

FROM LEADERSHIP STANDARDS TO PRACTICE: PRINCIPAL PREPARATION AND INTERNSHIP-BASED LEARNING

Tyler Kulp and Michele Parker

This systematic narrative review synthesizes research on the evolving role of school principals, the leadership standards shaping their work, and the effectiveness of principal preparation programs in the United States. Drawing on a structured, multistage search and screening process, the review examines shifts in leadership expectations and accountability frameworks over the past 2 decades with particular attention to national- and state-level standards, including the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders. Across the literature, persistent gaps emerge between leadership standards, program design, and leadership readiness through the integration of theory and practice. Emphasis is placed on internship and fieldwork experiences as central components of effective preparation with evidence suggesting that sustained, standards-aligned clinical experiences strengthen leadership competency, instructional capacity, and readiness for the principalship. While examples from North Carolina illustrate state-level responses to these challenges, the analysis situates these initiatives within a broader national context to identify shared trends, implementation variations, and implications for strengthening principal preparation.

Keywords: principal leadership, principal standards, principal preparation programs, North Carolina principal, internship

The educational preparation of school principals is central to the success of schools and students nationwide (Marzano et al., 2005). Given the pivotal role of principals in student achievement and school improvement, the lack of robust research on effective preparation models raises concerns (Darling-Hammond et al., 2022; WestEd, Learning Policy Institute, & Friday Institute for Educational Innovation at North Carolina State University [WestEd], 2019). Specifically, research on equity and quality of fieldwork and internship opportunities remains limited (Crow & Whiteman, 2016; Ni et al., 2022). Scholars such as Darling-Hammond (2007), Murphy et al. (2008), Levine (2005), and Elmore (2000) have argued that principal preparation programs in the early part of the 21st century often lacked the essential training needed to prepare leaders for the realities of school leadership.

The principalship has undergone substantial transformation over the past 2 decades, shaped by expanding expectations for instructional leadership, intensified accountability pressures, and rapid changes in school environments. Yet principal preparation programs have not kept pace with these shifts. Persistent misalignment remains between what programs offer and what contemporary leadership roles demand, particularly in areas such as data literacy, curriculum and instruction, clinical experience, alternative pathways, and ongoing professional learning. Although extensive

research exists on principal leadership, national standards, and preparation models, significant gaps endure. Rising principal turnover, uneven program rigor, and inconsistent attention to mental health, equity, and modern professional development needs highlight the urgency for reform. Only a limited number of programs demonstrate clear evidence of innovation or a measurable impact on candidate readiness. As a result, a comprehensive review is needed to clarify what is known, what remains underdeveloped, and what requires renewed attention to strengthen today's principal preparation pipeline.

Given the persistent gap between evolving leadership expectations and current preparation practices, examining the program components most strongly associated with principal readiness is essential. Among these, internships and other forms of clinical fieldwork consistently emerge as the most influential yet also the least well-designed and implemented. As programs work to align curricula, standards, and experiential learning with the complexities of contemporary school leadership, understanding the design, quality, and outcomes of internship models becomes increasingly critical. This review, therefore, turns to the role of internships within principal preparation, positioning them as a central lever for addressing the widening gap between what the job requires and how leaders are trained.

Internships serve as the primary bridge between leadership theory and practice, offering sustained opportunities for aspiring leaders to develop instructional, managerial, and community engagement competencies in authentic school settings. However, national trends reveal substantial variation in the structure and quality of these experiences from full-time residencies to part-time placements to programs with minimal or no fieldwork requirements. Although standards-based frameworks such as the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL) increasingly shape expectations for clinical practice, alignment between these standards and actual internship experiences remains inconsistent. Challenges persist surrounding access to high-quality placements, the depth and capacity of mentoring relationships, and variability in expectations for instructional leadership practice. By synthesizing national and regional perspectives, including illustrative examples from North Carolina, this review highlights both the promise and the limitations of current internship models and underscores the implications for strengthening principal preparation pipelines across diverse contexts.

Overview of the Iterative Search Strategy

This review employed a 5-stage, iterative search and screening protocol designed to ensure transparency, replicability, and thematic coherence (see Figure 1). The strategy combined structured database searches, predefined inclusion criteria, standards-based conceptual alignment, and multistage screening procedures. Search parameters were refined iteratively to enhance specificity and ensure saturation of relevant literature.

Stage 1: Systematic Collection

A structured search was conducted using the following databases and source types:

- Education Resources Information Center (ERIC)
- ProQuest
- Peer-reviewed regional journals
- Policy reports
- Publications from national professional organizations

Search terms were applied consistently across databases with minor adaptations to account for platform-specific indexing. Reference lists of highly relevant studies were also scanned to identify additional eligible sources.

Stage 2: Scope and Inclusion Parameters

To minimize selection bias and maintain analytic focus, explicit inclusion criteria were established prior to full-text review (see Table 1). Studies were required to

- be published between 2005 and 2025;
- focus on United States–based principal preparation programs;
- include substantive analysis of internship, residency, or fieldwork components; and
- demonstrate conceptual or policy alignment with contemporary leadership standards.

