

Launching a Principal Preparation Program for High Needs Rural Schools

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This paper describes the first two years of planning and launching a full scholarship principal preparation program aimed at developing leaders to work in poor rural schools throughout Arkansas. The founding principles that guided the program are explored as well as how those principles were challenged and retained from the initial proposal through funding and implementation. Ultimately the program launched with \$1,954,129 in funding over a four year period and was able to remain innovative while still leading to traditional licensure, remaining consistent with NCATE standards, working within the bureaucratic requirements of a university course delivery model, and meeting the needs of participants and stakeholder in poor rural communities.

The principal shortage is a national problem that is felt most deeply in the poorest and most geographically isolated corners of the country (Farkas, Johnson, Duffett, & Foleno, 2001; Author, 2009; Pounder & Crow, 2005; Roza 2003; Whitaker 2001). Communities that struggle to attract outside talent also tend to have difficulties developing their own home-grown leadership pipelines (Author, 2009). However, our understanding of how candidates are placed and retained in their initial leadership positions indicate that graduates are most likely to be working in leadership positions more quickly if they work in rural areas (Bathon & Black, 2011). Those candidates that are tapped for future leadership positions are often offered limited opportunities to engage in deeply engaging and diverse internships as part of their pre-professional development (Author, 2009). Moreover, it is the depth of those internships and the strong working relationship with a supervising principal that most interns point to as the most valuable part of their internship experience (Geer, Anast-May, & Gurley, 2014). To address these obstacles to ameliorating the principal shortage the University of Arkansas created a pilot program aimed specifically at addressing the needs of poor rural communities.

In 2009 a large scale study of the principal shortage in Arkansas showed that candidate pools for the principalship are more than half what they were ten years ago (Author, 2009). Additionally, there has been a tremendous turnover rate among school leaders in the state. The most dramatic change is among middle school principals who showed an 80% turnover rate over a three year period. The initial draft of the proposal to fund the Principal Fellows Program at the University of Arkansas was drafted in response to the 2009 study on the principal shortage.

As candidate pools for the principalship are shrinking, the problem is exacerbated by number of candidates who are not qualified for the job. A closer look at the quality of candidate pools reveals that of the approximately fifteen applicants urban schools receive (on average), less than half (seven) met the minimum criteria to be considered for an interview. By comparison, close to five met the minimum criteria in rural districts. When superintendents were asked to consider the number of principals hired in the past three years that met all the criteria they were looking for in their search, schools in the Southeast region of the state responded that none of them did.

The sobering reality of the leadership crisis on our horizon is more critical when we consider the important role school principals play in recruiting and retaining highly qualified teachers, promoting student achievement, and establishing a safe learning environment for children. Research consistently shows a positive connection between effective leadership and student test scores, teacher perceptions of working conditions, retention, school safety, and a variety of measures indicating positive school climate. The state of Arkansas needs more experienced and successful educators with outstanding leadership qualities who are willing to take on school leadership roles.

Purpose of Program

The Principal Fellows program was designed to improve upon current school leadership development efforts in and around the state of Arkansas by working closely with school districts to identify prospective leaders and create rich, meaningful and diverse internship experiences. What makes the Principal Fellows program unique even among the most creative, alternative leadership development programs is that it is built to be brought to scale and easily disseminated to existing leadership preparation programs. In other words, it is designed to be an evolution in how leadership preparation is done at its current institution rather than an alternative program

operating alongside a traditional leadership preparation program. Graduates of the Principal Fellows program will earn a traditional school administrators license and the program itself will be NCATE accredited.

The Principal Fellows program was designed to assist high-need local educational agencies (LEAs) in recruiting and training principals (including assistant principals) through such activities as:

- Building a curriculum that moves beyond the knowledge base of school leadership, and focuses on the skills and dispositions of highly effective leaders.
- Embeds the learning experience in a diverse and relevant internship practice - modifying the traditional three credit hour course based approach to meet the needs of working professionals.
- Providing financial support to aspiring new principals.
- Providing stipends and training to principals who mentor new principals.
- Encouraging partner districts to support more site based control.
- Implementing ongoing leadership development programs.
- Assisting school districts in the selection of prospective leaders who show great promise to succeed and persist in a school leadership role.
- Engaging in a rigorous program evaluation to identify best practice in the recruitment and retention of new principals.
- Offering fiscal incentives (scholarships) tied to future service commitments as leaders in persistently low achieving schools.

