

# Preparing Principals for Pre-K in Illinois

## The Prairie State's Story of Reform and Implementation

By Abbie Lieberman



In 2010, Illinois passed legislation making significant changes to its principal preparation and licensure policies. With the goal of improving student outcomes and closing achievement gaps, the state updated standards for principal preparation programs with a focus on instructional leadership. Illinois's reforms were ambitious, requiring all programs to reapply for approval from the state board of education under the new standards. Included in the legislation was something unique to Illinois—a call to prepare all principals to lead pre-K students.

To be effective instructional leaders who can help advance teacher practice, elementary school principals must understand how all children in their schools learn. Teaching and learning should look different in a pre-K classroom than it does in a fourth grade classroom, and principals need to be able to make that distinction. As leaders in their communities, principals are also naturally positioned to help align early childhood programs with elementary schools to create a seamless continuum of learning and support for children and families, even when pre-K classrooms are not located in their buildings.

In *Preparing Principals for Pre-K in Illinois: The Prairie State's Story of Reform and Implementation*, New America explores Illinois's shift from a general administrative license, called a "Type 75" license, to a "PK-12 Principal Endorsement." This brief includes both a history of the reform efforts and a look at how implementation has fared nearly a decade after the legislation was signed into law. It also offers lessons and recommendations for other states looking to follow Illinois's lead and ensure principals are equipped to lead pre-K and early grade classrooms.

The timeline in Figure 1 presents an overview of the road to reform from 2000 to 2010 and key developments in implementation since then. While there are many important components of Illinois's reform, this brief focuses on how different principal preparation programs incorporated early education via curricula and field experiences.

Programs have found a variety of approaches to integrate early childhood content into their coursework. For instance, some institutions of higher education have created new courses, others have brought in faculty with early childhood backgrounds or collaborated across departments to take advantage of expertise in their institution. However, there is still room for improvement, as a 2016 evaluation found that early childhood content is still only superficial or voluntary in many programs.<sup>1</sup>

The new licensure rules require all principal candidates to participate in a competency-based internship with instructional leadership opportunities that closely match those of a first-year principal. The structure of the internship, however, depends largely on the quality of partnerships between preparation programs and their local school districts. For instance, the University of Illinois at Chicago has a strong partnership with Chicago Public Schools. Its students complete a full-time, year-long residency, usually outside of the school where they worked. Chicago Public Schools funds the residency, paying prospective principals a competitive salary. Other districts, such as McLean County Unit District No. 5, fund semester-long substitutes so that Illinois State University students can be relieved from teaching duties for part of the year to intern full-time. But due to district funding constraints, prospective principals in many programs continue teaching full-time and complete internship requirements in their own time.

Illinois's principal reform journey is evidence that policy change and implementation take time. Almost a decade into implementation, programs are more likely to cover early childhood in both coursework and internships, but the aforementioned 2016 evaluation raised the important question of whether this is sufficient. Analyzing the benefits and drawbacks of how and when early childhood is included is an important next step for Illinois and the field at large. As the field considers these issues, there is much other states can learn from Illinois's experience. And as states pursue reform in both school leadership and early education, they should look for opportunities to align these efforts.