Studies that did not meet these criteria were excluded during screening.

Stage 3: Standards Alignment: Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium to PSEL

The 2005–2025 timeframe was selected to capture the evolution of policy from the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) standards to PSEL. This transition reflects a shift from managerial leadership models toward instructional, equity-centered, and professional practice frameworks. Alignment with this standards evolution served as a conceptual filter during full-text review to ensure consistency in the theoretical framing of included studies.

Stage 4: Multistage Screening and Review Protocol

Screening occurred in two sequential phases.

Phase 1: Title and Abstract Screening

All identified records were evaluated against the predefined inclusion criteria to determine preliminary eligibility.

Phase 2: Full-Text Review

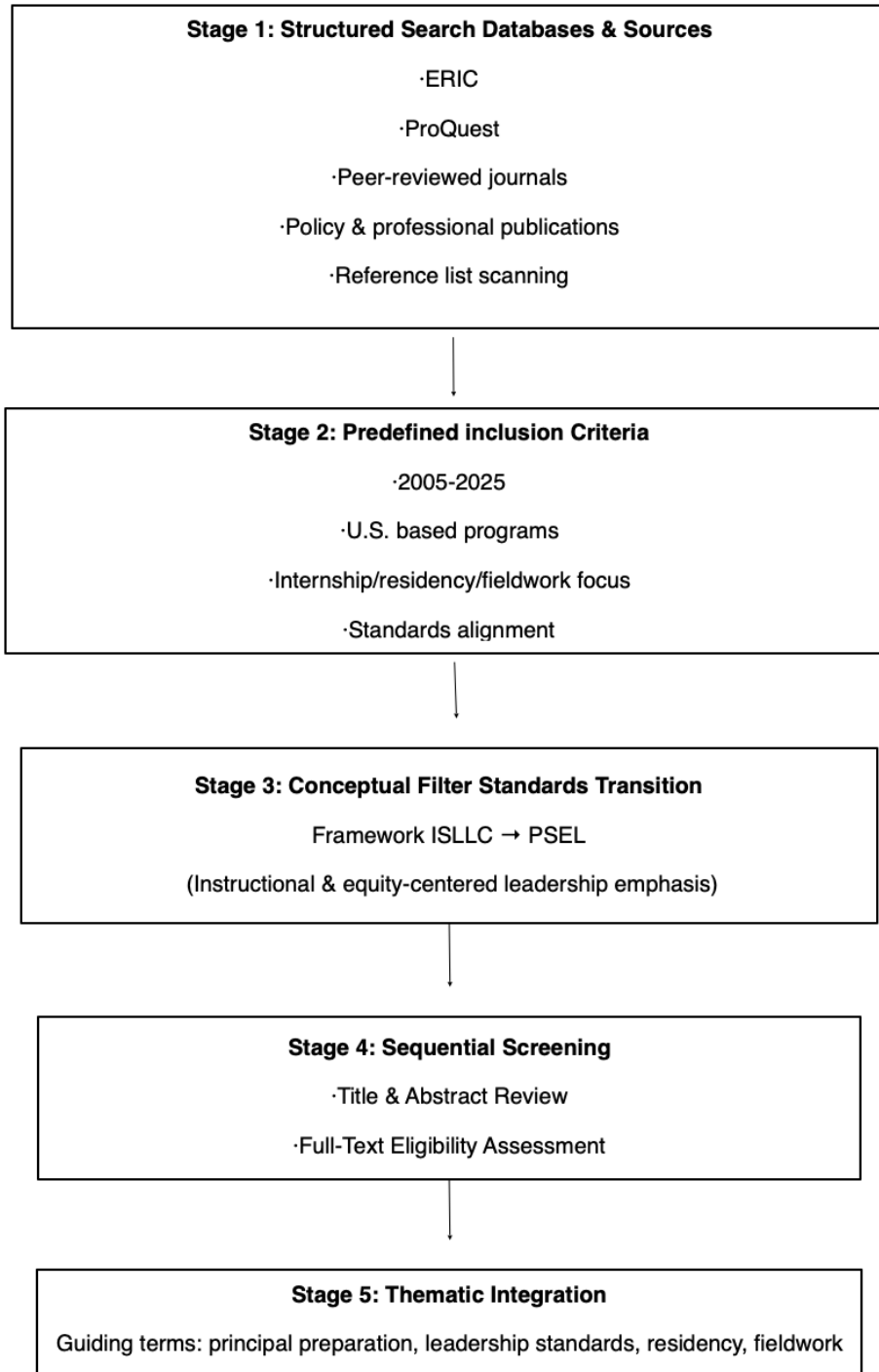
Studies meeting initial criteria were reviewed in full to confirm methodological relevance and depth of engagement with field-based preparation components. Eligibility determinations were based on explicit alignment with the study’s research focus. Ambiguous cases were reviewed closely to ensure consistent application of criteria.

