

Launching a Redesign of University Principal Preparation Programs

Partners Collaborate for Change

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Preface

As part of its deep commitment to improving school leadership, The Wallace Foundation launched the University Principal Preparation Initiative (UPPI) in July 2016. The four-year, \$48.5 million initiative supports seven universities, their district and state partners, and mentor programs to redesign the universities' principal preparation programs according to evidence-based principles and practices. RAND researchers are analyzing the implementation of the initiative and changes in the design and delivery of the principal preparation program. A UPPI goal is to generate lessons that other university principal preparation programs and their partners can adopt or adapt as they undertake their own principal preparation system improvement efforts. To this end, research and reporting on UPPI focuses on cross-site themes rather than on documenting the details of change at each site.

This executive summary provides insight into the first year of UPPI implementation.¹ It will be of particular interest to universities seeking to elevate the quality of their principal preparation programs in evidence-based ways, to districts looking to play an influential role in shaping school leadership preparation, and to state education agencies around the country looking for potential levers to support such work. Following the full report on early implementation, we are planning to release in fall 2020 a report focused on the intersection of UPPI and state reform efforts. The final report on UPPI implementation and changes in candidates' experience is scheduled for publication in 2022.

This study was undertaken by RAND Education, a unit of the RAND Corporation that conducts research on prekindergarten, kindergarten through grade 12 (K–12), and higher education issues, such as assessment and accountability, choice-based and standards-based school reform, vocational training, and the value of arts education and policy in sustaining and promoting well-rounded communities. This research was sponsored by The Wallace Foundation. The Wallace Foundation is committed to improving learning and enrichment for disadvantaged children, with a focus on school leadership, afterschool and summer learning, arts education, and social emotional learning, as well as improving the vitality of the arts for everyone.

¹ The full report (Wang et al., 2018) is available at www.rand.org/t/RR2612.

More information about RAND can be found at www.rand.org. Questions about this executive summary should be directed to Elaine Lin Wang at ewang@rand.org, and questions about RAND Education should be directed to edandlabormgmt@rand.org.

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Acknowledgments

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Our advisory group members were instrumental in helping us refine our study design and pushing us to think about the policy implications of this study. The members are Elaine Allensworth, Doug Anthony, Barnett Barry, Ann Clark, Brian Gill, Ellen Goldring, Erika Hunt, and Paul Manna. Also, our external reviewers, Christopher Nelson of RAND and Maryann Gray of the University of California, Los Angeles, provided valuable comments and guidance that helped us refine both the substance and the organization of our report.

Lastly, several RAND staff members supported the publishing of the full report and this executive summary. Cathy Stasz provided insightful feedback on drafts of the report during the quality assurance process, and Kate Giglio, Paul Steinberg, James Torr, Donna White, and Lea Xenakis assisted with revisions and editing. The authors take full responsibility for any errors in the full report and this executive summary.

Executive Summary

School principals play a significant role in today's public schools (Grissom and Loeb, 2011; Harvey and Holland, 2013; Knapp et al., 2010; Louis et al., 2010). They are charged with complex responsibilities that can include developing a school vision and culture, supporting teacher effectiveness, managing challenges and crises, communicating with the greater community, and more. At the turn of the millennium, however, many public schools faced a crisis in school leadership marked by high turnover, difficulties in finding replacements for departing principals, and a perception that newly hired principals lacked the skills to succeed in their positions (Gates et al., 2003). School district leaders, principals, and preparation program representatives themselves perceived university preparation programs as underperforming in their training of future school leaders (Bottoms and O'Neill, 2001; Briggs et al., 2013; Manna, 2015). A vast majority of superintendents surveyed on this topic in 2016 thought that program improvements were necessary (Davis, 2016). These district leaders rated the level of preparation as "less than effective" on the full set of common school leader competencies, such as recruiting and selecting teachers. Principals themselves were also critical of their preparation, with about half of principals surveyed rating their programs as poor to fair in preparing them to deal with diverse school environments and in-school policies (Davis, 2016). In a 2005 study by Levine, 89 percent of principals surveyed said that their program did not prepare graduates to cope with classroom realities. Perhaps most surprisingly, a fair number of program representatives agreed with this assessment: Davis (2016) reports that more than one-third of program representatives reported that their existing programs did not prepare graduates well.

