

MENTORING, POLICY, AND WORKFORCE CONDITIONS IN PRINCIPAL PREPARATION

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Principal preparation mentoring has been widely studied, but the literature has not yet systematically examined whether state-level mentoring policy variation produces measurably different outcomes for practicing principals. This review synthesizes empirical and conceptual research on the theoretical mechanisms through which mentoring builds leadership capacity, the policy contexts that determine whether mentoring is coherently enacted, the program and relational conditions that define its quality, and the workforce dynamics that moderate its effects. The central argument advanced here is that mentoring functions as the primary mechanism through which preparation translates into leadership efficacy, but its effects are structurally conditioned by the strength of state policy and the stability of school workforce environments. Without coherent policy support and stable workforce conditions, mentoring's developmental potential is distributed unevenly, producing inconsistent outcomes and inequitable preparation across contexts. Gaps in the literature point to the need for research that examines principal outcomes across multiple domains in relation to state mentoring policy variation.

Keywords: principal preparation, mentoring, state policy, leadership efficacy, workforce conditions

Principal preparation has become a growing focus of research in school improvement because the quality of school leadership is one of the most consequential factors shaping what teachers can accomplish and what students learn (Darling-Hammond et al., 2022; Grissom et al., 2021). Structured mentoring programs connect coursework with practical experience, grounding aspiring leaders in the theories of situated and social learning by placing them alongside experienced practitioners in authentic contexts (Browne-Ferrigno & Muth, 2004; Lave & Wenger, 1991). Guided practice in those settings builds the confidence and professional identity that coursework alone cannot produce, and it is through that guided practice that preparation becomes leadership capacity (Browne-Ferrigno & Muth, 2004; Darling-Hammond et al., 2022).

This article advances a central argument: mentoring functions as the primary mechanism through which preparation experiences translate into leadership capacity; however, how this mechanism operates depends consistently on two structuring conditions. State policy serves as the upstream determinant of whether or not mentoring is coherently available thus shaping the design, consistency, and accountability of mentoring across programs and placements. Workforce conditions serve as the downstream moderating force, determining if what was learned through mentoring can be enacted in the complex, resource-constrained realities of school leadership. While prior research has examined these elements in isolation, this article integrates them to

explain variation in principal outcomes across contexts. The consequences of this integration matter: where policy is weak and workforce conditions are unstable, preparation outcomes are inconsistent and inequitably distributed, a pattern that limits what even well-prepared principals can accomplish.

State policy strength shapes whether candidates receive consistent, high-quality mentoring or something considerably more uneven (Anderson & Reynolds, 2015; Hewitt & Rumley, 2022; Rogers & VanGronigen, 2023). School-level conditions then determine if what candidates learned through mentoring can actually be applied as teacher vacancies, uncertified staff proportions, and principal compensation either support or undercut the benefits of even well-designed preparation (Franco & Patrick, 2023; Grissom et al., 2018; Mitani, 2025). These contextual factors establish that mentoring's effects are conditional and that understanding those conditions is as important as understanding the mechanism itself.

Review Methodology

This literature review synthesizes empirical and conceptual research on mentoring in principal preparation with a focus on state policy variation, program and relational design conditions, and workforce dynamics that moderate principal outcomes. Sources were identified through searches of academic databases including ERIC, Education Source, and Google Scholar, using combinations of keywords such as “principal preparation,” “mentoring,” “leadership preparation policy,” “principal self-efficacy,” “occupational stress,” “teacher vacancies,” and “principal retention.”

Priority was given to peer-reviewed journal articles, policy reports, and foundational theoretical works published primarily within the past 20 years while including seminal earlier studies where necessary to establish theoretical grounding. Studies were selected based on their relevance to one or more of the following dimensions: (a) theoretical frameworks explaining how mentoring builds leadership capacity; (b) state-level policy variation and mentoring mandates; (c) program design, mentor characteristics, and relational conditions; and (d) workforce dynamics and principal outcomes including efficacy, stress, pay satisfaction, and retention. The review employed a thematic synthesis approach, organizing findings across these dimensions to identify patterns, inconsistencies, and gaps in the literature. While not exhaustive, the selection of sources reflects saturation across major themes relevant to mentoring in principal preparation.

