume that what Illinois had ignored, i.e., shutting down programs that were deemed 'cash cows' or requiring programs producing substandard principals to stiffen entry requirements or to improve program rigor, would be addressed with new program rules and new program approval. The Commission (2006) supported this monitoring failure by noting, "...another troublesome issue is the fact that the IBHE [Illinois Board of Higher Education] cannot easily close ineffective programs...[T]he board can flag them for priority review if significant improvements are needed..." (p. 27).

Perhaps Illinois intended to reduce the number of principal preparation programs as Iowa had in 2003 following statewide reform of the state's principal preparation programs. All programs were to redesign meeting new state requirements and to seek state approval. The result of the reformation was a reduction of Iowa state programs from nine to five (Hackmann & Wanat, 2007, p. 9).

Illinois law may reduce the number of approved principal preparation programs assuming one of three possibilities: (a) poor quality preparation programs would be discouraged by the new rules and not submit a program for approval, (b) poor quality programs would redesign their programs, meet rule requirements, and be approved, or (c) poor quality programs would redesign their programs, fail to meet rule requirements, and not be approved. Prior to the 2010 law, there were 32 approved principal preparation programs in Illinois. Twenty were located in Chicago and the collar county areas. The remaining twelve were located at institutions from DeKalb to Carbondale and from Quincy to Charleston. As of January 30, 2013, twenty new programs have been approved. All programs applications submitted have been approved by the Illinois Licensure Board.

Preparation programs will see fewer candidates enrolling which will result in fewer endorsed principals. As potential candidates learned that university programs were going to change, greater numbers of candidates entered programs to complete certification before the implementation of new rules. This has resulted in fewer candidates enrolling in new programs throughout the state. When program numbers are threatened, admission requirements may be difficult to uphold. Will highly-qualified candidates always be admitted when programs must

admit all that have applied to be able to keep a program going? With much smaller numbers of students will programs be more likely to ensure that highly-effective principals will result? These are questions that will be answered as the new programs evolve.

### **Partnerships Will Produce Highly Effective Principals**

Section 1 of Illinois principal preparation program rules focused heavily on the development of partnerships between preparation programs and school districts. The importance of partnerships in furthering the quality of teacher and administrator preparation dates back to a February 1999 report adopted by the Illinois Board of Higher Education outlining a statewide strategic plan for Illinois higher education. The report titled *The Illinois Commitment: Partnerships, Opportunities, and Excellence* (1999), described the need for partnerships, specifically to support new and experienced teachers,

To improve the preparation and continuing professional development of teachers, higher education needs to form local partnerships with schools to develop support programs for new teachers and to provide opportunities for experienced teachers to update their skills and knowledge. (p. 4).

Similarly, The Commission of School Leader Preparation in Illinois Colleges and Universities (2006) recommended principal preparation programs “implement programs that create collaborations between preparation programs and primary feeder school districts, enabling them to grow their own leadership talent pool” (p. 9). A most convincing argument for the development of university and school district partnerships was to assure that preparation program courses created linkage “between what is taught in the classroom and what occurs in the field” (Commission, 2006, p. 22). The Commission’s report proposed principal preparation programs served the students of Illinois by preparing effective school leaders, but failed to serve students well if robust partnerships did not focus on school-level instructional needs rather than on principal candidate needs (p. 23). The Commission continued this assertion by recommending the Illinois Board of Higher Education (1999) revise its goal to read,

Higher education will join elementary and secondary education to improve teaching and learning at all levels, and proactively work to improve all programs that train teachers, leaders, and auxiliary staff so that all who receive a certificate have the knowledge and skills necessary to improve student achievement (Commission, 2006, p. 12).

The principal preparation program rules followed the recommendations previously cited, requiring a formal partnership between programs and school districts. Illinois rules stated, “The program shall be jointly established by one or more institutions or not-for-profit entities and one or more public school districts or nonpublic schools” (Public Act 096-0903, 2012). This statement required public school participation and ownership in a university’s principal preparation program, which is further outlined in the details of the agreement or memorandum of understanding (MOU). The partners will have responsibilities and roles in the selection and assessment of candidates, the establishment of internship experiences and settings, the development and implementation of training for mentors, and the evaluation of the program and the partner-

ship. The rules also addressed non-partnering school districts “where the internship and any field experiences may occur” (Public Act 096-0903, 2012).

It is likely that preparation programs would develop formal MOUs with a few districts where their principal candidates are employed as teachers or where their candidates will most likely become principals. It may also be likely that preparation programs will partner with districts that can provide the support, resources, and time to candidates, to internships, and to program development with the university. The representation of districts in the partnership is critical and may present conflicts of interest. One responsibility and role of the partners in the partnership is in the selection and assessment of candidates. This supports the notion of reducing principal candidates by not selecting candidates to enter a program if they are not ‘principal material’ or if they are only interested in moving on the salary schedule. The rules are looking for candidates who are committed to being principals and who can do the job of increasing student achievement. Particular attention will need to be paid to partners weighing in on approval of their own candidates vying for admittance to a program. A portfolio providing documentation to assess the candidate’s achievements, experiences, and skills in curriculum and instruction, student achievement, and assessment is prepared and submitted as part of the approval process. Again, the diversity of districts who may be partners, can present biases in the assessment of portfolios. What may be an example of acceptable practice in a portfolio from a student in one district may not be so regarded by a partner who represents another district.