Preparing for Launch

To accomplish the primary launch goals of the Principal Fellows Program the University of Arkansas hired a staff that included an Executive Director and a Director of Outreach for the Principal Fellows Program whose primary functions were to cultivate Principal Fellows partnerships and program delivery. Among the earliest actions was to identify persistently low achieving, high-need schools as partners. This proved to be elusive at first even though the state offered several school communities that fit the criteria. The initial recruiting efforts were met with skepticism as one superintendent summed up by explaining that the last program that came through to “help” them trained their best teachers to become administrators, and then all of that local talent soon left for better paying jobs elsewhere. It was only after working together to better understand that this program was intended to be a partnership, not an intervention, and that the program’s primary goal was placing the graduates in local leadership positions that strong partnerships emerged.

As partnerships with school districts were forged, the directors began the important process of recruiting a cohort of students. This recruiting process focused not only on advertising the program directly to prospective students, but working closely with current school leaders to develop a process for identifying and encouraging talented educators to consider pursuing a leadership path. The initial proposal called for 20 new students each year to earn a state license in educational leadership through a hybrid-online delivery format offered by faculty at the University of Arkansas and adjunct instructors who were current practitioners.

Students and school districts were offered funding to support richer and more diverse internship experiences in several ways. One of the drawbacks of the traditional internship

experience is that it took place almost entirely in a teachers current school and there was little or no release time provided so it was squeezed into prep periods and time spent after the traditional instructional periods ended. To address that issue, resources to release internship students from their current school were provided so they may spend full days working on their internship in various school settings. Funds were also dedicated to recruit, train, and compensate mentor principals for supervising internships and to support graduates through ongoing mentoring in collaboration with the Arkansas Leadership Academy. Students were also provided with a full tuition scholarship titled the IMPACT Arkansas Fellowship.

Partnering with the Arkansas Leadership Academy

Initially the Arkansas Leadership Academy's Master Principal Program was enlisted as a resource to support the post-placement mentoring and pre-professional onsite supervision of principal candidates. However, as that relationship grew it became clear that the experience, established partners, and core curricular and pedagogical principles of the Arkansas Leadership Academy strengthened the entire program from recruitment through post-placement mentoring.

The Master Principal Program (MPP) was established by the 84th Arkansas General Assembly in the Second Extraordinary Session of 2003 and signed into law as Act 44 by the governor (An Act to Improve, 2004). Act 44 outlined the goals, target population, and financial incentives of the program which was developed and is administered by the Arkansas Leadership Academy (ALA). The rules and regulations for the program were subsequently promulgated by the Arkansas Department of Education (ADE). Because of the success of ALA with Individual, Team, Teacher, Principal, and Superintendent Institutes, state funds were awarded to the Academy to design and implement the MPP. Each Arkansas General Assembly since 2004 has funded the program.

The Master Principal Program is intended to improve principal leadership in Arkansas through professional development and by identifying Master Principals who will serve as role models and serve high-needs schools. The professional development offered by the Master Principal Program consists of three phases, or years, for a total of 10 multi-day residential setting professional development institutes, with work assignments between institutes for job-embedded application of learning. Three to four institutes occur in each of the one-year phases for a cohort of principals. The participants must submit evidence of implementation to proceed through this three-year, state funded, voluntary program. Since change occurs over time and implementation in diverse school settings requires flexibility, the three-year program may be completed within a six-year window.

The Master Principal Program, through the use of research and best practices, delivers innovative approaches which connect principals from across the state into professional learning communities, develop leadership skills, and impact learning for adults and students in Arkansas schools. It is a three-phased program built on five areas of leadership which improve school performance through expansion of the influence of effective leadership with each phase. Successful completion of the program and the evidence based evaluation process results in designated Master Principals who demonstrate leadership taken to scale in the performance areas and an upward trajectory in student achievement.

Legislators (An Act to Improve, 2004) established the Master Principal Program in response to the state's need for improved principal leadership and student achievement results. Now led by graduates of the Master Principal Program, ALA has over twenty years of experience and culture that has been experienced by over 10,000 institute participants. Evidence

of success and a strong reputation of effective professional development practices led to the Academy's influence in leadership development programs in other states and organizations (ALA, 2006).

