

TRANSFORMING PRINCIPAL PREPARATION IN NORTH CAROLINA

Policy Brief



Business for Educational
Success and Transformation

February 2018

Introduction

Principals are the superheroes of our public schools. They are responsible for establishing and maintaining a positive school culture focused on student success; they lead teams averaging 50 adults – recruiting, developing, and retaining outstanding teachers and staff; they manage a multi-million dollar operating budget; and they serve as the glue between the school and its surrounding community. Further, there is hardly a single documented case of a successful school turnaround without an outstanding leader at the helm. Research suggests that principals are second only to teachers in terms of school-level impacts on student learning, but many would argue principals are actually primary, as great teachers – like every other professional – want to work for a great leader.

Business leaders have a powerful understanding of the value of great leadership, and they recognize a critical executive position when they see it. That’s why BEST NC, a coalition of business leaders dedicated to the positive transformation of public education in North Carolina, made school principals a top priority early after its founding in 2013. At the top of the advocacy list for North Carolina was improving principals’ initial training for one of the most important – and difficult – jobs in the state. Despite some investments in the principalship during the federal Race to the Top initiative, an analysis in 2015 found that North Carolina’s principal preparation statewide was inadequate for the significant demands of the job, particularly in high-need and struggling schools.

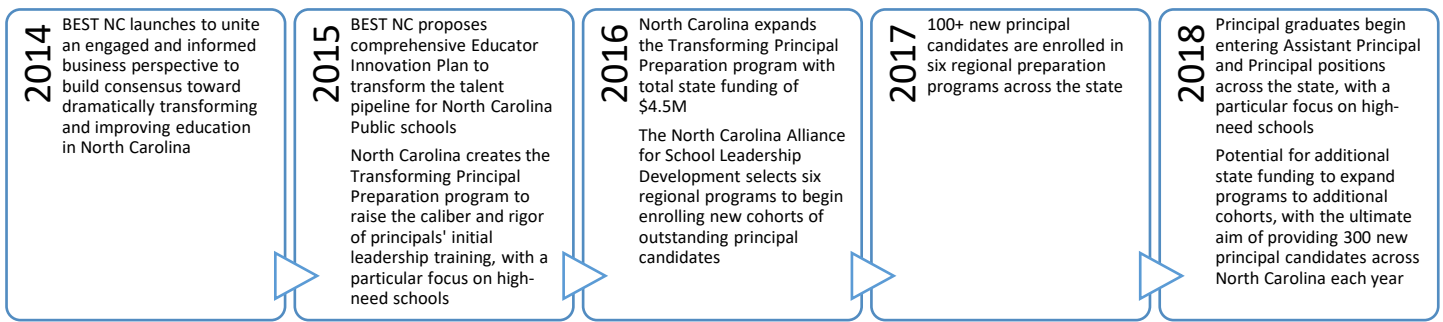
These findings galvanized the business community, which was instrumental in the creation of a new statewide program focused on improving the rigor and relevance of principal preparation across North Carolina. In 2015, the state created the Transforming Principal Preparation program (TP3), a bold effort to redefine principal preparation across the state. Structured as a competitive grant program, TP3 significantly increases North Carolina’s investment in school leadership, while raising the bar on who can serve as a principal and enabling preparation programs to dramatically improve their practices.

The first TP3-approved preparation programs opened their doors to state-funded cohorts in early 2017. Today, six regional programs are serving more than 100 new principal candidates who were rigorously selected in partnership with local districts, with a particular focus on high-need schools.

In this brief, we outline the importance of the principalship and document North Carolina’s investment in a new approach to principals’ initial preparation. We explore the business community’s role in advocacy on behalf of school leaders, and look ahead to additional investments, policies, and communications that can continue to strength North Carolina’s support for school principals.



Figure 1: Transforming Principal Preparation Timeline



Why Principals?