Another more practical purpose of the partnership was to ensure that preparation programs are meeting the leadership needs of schools in their area. Seeking the input from principals in the field is important to providing insight into the day-to-day knowledge and skills a principal must have to be effective. School leaders and professors ‘at the table’ to discuss current issues, trends, and legislation, would lead to programs with coursework and internships that better meet the developmental needs of aspiring school leaders. The program rules are specific about principal intern work with teachers of students with disabilities, teachers of ELL and ESL students, teachers of Early Childhood students, and teachers of gifted students, a one-size-fits-all throughout the preparation programs wherever they may be located. The partnership requirement does allow programs to develop coursework relative to local district needs, making the development of highly effective leaders for the area more likely.

There are questions for partnerships to consider. Are candidates from schools with fewer resources not likely to become highly effective principals? Are candidates from schools not making adequate yearly progress not likely to become highly effective principals? If schools and districts with fewer resources are not partners represented in the partnership, will candidates from districts such district not be able to compete for admission spots with candidates from districts with more resources? Will partners involved in candidate selection marginalize candidates from districts with fewer resources or opportunities overlooking these districts’ urgent needs for leadership development? If a district with fewer resources or opportunities is not a formal partner, are the district’s candidates fairly and equitably represented ‘at the table’? These will be critical issues for partners to consider.

### **Qualified, Trained Mentors; Prescribed Internships Activities; and, Rigorous Assessments Will Produce Highly Effective Principals**

The new principal preparation program rules required mentors supervising principal interns to meet specific professional standards, participate in training to serve as a mentor, and to

commit to provide interns the opportunity ‘to lead’ in a number of specific activities in their school. Only persons certified and in the role of principal in a school may serve as mentors for interns, and mentors are limited to supervising two interns. This rule poses a significant issue for large schools with one principal, several assistant principals, and more than two interns possibly from three or four different principal preparation programs wanting to complete an internship. How will a principal determine which interns to supervise? Will the principal’s decision be based upon which interns would be best suited to take a position in this district, or in this building, without regard for the intern’s suitability to take a position elsewhere, perhaps in another district? Is it the responsibility of the mentor principal to determine which interns should be supervised based upon his/her determination of which will become highly effective as a result of the internship experience?

The rules placed a great deal of responsibility on the mentor principal and require evidence of the mentor principal’s success as a school leader. Mentors “shall have three years of successful experience as a building principal as evidenced by relevant data, including data support student growth in two of the principal’s previous five years...” (Public Act 096-0903, 2012). While each preparation program may submit a plan for determining principal performance ensuring growth, the requirement may disallow principals at the helm of schools in the midst of performance turnaround from being mentors. These may be precisely the schools that could use the support of a committed intern to lead student achievement reform efforts, and this setting may be the fertile field for growing the effective administrator to meet the needs of such a school.

Internship experiences should be opportunities for interns to experience the world of principal leadership with exposure to the reality of principal day-to-day roles, but without paid, full-time internships the expectation of preparedness will always fall short of the desired goal. Illinois rules attempt to overcome the vast preparedness issue by requiring interns to complete specific activities aligned to three extensive assessment rubrics. One internship assessment rubric is included in program rules and organized around three broad assessment areas: school improvement, hiring and evaluation of employees, and schoolwide management. Each assessment area has focus areas, each with specific processes and products. Interns must “Meet the Standard” in each of the fifty competency areas. In order to “Meet” the first content requirement on this rubric, the candidate will “use(s) media in a compelling presentation format that focuses on the school’s vision and mission and its connection to the work of the staff and principal to attain greater student achievement” (Public Act 096-0903, 2012). While the importance of this competency area is not argued, the value of this activity being repeated by the plausible circumstance of two interns each semester over the course of a school year is questionable. The rules, while attempting to ‘cover all the bases’ leave little room for schools, principals, and interns to create valuable and meaningful activities specific to their environment.

### **Conclusion**

There is no argument that well-prepared principals are important to school leadership that results in higher student achievement. The principal preparation reform effort in Illinois that has resulted in more stringent admission requirements, partnerships between school districts and preparation programs, and rigorous internships was crafted and governed by rules intended to increase student achievement in Illinois schools. It is too soon to tell if the reform package will result in the intended outcomes. Over the next year, as the programs are implemented, there are

other factors that may affect the outcome. Illinois' budget crisis, resulting in cuts to school funding, coupled with the state's teacher pension fund crisis and the threat of increasing the retirement age, may be turning the best and brightest teachers and aspiring principals away from education as a career choice or away from a career in education in Illinois. On a more positive note, recent legislation concerning teacher evaluation has tied teacher retention to teacher performance. The new laws require principals to be trained in teacher evaluation and require teacher evaluation plans to incorporate measures of student growth. These are tools which can certainly help leverage higher student achievement in the hands of highly effective principals.

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