

## **Which Field Experiences Best Prepare Future School Leaders? An Analysis of Kentucky's Principal Preparation Program**

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*This paper examines the effectiveness of field experiences in preparing school principals for the exigencies of the job. Current school principals throughout Kentucky were surveyed regarding their perceptions of the utility and comparative effectiveness of field experiences in the principal preparation program (PPP) each attended. Surveys were emailed to school principals across Kentucky; the response rate was 30% (263 of 900 principals). Most respondents completed field experiences as part of their PPPs, and they considered many of these field experiences to have been valuable learning tools. Of those who did not complete field experiences, nearly all agreed that they would have been better prepared for school leadership had they performed field experiences. Current principals identified the most valuable field experiences to be those involving practical, hands-on, typical principal responsibilities (key words were leading, identifying, interviewing, and working). Least useful were observation-type experiences. This research finds clear support for augmenting use of two particular types of field experiences: (1) Budget and Finance and (2) Site-Based Decision Making. This research also shows the clear practical value of making field experiences an integral part of PPPs. In light of recent criticism that PPPs fail to adequately "ready" school principals, this research offers clear prescriptions for PPP improvement and highlights areas in which Kentucky's PPPs succeed.*

### **Introduction**

All Kentucky school principal preparation programs (PPP) require students to perform field experiences. This requirement stems from the Educational Professional Standards Board (EPSB), which issues and renews certificates for all Kentucky teachers and administrators. EPSB

mandates that aspiring principals “participate in school and district leadership activities” and that each PPP should have an “agreement between the university and school districts” which must include a plan to “collaborate with each district in providing high quality field experiences” (Kentucky.gov). This research explores the overall utility of field experiences in training future school leaders and what exactly constitutes “high-quality” field experiences in the eyes of currently-practicing principals.

Nationwide, school officials have criticized PPPs for not ensuring that graduates are “ready” for principalship. They often claim that students graduating from college and university PPPs lack the skills to step right in as effective leaders; instead, they need *too much* on-the-job learning. Dick Flannery, deputy executive director of programs and services for the National Association of Secondary Schools Principals, summarizes: “Universities talk about *preparation*, and school districts talk about *readiness*” (Zubrzycki, 2012; emphasis added). Some argue that districts could improve principal quality by acting as “consumers,” encouraging local universities to craft programs to meet specific needs (Turnbull, B. and Haslam, B., 2010). Because of this perception, school districts and cities across the U.S. have begun creating principal “readiness” programs to supplement PPP coursework. Nationwide, “homegrown” leadership academies and career tracks supplement university-based programs, adding hands-on experience, mentoring, and training in district-specific information and initiatives (Zubrzycki, 2012). Kentucky mirrors this trend.

Many Kentucky colleges and departments of education belong to the Southern Regional Educational Board (SREB). The nation’s first interstate compact for education, SREB serves 16 Southern states. The SREB’s Learning-Centered Leadership Program targets each state’s progress on key indicators of learning-centered systems,

including the development of programs with “school-based experiences that prepare participants to lead school improvement” (SREB, 2012). SREB’s own research has shown that school leadership programs in the South lack “hands-on” experiences that would prepare students to be effective school leaders (Fry, Bottoms, and O’Neill, 2005). SREB President Emeritus Mark Musick notes, “...every state has an urgent need for capable principals who know how to lead changes in school and classroom practices – especially in low performing schools” (Fry, Bottoms, and O’Neill, 2005). One learns school leadership by examining the key concepts and skills used by effective school leaders, watching good models, and “trial and error” on the job (Bottoms and O’Neill, 2001). PPPs evidently are the weak links in this chain.

### **Significance of the Study**

According to the Kentucky Department of Education (KDE), field experiences should have three goals: (1) “enhance courses throughout the entire program;” (2) “ensure that the candidate had a continuum of school-based experiences that range from observing, to participating, to leading;” and (3) “expose the candidate to diverse student populations and school environments” (KDE, 2013). Murray State University’s PPP is unique compared with other Kentucky institutions because it allows students to choose most field experience activities as complements to those dictated by course requirements. At most other state colleges and universities, the department responsible for principal preparation scripts field experiences. For example, at the University of Kentucky and at Northern Kentucky University, the leadership departments dictate field experiences (University of Kentucky, 2012, and Northern Kentucky University, 2012, respectively). Spalding University’s principal candidates collaborate with the director

of field experiences and the course instructor (Spalding University, 2012). Should future principals drive field experience choice? If they do, how much leeway should they be afforded? When it comes to field experiences, most Kentucky schools offer little self-direction by future principals. Whether this is justified and how it impacts school leader preparation are unanswered questions.