Just as executive leaders are essential to the success of businesses, principals are essential to the success of students and schools. The principal is one of the most important school-based factors impacting student achievement, second only to the influence of the classroom teacher. Indeed, approximately one-fourth of a school's impact on academic achievement can be attributed to the principal.¹ Further, evidence from both business and education confirms that an effective turnaround – transforming persistent low-performance into a successful organization – requires a highly effective leader at the helm.²

Since the start of America's education reform movement – and more today than perhaps ever before – education policy initiatives rely on excellent principals for their success. From raising academic standards and using data to inform instruction, to evaluating teachers and differentiating compensation, policymakers ultimately rely on school principals to carry out their vision for education transformation.

Decades ago in the United States, principals were viewed primarily as supervisors. This is not true today, and has not been for some time, as education reforms of the past half-century have placed increasing demands on the principal and transformed the role from supervisor to visionary change leader.³ The principal holds the highest leadership position in a school, and is responsible for setting the vision for the staff and students, establishing the organizational culture, providing instructional leadership throughout the building, hiring and managing an average of 50 direct reports, overseeing curricular decisions, managing a multi-million dollar budget, and much more. It is a role that requires talent and experience, to be sure, as well as rigorous, relevant training that provides both intensive skills development and meaningful practice on the job.

Education policy agendas are crowded, making it difficult – and rare – to see school principals on the legislative wish list, above many other competing issues. Yet research confirms that high-quality, well-prepared principals are able to dramatically improve outcomes for students. For example:

- Overhaul of principal preparation in Chicago enabled Chicago Public Schools students to outpace improvements among their Illinois peers in almost every demographic subgroup in nearly every grade and subject in less than ten years.⁴
- The New Leaders program, a national alternative preparation program for new principals, has produced school leaders who achieve larger (and statistically significant) performance gains over students in comparable schools.⁵
- North Carolina’s own Northeast Leadership Academy is preparing new principals under a model that was inspired by the Chicago model, and in three years is already producing unmatched results in some of the state’s most challenged and underserved schools.⁶

In short, policies focused on ensuring North Carolina schools have strong leaders should receive more attention. Perhaps nowhere is that more the case than the policy environment for principal preparation.

As one might guess, there is no one “perfect” type of initial preparation for the principalship, primarily because school, district, and state contexts vary dramatically and students’ needs shift over time. However, research suggests several elements that are consistently incorporated into successful principal preparation programs.⁷ An increasing body of literature has found that high-quality principal preparation program structures include:

- Rigorous admission requirements;⁸
- The use of cohorts;⁹
- Relevant and applied practical experience in the form of an extended practicum or internship;¹⁰ and
- Authentic partnerships between programs and local schools and districts.¹¹

North Carolina’s Regional Leadership Academies under Race to the Top

In 2010, under the federal Race to the Top program, North Carolina created three regional leadership academies with federal funds—the Northeast Leadership Academy, Piedmont Triad Leadership Academy, and Sandhills Leadership Academy. These academies were formed based on key elements found in the most successful principal preparation programs at the time.

However, when Race to the Top funding expired, two of the three (Piedmont and Sandhills) Leadership Academies shut down. Only one – the Northeast Leadership Academy, operated through North Carolina State University – was able to secure separate federal and private funding to continue its operations. NC State University now oversees two of the six state-funded programs awarded grants under the Transforming Principal Preparation program (TP3). In addition, the region previously served by the Sandhills Leadership Academy is now a partner in the Sandhills Regional Education Consortium Leadership Academy under TP3.

Challenges in North Carolina’s Principal Pipeline

Unfortunately, in North Carolina – as in most states – principal preparation that includes these research-based elements has been the exception, rather than the norm. Historically, the state has played a very limited role in preparing future leaders for success.

In 2015, understanding the critical role of the principal and importance of their initial preparation, BEST NC sought to study the condition of principal preparation within the state’s public university system. At the time, the research base on principal training within North Carolina specifically was nascent, and

publically-available statewide data almost non-existent. As a research-driven organization dedicated to advocating for policies that are informed by data and evidence, BEST NC needed more recent and relevant research on which to base its policy recommendations.