Theoretical Foundation

Principal preparation mentoring is grounded in three complementary theories: legitimate peripheral participation, adult learning theory, and self-efficacy theory. Together, they explain how mentoring builds leadership capacity and why the structural conditions surrounding it matter (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007). These frameworks are presented not as a complete theoretical background but to establish the explanatory logic connecting mentoring design, policy strength, and principal outcomes. A fourth perspective, systems theory, frames the policy environment in which all three operate.

Legitimate peripheral participation describes how novices move from the margins of practice into fuller participation by working alongside experienced practitioners in authentic, guided contexts (Lave & Wenger, 1991). In principal preparation, this theory explains why mentoring is developmentally irreplaceable. Leadership identity is coconstructed through

relational dialogue, real-time feedback, and taking on increasing responsibilities in authentic school settings, processes that coursework cannot replicate (Browne-Ferrigno & Muth, 2004; Cunningham et al., 2019; Virella & Cobb, 2022). Where mandates are weak or absent, the conditions for identity formation depend on program initiative or individual circumstance rather than on professional standards thereby producing the uneven preparation outcomes consistently documented in the literature (Anderson & Reynolds, 2015; Hewitt & Rumley, 2022).

Adult learning theory explains how program design can maximize or constrain candidate development (Knowles, 1984). Knowles' theory of andragogy identifies self-direction, relevance, and reflection as the conditions through which adults learn most effectively, and effective programs operationalize these principles through experiential learning and coaching relationships that support real-time application of leadership knowledge (Clayton & Myran, 2013; Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Jamison et al., 2020). Where state policies require structured mentoring, programs are more likely to create the andragogical conditions the literature identifies as essential; however, where mandates are absent or vague, those conditions are left to individual discretion, and candidates may enter the role feeling underprepared, a state the literature connects directly to higher occupational stress and lower resilience in the early years of leadership (Cosner, 2019; Rogers & VanGronigen, 2023).

Self-efficacy is a domain-specific construct; thus, self-efficacy in principalship refers to a principal's belief in their capacity to perform the specific tasks of school leadership, including conducting instructional walkthroughs, providing meaningful feedback to teachers, navigating difficult personnel decisions, and sustaining school improvement amid competing demands (Bandura, 1997; Hannah et al., 2008; Versland, 2016). Bandura proposed that efficacy develops through four sources: mastery experience, vicarious learning, social persuasion, and physiological regulation. Mentoring activates all four simultaneously as candidates build mastery through scaffolded leadership tasks, gain vicarious learning by observing mentor decision making, receive social persuasion through coaching and feedback, and develop emotional regulation through structured reflective practice (Drake et al., 2021; Versland, 2016). Principal self-efficacy is therefore not an incidental benefit of mentoring but is a direct, measurable product of mentoring quality, and the strength of state policy shapes the consistency with which that quality is achieved (Darling-Hammond et al., 2022; Richard & Cosner, 2024).

Scott and Davis (2000) described organizations as open systems continually shaped by external demands and internal dynamics, and preparation programs operating within networks of state agencies, educator preparation programs, and local education agencies reflect this systems perspective. When these entities fail to coordinate, mentoring becomes inconsistent and fragmented, limiting efficacy development and, thus, reducing candidates' resilience (Cosner, 2019; Crow et al., 2012; Darling-Hammond et al., 2022; Hewitt & Rumley, 2022). This systems perspective frames state policy not merely as contextual background but as a structuring condition that determines whether the theoretical mechanisms of mentoring are coherently enabled or systematically undermined across programs. Taken together, these theories collectively emphasize that mentoring outcomes are not uniform but are shaped by external structures, most consequentially policy strength and workforce stability, a principle that unifies the argument advanced throughout this article.

