

What Makes Them the Best? An Analysis of the Relationship between State Education Quality and Principal Preparation Practices

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Abstract This article examines the relationship between principals' training experiences and perceived school quality in seven U.S. states. Current school principals were surveyed regarding their perceptions of the comparative effectiveness of field experiences in the principal preparation program (PPP) each attended. States were selected to represent high, middle, and low scorers in the annual *Education Week* "Quality Counts" report (Education Week, 2014). Surveys were emailed to school principals in Kentucky, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Mississippi, Nebraska, and South Dakota; the response rate was over 17 percent. Most respondents completed field experiences as part of their PPPs and considered many of those experiences to have been valuable learning tools. Principals from the highest-ranked states identified data-driven analysis as having helped prepare them the most, while principals from two of the three lowest-ranked states mentioned working with curriculum and data analysis and involvement in teacher observations and/or evaluations as field experiences that helped prepare them the most. This research found strong support for expanding the use of field experiences in principal training, especially as part of a longer PPP period or internship. It also indicates a need for more budget and finance training, teacher observation and evaluation training, curriculum training, and student discipline training.

Keywords Principal Preparation Program (PPP); Field Experiences; Internships

Richard L. Dodson. (2015). What Makes Them the Best? An Analysis of the Relationship between State Education Quality and Principal Preparation Practices. *International Journal of Education Policy & Leadership* 10(7). URL: <http://journals.sfu.ca/ijepl/index.php/ijepl/article/view/634/152>

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Introduction

Every nation has a vested interest in the effective education of its citizens. Arguably, the most important position in a school is the principal. It is widely believed that a good principal is the key to a successful school (Branch, Hanushek, & Rivkin, 2013). As Leithwood and Riehl (2003) said, “Scratch the surface of an excellent school and you are likely to find an excellent principal. Peer into a failing school and you will find weak leadership” (p. 2). Without a high-quality principal at the helm, a school’s students are unlikely to enjoy successive years of effective teaching (Briggs, Davis, & Rhines Cheney, 2012). It is crucial, then, that future principals be trained successfully to become leaders who are ready to steer the ship, so to speak. Whether universities and colleges adequately prepare future principals is currently a hot topic of debate in the United States.

Nationwide, school officials have criticized college and university Principal Preparation Programs (PPPs) for not ensuring that graduates are ready to assume the principalship. In short, school districts need personnel with skills to step right in as effective leaders with minimal on-the-job learning. Perceived shortfalls in extant PPPs have prompted some districts and cities to construct their own principal “readiness” programs to supplement PPP coursework, adding hands-on experience, mentoring, and training in district-specific information and initiatives (Zubrzycki, 2012; Turnbull & Haslam, 2010). Has this effort been successful? If so, one would expect to see a correlation between district or state education quality rankings and the use of tailored, hands-on training for new school principals. This article examines whether such a correlation indeed exists at the state level.

State education quality rankings

For the past 17 years, *Education Week* has ranked all U.S. states and the District of Columbia in education using six categories: K–12 Achievement; Standards, Assessments & Accountability; Teaching Profession; School Finance; Transitions & Alignment; and Chance for Success (an index that combines information from 13 indicators covering residents’ lives from “cradle to career”). U.S. states and the District of Columbia also receive overall scores and letter grades based on the average of scores over the six categories. This article examines states with *Education Week* rankings in the top, middle, and bottom ranges.

Table 1. *Education week* state rankings

State	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	6-yr. average
Maryland	1	1	1	1	1	1	1.0
Massachusetts	2	3	3	2	2	2	2.3
Kentucky	41	37	34	14	10	9	24.1
Maine	17	21	27	28	33	35	26.8
Mississippi	48	47	48	45	48	46	47.0
Nebraska	47	49	51	50	46	45	48.0
South Dakota	46	48	49	51	51	51	49.3

According to *Education Week's* "Quality Counts" report, Maryland has been the top state in education quality from 2009 through 2014, while Massachusetts has been ranked either second or third during those years. On the other end of the spectrum, Mississippi, Nebraska, and South Dakota have been ranked near the bottom in education for the past six years. Mississippi sat at 47th overall over the six-year period; Nebraska averaged 48th; and South Dakota averaged an overall ranking of 49.3 during the same period (see Table 1). Two states that have ranked in the middle over the six-year span are Maine and Kentucky. Although Maine averaged an overall ranking of 26.8, it has progressively dipped in the rankings, from 17th in 2009 to 33rd in 2013 and 35th in 2014. Kentucky, on the other hand, averaged 24.1 during the six-year span but has progressively risen, from 41st overall best state in 2009 to 10th in 2013 to 9th in 2014. (The rankings include the District of Columbia, which increases the total number to be ranked to 51. *Education Week* did not rank states in their 2014 findings. However, they gave each state [and the District of Columbia] scores in each of the six categories and then provided an overall average score. The reader was then able to rank states in order, which this researcher did.)