The limited existing research on university-based principal preparation programs suggests that key features that make such programs successful are lacking. These program features include an emphasis on leadership skills with a demonstrated relationship to student and school success, comprehensive clinical experiences that are linked to coursework, high-quality supervision of clinical experiences, and selective admission into the program (Davis, 2016; Fry, Bottoms, and O'Neill, 2005; Hess and Kelly, 2007; Sherman and Cunningham, 2006). These and additional evidence-based features and contexts of effective university principal preparation programs are presented in brief in Table 1.

Table 1
Evidence-Based Features and Contexts of Successful University Principal Preparation Programs

Feature or Context	Description
Program features	
Coherent curriculum	The program's course of study is focused on instruction and school improvement, integrating theory and practice through active learning and input from faculty with experience in school administration.
Supervised clinical experiences	The program provides opportunities for participants to engage in leadership activities over a long period of time and obtain constructive feedback from effective principals.
Active recruiting	The program searches for high-quality candidates, screening applicants through meaningful assessments.
Cohort structure	The program is structured to provide mentorship and support for candidates.
Program context	
Effective program leadership	Program leaders are able to coordinate all stakeholders, obtain all necessary resources, and put critical program features into effect.
University-district partnerships	The program works with partners in substantive and operative ways that contribute to program sustainability.
Financial support	Program participants are given the support they need to complete the program.
State context	The program's standards are aligned with state standards, such as those related to program accreditation and school leader certification.

SOURCE: Evidence reviewed and compiled in Darling-Hammond et al. (2007).

NOTE: Darling-Hammond et al. (2007) identified a fifth program feature that is not part of the UPPI effort: continuous engagement with program participants, wherein the program offers induction coaching and support to graduates after they have been placed as principals.

In response to concerns about the state of initial principal preparation, The Wallace Foundation established the University Principal Preparation Initiative (UPPI). This four-year, \$48.5 million initiative works toward redesigning universities' principal preparation programs with the support of high-need districts and according to the features and contexts recommended in the emerging evidence base on high-quality principal preparation (Table 1). These features and contexts inform UPPI's three goals:

- Develop and implement high-quality courses of study and supportive organization conditions at universities where future principals receive their pre-service training.
- Foster strong collaborations between each university and its partner school districts.

- Develop state policies about program accreditation and principal licensure to promote higher-quality training statewide.

As of fall 2018, UPPI supports seven universities and their district or consortium partners. These are listed in Table 2. Each partnership also includes a state partner and a mentor program.

Table 2
UPPI Universities and District/Consortium Partners

University	District/Consortium Partners
Albany State University (ASU)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Calhoun County Schools • Dougherty County School System • Pelham City Schools
Florida Atlantic University (FAU)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Broward County Public Schools • School District of Palm Beach County • St. Lucie County Public Schools
North Carolina State University (NC State)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Johnston County School District • Northeast Leadership Academy Consortium • Wake County Public School System
San Diego State University (SDSU)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chula Vista Elementary School District • San Diego Unified School District • Sweetwater Union High School District
University of Connecticut (UCONN)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hartford Public Schools • Meriden Public Schools • New Haven Public Schools
Virginia State University (VSU)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Henrico County Public Schools • Hopewell City Public Schools • Sussex County Public Schools
Western Kentucky University (WKU)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Green River Regional Educational Cooperative, represented initially by three member districts: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Bowling Green Independent School District – Owensboro Public Schools – Simpson County Schools

To better understand the potential and challenges for this type of reform, The Wallace Foundation asked RAND Corporation researchers to conduct a five-year study of how UPPI programs are being implemented and the program’s early results. The first part of the study, documented in the full version of this report, focuses on the implementation of UPPI in its first year, from fall 2016 to fall 2017, and addresses four research questions:

1. **Program Changes:** To what extent and in what ways have university programs modified their principal preparation programs?

2. **Management of the Redesign Process:** How did the university-based leads (ULs)—the individuals from each university leading the overall initiative at that site—manage the redesign process?
3. **Partner Engagement:** To what extent and how did partners (districts, state accrediting agency, mentor programs) support the program change?
4. **Challenges and Mitigating Strategies:** What challenges were encountered in the program redesign process, and how were they mitigated?