Mentoring as a Developmental Mechanism

Mentoring functions as the connective tissue between preparation and practice, and the evidence across the literature is consistent: it is the mechanism through which aspiring principals transform coursework knowledge into enacted leadership capacity (Browne-Ferrigno & Muth, 2004; Clayton & Myran, 2013; Versland, 2016). Structured mentoring relationships provide candidates with frequent feedback, one-on-one coaching, and professional modeling, and across studies these elements together explain variation in candidates' sense of preparedness, principal self-efficacy, and early career persistence (Anderson & Reynolds, 2015; Browne-Ferrigno & Muth, 2004; Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Fry et al., 2005). Across these studies, mentoring quality directly explains variation in principal self-efficacy, suggesting that policy-supported mentoring is not just beneficial but foundational to equitable preparation. In the absence of clear state mandates, mentored internships that lack structure produce inconsistent learning opportunities and uneven developmental support, a finding that underscores why the mechanism of mentoring cannot be separated from the policy conditions that determine its availability (Anderson & Reynolds, 2015; Hewitt & Rumley, 2022).

The demands placed on current principals further explain why this mechanism matters. Role expectations have expanded substantially, encompassing instructional leadership, community engagement, data-driven decision making, and staff development simultaneously, yet the structural supports available to principals have not kept pace (Cosner, 2019; Drake et al., 2023; Rogers & VanGronigen, 2023; Su-Keene et al., 2026). Mentoring that is intentionally designed and supported by policy is therefore not merely an enhancement to preparation quality at the margins; it is the primary means through which aspiring leaders develop the resilience, professional identity, and domain-specific confidence needed to sustain the expanding demands of the role. Without it, early career attrition rates remain high and preparation inequities persist (Cosner, 2019; Darling-Hammond et al., 2022).

Mentors also function as brokers of professional socialization, connecting candidates to networks, resources, and communities of practice that broaden their understanding of school leadership (Cosner & De Voto, 2023). Through brokered exposure to strategic decision making, authentic leadership tasks, and diverse school contexts, mentoring accelerates identity development and builds the relational skills associated with principal self-efficacy (Clayton & Myran, 2013; Tucker et al., 2012; Van Nieuwerburgh et al., 2020). Consistently across the literature, these socialization functions are most available when state policy mandates structured mentoring; without that mandate, access to connected and experienced mentors depend on program-level initiative or individual circumstance rather than professional standards, producing the inequitable access to preparation networks the literature documents (Anderson & Reynolds, 2015; Hewitt & Rumley, 2022; Méndez-Morse, 2004).

Mentoring Design and Implementation Conditions

The quality of mentoring as a developmental mechanism depends on four interrelated implementation conditions: program design, mentor characteristics and training, structural frameworks that align mentoring with program and policy goals, and deliberate attention to equity. These are not independent factors but dimensions of a single design problem, and the literature consistently shows that when any one is underdeveloped, the developmental mechanism weakens and preparation outcomes suffer.

Program Design as the Bridge Between Policy and Practice

Program design is the mechanism through which state policy becomes preparation practice, and stronger state policy produces stronger program design that in turn produces better principal outcomes (Anderson & Reynolds, 2015; Rogers & VanGronigen, 2023). The evidence converges on three broad categories of effective design: instructional design elements such as scenario-based learning and iterative observation-and-feedback cycles; coaching structures including one-on-one mentoring and goal-setting processes aligned with leadership standards; and equity integration that ensures candidates experience organizational change, managerial responsibilities, and culturally responsive leadership rather than a curated subset of the role (Clayton & Myran, 2013; Jamison et al., 2020; Virella & Cobb, 2022; Young & Eddy-Spicer, 2019). The most effective programs integrate all three so that candidates experience the full scope of school leadership (Bastian & Drake, 2023; Cosner & De Voto, 2023; Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Rogers & VanGronigen, 2023).