Significance of this study

Given the widespread acknowledgment that future principals need practical, hands-on experience prior to actually leading a school, this article examines the relationship between such training and perceived school quality in seven states. The first three states represent the high (Maryland), middle (Kentucky), and low (Mississippi) ends of the *Education Week* rankings, and all are members of the Southern Regional Educational Board (SREB), the nation's first interstate compact for education, which serves 16 Southern states. As SREB members, these states' principals should have received hands-on experiences as part of their principal preparation programs. A stated goal of SREB's Learning-Centered Leadership Program is the inclusion in PPPs of "substantive field-based experiences" that "place aspiring leaders in a variety of school settings to solve real problems of practice. Continual field experiences should be integrated with course work and guided by a mentor or a coach" (Bottoms, Egelson, & Bussey, 2012).

Although SREB calls for field experiences to be part of coursework taken by future principals, the Maryland State Department of Education (2013) does not require field experiences *per se* in principal preparation coursework, although it does require an administrative internship.

For this study, "field experiences" are defined as those activities principal candidates perform as part of their principal preparation coursework. Such activities typically vary based on course content and may range from observing, to participating in, to leading school operations and activities. Field experiences are tied to specific course objectives. By contrast, "internship" in this study is tied directly to administrator responsibilities as performed on a daily basis and is distinct from PPP course requirements and activities. Internships by definition may be more fluid and unpredictable than are field experiences. Further, although an internship may include the same types of activities as those performed during field experiences, an internship comprises an extended commitment during which the principal candidate is placed usually in one school setting, typically for a whole semester or year.

Requirements and recommendations for field experiences versus internships in PPPs vary by state. For example, at Towson University future principals must complete a 300-hour supervised internship (Towson University, 2013). Kentucky's Department of Education requires all PPPs to include field experiences as part of the coursework (Kentucky Department of Education, 2013). By contrast, the Mississippi State Department of Education *recommends* including field experiences in PPPs, and some universities and colleges do require field experiences as part of their coursework. For example, two years ago at Mississippi State University, the Department of Leadership and Foundations decided to "embed clinical experiences throughout classes" (Commission on Teacher and Administrator Education, 2012). These clinical experiences were described as field-based assignments that either are conducted in a P–12 school setting or require the student to use authentic school documents, projects, and simulations. Student work responsibilities vary in these clinical experiences, but the assignments continuously push the students to "think and behave like a school leader" (Commission on Teacher and Administrator Education, 2012). In short, all three SREB-member states recognize the importance of practical, authentic training for principalship.

In addition to Maryland, Kentucky, and Mississippi, this study involves principals currently working in Massachusetts, another state ranked highly by *Education Week*, and in Maine (middle-level ranking), Nebraska (low-level ranking), and South Dakota (low-level ranking). These states vary in whether they require, recommend, or do not address field experiences as part of principal preparation programs. Like Maryland, the Massachusetts Department of Education requires future principals to complete an administrative internship of at least 300 hours of field experience working with a "trained mentor and engaged in projects and professional activities" (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2003), but does not mention field experiences as a requirement in the state's principal preparation coursework. The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (2012) acknowledges that most aspiring administrative leaders lack "sufficient in-depth, real-time field experiences working directly in schools and districts with a supervisor ... to support and strengthen their development as highly effective leaders" (pp. 7–8). Besides the state-required internship, this department *recommends* that principal candidates engage in "real-world classroom-based experiences" which might include project-based learning, case studies, and role-play, as well as extended field-based experiences. The goal is to "assist in raising the level of expectations for candidates seeking administrative leadership licensure ... by accepting the challenge to create rigorous, challenging, practice-based programs that reflect an outcome-based curriculum ..." (pp. 7–8).

Like Kentucky, Nebraska's Department of Education requires its future principals to take courses that incorporate field experiences. State policy mandates that all students engage in "field-based internship experiences in which the candidate will participate in planned and authentic school-based field experiences embedded within courses during the entire duration of the program as assigned by institution faculty and approved by the on-site mentor[;] ... document all field experiences[;] ... [and] participate in field experiences that occur in a variety of school leadership settings

that allow candidates to demonstrate a wide range of relevant knowledge and skills” (Nebraska Department of Education, 2013).

The Maine and South Dakota Departments of Education do not address course-work-based field experiences, but they do require internships. Principal certification in Maine requires a graduate-level, state-approved administrator internship or practicum program of at least 15 weeks (Maine Department of Education, 2013). Similarly, South Dakota stipulates that future principals complete an internship that includes “all job responsibilities of the principalship at the age/grade span for which authorization is sought” (South Dakota Department of Education, 2013). In sum, three of the seven states (Maryland, Massachusetts, and Mississippi) require principals to have completed an internship *and* recommend that principal preparation programs include field experiences. Two states (Maine and South Dakota) require an internship but do not mention field experiences as part of coursework. Two states (Kentucky and Nebraska) require field experiences as part of coursework.