Stage 5: Lexical Framework

The search and screening process was guided by a consistent lexical framework, including the following terms: principal preparation, leadership standards, internship, residency, and fieldwork. These terms structured database queries and supported thematic consistency across the review process.

Figure 1

5-Stage Systematic Narrative Review Process



This article is best characterized as a systematic narrative review. While the review employed structured search procedures, explicit inclusion criteria, and multistage screening protocols consistent with systematic evidence synthesis, the included studies reflect methodological, contextual, and conceptual heterogeneity that precludes statistical aggregation or meta-analytic modeling. The purpose of the review was interpretive and integrative rather than effect-size estimation, emphasizing thematic synthesis, policy alignment, and conceptual evolution within the field of principal preparation research. Accordingly, the review maintains procedural transparency and rigor while adopting a narrative analytic approach suited to the diversity of designs, outcomes, and theoretical frameworks represented in the literature.

Derivation of Themes

These themes were derived through a process of analytic reduction and constant comparison conducted during the review phase. As studies were examined in depth, recurring constructs, policy frameworks, and programmatic features were organized into initial categories (e.g., standards, leadership, NC-specific, internships). Literature that showed the evolution, multiple purposes, and implementation of leadership standards clustered chronologically to examine the first theme of the *development of leadership standards*. A second cluster of literature consistently addressed outcomes, inequities, misalignment, and limits within and surrounding principal preparation programs, focusing on both the national and specifically North Carolina contexts, leading to the theme of *effectiveness and gaps in principal preparation programs across the nation*. A third grouping focused on experience-based preparation, highlighting internships, residencies, fieldwork, and leadership components in actual educational buildings to translate leadership theory into practice; the culmination of this literature review led to the theme of *internship models and their impact*.

Theme 1: Development of Leadership Standards for Principals

A cross-cutting pattern across the reviewed literature was the central role of leadership standards in organizing principal preparation, particularly in relation to experiential learning requirements. Leadership standards functioned as both accountability mechanisms and developmental frameworks, informing program design, internship expectations, and assessments of readiness for the principalship. This emphasis positions leadership standards as a logical starting point for the thematic synthesis. The first theme, therefore, addresses the development of leadership standards for principals.

The development of leadership standards has played a central role in shaping expectations for principal practice, preparation, and evaluation in the United States. Initially established by ISLLC in 1996, these standards articulated shared expectations for school leaders' knowledge, skills, and dispositions and served as a national reference point for licensure, accountability, and preparation program design (Davis et al., 2005). Subsequent research and policy efforts, including *Making Sense of Leading Schools: A Study of the School Principalship* (Portin et al., 2003), informed state-level adaptation of leadership standards and set the stage for ongoing debates about their scope, use, and impact.

The ISLLC standards—introduced in 1996 and revised in 2008—served as the dominant framework guiding principal preparation programs across the United States for nearly 2 decades (Davis et al., 2005; Lashway, 2002; Murphy & Shipman, 1999). The standards articulated shared

expectations for principals' knowledge, skills, and dispositions, grounded in principles of effective teaching and learning, and were widely adopted to structure licensure requirements and preparation program curricula (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; Davis et al., 2005; National Policy Board for Educational Administration [NPBEA], 2001).

Although the ISLLC standards contributed to greater coherence in leadership preparation nationwide, empirical and meta-analytic research raised concerns about their scope and emphasis. Studies examining leadership practices associated with student achievement suggested that the standards underemphasized several key dimensions of effective leadership, including principals' direct engagement in curriculum design and implementation, support for instructional and assessment practices, recognition of individual and organizational accomplishments, and adaptive leadership responsive to local contexts (Davis et al., 2005; Waters & Grubb, 2004; Waters & Kingston, 2005;). Additionally, Murphy et al. (2017) argued that the ISLLC standards reflected a deficit-oriented perspective on leadership, limiting their developmental potential when used for evaluation.

Early empirical critiques further highlighted limitations of the ISLLC framework. Morrow (2003) drew on survey data and found that principals perceived a shift in their role from managerial oversight to academic leadership, emphasizing responsibility for developing and communicating a clear instructional vision. Subsequent scholarship reinforced the importance of embedding this academic leadership focus more explicitly within preparation programs (King, 2019). Similarly, comparative analyses contrasting ISLLC indicators with alternative leadership frameworks underscored the expanding and evolving responsibilities of principals and identified gaps in how leadership knowledge and practice were conceptualized (Burks, 2014; Waters & Kingston, 2005).

In response to these critiques, ISLLC advanced several strategic efforts in 2008, including promoting national adoption of leadership standards, redesigning principal preparation programs, expanding professional development, and aligning evaluation systems with standards-based frameworks (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2008; King, 2019). While these strategies provided guidance and increased alignment, accountability pressures and assessment-driven policies increasingly shaped how standards were operationalized in practice (King, 2019).