A persistent tension revealed in the literature is the misalignment between what program design research recommends and what most programs actually deliver. When coursework and field-based experiences are poorly coordinated, mentoring encounters become inconsistent and have minimal impact on candidate growth, and this misalignment is most common in states where policy provides only aspirational guidance (Anderson & Reynolds, 2015; Versland, 2016). Candidates who participate in coordinated, field-based programs report feeling more prepared than peers in less structured placements, a difference that translates directly into stronger principal self-efficacy and greater readiness at entry (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Drake et al., 2021; Fry et al., 2005; Vilorio et al., 2020). This evidence makes clear that program design variation is not a random artifact of institutional difference; it is a structured consequence of policy strength and explains a substantial portion of the variance in principal preparation outcomes.

Mentor Characteristics, Training, and Reflective Practice

Consistently across the literature, mentor quality is identified as one of the most important relational variables in principal preparation, yet policy rarely ensures it (Browne-Ferrigno & Muth, 2004; Jamison et al., 2020; Virella & Cobb, 2022). This is one of the most consequential tensions in the field, and it warrants explicit attention rather than implication. Effective mentors bring more than years of experience; they articulate their thinking in ways that scaffold future principals' learning, build trust-based relationships that foster psychological safety, and model leadership strategies that candidates can observe and internalize (Browne-Ferrigno & Muth, 2004; Clayton & Myran, 2013; Van Nieuwerburgh et al., 2020). Qualities such as patience, openness, developmental flexibility, and the capacity to build relational trust are essential, and effective mentors adjust their support to match each candidate's developmental readiness rather than applying a uniform approach (Cunningham et al., 2019; Hudson, 2013; Service et al., 2016).

The most effective mentors observe candidates frequently, provide targeted evidence-based feedback, ask probing questions, model reflective thinking, and adapt their coaching to each candidate's readiness. These practices directly activate the mastery experience, vicarious learning, and social persuasion sources of efficacy identified in self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1997; Bastian & Drake, 2023; Drake et al., 2023; Jamison et al., 2020; Young & Eddy-Spicer, 2019). Without preparation and training, however, mentors consistently default to logistical advice rather than cultivating deeper leadership skills, a pattern documented across multiple studies that explains why

mentor training is as important as mentor selection (Browne-Ferrigno & Muth, 2004; Jamison et al., 2020; Virella & Cobb, 2022). In many states, mentor selection defaults to availability rather than qualification, and the absence of clear selection standards contributes directly to the variability in preparation quality that candidates experience (Bastian & Drake, 2023; Hewitt & Rumley, 2022). The research base is unambiguous about what effective mentors do, yet policy frameworks rarely create the conditions to ensure it and that gap represents one of the most consequential structural failures in the principal preparation system.

Structured reflection is a defining feature of effective mentoring practice, giving candidates time to connect their leadership actions to theory and coursework (Browne-Ferrigno & Muth, 2004). Whether through journaling, debrief sessions, or coaching conversations, reflection helps candidates identify strengths and gaps, regulate their responses to stress, and align their decision making with the needs of diverse students and communities (Clayton & Myran, 2013; Hudson, 2013; Van Nieuwerburgh et al., 2020). Structured reflection also benefits mentors as mentees' questions often prompt mentors to reconsider their own leadership assumptions, making the mentoring relationship itself a form of professional learning for both parties (Hudson, 2013).

Mentoring Frameworks, Selection, and Programmatic Alignment

Well-designed mentoring frameworks provide the structure that allows aspiring principals to connect theory with practice reliably across different placements. They outline how mentors and candidates interact, tie mentoring activities to leadership standards, and establish clear expectations for growth through goal setting, observation and feedback cycles, structured reflection, and performance assessments (Fry et al., 2005; Herman et al., 2022; Tucker et al., 2012). Frameworks that incorporate coaching elements are especially effective because they create opportunities for candidates to engage in authentic leadership tasks such as analyzing school data, leading community meetings, and facilitating staff problem solving, which Cosner and colleagues described as brokered learning (Cosner & De Voto, 2023; Van Nieuwerburgh et al., 2020). Practical accountability tools such as handbooks, checklists, and performance verification structures distinguish programs where mentoring functions as a coherent developmental system from those where it functions primarily as logistical supervision (Anderson & Reynolds, 2015; Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Fry et al., 2005; Jamison et al., 2020; Richard & Cosner, 2024).