Research questions

Whether they require course-based field experiences or internships, all seven state departments of education clearly accord great importance to practical experience in readying new principals for their duties. Principals themselves also consider field experiences essential to their readiness for the job—provided those experiences involve actual principal duties (Dodson, 2014). The present study builds on previous research regarding the perceived effectiveness of field experiences in principal preparation programs to determine whether the quality of education in a state shows a relationship with specific aspects of its principals’ training. Of particular interest is whether certain types of field experiences tend to produce better-prepared principals and, by extension, higher-quality schools. With this in mind, the current study addresses the following questions:

1. What commonalities and differences exist among the highest-ranked, middle-ranked, and lowest-ranked states in their principal preparation programs in regard to using field experiences in coursework?
2. Is there a relationship between the ranking of states in education quality and how they prepare their principals in regard to field experience requirements?
3. Which field experiences do principals consider the *most* effective in each state?
4. Which field experiences do principals consider the *least* effective in each state?
5. What type(s) of field experiences should be added to principal preparation programs in each state?

Methodology

A survey was sent to all principals in Kentucky, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Mississippi, Nebraska, and South Dakota whose email addresses could be obtained. States were chosen to represent high, middle, and low rankings in *Education Week’s* annual “Quality Counts” report on the quality of education in the United States. At the same time, an effort was made to represent different geographic regions in the U.S.

A link to the field experiences survey was sent via email (the survey itself is located on Survey Monkey). The survey was first directly emailed to every school district superintendent in each state, requesting that they forward the survey to all of their principals (assistant principals were not included in the survey). The survey was then directly emailed to all public school principals in the six states. An introduction letter to the principal accompanied the survey link. A different Survey Monkey hyperlink was provided for each state's set of school principals.

The survey used a Likert-scale attitude measure as well as forced choice (yes/no) and open-ended questions. Questions examined principals' perceptions of field experiences' impact on their preparation to be school leaders. The survey also asked what changes in the field experience requirements the principals would like to see in the programs they attended (see Appendix).

Results

Response rates varied by state. The states with the highest response rates were Kentucky (29%), Maine (21%), South Dakota (21%), and Nebraska (20%). Lower rates were obtained for Maryland (16%), Mississippi (16%), and Massachusetts (9%). In three states, the potential pool of respondents was restricted. In Maryland, officials from five counties—Frederick, Montgomery, Howard, Charles, and Baltimore—declined participation on behalf of their roughly 850 principals because, as one official put it, “due to a refocus of BCPS priorities around the Common Core, the district is not accepting external research requests at this time” (G. Brager, personal communication, February 5, 2014). As a result, only an estimated 500 principals in Maryland were available to complete the survey. Similarly, there are over 175 principals in the Omaha Public School District, but officials declined participation due to “[t]ime commitment required by principals” (J. Zahm, personal communication, February 10, 2014); this left an estimated 800 principals in Nebraska available to respond to the survey. In Kentucky also, one school district opted out of the research: Jefferson County officials declined to participate, citing “numerous surveys and the timing of this proposal” (M. Munoz, personal communication, April 3, 2013); this decreased potential respondents from over 1100 to about 900 principals. In sum, an estimated 5,800 principals in the seven states combined could have responded to this survey; 1,006 actually participated, yielding a response rate of slightly over 17 percent. This surpasses the average external online response rate of 10 to 15 percent (SurveyGizmo, 2010; PeoplePulse, 2013).

Participant gender, education, age, and experience level

For most states in this study, just over half of respondents (51% to 57%) were female. Maryland provided an exception on the high side, with 65.4 percent of respondents female, while Nebraska (26.5% female) and South Dakota (42.5% female) respondents were more likely to be male. Education levels also were similar, with the largest group of respondents for every state having achieved the Master's degree plus 15 hours of coursework. This subgroup ranged from a high of 88 percent of Kentucky respondents to a low of 47 percent of Mississippi respondents. Notably, 18.8 percent of Massachusetts respondents reported having a doctorate.

Respondents' ages tended to fall in the 46- to 55-year range, with the exceptions of Kentucky and Mississippi, whose largest proportion of respondents fell into the 41- to 45-year age range (25.6% and 24.4%, respectively). Experience levels were fairly consistent, with most respondents having been school principals for less than eight years and the highest proportion for every state except Maine having less than five years' experience. Among Maine's respondents, a slightly larger group (25%) reported five to eight years of experience as a school principal compared with four or fewer years of experience (23%).

Participant school type, location, and level

An overwhelming majority of respondents from all seven states were employed in public schools (ranging from 93.4 percent of South Dakota respondents to 100 percent of Maryland respondents). Considering school location, the largest subgroup of respondents for Kentucky, Maine, Mississippi, Nebraska, and South Dakota reported working in a rural location. Among these states, Maine had the highest percentage of principals in rural locales (70% of respondents); Mississippi had the lowest (53.4%). By contrast, respondents from both Maryland and Massachusetts were more likely to work in suburban schools (44.9% and 44.4% of respondents, respectively). Finally, for every state except Nebraska, the largest subgroup of responding principals led elementary-level institutions, with percentages ranging from 42.4 percent of South Dakota respondents to 61.5 percent of Maryland respondents. Among Nebraska principals, 37 percent (the largest subgroup) reported leading at the high school level.