Murray State University is the only Kentucky institution that aligns its field experiences to Critical Success Factors (CSFs), a step the Southern Regional Educational Board recommends but EPSB regulations do not require (Murray State University, 2013). Like MSU students, Western Kentucky University students may engage in prescribed field experience activities, but their field experiences are not aligned to CSFs (WKU, 2011). Finally, not all Kentucky school principals were trained in-state. Regional and national differences in program requirements and their perceived utility might prove instructive. Clearly, MSU and the Kentucky Department of Education accord great importance to field experiences in preparing future principals. Whether this is warranted remains an open question, with no research yet documenting the effectiveness of field experiences in readying future principals for their jobs. This research addresses this evidence gap. While the initial focus falls on principals working in Kentucky, this study's implications resonate for PPPs across the United States.

### **Research Questions**

Recognizing that performing field experiences might constitute a valuable teaching strategy, this study examines whether including field experiences in training enhances principal preparation and which types of field experiences current principals find to have been most helpful. This research addresses the following questions:

1. Are programs that include field experiences more effective in preparing principals than those that do not include field experiences?
2. Does allowing students and their administrators to choose field experiences result in more effective training than having the university script which field experiences students perform?
3. Which field experiences do current principals consider the most effective?
4. What type(s) of field experiences should be added to principal preparation programs?
5. Does requiring field experiences put Kentucky ahead of the curve in principal preparation?

### **Methodology**

Working school principals across Kentucky received an email letter with an electronic link to a questionnaire on Survey Monkey. The survey was first directly e-mailed to each superintendent of school districts in the state, numbering nearly 170, requesting that they forward the survey to all of their principals. The survey was then directly e-mailed to all Kentucky public, private, and magnet school principals. There are over 230 principals in Jefferson County. However, Jefferson County school officials declined participation in this study “due to numerous surveys and the timing of this proposal,” (M. Munoz, personal communication, April 3, 2013). Therefore, an estimated 900 principals in the state could have responded to this on-line survey, and 263 actually responded, yielding a response rate of slightly under 30%. This corresponds to the average on-line response rate (Instructional Assessment Resources, 2011). The survey used a Likert-scale attitude measure, as well as forced choice (yes/no) and open-ended questions. Questions examined principal perceptions of field experiences’ impact on their preparation to be school leaders.

## **Participants**

### School Type, Location, & Level

Of the 263 respondents, an overwhelming majority (99.2%) were from public schools; two worked at magnet schools; and one each worked at a day treatment program school, a vocational and technical school, an A6 alternative school, a Department of Defense school, and a University of Kentucky school. Nearly 55 percent (54.6%) were employed at schools in rural locales; 19.2% in towns; 13.8% in suburban locations; and 12.3% in urban schools. Nearly half or 49.8% reported their instructional level as elementary school; 29.3% as middle/junior high school; 32.8% as secondary school, and 5.8% as (Pre)K-12 school (see Table 1).

### Gender, Education, Age, & Experience Level

Slightly more women than men completed the survey (51.4% and 48.6%, respectively). Nearly 88 percent of respondents have a master's degree plus 15 hours, 6.3% have a doctoral degree, and 5.9% have only a master's degree. No one had only an undergraduate degree or an undergraduate degree plus 15 hours. Principals' ages skewed toward the 40s but were fairly evenly distributed. The largest age group was 41 to 45 years old (25.6%), followed by 46 to 50 (21.7%). Experience levels varied but tended to be less than 13 years. The largest group of respondents (33.8%) had been a school principal for 0 to 4 years. The lowest percentage of respondents (1.2%) had 26 or more years of experience as a school principal (see Table 1).

### **Principal Preparation Program Completed**

About 94% of respondents had completed a principal preparation program (PPP). Of these, 96% did so in Kentucky; about 4% do so in Tennessee. Principals also trained in North Carolina, South Carolina, Indiana, Georgia,

Texas, Michigan and California. The largest group of respondents attended Murray State University, followed by Western Kentucky University and Eastern Kentucky University. Other Kentucky institutions included (in descending order of attendance rate): Morehead State University, University of Louisville, University of Kentucky, Northern Kentucky University, Union College, University of the Cumberlands, Xavier, and Spalding University. Out-of-state institutions included: Austin Peay State University, Converse College, Tennessee Technological University, Indiana University-Southeast, Indiana Wesleyan University, Trevecca Nazarene University, University of Tennessee-Martin, State University of West Georgia, Loyola Marymount University, Clemson University, University of North Carolina, Texas A&M at Commerce, California State University at Northridge, Lincoln Memorial University, University of Dayton, and Eastern Carolina University (see Table 2).

In sum, survey respondents tended to work in rural public elementary schools, have a master's degree plus 15 hours, are between 41 and 50 years old, and have been a principal for less than thirteen years. Nearly all had completed a PPP, and most completed programs in Kentucky.