Recognizing these limitations, the NPBEA introduced PSEL in 2015, replacing the ISLLC standards (NPBEA, 2015). The revised standards emphasized student learning, relational leadership, ethical practice, and future-oriented leadership, explicitly challenging preparation programs, policymakers, and professional organizations to envision more holistic and equitable models of school leadership. Student learning was positioned as the central organizing principle of the standards with supporting frameworks illustrating how leadership practice, professional preparation, and policy alignment collectively contribute to improved educational outcomes (Case et al., 2016; NPBEA, 2015).

To illustrate the shift from ISLLC to PSEL, Table 1 provides a comparative example of a former ISLLC standard and its corresponding PSEL revision. The comparison highlights a stronger emphasis on student-centered leadership, relational practice, and collaborative approaches to leadership, reflecting the broader conceptual reorientation of the standards (NPBEA, 2015). As Case et al. (2016) noted, the revised standards foreground each student's academic success and articulate a more systematic and integrated approach to leadership practice. This reorientation is also evident in PSEL Standard 2: Ethics and Professional Norms that emphasizes that educational leaders must act ethically and uphold professional norms to support the academic success and well-being of all students. The standard outlines six domains of ethical practice, including ethical personal conduct and stewardship (A), adherence to professional norms such as integrity and

fairness (B), commitment to each student’s well-being (C), promotion of democratic values and equity (D), the use of interpersonal and culturally responsive leadership skills (E), and the provision of moral direction within the school community (F).

Table 1

PSEL Standard 2: Ethics and Professional Norms (NPBEA, 2015)

Standard	Description	Effective Leaders
2	<p>Ethics and Professional Norms</p> <p>Effective educational leaders act ethically and according to professional norms to promote each student’s academic success and well-being.</p>	<p>A) Act ethically and professionally in personal conduct, relationships with others, decision-making, stewardship of the school’s resources, and all aspects of school leadership.</p> <p>B) Act according to and promote the professional norms of integrity, fairness, transparency, trust, collaboration, perseverance, learning, and continuous improvement.</p> <p>C) Place children at the center of education and accept responsibility for each student’s academic success and well-being.</p> <p>D) Safeguard and promote the values of democracy, individual freedom and responsibility, equity, social justice, community, and diversity.</p> <p>E) Lead with interpersonal and communication skill, social-emotional insight, and understanding of all students’ and staff members’ backgrounds and cultures.</p> <p>F) Provide moral direction for the school and promote ethical and professional behavior among faculty and staff.</p>

In conjunction with the PSEL, the National Educational Leadership Preparation (NELP) standards were introduced to operationalize leadership expectations within preparation programs (NPBEA, 2018). Developed to guide program design, accreditation review, and state approval processes, the NELP standards provide greater specificity regarding performance expectations for beginning principals and district leaders. Together, PSEL and NELP clarify what graduates of high-quality leadership preparation programs should know and be able to do upon completion,

strengthening alignment between leadership standards and preparation program outcomes (Young et al., 2015).

Principal Standards for North Carolina

Building on national leadership research and the ISLLC standards, North Carolina adopted its initial principal standards in December 2006 following the Wallace Foundation–sponsored study *Making Sense of Leading Schools: A Study of the School Principalship* (Portin, 2003). These standards form the foundation of the state’s current principal evaluation framework and were designed to support continuous reflection and improvement across principals’ professional careers (NCSSE, 2006).

The standards were intended to serve multiple stakeholders, including higher education institutions responsible for principal preparation; school districts establishing leadership expectations; and professional development, coaching, and mentoring initiatives for educational leaders (NCSSE, 2006). North Carolina’s framework articulated seven executive leadership standards—strategic, instructional, cultural, human resource, managerial, external development, and micropolitical leadership—each accompanied by summaries, practices, artifacts, and competencies to guide leadership development and assessment.

Subsequent revisions expanded the evaluative framework. A formal rubric was introduced in 2008, followed by the addition of an eighth standard focused on academic achievement in 2011 (NCSSE, 2013). Under this system, principals are evaluated across multiple leadership dimensions and student growth indicators with ratings reflecting both standards-based performance and achievement outcomes. The most recent revision of the NCSSE was published in 2013 and continues to guide leadership evaluation and preparation statewide (NCSSE, 2013).

Positives of a Standards-Based Approach to Principal Evaluation

Standards-based principal evaluation frameworks are designed to guide professional practice, establish accountability, and articulate goals that support effective leadership (Catano & Stronge, 2007; Stufflebeam & Nevo, 1993). By clearly defining performance expectations, evaluation instruments provide a shared framework for principals to orient their leadership practice (Catano & Stronge, 2007).

Empirical research examining standards-based approaches to principal evaluation underscores the importance of validity and alignment with leadership standards. In a case study of South Carolina’s implementation of principal standards, Amsterdam et al. (2003) found that a standards-based evaluation framework demonstrated validity when aligned with ISLLC standards and existing state evaluation criteria. Stakeholders in the study engaged in cross-state comparisons, contributed to the development of evaluation standards, and participated in field reviews assessing their relevance and importance.