The ALA Partner Organizations, which include fifteen universities, nine professional associations, fifteen educational cooperatives, the Arkansas Departments of Education, and many others, create support for the Academy and participants in numerous ways from learning activities to political influence. Both Arkansas public schools and the Partner Organizations respond to and influence the context within which all flourish or fail. From its inception, the ALA was designed to drive positive systems change. For schools, that includes changes in the leadership of the school board, superintendent, central office staff, principals, teachers, students, and local stakeholders. The Partners represent the external systems context. As the Partners change their own internal leadership practices, they conversely influence the context for the other Partners and the ALA.

Through a systems approach to leadership development and organizational change, Partners of the Arkansas Leadership Academy represent a diverse group of stakeholders interested in improving school leadership and student success in Arkansas' schools as well as the leadership capacity of their own organization. Both Arkansas public schools and the Partner Organizations respond to and influence the context within which all flourish or fail. From its inception, the ALA was designed to drive positive systems change. For schools, that includes changes in the leadership of the school board, superintendent, central office staff, principals, teachers, students, and local stakeholders. The Partners represent the external systems context. As the Partners change their own internal leadership practices, they conversely influence the context for the other Partners and the ALA.

The research-based curriculum and constructivist approach to learning create an environment for professional growth that is unlike others the principals have encountered. The Master Principal Program Rubrics clearly describe what leadership looks like along the way toward proven successful practices in five performance areas. As a quick-response organization, the Academy and its programs are innovative and adaptive to the changing needs of educational leaders. The five performance areas of the Master Principal Program that drive the curriculum are:

1. Creating and Living the Mission, Vision and Beliefs
2. Leading and Managing Change
3. Developing Deep Knowledge about Teaching and Learning
4. Building and Maintaining Collaborative Relationships
5. Building and Sustaining Accountability Systems

These performance areas capture the essence of what the ALA has identified as best practices in educational leadership. The curriculum activities are designed to build the knowledge and skills of the principals in each of the performance areas through a spiral curriculum. Implementation through a systems approach to change takes the principal and the school community closer to scale in each of the areas.

Staffing

The Principal Fellows model includes four primary groups: The University of Arkansas, the Arkansas Leadership Academy, the school system partners, and the Principal Fellows staff. The staff was initially designed to include three primary people: The Executive Director, the Director of Outreach and the Director of Support. The Executive Director oversees the entire operation and manages the relationships between the various stakeholder groups.

The Director of Outreach for the Principal Fellows Program develops, communicates, invests others in, and manages the delivery of the internship and cohort training, and the ongoing professional development program for new and existing Principal Fellows. This position was designed to be centrally based in the Delta Region of Arkansas so they would be closer the communities this program will serve. The Director of Outreach for the Principal Fellows Program ensures the success of the fellows by fostering close working relationships with the University of Arkansas Principal Fellow leadership team. Responsibilities include traveling to and observing fellows' internship experiences; providing detailed oral and written feedback; communicating with principals, mentors, and other stakeholders regarding fellows' progress; and assisting fellows with long-term goal-setting and monitoring progress towards goals. This individual is also called on to assist with the recruitment and selection process of the fellows.

The Director of Outreach's primary responsibilities include:

- Developing strategies and calendars for accountability in curriculum design, logistics, culture building, recruitment and the application process, and any outside research or public communication needs of the program.
- Overseeing the development of the curriculum (including design or managing the outsourcing of qualified designers).
- Managing the acquisition and proper distribution of resources including training materials and schedules for mentors, fellows, lecturers, workshop facilitators, and other jobs.
- Managing internship and training school sites and resources.
- Proposing and/or verifying all documents, deadlines, schedules, and tasks regarding the planning and facilitation of the training.
- Serve as the go-to and sign-off person for issues in managing and facilitating the training.

The Director of Support is responsible for monitoring the fellow training and individual progress of fellows who receive the IMPACT Arkansas Fellowship. Primary responsibilities include traveling to and observing fellows' professional development; providing detailed oral and written feedback on lesson delivery, classroom observations, and professional development delivery; communicating with professors, Arkansas Leadership Academy facilitators, principals, and other stakeholders regarding fellows' progress; and assisting fellows in implementation of research proposals. The Director of Support may be called on to assist in recruitment, selection, and professional development.

The Four-Stage Student Selection Process

It was determined early on in the process that a heavy emphasis should be placed on the candidate selection process. It was believed that this early investment in recruiting and screening would not only yield a more talented pool of applicants, but also help ensure the program was attracting a strong commitment to work with high needs rural schools after graduation.

Stage One

Applicants were asked to fill out an online application and respond to each of the following questions (200-500 words each).

- Why (do you want/did you choose) to be in school leadership?
- What are two vital traits of an effective leader?
- What teacher practice has the biggest impact on student achievement?