This original research, undertaken by a Master’s student at Duke University’s Sanford School of Public Policy, uncovered several alarming trends, including:

- Teachers self-select into the profession, with most principal preparation programs in North Carolina accepting nearly 100% of applicants, with very little proactive recruitment.
- By default, teachers are the primary “consumer” of principal preparation programs, rather than the districts or schools that they will serve. Programs are incentivized, therefore, to offer the least expensive, fastest option – with an increasing number offering programs completely online, as “add-on” programs with only a few short courses, and/or night classes while candidates also teach in a K-12 classroom, full time.
- Most principals enter the profession in North Carolina without any on-the-job training. In other professions, individuals with executive potential are groomed in-house or receive residency experience that prepares them for their new role as a leader. Yet North Carolina does not require a full-time residency for principal candidates to gain supervised practice leading a school.
- Relationships between districts and principal preparation programs vary widely, but are generally informal with district feedback having very little if any influence upon the preparation program’s students, content or structure. ¹²

North Carolina is not unique in these respects, nor is the challenge a new one, as studies since the 1980s through the present day have uncovered similar shortcomings in principal preparation nationally.¹³ Despite the critical importance of the role, a thoughtful approach to school leadership training is simply not the norm. It is no wonder that districts, when pressed, therefore express general disappointment with the candidate pools available to them for the principalship.¹⁴

The Role of the Business Community

In 2013, in response to a growing concern that North Carolina’s education system was failing to adequately prepare students for college and the new workforce, a group of business leaders formed a non-partisan, non-profit coalition of CEOs dedicated to state-level advocacy in support of public education in North Carolina. Inspired by impactful practices in other states, BEST NC (Business for Educational Success and Transformation in North Carolina) was formed with the mission to “unite an engaged and informed business perspective to build consensus toward dramatically transforming and improving

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education in North Carolina.” BEST NC works to achieve this mission by convening a broad constituency; encouraging collaboration around a shared, bold vision for education; and advocating for policies and programs that will significantly improve education in North Carolina.

BEST NC directly advocates for state education policies and investments by fostering strong, trusting relationships with policymakers; informing legislative committees and debates with data and facts; and sponsoring pro-student and pro-educator communications such as videos, social media campaigns, and publications.

As business leaders, BEST NC members understand the importance of great talent in their own professional organizations, which makes BEST NC a natural advocate for elevating educators as the greatest in-school factor for student success. Since its founding, the organization’s advocacy agenda has focused on the “Educator Innovation Plan,” a comprehensive set of policies and initiatives designed to recruit, develop, retain, and reward the best teachers and principals in the nation. The Educator Innovation plan calls for strategic and sustained investments in teacher and principal salaries, the creation of teacher recruitment scholarships for hard-to-staff subjects and schools, teacher leadership and alternative compensation pilots across the state, and targeted investments in high-quality recruitment and initial preparation for school principals.

The Educator Innovation Plan

- *Strategic and sustained investments in teacher & principal salaries*
 - *Teacher recruitment scholarships for hard-to-staff schools & subjects*
 - *Teacher leadership & alternative compensation pilots*
 - *Targeted investments in high-quality recruitment & principal preparation*
-

Transforming Principal Preparation (TP3) in North Carolina

As part of the Educator Innovation plan, a top priority for BEST NC has been expanding the state’s investment in initial preparation for school principals, particularly for service in high-need schools and districts where outstanding candidates are in short supply. BEST NC’s business members have encouraged state leaders to invest in traditional and non-traditional, public and private programs that significantly raise the entry requirements for school leadership and provide candidates with deep, closely supervised, school-based leadership experience to support improved student outcomes.