Similarly, Catano and Stronge (2007) examined Virginia’s principal evaluation and performance standards and found strong alignment with ISLLC standards, particularly in leadership and managerial responsibilities. Collectively, these studies suggest that standards-based evaluation systems can offer coherent, aligned frameworks that support both accountability and professional growth when thoughtfully designed and implemented.

Concerns With a Standards-Based Approach to Evaluation

Despite their widespread adoption, standards-based evaluation frameworks have raised concerns regarding feasibility, coherence, and alignment with the realities of principal practice. A central critique is whether it is realistic to expect a single principal to effectively fulfill the full range of responsibilities embedded in comprehensive leadership standards (Catano & Stronge, 2007; Militello et al., 2011).

Research suggests that the relevance of specific leadership standards varies across career stages. Hvidston et al. (2015) found that novice principals tend to prioritize instructional and curricular leadership standards whereas more experienced principals place greater emphasis on organizational and managerial responsibilities. This variation complicates the use of uniform evaluation frameworks across diverse professional trajectories.

Additional concerns center on misalignment among leadership standards, state and national policy expectations, and district-level responsibilities. Catano and Stronge (2007) argued that these alignment challenges can contribute to role overload and unclear expectations within principal evaluation systems. While standards are intended to clarify leadership responsibilities, poorly integrated frameworks may instead amplify ambiguity and pressure.

Similarly, Militello et al. (2011) emphasized that no single evaluative framework can fully capture the complexity of leadership practice within school settings. Although principals in their study identified vision, policy standards, and collaboration as influential factors shaping their evaluation experiences, they also reported persistent dissonance between formal standards and the enacted realities of leadership. In this way, standards-based approaches applied rigidly may constrain or undermine effective principal practice rather than support it.

Taken together, the strengths and limitations of standards-based evaluation highlight the importance of how leadership expectations are enacted through principal preparation programs. The second theme, therefore, examines the effectiveness and gaps in principal preparation pathways across the United States with particular attention to North Carolina.

Theme 2: Effectiveness and Gaps in Principal Preparation Programs Across the Nation and Specifically in North Carolina

While leadership standards define expectations for principal practice, their impact ultimately depends on how they are enacted through preparation programs. The second theme, therefore, examines the effectiveness of principal preparation pathways and persistent gaps in program design across the United States with particular attention to North Carolina.

Pathways to the Principalship

Across the United States, aspiring educational leaders access the principalship through multiple preparation pathways, including university-based educator preparation programs, alternative licensure routes, and state-sponsored leadership initiatives (Horner & Jordan, 2020). These pathways typically combine graduate coursework, licensure requirements, and supervised field experiences intended to prepare candidates for entry into school leadership roles.

Research examining the effectiveness of principal preparation programs highlights ongoing efforts to strengthen educator preparation programs through standards-aligned redesign, continuous evaluation, and evidence-informed improvement initiatives (Davis & Darling-

Hammond, 2012). An increasing number of programs emphasize internships, thematically integrated curricula, problem-based learning, and formal partnerships with school districts as mechanisms for improving leadership readiness (Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2012).

Despite these advances, persistent gaps remain between coursework and practice. Scholars note that many educator preparation programs continue to struggle to balance theoretical instruction with meaningful field-based learning experiences, particularly internships that authentically reflect the complexity of principal practice (Pannell et al., 2015). Additionally, misalignment between higher education institutions and school districts can undermine preparation efforts as universities tend to emphasize preparation while districts prioritize immediate readiness for leadership responsibilities (Zubnzycki, 2013). Together, these tensions highlight the uneven effectiveness of principal preparation pathways and underscore the need for stronger integration between preparation programs and practice-based learning opportunities.

Concerns With Principal Preparation Programs

Scholars have long identified persistent concerns with the design and effectiveness of principal preparation programs, many of which reflect systemic misalignment between preparation and the evolving demands of school leadership. Levine's (2005) national review of leadership preparation programs concluded that many programs were producing graduates insufficiently prepared to meet contemporary accountability and policy demands, particularly those introduced under the No Child Left Behind Act. Key deficiencies included weak alignment with leadership standards, underqualified faculty, and limited or poorly designed internship and fieldwork experiences (Levine, 2005; VanTuyle & Hunt, 2013).

Levine (2005) further recommended more selective admissions and more rigorous graduation requirements, particularly those emphasizing instructional leadership capacity. Notably, a substantial proportion of program completers reported feeling unprepared for the realities of school leadership, a finding echoed across multiple studies (Burks, 2014; Levine, 2005; VanTuyle & Hunt, 2013). Subsequent scholarship reinforced these critiques, identifying recurring concerns related to curriculum relevance, course requirements, insufficient field-based learning, limited practitioner expertise among faculty, and institutional resistance to program redesign despite rapidly changing leadership demands (Bottoms & O'Neill, 2001; Crow & Rodney, 2016; Grogan & Andrews, 2002; Nir, 2013).