Summary participant description

Of the 1,006 respondents who completed the survey, slightly more than half (50.3%) were male, while 49.7 percent were female (see Table 2). The majority of respondents were between ages 41 and 55 years. Regarding the highest degree level, 63 percent of all respondents said they had a Master's degree plus 15 hours of education courses taken; nearly 25 percent had a Master's only; and 12 percent had earned a Doctorate. Most had relatively little experience as a working principal, and 32 percent reported having been a school principal for less than five years. Public school principals accounted for 97 percent of respondents. Only 1 percent worked in a charter school, and another 1 percent listed their schools as "other." This category included "Tribal school," "Vocational," "State operated facility for juvenile girls," "Day treatment program school," "Department of Defense school," and "University of Kentucky school." Half of all respondents reported working in a rural educational setting; about one in five worked in a town or suburban setting; only 11 percent served as principals in urban schools. Almost 44 percent said they worked in elementary schools, nearly 25 percent in secondary schools, 23 percent in middle schools, and 8 percent in Pre-K/K-12 schools. The average respondent, then, worked in a rural, public elementary school, was male with a Master's plus 15 hours, was between the ages of 46 and 50, and had been a principal less than five years.

Table 2. Participant demographics

N = 1,006	Percentage of respondents	N = 1,006	Percentage of respondents
Gender		Highest level of ed.	
Male	50.3	Master's degree	24.8
Female	49.7	Master's degree + 15	63.2
		Doctorate degree	11.9
Age in years		Years as a principal	
36–40	12.1	0–4	31.5
41–45	18.5	5–8	24.8
46–50	20.0	9–12	19.9
51–55	17.9	13–16	11.7
School setting/location		Type of school	
Rural	50.0	Public	97.2
Town	20.7	Charter	01.0
Suburban	18.3	Other	01.3
Urban	11.0		
Instructional level			
(Pre)K–12	08.1		
Elementary	43.8		
Middle/Junior High	23.0		
Secondary	24.9		

Principal preparation program completed

Although it falls at the bottom of the *Education Week* rankings among the seven states studied, South Dakota leads the states in its rate of principal preparation program completion: 97.2 percent of responding school principals in South Dakota had completed a PPP (see Table 3).

Table 3. Respondents' principal preparation programs (PPPs)

N = 1,006	Percentage of respondents	Percentage of respondents	Average Education Week rank
PPP completed		PPP completed at in-state institution	
South Dakota	97.2	80.8	49.3
Nebraska	96.8	92.8	48.0
Kentucky	94.1	96.0	24.1
Mississippi	92.3	90.1	47.0
Maine	85.8	87.1	26.8
Maryland	82.1	89.6	1.0
Massachusetts	78.8	86.1	2.3

Principals from Nebraska, also a state with a low *Education Week* ranking (48 average), reported the next-highest rate of PPP completion—96.8 percent. The other lower-ranked state in this study, Mississippi, reports a comparatively high rate of

principal preparation program completion, at 92.3 percent. Besides South Dakota and Nebraska, only Kentucky's rate (94.1%) is higher. Kentucky is a middle-ranked state that recently has been rising in the *Education Week* evaluation, with a 6-year average rank of 24.1 but a 2014 rank of 9.

Maine and Maryland principals reported similar rates of PPP completion, although their *Education Week* rankings differ considerably, with Maryland consistently ranked 1st and Maine falling in the middle range and on a downward trend (six-year average: 26.8). Nearly 86 percent of Maine respondents had completed a PPP, compared with just over 82 percent of Maryland respondents. Finally, principals in Massachusetts reported the lowest rate of PPP completion, at 78.8 percent. Along with Maryland, Massachusetts consistently receives a high ranking from *Education Week* (number 2 or 3 for the past six years).

Overall, across the seven states studied, most survey respondents have completed a principal preparation program, and most have done so at an in-state college or university (see Table 3). Completion of a PPP in itself does not appear to be related to overall quality of education in a state as gauged by the criteria used in the annual *Education Week* "Quality Counts" report: the two highest-ranked states (Maryland and Massachusetts) reported the lowest rates of PPP completion, and the two lowest-ranked states (South Dakota and Nebraska) reported the highest rates. If completion of a PPP itself does not greatly influence education quality, do specific types of hands-on training enhance fledgling principals' readiness for the job and, thereby, overall school quality? This question is examined next.