In 2015, BEST NC worked successfully with state lawmakers in the House and Senate to create and provide seed funding for a transformative approach to new principal preparation. The initiative is known by the title of its original bill, “Transforming Principal Preparation,” or TP3. Introduced in the House as HB902, TP3 was incorporated into the state budget in 2015 with an initial investment of \$1M.¹⁵

The TP3 policy makes state funds available to principal preparation programs through a competitive grant program. Traditional public and independent institutions of higher education are eligible to apply, as are non-traditional, non-profit routes of entry. Through the incentive of state funds, TP3 integrates the key research-based components of successful principal preparation nationwide, including:

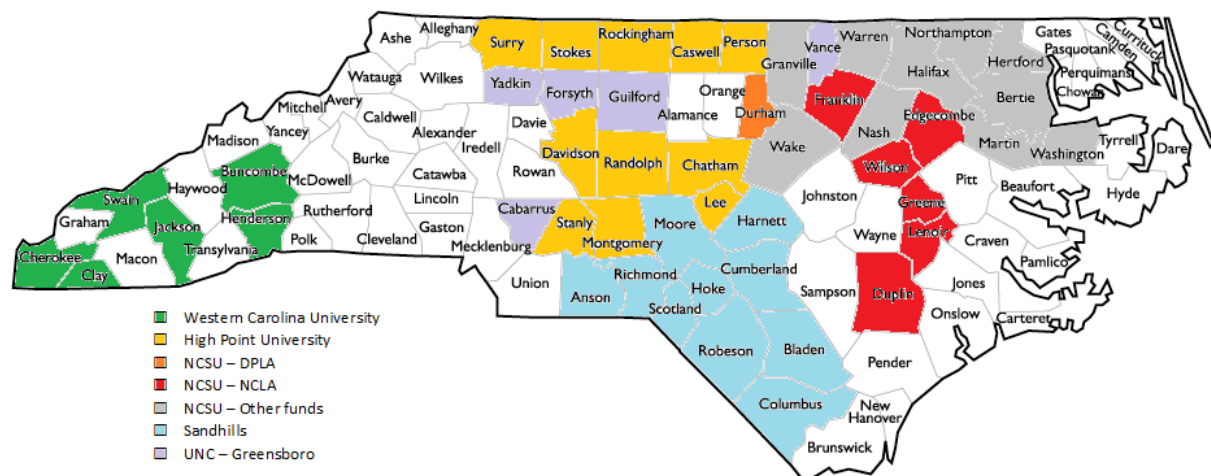
- Proactive, intentional recruitment efforts;
- A high bar for entry;
- Rigorous and relevant coursework;

- A full-time, paid residency; and
- A focus on authentic partnerships with and preparation for service in high-need schools and districts.

An overarching focus of this approach, in addition to recognizing and rewarding the state’s most outstanding preparation programs, is to empower institutions to flip the traditional “customer” relationship from one focused on principal candidates’ available time and ability to pay, to one dedicated to students’ and schools’ needs. By investing state funds to subsidize candidates’ tuition and residency, North Carolina is enabling institutions to be highly selective with new candidates and provide them the deep, practice-based preparation research suggests they need. No longer forced to chase tuition dollars, North Carolina’s TP3 programs are able to make K-12 students, schools, and districts their primary customer.

The North Carolina Alliance for School Leadership Development (NCASLD), a non-profit organization based in North Carolina and allied with the state principals’ association, was selected by the state’s Education Assistance Authority (a quasi-governmental agency associated with the UNC System) to oversee the program. NCASLD was chosen through a competitive process to make grant awards and oversee renewals on a five year-basis. NCASLD issued its first RFP in the spring of 2016, and awarded a grant from the initial \$1M in state funds to North Carolina State University (which operates the Northeast Leadership Academy) to expand its cohort into Durham, a high-need urban district in the Research Triangle region.

Figure 2: TP3 Programs and Partner Districts



During the 2016 Legislative session, North Carolina significantly expanded funding for TP3, bringing the total recurring state investment to \$4.5M. At the conclusion of the session, the NCASLD issued a second RFP and selected an additional five institutions to prepare principal candidates in the western, piedmont, and coastal regions of the state. Each program selected new principal candidates in late fall of 2016, and began serving participants in January 2017. In 2017-18, the six programs are serving approximately 120 principal candidates with \$4.2M in state funds each year (\$300K is set aside each year for program administration and evaluation). The six programs represent partnerships with 46 districts (40 percent) across the state.¹⁶

The first two cohorts recruited and trained under TP3 will be eligible to assume leadership roles in NC public schools in fall of 2018. At full scale, approved principal programs under TP3 have the potential to prepare approximately 300 principals every year, or roughly enough candidates for every open position in North Carolina's 2,500 schools.