To answer these questions, we gathered data through site visits to the seven UPPI universities. We conducted interviews with the UL, university administrators, and leaders of the program, districts, state agency, and mentor program at each site. We also conducted focus groups with principal candidates, program faculty, and district principal mentors; observed UPPI team meetings; and reviewed literature, policy, and UPPI documents to gain insight into principal preparation program changes. The four research questions guided our data coding and analysis. Subsequent reports will offer in-depth assessments and analyses of state reform efforts, program implementation, and candidates' experiences in the redesigned program.

Findings Related to UPPI Implementation

The following findings address the early implementation of UPPI with respect to program changes, management of the redesign process, partner engagement, and challenges. These topics are ultimately interconnected.

Finding 1: UPPI programs began with some evidence-based features and contexts already in place.

Analysis of the data shows that many of the UPPI programs already had a number of the evidence-based features and contexts, summarized in Table 1, in place before beginning the redesign process. For example, university programs had begun to build a **coherent curriculum** that prepared candidates for the demanding work of school principals, and to increase the use of instructors with administrative experience. Moreover, most of the selected programs began UPPI with a **clinical experience component** already in place, although some of these experiences did not reflect desired intensive learning experiences. For example, some programs required part-time internships with activities somewhat divorced from the real work of principals, whereas others required more sustained, on-the-job experiences. Several programs were already conducting **active recruiting**—that is, they had rigorous requirements and used performance-based tasks for candidate selection; other programs were using more traditional and test-based criteria. Most of the UPPI programs were already operating at least one district-based **cohort**; they had admitted a group of principal candidates from a given

district and may have tailored curriculum and clinical experiences to the district needs. Those that did operate district-based cohorts indicated a desire to deepen or expand the cohort approach. Finally, the **districts** were committed to the effort—some of the districts had prior experiences working with the university programs, and **state policy** was generally consistent with the direction of the reform.

Finding 2: UPPI partnerships used the first year to develop a vision for the new program and the redesign process.

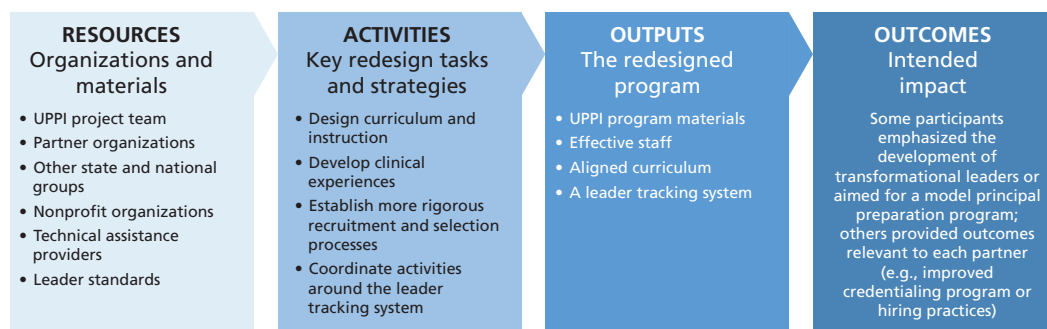
The process of “re-envisioning” the program provided an opportunity to examine and define guiding aspirations for the program, assess where development was needed, and begin to foster partnerships necessary for carrying out the work. The UPPI leadership teams engaged in three primary re-envisioning activities:

- **Standards development:** Each UPPI leadership team worked to develop or identify leader standards for the program. Program leader standards are broad performance expectations and goals for principal candidates graduating from each program. The process of developing standards brought teams together and contributed to identification of gaps in both the program leader standards and state and national leader standards.
- **Program assessment:** Each UPPI leadership team conducted an assessment to better understand the strengths and needs of its existing program. The teams used Quality Measures (QM; Education Development Center, 2009, 2018), a formative program assessment, to support such reflection. Most university programs and their partners described the QM exercise as a foundational experience that helped partners learn about one another’s organizations and perspectives and that facilitated relationship-building. Although the insights generated through QM were not specific enough to support targeted program improvement, partners reported that QM helped their teams to identify gaps and areas of strength.
- **Logic model development:** Each UPPI leadership team worked to develop a logic model that would help guide change. Building logic models supported team-building by helping all partners understand the entire initiative and how the pieces worked together. Furthermore, in developing the logic model, the partners had an opportunity to share their thinking and be heard. This resulted in both a commitment to engage in the work and a logic model that reflected the perspectives of the stakeholders. Logic models took on many different forms but generally had four features, as illustrated in Figure 1.