Program-level decisions about mentor selection and training are directly shaped by how clearly states articulate their expectations, meaning that framework quality and mentor selection are not merely program-design concerns but direct reflections of state policy priorities (Anderson & Reynolds, 2015; Hewitt & Rumley, 2022; Young & Crow, 2016). Candidates gain more when matched with mentors who understand their context and can model culturally responsive, equity-focused practices (Richard & Cosner, 2024). Without this structural alignment, internships risk becoming observational placements rather than robust developmental opportunities, a risk that is substantially higher in states where policy provides insufficient guidance (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Young & Crow, 2016).

Equity as a Dimension of Mentoring Quality

Equity is a substantive dimension of mentoring quality that shapes access to high-quality mentoring itself and is not merely a contextual backdrop (Darling-Hammond et al., 2022; Virella & Cobb, 2022). When formal mentoring is unavailable, candidates, particularly those from

historically underrepresented groups, often piece together support from informal sources, a pattern that narrows opportunities for growth, limits exposure to professional networks, and reproduces the preparation inequities that formal mentoring is designed to address (Darling-Hammond et al., 2022; Méndez-Morse, 2004; Virella & Cobb, 2022). Bastian and Drake (2023) found that principal interns were disproportionately placed in lower-performing schools, settings less likely to offer the stable, resource-rich contexts in which mentoring's developmental potential is most fully realized. Principals later hired in high-poverty schools are less likely to have received high-quality internships and mentoring during preparation unless policies are deliberately designed to address these placement gaps (Richard & Cosner, 2024; Versland, 2016).

The degree to which mentoring mandates reduce or reproduce preparation inequities depends entirely on whether those mandates are designed with explicit attention to the needs of candidates and schools in high-need contexts (Richard & Cosner, 2024). Where state mandates are strong and well-resourced, principals are more likely to enter their roles with greater confidence, stronger efficacy, and more effective instructional practices (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Hewitt & Rumley, 2022; Young & Crow, 2016). Where mandates are absent or weakly supported, these advantages are distributed unevenly with preparation gaps falling most consequentially on leaders in the highest-need schools (Bastian & Drake, 2023; Richard & Cosner, 2024; Virella & Cobb, 2022).

State Policy as a Structuring Condition

The Policy-Practice Gap

Despite the recognized importance of mentoring, many state policies do not specify requirements for mentoring programs, and without clear state expectations, educator preparation programs must design their own mentoring structures, resulting in wide variation in candidates' experiences driven by program discretion rather than professional standards (Anderson & Reynolds, 2015; Cosner, 2019; Grissom et al., 2018; Richard & Cosner, 2024). The distinction between the presence of a requirement and the quality of its implementation is central to understanding why mandate language alone is an insufficient proxy for preparation quality (Mazmanian & Sabatier, 1983). Effective implementation depends on how state requirements are aligned with program design and local execution and on access to qualified mentors and adequate funding, conditions that mandate language alone does not guarantee (Cosner, 2019; Darling-Hammond et al., 2022; Rogers & VanGronigen, 2023). This gap between policy adoption and policy enactment is one of the most persistent challenges in principal preparation reform, and it is precisely this distinction that must anchor how researchers and policymakers interpret state-level variation in mentoring outcomes (Pechota et al., 2023; Rogers & VanGronigen, 2023).

Principals also frequently face multiple, sometimes conflicting mandates from different governance levels, contributing to role ambiguity and implementation inconsistency that further erodes the coherence of mentoring across placements (Anderson & Reynolds, 2015; Crow et al., 2012). The layered nature of education governance means that state mentoring policies interact with competing local and accountability demands, producing implementation environments that are more complex and less predictable than the policy language itself suggests (Honig, 2006; Mazmanian & Sabatier, 1983; Pechota et al., 2023).