A central critique emerging across this literature is the limited integration of theory and practice. Darling-Hammond (2007) emphasized that many preparation programs fail to embed meaningful principal fieldwork within the curriculum, constraining candidates' ability to apply leadership theory in authentic school contexts. Similarly, other researchers have argued that preparation programs often fail to adequately prepare aspiring principals to serve as instructional leaders despite this role being central to contemporary leadership expectations (Hernandez et al., 2012; Lynch, 2012; Miller, 2013; Pannell et al., 2015).

Unfortunately, few universities can offer changes. The cost of extensive, research-driven redesign is a major factor on why programs are not considering change (Fusarelli & Fusarelli, 2024). Another factor is sustainability. Often partnerships with districts are needed along with funding from foundations, the state, and national agencies thereby leaving principal program reform tough to sustain (Fusarelli & Fusarelli, 2024). Even with principal preparation being a popular policy among all states, the oversight of these regulations are varied (Jackson, 2025). Policies must be attentive to new reform, be attentive to all involved, and support the

implementation or change of principal preparation (Jackson, 2025).

Leandro Case(s)

There were three major court cases in North Carolina over the past 2 decades that will reshape the landscape of public education. They are listed here in chronological order:

- *Leandro v. State of North Carolina*, 346 N.C. 336, 488 S.E.2d 249 (1997).
- *Leandro v. State of North Carolina*, 358 N.C. 605, 599 S.E.2d 365 (2004).
- *Hoke County Board of Education v. State of North Carolina*, 379 N.C. 170, 864 S.E.2d 1 (2022).

In 1994, five North Carolina school districts—Hoke, Halifax, Robeson, Vance, and Cumberland—along with families filed a lawsuit against the state in *Leandro v. State of North Carolina* alleging that insufficient and inequitable funding denied students access to an adequate public education (Public School Forum of North Carolina [PSFNC], 2023). In two landmark decisions (1997, 2004), the North Carolina Supreme Court ruled in favor of the plaintiffs, affirming the state’s constitutional obligation to ensure that all children have access to a basic education (PSFNC, 2023; WestEd, 2019). In another court case, specifically with Hoke County in 2022, the issue of how to remedy the problem of public education is ongoing.

The Court’s rulings emphasized essential components of educational adequacy, including access to qualified teachers and principals, sufficient instructional resources, and appropriate facilities and technology. Despite these mandates, subsequent analyses indicate that North Carolina has continued to fall short of meeting its constitutional obligation particularly in high-need, historically underresourced districts (PSFNC, 2023; WestEd, 2019). Judicial commentary underscored the severity of these shortcomings with one ruling characterizing conditions in a district like an academic genocide and raising the possibility of state intervention in local leadership (Atwater et al., 2008; Fusarelli et al., 2019).

In response to ongoing noncompliance, the court ordered an independent, comprehensive review, which led WestEd to develop a 301-page action plan in 2018 (PSFNC, 2023). Since the release of this report, litigation has continued, most notably in *Hoke County Board of Education v. State of North Carolina* (2022), with courts addressing the state’s responsibility to fund remedial actions, including commitments totaling billions of dollars (Paul, 2019; PSFNC, 2023).

The WestEd report identified eight critical areas necessary to ensure access to a “sound basic education” by 2030, one of which focused explicitly on leadership capacity. The section titled A Qualified and Well-Prepared Principal emphasized the central role of school leadership and advanced four key recommendations:

1. updating principal preparation and licensure requirements while expanding access to high-quality preparation programs;
2. expanding professional learning opportunities for current principals and assistant principals;
3. revising salary structures for principals and assistant principals; and
4. improving working conditions to attract and retain qualified leaders, particularly in high-need schools (WestEd, 2019).

North Carolina as a State-Level Response to National Preparation Gaps

In response to national concerns regarding principal preparation, specifically the misalignment

between standards, coursework, and leadership readiness, North Carolina developed a multipathway system intended to strengthen leadership pipelines and expand access to high-quality preparation. These initiatives provide a useful case for examining how standards-aligned preparation, paid internships, and state policy interact to address persistent gaps identified in the literature.

North Carolina currently offers multiple pathways to principal licensure, including traditional university-based master of school administration (MSA) programs, add-on licensure routes, alternative leadership academies, and state-funded pipeline programs (Bastian & Goff, 2017; Business for Educational Success and Transformation in North Carolina [BEST NC], 2018). Across these pathways, licensure is primarily obtained through MSA degrees or add-on certificates offered by 21 institutions statewide (Gates et al., 2019).

Transforming Principal Preparation Program

In response to persistent concerns regarding the quality and coherence of principal preparation, North Carolina launched the Transforming Principal Preparation Program (TP3) as a state-supported effort to redesign leadership preparation through research-based, practice-intensive models. Initiated in 2013 through a partnership involving business and education stakeholders, notably BEST NC, TP3 was designed to strengthen the principal pipeline by emphasizing selective recruitment; district partnerships; and full-time, paid residency experiences (BEST NC, 2018; Sturtz et al., 2018).