Applicants were then asked to create a 5 to 8 minute video of themselves teaching a lesson and send that as part of their initial application packet. Coaches applying to the program prepared a 5 to 8 minute video of a lesson observation debrief.

The final piece of the initial application was to have their principal send a letter of recommendation to the Director of Outreach for the Principal Fellows Program. This was required not only because it was believed that the principal would be in a strong position to speak to their readiness to pursue a path to leadership, but also because we wanted to ensure buy-in at an early stage so the candidate had solicited and received the principal's support.

Stage Two

Candidates selected to continue to stage two are scheduled for a phone call centered around feedback of the supplied video of a lesson and more conversation regarding leader mindsets. This interview may be conducted by the executive director, the director of outreach, or a University of Arkansas professor. During this one hour interview candidates are told they can expect to discuss their educational experience, philosophies, and aspirations. They discuss their reflections regarding their video feedback and their Myers Briggs results. The Myers Briggs is completed via an electronic link that is provided to the candidates upon transitioning to stage two of the application. They also discuss any questions they may have about the program or the process. Prior to the phone call they receive the following message:

We will be accepting 12-20 candidates for the first IMPACT Arkansas Fellowship cohort. Those accepted will participate in a fifteen month development program. The development will be delivered by professors at the University of Arkansas' College of Education and Health Professions and our partners at the Arkansas Leadership Academy. Fellows will take part in project-based course delivery for many of the credit hours required for the M.ED. in Educational Leadership. We're also working in close collaboration with the Arkansas Leadership Academy. The ALA has developed outstanding and innovative training programs for teacher-leaders and administrators. Fellows will support each other throughout the process and will be supported by IMPACT staff as they implement what they're learning at their respective campuses. This

is a brand new approach to leadership development in the state of Arkansas. We're very excited to pioneer this new, hands-on approach.

Stage Three

This stage features in depth reference checks and a school visit from IMPACT staff and partners at the Arkansas Leadership Academy and the University of Arkansas' Educational Leadership professors. These visits serve two purposes. The first is to get to know the candidates better as educators, and to see the roles they play on their campuses. Staff spend time talking with students, colleagues, and administrators. This will also give the staff a chance to observe candidates in action as educators. The second is to begin to get a picture of how the program can fit in supporting their respective schools. Staff sets up meeting time with administrators about existing systems for staff development, collaboration, and community involvement. This will inform what kinds of projects and proposals might best benefit their respective schools.

Stage Four

The final stage of the application process brings all the finalists together at the same time. The finalists are divided into groups of approximately six each. Each group is given a scenario of a struggling school and asked to come up with short and long term solutions. The group then presents their solutions to a panel made up of faculty, program staff, and experienced educational leaders. Half of the panel observes the brainstorm process, and the candidates presents to the other half of the panel. After both portions of the group exercise are completed the candidates take turns meeting the joint panel for individual interviews. Before calling the candidates in for their individual interviews, the panel meets to compare notes regarding how the candidate conducted him or herself during the collaboration and presentation portions of the day. At the end of this process the panel discusses the entire process and makes recommendations for admission to the program.

Measuring Success

To evaluate the program and its progress towards program goals an outside evaluation team will measure student performance and school climate over the tenure of each Principal Fellow. Standardized tests and End of Course (EOC) scores will be collected to measure student performance and a school climate assessment will be customized for evaluating the impact of the fellows from the Comprehensive School Climate Inventory (CSCI).

To determine if principal fellows are as effective or more effective in increasing student achievement as leaders with similar students in similar districts, the evaluation team will use a "virtual twin" method. Using this analytic strategy, they can conduct an "apples-to-apples" comparison of the students in schools with Principal Fellows and similar students in similar schools from across the state. The quality of this particular type of statistical analysis is dependent on the quality of the comparison groups used. They will carefully develop a comparison group of students from the school districts with similar demographics and then match each student in a school led by a Principal Fellow to a specific peer student (or a virtual twin) with similar or identical starting test scores and similar demographic characteristics from the comparison group. The comparison student will be in the same grade, with the same test scores, free and reduced lunch status (FRL), race and/or ethnicity, and gender.