State Policy Variation and Its Consequences

Policies governing mentoring in principal preparation vary widely across states, and that variation operates as a structuring condition, determining not just if mentoring is available but how coherently and equitably it is experienced across programs and candidates (Pechota et al., 2023). The Education Commission of the States documents that states such as Delaware and Georgia have explicit mentoring mandates with designated funding streams and state-level oversight, while many others provide only limited guidance, leaving implementation to local education agencies or individual preparation programs (Pechota et al., 2023). A few states tie mentoring directly to licensure, creating structural accountability that makes coherent preparation more likely; others mention mentoring only in broad or aspirational language; and still others impose no requirement at all (Pechota et al., 2023).

These policy types differ meaningfully in their expected effects. Licensure-tied mandates create accountability structures that make consistently implemented, high-quality mentoring more probable while aspirational language leaves implementation entirely to local discretion, producing precisely the preparation inequities documented throughout the literature (Anderson & Reynolds, 2015; Bastian & Drake, 2023; Rogers & VanGronigen, 2023). However, a critical gap remains: the existing literature documents this variation thoroughly without yet testing whether states with formal mentoring mandates produce measurably better principal outcomes across domains (Anderson & Reynolds, 2015; Grissom et al., 2021). Research on leadership efficacy, occupational stress, pay satisfaction, and student achievement tends to be conducted in isolation, making it difficult to determine whether state mentoring policy exerts consistent effects across these outcomes or whether its influence is conditional on workforce and funding contexts. This represents the central unresolved question in the field.

Policy Enactment and Principal Sensemaking

Policy enactment frequently diverges from original intent, and principal preparation is no exception (Honig, 2006; Mazmanian & Sabatier, 1983). Aspiring principals experience preparation as collaborative, context-specific work grounded in local data and relationships rather than as adherence to policy templates (Fry et al., 2005). Bros and Schechter (2022) documented cases in which principals interpret reform mandates through the lens of their own professional pathways and local contexts, enacting them as compliance requirements rather than developmental supports regardless of the original policy intent. Urick and Bowers (2014) further showed that self-perceived leadership styles shape how reform is understood and applied across different school settings, meaning that the same policy can produce meaningfully different preparation experiences depending on who is implementing it and in what context.

Together, these findings illustrate why the presence of a mentoring mandate at the state level does not guarantee that candidates experience coherent developmental support and why principals' perceptions of the policies under which they were prepared are an essential complement to aggregate policy data. How principals make sense of their mentoring experiences shapes how much value they attribute to those experiences and how fully those experiences translate into enacted leadership capacity (Weick, 1995). This distinction between policy adoption and policy enactment explains why two states with nominally similar mandates can produce substantially different preparation outcomes and why research must attend to the interpretive layer between

policy design and principal experience (Mazmanian & Sabatier, 1983; Rogers & VanGronigen, 2023).

Workforce Conditions as Moderating Forces

Mentoring's effectiveness does not operate uniformly; its impact is moderated by the structural conditions of the schools and systems in which principals work and ignoring those conditions produces an incomplete account of what mentoring policy can deliver (Franco & Patrick, 2023; Grissom et al., 2018). Per-pupil spending, principal compensation, and teacher workforce stability all shape how leaders can apply what they learned through mentoring (Grissom et al., 2018; Mitani, 2025). A principal who developed instructional coaching skills during a mentored internship may find those skills readily applicable in a well-staffed school but largely inaccessible in a school consumed by chronic vacancies where daily operational demands leave little room for the deliberate instructional leadership that mentoring is designed to cultivate (Darling-Hammond et al., 2022; Grissom et al., 2018; Mitani, 2025). This conditional relationship where mentoring matters only to the degree that context allows its lessons to be enacted must be made explicit in any account of what mentoring policy produces in practice.