### **Findings**

Over 60% of respondents completed field experiences as part of their PPPs. Most respondents (91.4%) believed field experiences helped prepare them for principalship, while 8.6% considered them ineffective. Those who did not complete field experiences were asked if their program would have better prepared them for school leadership had it included field experiences. Over 83% believed they would have benefitted from field experiences. Those few principals (13) who did not complete a PPP at all *unanimously* agreed that

they would have been better prepared as a principal had they performed field experiences beforehand.

Reflecting with the benefit of hindsight, most principals whose PPPs did not require field experiences wish they had. Desired experiences vary and include: shadow a principal; work on instruction and discipline; participate in committee meetings; conduct instructional coaching; analyze student data; conduct teacher observations and evaluations; develop a budget; **Site-Based Decision Making**; train to interact with upset parents; engage in Comprehensive School Improvement Planning; handle personnel issues; and review school law. Clearly, the complex demands of leading a school cannot adequately be taught without real-world practice.

Besides experience type, another dimension affecting perceived utility of field experiences was *who selected* which experiences would be performed. The largest group of respondents (32.2%) jointly chose field experiences with their administrators, but the administrators chose more of them. Equal numbers of respondents (24.3%) said that either the administrator chose the field experiences, or the administrator and they chose field experiences, but the student chose more. Most who chose field experiences alone (71.5%) or with their administrator (68.8%) were satisfied with the process. By contrast, only 37.1% of those whose administrator alone decided on field experiences were satisfied with the results.

### **Southern Regional Educational Board (SREB) Recommended Field Experiences**

The survey provided respondents a list of field experiences aligned to Critical Success Factors, which were recommended by SREB to be included as part of all principal preparation programs in the southern region, including Kentucky. These field experiences are part of the continuum of school-based experiences that range from observing, to participating, to



leading. SREB-recommended field experiences performed the *most* by respondents were:

1. Interview principals and other instructional leaders who have implemented changes that impact student learning (95.6% of respondents).
2. Identify and observe an experienced school leader who will serve as a confidante and professional mentor (80.9%).
3. Observe the school leader discussing a new instructional program with others (70.6%).
4. Participate in parent information night in which standards, grade level expectations and scoring guides are explained to parents and parents can work on and discuss sample assessments similar to those on the state test (52.9%).
5. Observe a principal presenting the school improvement plan to the board (41.2%).
6. SREB-recommended field experiences that were performed the *least* by respondents included:
  1. Lead in facilitating a panel discussion with school and community leaders (7.4%).
  2. Observe a sample of student transcripts to determine course taking strategies and review student educational and career plans when available (13.3%).
  3. Lead in the development of a school web site or listserv discussion group devoted to sharing best practices among the faculty on communicating with the community (16.1%).
  4. Participate in a school/business partnership and analyze its influence on student learning (16.2%).
  5. Lead a faculty presentation on the steps in developing a professional growth plan (16.9%).

Most SREB-recommended field experiences in which respondents participated fell at the lowest levels of the SREB participation continuum (*Observe* and *Participate*), while the least-performed SREB-recommended field experiences met the highest level (*Lead*). Only 19.2% of respondents knew whether their field experiences were aligned to SREB's 13 Critical Success Factors.

### **Helpful, Unhelpful, and Missing Field Experiences**

Over 300 hundred responses specified which field experiences helped prepare respondents the *most* for principalship. Nearly 40% of these indicated that *leading*, *identifying*, *interviewing*, and *working* field experiences helped the *most*. The most beneficial experiences involved *leading* (over 60 responses). Examples included: "Lead Faculty Meetings [because of] presentation and discussion of Curriculum;" "Leading data driven faculty meetings [because] instructional leaders need experience using data;" "Opportunity to lead professional development [because] gained experience, self-confidence and research skills;" and "Lead a data-driven faculty meeting discussion that supports change that will enhance student achievement [because] change is the hardest thing a faculty goes through..." Field experiences that allow aspiring principals to perform the duties of acting principals clearly benefit those in training.

Similarly, current principals found they learned more when working directly with established principals. Many noted mentorship's benefits: "the presence of a mentor with whom I could consult and discuss the day to day process of leading a school has been invaluable;" and "Work with experienced school leader as mentor [because it] provided ongoing support and opportunity to ask questions, observe, and test ideas." Working with mentors afforded insight, the opportunity to observe day-to-day practicalities of leadership, and the competent modeling of activities like data gathering

and decision-making. These types of *working* experiences tended to overlap with *identify* and *interview* types of experiences. For example, experiences considered useful in the *identify* category included “Identify and observe an experienced school leader...[because] being around an effective principal and watching them work and...interact was crucial to my first months on the job.” Beneficial experiences in the *interview* category also focused on learning from established principals: “Interview leaders about changes that impacted student learning...because it gave me information that was valuable about...how to make a decision, what factors were involved and what I might expect from these type of decisions;” and “Interview of practicing principals and other district administrators [because] I gained insight...that you don't get in a typical admin course.”