TP3-funded programs were required to implement a set of core design principles aligned with both national leadership standards and state priorities articulated by the North Carolina General Assembly. These principles included rigorous candidate selection, coursework explicitly linking theory to practice, sustained mentoring and coaching, and a minimum of 5 months (750 hours) of full-time clinical practice embedded within high-need school contexts (BEST NC, 2018; Sturtz et al., 2018). Collectively, the six TP3 programs partnered with 46 school districts and emphasized leadership practices that improve student outcomes.

Compared to traditional MSA pathways, TP3 programs demonstrated several distinguishing features, including lower acceptance rates, paid full-time residencies, and formalized university-district partnerships designed to support authentic leadership development (BEST NC, 2018). Early evaluations highlighted the promise of these design elements while also identifying implementation challenges related to program governance, sustainability, and coordination with existing state-supported preparation models (BEST NC, 2018; WestEd, 2019). Notably, TP3's coexistence with the long-established North Carolina Principal Fellows Program (NCPFP) surfaced questions about alignment, scalability, and long-term integration within the state's broader leadership preparation system. Overall, TP3 represents a deliberate attempt to address nationally documented weaknesses in principal preparation—particularly the limited depth and consistency of internship experiences—by embedding leadership development within extended, standards-aligned clinical practice.

NCPFP

In 1993, the North Carolina General Assembly created the NCPFP to prepare candidates for leadership positions (principal and assistant principal) in the state's schools (Bastian & Fuller, 2015). The program provides a scholarship loan to attend one of the 11 participating UNC System

schools to earn an MSA degree (Bastian & Fuller, 2015). During the academic year, Principal Fellows receive \$30,000 to support tuition, books, and living expenses (WestEd, 2019). In the second year, Principal Fellows receive an amount equivalent to a first-year assistant principal's salary plus a stipend when they intern under a principal (WestEd, 2019). Through different changes and legislation, there are now only eight current participating universities: University of North Carolina at Greensboro, University of North Carolina at Charlotte, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Appalachian State University, East Carolina University, North Carolina Central University, Western Carolina University, and North Carolina State University (NCPFP, 2020). The program offers 1 year of academic study and a 1-year internship in a public school in North Carolina (Bastian & Fuller, 2015).

After completing the program, the Principal Fellow agrees to seek and obtain employment in a North Carolina public school for 4 years, and the loan is forgiven (Bastian & Fuller, 2015; NCPFP, 2020). If the fellow does not meet the requirements or decides to leave education, the loan must be repaid in full with interest (Bastian & Fuller, 2015). Traditionally, fellows participating in the program are more effective than other MSA graduates as evidenced by student achievement, student absences, and teacher retention rates (based on the outcomes of the NC Teacher Working Conditions survey; Bastian & Fuller, 2015; Bastian & Fuller, 2015; WestEd, 2019). Studies by Bastian and Fuller (2015) have also shown higher graduation rates in MSA programs and employment rates after completion of the MSA than among non-Principal Fellow participants.

Merger of the NCPFP and TP3

In July of 2021, the NCPFP and TP3 merged into a single, state-funded program (NCPFP, 2020). The new TP3/NCPFP program combined the grant-based approach from TP3 with the governance from the NCPFP to ensure the program recruits the best candidates to serve in the state's public schools of highest need (NCPFP, 2020). This combination of the two successful principal pipeline programs provides North Carolina with a practical, research-driven approach to developing highly qualified, well-prepared principals (WestEd, 2019).

The expansion of these programs is expected to raise expectations, including increasing the number of Principal Fellows and diversifying the candidate pool (WestEd, 2019). While maintaining its high standards and paid internship requirement, the TP3 program seeks to support improvements in other principal preparation or MSA programs across North Carolina with the expectation that each district will partner with at least one TP3-funded program (WestEd, 2019). With the programs combined, the merged program will produce at least 40% of the annual principal pipeline for the state of North Carolina (NCPFP, 2020).

Theme 3: Internship Models and the Impact

Internships have traditionally been a core component of MSA programs; however, the research base examining their impact has historically been limited (McCarthy, 2014; Young et al., 2015). While field-based learning has become increasingly emphasized across leadership curricula, progress toward robust, integrated internship models has been uneven and slow (McCarthy, 2014; Murphy et al., 2008). As a result, internship experiences often vary widely in structure, purpose, and alignment with program goals. Nevertheless, internships are a vital component of principal preparation programs (Jamison et al., 2020).

A growing body of research identifies high-quality internships as a defining feature of effective principal preparation programs (Crow & Whiteman, 2016; Darling-Hammond et al., 2009). Studies consistently highlight the importance of sustained, authentic, and embedded internships within school leadership practice (Christian, 2011; Crow & Whiteman, 2016; Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; Duncan et al., 2011). These experiences allow candidates to bridge theory and practice in meaningful ways while developing leadership identities grounded in real school contexts. Common internship models include full-time embedded residencies, detached internships focused on documentation, and course-embedded field experiences (Crow & Whiteman, 2016), each offering varying levels of immersion and responsibility.