The importance of field experiences in principal preparation

Although principals in Massachusetts were the least likely to have completed a principal preparation program, they were the *most* likely to have engaged in field experiences as part of such programs, with 90.4 percent of them doing so. Again, however, the presumed link between practical, hands-on training and principal quality as a foundation for school quality and, by extension, education quality does not appear to be straightforward. Only 67.2 percent of top-ranked Maryland principals reported having had field experiences as part of their PPPs. Further, both South Dakota principals (81.6%) and Nebraska principals (88.2%) were *more* likely to engage in field experiences than were Maryland's principals. Principals from both of the middle-ranked states reported completing field experiences at lower rates (Kentucky at 60% and Maine at 63.6%). Finally, among Mississippi principals who completed a PPP, 62.1 percent did so in a program that included field experiences. Overall, 73 percent of all respondents in the seven states completed field experiences during their PPPs.

While there may be no clear relationship between having performed field experiences before serving as a school principal and a state's perceived education quality, the principals themselves believe that such practical training helps prepare them to lead schools. Massachusetts respondents were the most likely to say that field experiences helped prepare them for principalship (98.1%), followed by Mississippi (97.4%), Maine (95.5%), Maryland and South Dakota (both at 95.4%), Kentucky (91.4%), and Nebraska (90.6%). Further, among those principals who did *not* com-

plete a PPP, 80 percent reported that they would have been better prepared as a principal had they performed field experiences beforehand. Maryland principals provide a contrast: of those Maryland principals who did not complete a PPP, only 50 percent reported that they would have been better prepared had they performed field experiences beforehand.

Types of field experiences

The survey provided respondents with a list of field experiences aligned to critical success factors (CSFs) recommended by SREB to be included as part of all principal preparation programs in the southern region, including Maryland, Mississippi, and Kentucky. These field experiences fall along a continuum of school-based experiences that range from merely observing, to participating in, to leading school operations and activities. SREB-recommended field experiences include: identify and *observe* an experienced school leader who will serve as a confidante and professional mentor; *observe* a sample of student transcripts to determine course-taking strategies and review student educational and career plans when available; *participate* in a school/business partnership and analyze its influence on student learning; *participate* in a curriculum review to identify changes needed in the school's curriculum.; and *lead* an initiative for updating a school/parent handbook and website.

Among the seven states studied, school principals who completed PPPs report having performed fairly similar types of field experiences as part of their programs. For example, over 80 percent of those who engaged in field experiences *interviewed school leaders who have implemented changes that impact student learning* (ranging from 82 percent of Nebraska respondents to 96 percent of Kentucky principals who completed a PPP). Similarly, more than three-quarters of each state's principals who had field experiences *identified and observed an experienced school leader who served as a confidante and professional mentor* (ranging from 75% of Nebraska respondents to 91% of Maryland respondents who completed a PPP). *Leading an initiative for updating a handbook and website* was less common, although it was done by roughly half of Maine and Nebraska principals who had completed a PPP and by 65 percent of South Dakota principals who had completed a PPP.

Principals from all seven states studied reported the same top three most frequently performed field experiences during their PPPs: *identify and observe an experienced school leader who will serve as a confidante and professional mentor* (top for Maryland; second for all others); *interview principals and other instructional leaders who have implemented changes that impact student learning* (second for Maryland; top for all others); and *observe the school leader discussing a new instructional program with others* (third for every state). For most states, the fourth and fifth most common field experiences were *participating in parent information night in which standards, grade level expectations and scoring guides are explained* and *participating in a curriculum review to identify changes needed*. In short, while some variation appeared in the precise frequencies with which each state's principals had performed different field experiences, overall, the most often engaged-in experiences were similar across all seven states.

While principals tended to perform the same types of field experiences most frequently regardless of their home state, they also displayed similarities in the types

of field experiences they were *least* likely to have performed. For example, though it was engaged in much less frequently than the others, one field experience also emerged as common to principals from every state: at least one in ten principals from each state (and one in four in Mississippi) *led the development of a school website or listserv discussion group devoted to sharing best practices among the faculty on communicating with the community*. Similarly, *observing a sample of student transcripts to determine course-taking strategies and review student educational and career plans* tended to rate among the least-performed of field experiences, with one in four or fewer principals engaging in this activity in most states. Overall, while there were some commonalities in the least-performed field experiences, there also was more variation across states than was found for the most-often-performed activities.

Helpful and unhelpful field experiences

In addition to reporting which field experiences they had performed in their PPPs, principals were asked to evaluate the quality of those experiences in light of their actual work leading schools. Respondents cited a wide variety of experiences that they considered beneficial, but patterns did emerge across the seven states. In particular, for every state except Mississippi, respondents described *interviewing, observing, and/or shadowing a school leader* as being among the most helpful field experiences in their training. One Maine respondent noted that this was useful because the observed principal “modeled good practices for working with students, teachers, and parents.” Similarly, a Maryland respondent reported that shadowing a working principal “provided insight into responsibilities of the job.”