Finding 3: Each UPPI leadership team focused on redesigning its curriculum and instruction.

Curriculum changes aimed to create more coherent programs by (1) building on core ideas across courses, (2) developing cross-course assessments and assignments, and

Figure 1
Common Features of a UPPI Redesign Logic Model



(3) developing a tighter alignment between courses and clinical experiences. Moreover, in the redesigned curriculum, teams aimed to incorporate districts' perspectives and needs, as well as fill gaps identified through program re-envisioning activities. Some partnerships emphasized the application of adult education theory and research in redesigning their instructional approaches. These teams recognized that their adult students had potentially different learning needs than undergraduate and younger learners. For example, adult learners often bring prior work-related experiences to the classroom, and thus may be more able to engage in reflection based on experience. Teams also discussed greater use of interactive instructional strategies and the need to balance theory and practice.

Finding 4: UPPI leadership teams explored changes to clinical experiences and candidate recruitment and selection.

Although it is early in the process of redesigning clinical experiences, participating partnerships explored several changes in accordance with best practices and UPPI goals:

- aligning clinical experiences with standards and curricula
- providing candidates with realistic principal experiences
- extending the length of the clinical experience
- enhancing the mentoring, supervision, and evaluation of the candidates throughout the clinical experience.

Nearly all partnerships explicitly recognized that to develop practical knowledge and skills, candidates need structured opportunities to engage in activities that reflect the duties of a principal—which generally entails full-time, extended internships. Therefore, teams began to explore options for extending the clinical experience to better develop principal candidates. They also considered ways to improve mentoring, supervision, and evaluation in the clinical experience. For example, they explored

limiting the mentor principal role to highly effective principals, training mentor principals, and shifting the university-based supervisor role so it is less about monitoring candidates for compliance with clinical experience expectations and more focused on actively coaching candidates and supporting their development.

Program redesign efforts also motivated all participating university programs to reflect on their recruitment and selection processes and work toward making them more in line with best practices. Most partnerships recognized a need to maintain or enhance the diversity of the candidate pool along various demographic dimensions, including gender, race, and ethnicity, and limiting selection to program candidates who aspire to be school leaders (i.e., not accepting all candidates willing to pay tuition) and who have the skills, abilities, and experiences needed to succeed in the program. Some teams considered how to effectively incorporate district input and in-depth, performance-based assessments into the candidate selection process.

Finding 5: University-based leads and actively engaged partners drove the initiative in the first year.

ULs in each program played a critical role in the redesign. The dedication, enthusiasm, management, and team-building skills of these leaders kept the initiative on track. It also was important that all organizations engaged on both a strategic and an operational level; staffing on the UPPI teams grew over the year to ensure capacity for this level of engagement. There was a strong emphasis on building and nurturing relationships among partners. Most partners recognized that openness, trust, and a culture of collaboration within teams were essential when working toward change. In part, this was accomplished by establishing a common vision and working backward from this vision to develop roles, responsibilities, and processes to reach partnership goals. Partners actively engaged in curriculum development either as part of cross-organization working groups or by reviewing key materials in their steering groups.

Finding 6: UPPI prompted partner states and districts to consider issues and/or undertake activities they may not have otherwise.

Engaging in the program redesign process prompted some states to consider—and even carry out—policy and practice changes, such as revising state-level leader standards, including the topic of leadership in state events, and scaling deep, formative program self-assessments. State partners also engaged with the UPPI leadership team to help carry out the redesign work, especially in providing guidance on how to align that work with state requirements. However, staff time limitations, as well as political sensitivities, limited state engagement in some cases.