North Carolina's New Regional Programs

In its first year, the TP3 program led to state investments in six regional programs, operated by five university-district partnerships across the state (see Figure 2). The program's initial grantees are:

- High Point University's Leadership Academy;
- UNC Greensboro's Principal Preparation for Excellence and Equity in Rural Schools Program;
- North Carolina State University's Durham Leadership Academy and North Carolina Leadership Academy;
- Western Carolina University's North Carolina School Executive Leadership Program; and
- The Sandhills Regional Education Consortium Leadership Academy.¹⁷

Each of the TP3 programs is operated by a traditional institution of higher education (three public universities and one private) with the exception of Sandhills Leadership Academy, which partnered with the University of North Carolina at Pembroke and a local school district as its fiscal agent. The TP3 grantees were selected through a competitive process based on their proposed program alignment with the research-based components of highly-successful principal preparation programs, as well as specific priorities of the North Carolina General Assembly, including:

- An aggressive and intentional recruitment strategy;
- Rigorous selection criteria based on competencies that are predictive of success as a school leader;
- Rigorous coursework that effectively links theory with practice;
- Full-time paid clinical practice of at least five months and 750 hours in duration;
- Multiple opportunities for school leader candidates to be observed and coached by program faculty;
- A process for continuous program improvement based on feedback from partnering districts and data from program completers, including student achievement data; and
- Dynamic partnerships with districts that are used to inform and improve the program.¹⁸

In addition, grantees were required to show prior success in preparing principals for high-need school environments, or to propose a research-based design. Priority was given to programs that demonstrated a commitment and capacity to prepare leaders for high-need, low-performing schools.

Table 1: Scope and Scale of TP3 Grantees

Grantee	Participants	Partner Districts	2-Year Budget	State Investment Per Candidate*
High Point University Leadership Academy	30	9	\$1,781,415	\$59,381
North Carolina State University – Durham Principal Leadership Academy	14	2	\$998,553	\$71,325
North Carolina State University – North Carolina Leadership Academy	20	6	\$1,771,724	\$88,586
Sandhills Regional Education Consortium Leadership Academy	26	11	\$1,607,040	\$61,809
University of North Carolina – Greensboro Principal Preparation Program in Rural Schools	20	11	\$1,782,460	\$89,123
Western Carolina University Executive Leadership Program	10	7	\$429,559	\$42,956
Total	120	46	\$8,370,751	\$69,756

* Individual program budgets vary considerably, and often invest significantly more in principal candidates than state funds reveal by leveraging funding matches with partnering districts and/or private philanthropy.

An independent, legislatively-mandated evaluation of the TP3 program in year one found that each of the grantees demonstrated alignment with all of the required elements, to the degree they could be assessed at that point in the program. Specifically:

- *Proactive recruitment and a high bar for entry.* Approved programs used a variety of recruitment strategies to identify potential candidates for the principalship, including traditional methods such as recruitment websites, brochures, and email blasts, as well as more tailored, intensive strategies such as meeting with local Boards of Education and superintendents to request specific endorsements. In contrast to the nearly 100% acceptance rates at most traditional principal preparation programs, TP3 grantees carefully screened each candidate for admission, averaging a 36% acceptance rate (ranging from 60% to 22% across programs). One shortcoming identified in some programs, however, was a lack of racial, gender, and age diversity in the new principal cohorts. The level of candidate diversity varies significantly across TP3-funded programs, with some serving much more diverse groups of educators than others. Taken as a whole, each cohort also is more diverse than the current principal population in North Carolina.¹⁹

Table 2: Gender and Racial and Ethnic Background of TP3 Principal Candidates

	Male	Female	Total	Percentage*
American Indian/Alaska Native	0	1	1	1%
Asian	0	0	0	0%
African American	8	32	40	33%
White	31	46	77	64%
Hispanic/Latino	2	0	2	2%
	34%	66%		

*Current North Carolina principals are 73% white and 60% female.