Beyond simply shadowing a school leader, many respondents cited the benefits of a mentorship relationship: “Work with [an] experienced school leader as mentor provided ongoing support and [the] opportunity to ask questions, observe, and test ideas” (Kentucky respondent). One Mississippi respondent noted, “I was fortunate to be in a situation where my mentor during this year-long program treated me as [a] true assistant principal and expected me to do that caliber of work.” Ideally, a mentor provides insight, opportunities to observe the actual, day-to-day challenges of leadership, and an effective role model; for many principals in this study, this was indeed the case. Only Mississippi’s principals did not tend to list *observing or shadowing a principal* as the most useful field experience. Instead, they most often mentioned *working with curriculum, data analysis or gathering, and involvement in teacher observations and/or evaluations* as most beneficial. Other states whose principals identified engaging in teacher observations and evaluations as most useful were Nebraska and Massachusetts.

Principals from the two top-ranked states (Maryland and Massachusetts) overlapped considerably in which field experience types they found valuable for their current positions. These principals listed as most useful *observing or shadowing a principal, conducting data-driven analysis, and observing or engaging in parent-related issues*. Responses describing the value of observing included: “Observed the preparation of a school budget [because it is an] important aspect of the job,” and “Observe the school leader discussing a new instructional program with others [because] it was an actual leader doing what leaders do...lead.” Maryland principals were more likely

to cite *observing or shadowing* as the most beneficial field experiences, whereas Massachusetts principals more often cited *data-driven analysis* and *dealing with parent-related issues*. Massachusetts principals also included *dealing with student discipline issues* and *curriculum review* as among the most helpful field experiences. One Massachusetts principal noted, “Participat[ing] in a curriculum review provided opportunities to understand targeted areas for improvement more deeply.” Other states whose principals often mentioned *curriculum review* as particularly helpful were Maine, Mississippi, and Nebraska.

Actually *leading* a school activity also made the list of useful experiences cited by Maryland principals. This included, for example: “Lead data-driven faculty meeting [because] it is what drives decision-making,” and “Leading a new program with staff and students to make it successful.” Interestingly, the other states whose principals frequently cited *leading* activities as most beneficial were Nebraska and Kentucky; Kentucky’s principals were the most likely of any state’s to describe *leading* activities—as opposed to *observing*—as the most beneficial experiences. Examples included: “Lead Faculty Meetings [because of] presentation and discussion of Curriculum;” “Leading data driven faculty meetings [because] instructional leaders need experience using data;” and “Opportunity to lead professional development [because I] gained experience, self-confidence, and research skills.”

Field experiences that allow aspiring principals to perform the authentic duties of acting principals clearly benefit those in training. Across all seven states, working principals seem to agree that field experiences such as *performing lunch or hallway duty*, *attending meetings* without participating in them, and *completing paperwork* lack utility. Examples included: “Cafeteria duty [because] there were no set school-wide rules” (Mississippi respondent); “Be present at meetings [because it provided] little benefit to personal growth” (Massachusetts respondent); “Observing parent meetings [because I] didn’t have enough background information” (Kentucky respondent); “Collecting artifacts [because it was] busywork” (South Dakota respondent); and “Maintaining attendance records [because it was] just paperwork” (Maryland respondent). The exception here was Maine’s principals, some of whom listed *attending board meetings* as among the most beneficial field experiences in their PPPs.

In sum, across all seven states, the field experiences that tended to be described as most beneficial to actually performing the job of principal were: data-driven analysis, budget-related issues, curriculum review or alignment, parent-related issues, teacher observations and evaluations, and working directly with a mentor.

Missing field experiences

In addition to evaluating the quality of the field experiences they performed in their PPPs, respondents were asked which changes, if any, they would make to their PPPs in order to enhance their effectiveness in preparing future principals for the job’s challenges. Not every respondent provided suggestions, but there were clear commonalities among those who did. At least some principals from every state expressed a desire for more *hands-on training*, most often in the form of an *internship*. Comments included: “I think [the internship] should last an entire school year” (Massachusetts respondent); “Have more internship hours rather than activities” (Maryland respon-

dent); “More time to have on-site experiences” (Nebraska respondent); “It needs to be more like student teaching—immersed in the position” (South Dakota respondent); and “More in field experience hours—the more time in the role, the better the experience and knowledge” (Kentucky respondent).

In addition to devoting more time to hands-on experiences, a variety of suggested improvements emerged in the principals’ comments. For the most part, there were clear differences by state. Respondents from both Maryland and Kentucky would have liked more training in *budget and finance* issues. Comments included: “Being able to think out of the box with budget cuts and meeting high expectations set by regulations—such as the Program Review process” (Kentucky respondent). Massachusetts principals tended to want more training in *teacher observation and evaluation*. In addition, both Massachusetts and Mississippi respondents indicated a need for more *curriculum-related* training: “How to align curriculum” (Mississippi respondent); “More time on common core curriculum . . .” (Massachusetts respondent). More than other states’ principals, those in Nebraska tended to want more *student discipline* training. Finally, Kentucky’s respondents distinguished themselves as a group in their desire for more training regarding *site-based decision-making (SBDM)* issues. Less frequently mentioned desired experiences included: scheduling, Title I issues, building school culture, creating effective communication with staff, and data collection.