Like states, through their participation in the redesign work, some districts have begun to reassess policies, such as those affecting district hiring practices. Some districts have also developed new collaborations with the university or with other districts. For example, one university-district partnership has begun to collaborate on an initia-

tive to improve the diversity of the teaching workforce. Partly by design, the preparation program work at another site has begun to extend into professional development for sitting principals. Moreover, districts have begun to plan and build a leader tracking system (LTS), a required component of the UPPI effort. There is, however, some disconnect between the districts' expectations for such a data system (e.g., systematically collecting data on aspiring and sitting principals to guide development and placement decisions) and university programs' expectations (e.g., collecting data on program graduates to inform program improvements).

Finding 7: UPPI leadership teams developed strategies to mitigate the most pressing challenges, such as turnover and capacity limitations.

A range of institutional, or contextual, challenges threatened UPPI implementation. The most commonly reported challenge was turnover in leadership roles in UPPI teams or in a partner organization, which caused delays and threatened the continuity of support and vision for program redesign. Another type of contextual challenge involved institutional guidelines, such as lengthy hiring and course approval processes. Partnerships relied on ULs to mitigate these challenges and move the work forward. ULs did so by keeping the team focused on the goal, helping new leaders transition into the UPPI leadership team, and communicating with the university dean and provost about course approval and with state officials about implications of UPPI for policy. Some teams employed more-preemptive strategies (e.g., cross-training members for multiple roles in the UPPI leadership team and mapping deadlines for course approval) early on to help guard against contingencies.

Conclusions and Lessons Learned from the First Year of UPPI

The UPPI redesign process is complex. It involves multiple partners investing substantial time and effort into aligning priorities and long-range planning. Each of the seven UPPI leadership teams dedicated the first year to developing relationships, engaging partners, envisioning its redesigned principal preparation program, and beginning to redesign the program's curriculum. By all accounts, UPPI partner engagement was successful and sustained despite potential institutional barriers. Such engagement supported progress in curriculum redesign and planning of the LTS. In line with the goal of UPPI, advancements in program redesign moved toward evidence-based features. Smooth management of the redesign process depended on a shared vision, the drive of the UL, the establishment of work structures, and the application of tools and processes to support ongoing communication and collaboration.

UPPI partners identified several lessons learned from their first-year experiences. These can inform future UPPI-related principal preparation program reforms and other reforms conducted outside the UPPI effort:

- **Select partner organizations and individuals intentionally.** University respondents learned that, from the outset, selecting the right organizations to partner with and the right individuals within each organization to serve in key roles was crucial. University administrators defined desirable partner organizations as those that value innovative approaches to preparing leaders. Similarly, district partners expressed the importance of faculty being nimble and open to change. Ideally, all individuals working within a partnership should possess excellent communication skills, be a strong voice within their organization, be willing to advocate for UPPI-related activities and decisions, understand how to operationalize redesign ideas, and be able to see the big picture of the initiative.
- **Develop strong relationships early on to encourage commitment and progress.** Individuals from all seven UPPI programs reported learning the importance of developing strong relationships with district and state partners—both organizationally and individually—early in the initiative. Doing so helped to build commitment to both the redesign process and the redesigned program and helped ensure that each element of the program redesign would work to fulfill UPPI aims and meet the needs of each partner—despite inevitable obstacles.
- **It takes time and patience to achieve change.** Effecting change requires patience and commitment to a process that may seem painfully slow at times. While some ULs, leads from partner organizations, and others expressed frustration at the apparent slow pace of progress, they also recognized the benefit of taking the time, especially early on, to build a common understanding of goals, processes, and roles.

UPPI entails a systemic effort on the part of a network of at least four types of organizations (university, school districts or consortium, state agency, and mentor program), each with unique institutional and contextual backgrounds. It requires the partnerships to redesign four program features (curriculum and instruction, clinical experience, candidate recruitment and selection, and cohort structure), drawing on evidence on effective principal preparation, and to develop a leader tracking system to help inform continuous program improvement. Thus far, all seven partnerships appear to be standing up to the challenge: They have established a firm foundation of partnerships, articulated a common vision, developed approaches to manage the work, and initiated redesign of multiple program components.

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