- *Paid, full-time residencies.* Each of the approved programs under TP3 sponsors an intensive residency program for principal candidates, one of the research-based components of highly-effective preparation. Five of the six programs sponsor a rigorously-selected principal mentor for each of their principal residents, assign faculty to supervise the residency, and provide leadership coaching independent of the host school district.²⁰ In addition, due to policy changes that BEST NC championed and the state adopted in 2017, all residencies are required to engage candidates for at least five months during the school year, and be fully-funded (either by the program provider or partner district) to ensure that the residency can be full-time without creating financial barriers for candidates.
- *Authentic partnerships with high-need districts.* Early on, a particular strength of the six TP3 programs – especially when compared with traditional principal preparation in North Carolina and nationwide – appears to be close, dynamic working relationships between the provider and local districts. Because applicants were required to demonstrate evidence of partnerships to be eligible for grant funds, they formed relationships with multiple districts even before recruiting candidates, drawing upon districts’ need for more, higher-quality principal candidates. In the first few months of the program, partnerships focused on joint recruitment and selection of candidates. As candidates’ residencies begin, the collaboration is shifting more toward aligning coursework and supporting principal candidates through strategic placements.²¹

Looking to the Future

North Carolina has taken a critical step forward to better support new principals for success by implementing and funding TP3. With the state’s investment in this competitive program, more than 100 talented educators across the state now have access to rigorous, relevant initial training for the principalship, with a particular focus on the crucial needs of students in under-served communities and schools. It will take continued legislative commitment and advocacy by the business community and others, but over time the program has the potential to scale to prepare every new principal in the state – a crucial part of North Carolina’s constitutional obligation to provide each student with access to a “sound, basic education.”

As champions for the program from its passage to initial expansion, BEST NC has an important role to play in supporting TP3’s successful implementation, from trumpeting successes across the state and nation, to facilitating communications among program directors and policymakers; from helping to hold each TP3 provider and the program accountable for outcomes, to advocating for program expansion. This policy brief is the first in a series of publications that we hope will facilitate broader sharing of lessons learned, celebration of success, and documentation of challenges along the way.

In just the first year of implementation, for example, two challenges have arisen with TP3 that will require active collaboration, communication, and policy advocacy to address. First, governance of the program is complicated, with grant-approved programs reporting to the NCASLD, an independent non-profit organization with deep expertise in the principalship but no connection to the state nor established infrastructure for distributing state funds. The NCASLD further reports to the North Carolina State Education Assistance Authority (NCSEAA), a quasi-governmental state agency with ties to the University of North Carolina system. NCSEAA has final authority over all grant awards and renewals, but no content expertise in the preparation of public school principals. Talented and committed leaders have thus far

been able to make this arrangement work, but all stakeholders will need to continue to assess the governance structure to ensure the success of the TP3 program and its stability for the future.

Second, since 1993 North Carolina has sponsored the Principal Fellows Program, a forgivable loan program offered at 11 of the 16 campuses within the University of North Carolina system that provides a full-time residency for qualified candidates.²² The program is quite distinct from TP3, as it focuses primarily on recruitment rather than program quality, and does not specifically prepare nor require candidates to serve in struggling schools. Nonetheless, both programs focus on leadership and sponsor a full-time residency at least partially with state funds. North Carolina's leaders will need to continue to assess each program's outcomes to inform future decisions about investments, alignment, and clarity for principal candidates.

More challenges like these are likely to arise in the future, and as an initial champion of the program mission-driven to advocate for school principals, BEST NC is dedicated to partnering with program administrators, principal candidates, policymakers and the broader education community to help resolve them. BEST NC's members understand that in schools, as in every industry, great leaders are a critical investment. North Carolina's strategic investment in – and continuous improvement of – principal preparation for high-need schools is a critical one, for the future of the state's public schools, economy, and most importantly, North Carolina students.

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