In sum, working principals identified an array of field experiences that they believe would have enhanced their readiness for the job. The common thread through all of these was practice performing the authentic responsibilities of a principal, with a mentor who was genuinely interested in the future principal’s training.

Conclusions

There seems to be widespread agreement that future principals need abundant prior hands-on practice to step in as effective school leaders. What constitutes the most useful types of practice, and do specific types of principal training correlate with education quality in a state? Some patterns did emerge. Nearly all principals agreed that field experiences positively affected their readiness for the job, and 80 percent who did not complete field experiences agreed that they would have been better prepared had their program included such experiences. Reflecting on the field experiences they performed during their PPPs, principals from the highest-ranked states identified *data-driven analysis or gathering* as field experiences that helped prepare them the most, while principals from two of the three lowest-ranked states mentioned *working with curriculum, data analysis, and involvement in teacher observations and/or evaluations* as field experiences that helped prepare them the most.

Many principals from all seven states also wanted a *longer PPP period*, specifically an *internship*. The Educational Leadership Constituent Council (ELCC) apparently agrees and in 2011 required that principal preparation programs provide significant field experiences and clinical internship experience for candidates to “synthesize and apply the content knowledge and develop professional skills . . . through authentic, school-based leadership experiences” (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2011). The ELCC-prescribed internship experience may include two non-continuous clinical internships of six months each, or two four-month clinical

internships with four months of field experiences, or an equivalent combination, with 9–12 hours of field experiences per week. An example of a PPP currently working to incorporate internships into coursework can be found at Murray State University (2013) in western Kentucky, where principal candidates complete a smaller number of field experience hours in some courses in their principal preparation program, then a much larger number in three PPP courses entitled *Internship 1, 2, and 3*.

Principals from all seven states agreed that the *least* beneficial field experiences involved activities viewed as purposeless or not meaningful for a school leader to perform. Clearly, future principals in all seven states feel they benefit most from field experiences in which they work with experienced administrators who deal with day-to-day practical leadership rather than simply observing a board meeting, walking halls, or having cafeteria or playground duty. At least some principals from all seven states agreed that PPPs should include in their coursework more *budget and finance training, teacher observation and evaluation training, curriculum training, and student discipline training*.

There is no clear-cut relationship between requiring field experiences or internships and overall education quality in the states studied. There also does not appear to be a straightforward link between the types of field experiences performed as part of principal preparation programs and overall education quality. Some experiences—particularly *data-driven analysis* and *dealing with parent issues*—did seem to be more common in higher-ranked states. This might suggest the power of data-driven activities to improve schools and overall state education quality. It remains an open question as to whether the top-ranked states employ data-driven improvement strategies more than do other states, and whether such strategies might pave the way for lower-ranked states to rise in the evaluation.

Finally, the two top-ranked states' principals were the *least* likely of all the principals participating in this survey to have completed a principal preparation program; two of the lowest-ranked states' principals were the *most* likely to have completed such a program. What conclusions are principal educators to draw from this finding? Has the nationwide push by school districts to supplement university programs with mentoring and additional training to ensure that principals are ready to lead schools been especially productive in high-ranking states? Do principal preparation programs matter more in some states—which perhaps lack other resources—than in others? It may be that higher-ranked states reporting the lowest rates of PPP completion have more *rigorous* programs than lower-ranked states with higher completion percentages. Although it is beyond the scope of this study, this possibility should be examined in future research.

This study scratches the surface of these questions and strongly suggests the need for additional research into just what makes a school principal effective and just what the relationship is between principal quality and a state's overall education quality. Of particular concern might be ensuring that future principals have the best current principals as mentors in every state, and that they enjoy as much opportunity as possible to work alongside them. In addition, the findings in this study should be compared to similar research done in other nations that have examined whether a connection exists between school principal training experiences and regional dif-

ferences in educational quality. Regardless of the particular region or culture studied, it seems reasonable to expect that hands-on, practical experiences would serve not just U.S. but all school administrators well.

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Principal Preparation Field Experiences Survey

State Education
Quality and Principal
Preparation
Practices

Please answer each question based on your personal experience in your principal preparation program.

1. Have you completed a principal preparation program?
A. ____ Yes, I have completed a principal preparation program.
B. ____ No, but I am currently enrolled in a principal preparation program.
C. ____ No, I have not completed a principal preparation program and I am not currently enrolled in a principal preparation program.*
* If you answered C, please skip to question 19. Otherwise, continue with question 2.

2. In what state did you complete (or are enrolled in) your principal preparation program? _____

3. At what college or university did you complete (or are enrolled in) your principal preparation program?

4. I had to complete field experiences as part of my principal preparation program's requirements.
A. ____ Yes
B. ____ No*
* If you answered no, please skip to question 19. Otherwise, continue with question 5.