Only 35 responses specified unhelpful field experiences. These centered on *observation*-type experiences. Comments included: “Observing parent meetings [because] “(I) didn't have enough background information;” “Observing Paperwork;” and “Observing a board meeting [because] there was no clear objective, just required attendance.” Merely attending meetings was roundly denounced as pointless. The only field experiences involving observation that principals found useful were those in which they shadowed a working principal. Clearly, future principals feel they benefit most from field experiences in which they work collaboratively with experienced administrators and which deal with day-to-day practical leadership.

A few principals would not make any changes to their PPPs, but they comprised a clear minority. Overall, respondents identified two types of field experiences that would have better prepared them to lead a school. First, over 100 principals said that field experiences dealing with *budget and finance preparation* needed to be included more. Typical comments included: “I would like to have been able to sit

down with someone to understand a school budget better;” “Being shown real budgets/staffing;” “Observe budgeting decision making;” and “Being able to think out of the box with budget cuts and meeting high expectations set by regulations - such as the Program Review process.” Second, nearly 20 principals indicated that field experiences should include work on *Site-Based Decision Making (SBDM) issues*. Comments included: “Preparing and conducting SBDM meetings;” “SBDM Training - observing Principals Chair meetings;” “SBDM Training - prepare policies or review how this is done;” “Development of SBDM agendas,” and “Visiting a SBDM meeting and discussing procedures with principal.”

In addition to these two perceived deficiencies, respondents suggested a wide variety of changes to PPP field experience requirements. Most called for *more* field experiences in several areas. Principals want more “variety of experiences, working at elementary, middle and high;” “ownership in curriculum;” “participation in public concerns;” “work in the hiring process & observation/feedback to teachers;” “technology use;” “exploration of behavioral programs, implementation, and support;” and “soft skills and storytelling from experienced principals.” Several respondents suggested the field experiences program mimic some aspects of student teaching programs. Comments included: “Field experiences should be assigned by colleges as would be student teaching. There should be defined rubric of expected experiences and outcomes” and “It would be helpful to have more of a student teaching experience except in the principalship. I would have preferred a class like student teaching where I spent hours with a principal as opposed to going to a class.” Evidently, current PPPs tend to lack the real-world experience in the company of a skilled practitioner needed for effective principal preparation.

### Conclusions

Kentucky requires principal preparation programs (PPPs) to include field experiences, but not all states do. In this study, over 60% of working principals completed field experiences during their PPPs. Further, nearly all of them believed the experiences enhanced their readiness to be school leaders. Most of those who did not complete field experiences wished they had, and every principal who did not complete a PPP *at all* agreed that they would have been better prepared had they performed field experiences. This research, therefore, indicates that programs that include field experiences are more effective in preparing principals than are those that lack field experiences. In addition, the best way to implement field experiences seems to be allowing students and their administrators jointly to choose those experiences. Working principals considered university- or college-scripted experiences to be less useful in their training than were those selected by students or student-administrator dyads. At least partial self-direction seems crucial to perceived effectiveness of principal preparation programs.

This study also highlights which field experiences principals find most effective in preparing them to lead: hands-on experiences that involve leading and working on actual day-to-day principal duties. In terms of SREB recommendations, these activities fall into the categories of *leading*, *identifying*, *interviewing*, and *working*. Current principals also value having had a mentor and shadowing school leaders. By contrast, they roundly denounced merely observing as useless for their future positions. They also seem to endorse modifying current SREB recommendations, which prescribe observation-type field experiences prior to those with increasing participation and leading activities. Finally, at present, future school leaders do not receive enough experience in budget and finance skills or Site-Based Decision Making.

This study focused on Kentucky principals, but including field experiences in principal preparation is of national import. Because most respondents were from rural settings and public schools, follow-up research should include those from urban and suburban locales and those at private and charter schools. Whether PPPs should include an internship where principal candidates focus on active, hands-on roles and be placed with a mentor in a more concentrated time frame should also be examined. Does requiring field experiences help produce Kentucky principals who are ready to lead and, thereby, put the state ahead of the curve in principal preparation? This research clearly shows the importance of making field experiences focused on practicalities of school leadership an integral part of PPPs. The increasing inclusion of field experiences in Kentucky universities and college PPPs with an emphasis on hands-on activities may effectively combat the recent national criticism that principal programs do not adequately “ready” candidates for arguably the most important position in a school -- the principalship.

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