Researchers further suggest that internship effectiveness depends on specific design features. Some studies emphasize mentoring, coaching, and strong relationships between interns and school contexts as critical to leadership development (Christian, 2011; Duncan et al., 2011) while others highlight standards-aligned experiences and opportunities to engage in authentic leadership responsibilities (Sherman & Crum, 2009). When these elements are intentionally integrated, internships can serve as developmental spaces for reflective practice and instructional leadership. Longitudinal findings indicate that extended internships support candidates' capacity to lead collaboratively, use data to guide improvement, and assume leadership roles with greater confidence and readiness (Perez et al., 2011). Rangel et al. (2024) reported that when interns have fieldwork experiences that align with standards, the experience and learning is authentic and often leads to them taking charge. Programs can create these internships in which future leaders can gain deeper engagement with the content (Rangel et al., 2024).

An Example of Alignment From a Program With Alignment to Standards

Among North Carolina's preparation pathways, paid, full-time internships, particularly within the NCPFP, represent a central mechanism for translating leadership standards into sustained, practice-based learning. A defining feature of the program is a 10-month, supervised clinical internship completed during the second year of preparation in which Fellows are compensated at a level equivalent to a first-year assistant principal salary (; NCPFP, 2020). By embedding a paid, full-time internship as the culminating component of preparation, the NCPFP reduces financial and employment barriers that often limit candidates' ability to engage in extended, authentic leadership practice.

The internship model emphasizes full-time enrollment, close mentoring by practicing school leaders, and immersion in authentic leadership responsibilities, aligning with national expectations articulated in PSEL and the NELP standards. Research examining university-based internships similarly highlights the importance of intentional mentor selection and standards-aligned clinical experiences as central components of redesigned principal preparation programs (Herman et al., 2022).

By embedding a compensated, yearlong internship within preparation, the NCPFP addresses a central gap identified in the literature with a focus on the inconsistent quality and feasibility of experiential learning opportunities, positioning fieldwork (the paid internships) as a critical mechanism for translating leadership standards into practice (Crow & Whiteman, 2016; Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; Levine, 2005; Perez et al., 2011).

Cumulatively, the literature on principal preparation programs reveals persistent gaps between leadership standards, program design, and leadership readiness despite decades of reform efforts (Bottoms & O'Neill, 2001; Davis et al., 2005; McCarthy, 2014). Across national and state

contexts, preparation pathways vary widely in structure and effectiveness with recurring concerns related to weak integration of theory and practice, uneven internship quality, and misalignment between university-based preparation and district expectations (Grogan & Andrews, 2002; Murphy et al., 2008; Ni et al., 2022). While innovative models like paid, full-time internships and state-supported pipeline programs demonstrate promise in addressing these challenges, their implementation remains uneven and often constrained by policy, capacity, and governance structures (Bastian & Fuller, 2015; Gates et al., 2019).

The evidence consistently suggests that preparation programs are most effective when internships are sustained, standards-aligned, and embedded within authentic leadership practice (Crow & Whiteman, 2016; Darling-Hammond, 2007; Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2012). While the initiatives examined in this review are state-specific, they reflect broader national efforts to redesign principal preparation through practice-intensive, standards-informed models, positioning North Carolina as a useful case for examining how policy, preparation, and leadership development intersect (Gates et al., 2019; Herman et al., 2022).

These persistent gaps in principal preparation, particularly the level of quality and feasibility of internship experiences, have drawn attention at the policy level especially in states where leadership capacity is tied to constitutional guarantees of educational adequacy (Murphy et al., 2008; PSFNC, 2023; WestEd, 2019). In such contexts, internships are increasingly viewed not as supplemental experiences but as absolutely vital for ensuring leadership readiness and capacity building (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; Gates et al., 2019).

Conclusion and Future Directions

Over the past quarter century, leadership standards and evaluation frameworks have clarified expectations for principal practice, yet alignment on paper has not consistently translated into preparation or equitable access to high-quality internship experiences. As the role of the principal continues to expand, preparation programs must move beyond standards compliance toward intentionally designed, practice-embedded training models in schools. Sustained internships, structured mentorship, and authentic leadership enactment within diverse school contexts should not be supplemental components but, instead, be the center of leadership preparation. We need to shift from theory to practice for preparation.

In the future, policymakers, accrediting bodies, and universities must reconsider the constraints that limit meaningful fieldwork immersion and perpetuate uneven access to high-quality internships. Future research should examine how preparation design, particularly the internship or fieldwork aspect, shapes leadership effectiveness, retention, and outcomes in varied contexts. Ultimately, strengthening principal preparation will require preparation ecologies that deliberately bridge standards, theory, and sustained practice thereby ensuring that aspiring leaders are equipped to meet the evolving demands of school leadership.

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