5. The field experiences I performed as part of my coursework had an effect on my preparation for principalship.
A. Strongly agree
B. Somewhat agree
C. Somewhat disagree
D. Strongly disagree

6. The field experiences I performed had a positive impact on my preparation for principalship.
A. Strongly agree
B. Somewhat agree
C. Somewhat disagree
D. Strongly disagree

7. The field experiences I performed had a negative impact on my preparation for principalship.
- A. Strongly agree
 - B. Somewhat agree
 - C. Somewhat disagree
 - D. Strongly disagree
8. Please check which field experiences, if any, you performed.
- A. Observe a sample of student transcripts to determine course taking strategies and review student educational and career plans when available.
 - B. Complete an inventory of extra-curricular activities and determine if opportunities for participation are available to all students.
 - C. Administer, analyze, and share the results of a student satisfaction survey with appropriate groups.
 - D. Interview principals and other instructional leaders who have implemented changes that impact student learning.
 - E. Participate in a curriculum review to identify changes needed in the school's curriculum.
 - F. Lead a data-driven faculty meeting discussion that supports change that will enhance student achievement.
9. Please check which field experiences, if any, you performed.
- A. Participate in a 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.
 - B. 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.
 - C. Observe parent training for a school wide improvement initiative.
 - D. Participate in the design of a parent involvement program.
 - E. Participate in an analysis of parent involvement with the school.
 - F. Lead an initiative for updating a school/parent handbook and website.
10. Please check which field experiences, if any, you performed.
- A. Observe a principal presenting the school improvement plan to the board.
 - B. Participate in a school/business partnership and analyze its influence on student learning.
 - C. Lead in facilitating a panel discussion with school and community leaders.

- _____ D. Observe the school leader discussing a new instructional program with others.
- _____ E. Identify and observe an experienced school leader who will serve as a confidante and professional mentor.
- _____ F. Lead a faculty presentation on the steps in developing a professional growth plan.

11. Please indicate which of the field experiences you performed helped prepare you the most for the principalship.

- A. Field experience: _____
Why? _____
- B. Field experience: _____
Why? _____
- C. Field experience: _____
Why? _____
- D. Field experience: _____
Why? _____
- E. Field experience: _____
Why? _____

12. Please indicate which of the field experiences you performed did not help prepare you for the principalship.

- A. Field experience: _____
Why? _____
- B. Field experience: _____
Why? _____
- C. Field experience: _____
Why? _____
- D. Field experience: _____
Why? _____
- E. Field experience: _____
Why? _____

13. Select the statement that most closely describes your experience.

- A. My administrator chose which field experiences I performed.
- B. I alone chose which field experiences I performed.
- C. My administrator and I chose which field experiences I performed, but my administrator chose more of them.
- D. My administrator and I chose which field experiences I performed, but I chose more of them.

14. I was pleased that I chose the field experiences.

- A. Strongly agree
- B. Somewhat agree
- C. Somewhat disagree

D. Strongly disagree

E. N/A

15. I was pleased that my administrator and I chose the field experiences.

A. Strongly agree

B. Somewhat agree

C. Somewhat disagree

D. Strongly disagree

E. N/A

16. I was pleased that my administrator chose the field experiences for me.

A. Strongly agree

B. Somewhat agree

C. Somewhat disagree

D. Strongly disagree

E. N/A

17. Were your field experiences aligned to the Southern Regional Educational Board (SREB)'s 13 Critical Success Factors?

A. _____ Yes

B. _____ No

C. _____ I don't know

18. What changes, if any, would you like to be made to the field experience requirement in your principal preparation program?

A. _____

B. _____

C. _____

19. My principal preparation program would have better prepared me to be a principal if it had included field experiences.

A. Strongly agree

B. Somewhat agree

C. Somewhat disagree

D. Strongly disagree

20. Please list the types of field experiences that would have better prepared you to be a school principal.

A. _____

B. _____

C. _____

D. _____

E. _____

F. _____

Please answer the following concerning your career and school.

What is your current position at your school? _____

In what type of school are you employed?

1. Public 2. Private 3. Charter 4. Magnet 5. Other

In what instructional level at the school are you employed?

(Check all that apply.)

1. Elementary 2. Middle/junior high 3. Secondary
4. (P)K-12

How many years have you been a principal?

1. 0-4 years 2. 5-8 years 3. 9-12 years 4. 13-16 years
5. 17-20 years 6. 21-25 years 7. 26+years

What is your gender? Female Male

What is your highest degree level?

1. Undergraduate degree 2. Undergraduate degree + 15 hours
3. Masters degree 4. Masters degree + 15 hours
5. Doctoral degree

What is your age?

1. 21-24 2. 25-30 3. 31-35 4. 36-40
5. 41-45 6. 46-50 7. 51-55 8. 56-60 9. 60+

In what setting/location is your school?

1. Urban 2. Suburban 3. Town 4. Rural

THANK YOU!!!

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