Sample Outputs:

1. **Conduct Training:** The Principal Fellows program will train 20 Fellows each year, for a total of 60 fellows, to work as school building leaders in high need schools, as recorded in program admissions, enrollment and advising reports.
2. **Curriculum and licensure:** By the admission of the first cohort, the Principal Fellows program graduates will qualify for traditional state building level licensure and the program will be eligible to be NCATE and ELCC accredited as documented by the dean's office in the College of Education and Health Professions.
3. **Provide Pre-Service Mentoring:** By admission of the first cohort, the Principal Fellows program will train experienced and successful school leaders to provide at least 45 hours of mentoring to each Principal Fellow during the training program as documented by internship logs.
4. **Provide In-Service Mentoring:** Upon completion of the first cohort, the Principal Fellows (in collaboration with the Arkansas Leadership Academy) will train experienced and successful school leaders to provide at least 45 hours of mentoring to each Principal Fellow during their first year as a school leader as documented by mentoring logs.
5. **Recruitment:** In advance of admission of each cohort the Principal Fellows program will engage school district leaders throughout the region to join in a rigorous, targeted recruitment and selection process to seek out expert teachers with leadership potential and a commitment to leading in a high need school system as evidenced by the number and engagement of partner districts who nominate potential candidates.
6. **Meaningful internship:** Prior to the start of each cohort's program of study the Principal Fellows program will develop (in partnership with exemplary school systems) a well designed and supervised leadership internship that will serve as a primary delivery mechanism for all training and allow candidates to engage in leadership responsibilities for substantial periods of time under the tutelage of expert veterans as demonstrated by the program curriculum.

Sample Outcomes:

1. **Academic Value-Added:** Student performance will improve after the first year in both reading and math relative to what we would predict it would have given the prior year test score and the background characteristics of the students.
2. **Continuing School Improvement:** Student performance will improve continually over the tenure of the principal as measured by the value added student achievement in reading and math after three full academic years of leadership. The school in each year under the principal's leadership will meet all state Annual Measurable Outcomes (AMO's).
3. **School Climate:** Each academic year, at least 90% of teachers, parents and students will report moderate to high levels of satisfaction on measures of safety, communication and

positive working/learning conditions as reported in a school climate survey conducted by an external evaluator.

4. Principal Fellows, upon completion of their fellowship, will serve in schools where 70% or more of the students are eligible for free and reduced lunch according to demographic reporting provided by the Arkansas Department of Education.

Looking Ahead to Program Sustainability

After the conclusion of the grant period, there are several options that will be explored to ensure program's sustainability. The first option would be for the organization to seek a multi-million dollar endowment (from multiple partners) that would fund the program for an indefinite period of time. This would be a long-term solution that would allow the Principal Fellows program to continue to place leaders in districts as long as they are needed. With the anticipated success of the first four years, we hope for the state of Arkansas to also express interest in the program. Similar to programs like the North Carolina Principal Fellows Program, the Arkansas Principal Fellows program can petition the state of Arkansas to fully fund the program within the Department of Education. If the state does not cover the full balance of the expenses of the program, we may ask that the founding funders or other organizations contribute to fill any gaps in funding. Ultimately though there are components of this pilot program that can have an impact on how school leaders are prepared even if future funding is not available. The opportunity to experiment with new methods of identifying talent and cultivating leadership succession pipelines in rural communities holds great promise for future practice. Moreover, this program will have developed four years of experience in how to more thoughtfully integrate meaningful internship experiences through the curriculum rather than as an add-on to a traditional university preparation program.

Roadblocks to Success

There are two major risks to the success of the program once it is launched:

- Lack of support from school districts
- Low impact of leaders

The Principal Fellows program relies on school districts working with us during three key phases of the project:

1. Identifying potential future leaders
2. Supporting fellows as they take substantial release time from their current duties for their internship experience.
3. Hosting a rich, high quality internship experience.

There is little direct incentive for rural districts to support the Principal Fellows program because, unlike efforts like this in large urban districts, the graduates of the Principal Fellows program are likely to continue their career as educational leaders elsewhere. Fostering a sense of community among partner districts and publicly recognizing their contributions to this effort will

help develop a culture of shared goals and responsibility among districts to promote the development of the next generation of high impact school leaders.

The ultimate goal of the program is not just to address the shortage of high quality leadership candidates in high needs districts, but to develop and support the ongoing development of leaders that will have a strong positive impact on student learning and school climate. While the greatest impact of leadership on learning happens over time as a leader has the opportunity to understand and address the strengths and weaknesses of their staff there are also opportunities early on in a leaders tenure to impact learning and climate. The Arkansas Leadership Academy will be a critical partner in supporting Principal Fellows graduates during their first two years on the job.

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