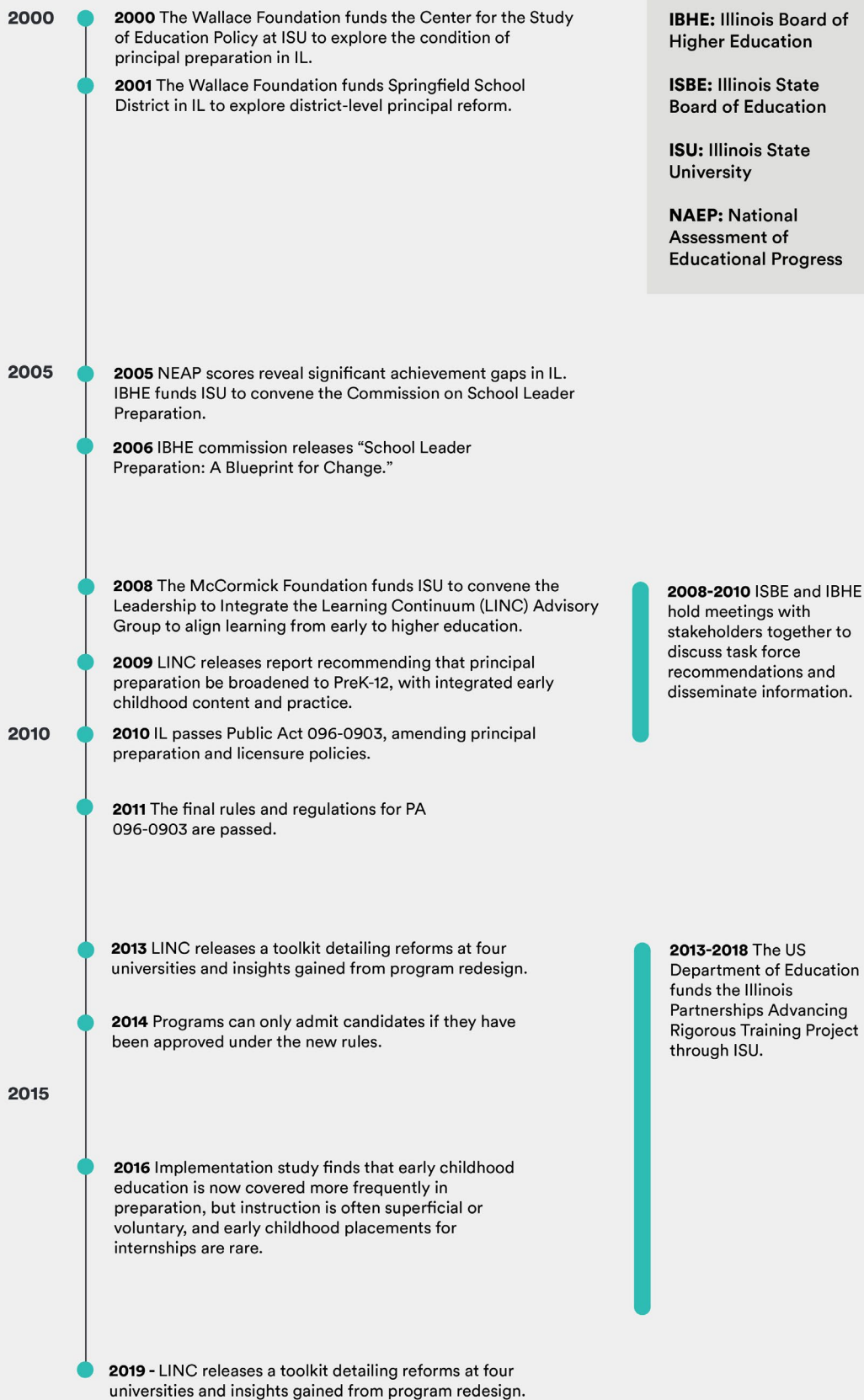
### Here are a half-dozen takeaways from Illinois's experience for states looking to strengthen principals as early learning leaders:

1. **Seat the right stakeholders at the table.** Ensuring that leaders across fields, including higher education, school districts, state government, philanthropic organizations, and practitioners were involved in multiple steps of the process helped get buy-in. Early education experts should be given multiple opportunities to weigh in on the reforms, as they were in Illinois.
2. **Invest in order to scale up successful reforms.** Illinois required programs and districts to make substantial reforms without additional state funding, exacerbating disparities in implementation. State funding should be used to incentivize best practices. The state could also choose to allocate federal funding in this direction, such as through Title II of the Every Student Succeeds Act.
3. **Monitor implementation progress.** Illinois passed legislation almost a decade ago, but efforts to improve implementation are ongoing. A continuous improvement mindset at both at the state and program level are essential to ensuring achievement of the long-term goal of preparing principals to support student success.
4. **Facilitate and encourage partnerships with early education programs.** To expand exposure to early childhood education, the state can support those responsible for coordinating internship opportunities and site visits in partnering with high-quality community-based programs.
5. **Incorporate early education throughout the principalship.** All incoming principals should begin their jobs prepared to lead all staff and students in their charge. However, principals continue to need support and opportunities for development throughout their careers.
6. **Acknowledge that individual policies do not stand alone.** Principals' knowledge and priorities are impacted by countless policies beyond preparation requirements, and as a result there are numerous ways to expose principals to the importance of early childhood education.

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1 Bradford R. White, Amber Stitzel Pareja, Holly Hart, Brenda K. Klostermann, and Michelle Hanh Huyuh, *Navigating the Shift to Intensive Principal Preparation in Illinois: An In-Depth Look at Stakeholder Perspectives* (Edwardsville: Illinois Education Research Council Publications, 2016), [https://spark.siu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=&httpsredir=1&article=1000&context=ierc\\_pub](https://spark.siu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=&httpsredir=1&article=1000&context=ierc_pub).

## Figure 1 | Timeline of Principal Preparation Reforms



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