Principal turnover is significantly higher in schools with greater teacher turnover, suggesting that workforce instability and leadership instability are mutually reinforcing rather than independent challenges (Bartanen et al., 2019). Principals managing chronic vacancies and high proportions of uncertified teachers consistently report elevated stress, lower pay satisfaction, and diminished capacity to focus on instructional improvement, the very outcomes that strong mentoring preparation is designed to support (Drake et al., 2023; Su-Keene et al., 2026). In schools facing these conditions, mentoring's developmental agenda is effectively displaced, shifting from instructional growth and leadership identity development toward immediate staffing and organizational survival concerns (Drake et al., 2023; Franco & Patrick, 2023; Versland, 2016). In states that maintain strong teacher pipelines and fair compensation structures, by contrast, principals are more likely to apply what they learned through mentoring to build instructionally focused systems and pursue sustained school improvement (Bastian & Drake, 2023; Darling-Hammond et al., 2022). Thus, even high-quality mentoring is only as impactful as workforce conditions allow, reinforcing the need for policy attention to school-level structural issues alongside mentoring mandates.

Teacher vacancy rates, the proportion of undercertified teachers, teacher attrition, and per-pupil spending each function as moderating conditions, determining the degree to which mentoring translates into improved principal efficacy, reduced stress, greater pay satisfaction, and stronger student outcomes (Franco & Patrick, 2023; Grissom et al., 2018; Mitani, 2025). High vacancy rates constrain principals' ability to influence instruction regardless of preparation quality because much of their energy is redirected toward managing staffing gaps rather than instructional leadership, a redirection that crowds out the mastery experiences and vicarious learning through which efficacy is built and sustained (Bandura, 1997; Franco & Patrick, 2023; Grissom et al., 2021; Virella & Cobb, 2022). Mentoring can help buffer some of these challenges as principals supported by experienced mentors often develop strategies for recruiting and retaining teachers, coaching novice staff, and sustaining organizational coherence under difficult conditions (Franco & Patrick, 2023; Rogers & VanGronigen, 2023). However, this buffering capacity is itself contingent: it is most effective when mentoring is sustained and structured, state policy ensures its consistent

availability, and compensation structures signal to principals that their professional investment is valued (Mitani, 2025; Service et al., 2016).

Principal Outcomes: Efficacy, Stress, Retention, and Student Achievement

Principal Self-Efficacy

Principal self-efficacy, referring to principals' domain-specific confidence to perform the tasks of school leadership, is one of the most consistent predictors of principal persistence, instructional leadership quality, and school improvement outcomes (Hannah et al., 2008; Van Nieuwerburgh et al., 2020; Versland, 2016). Mentoring activates all four sources of efficacy information simultaneously, and iterative cycles of feedback and reflection further strengthen efficacy by allowing candidates to refine their approaches and connect leadership actions to instructional improvement, a process that makes mastery experiences durable rather than situational (Cosner et al., 2018; Cunningham et al., 2019). Principals who receive stronger preparation, including structured mentoring, report higher levels of self-efficacy and are more likely to remain in the profession, and structured internship experiences with strong mentoring components predict principals' self-reported sense of preparedness and readiness to lead (Bastian & Henry, 2015; Grissom et al., 2018). The connection between mentoring quality, state policy strength, and self-efficacy represents one of the most well-supported relationships in the principal preparation literature and one of the clearest arguments for why policy variation carries real consequences for schools and the leaders who serve them.

Occupational Stress and Wellbeing

Occupational stress is a persistent challenge for school principals particularly in contexts characterized by high accountability demands, staffing instability, and resource constraints (Grissom et al., 2018; Su-Keene et al., 2026). The sources of principal stress include managing chronic teacher vacancies, navigating competing policy demands, and absorbing role expectations that have expanded substantially without corresponding increases in structural support (Cosner, 2019; Drake et al., 2023; Su-Keene et al., 2026). Su-Keene et al. found that the majority of principals reported high work stress with moderate levels of anxiety and depression, and stress has been linked to poor sleep quality, weakened principal self-efficacy, and increased intentions to leave the profession.

Mentoring functions as a theorized buffer against occupational stress by reducing the likelihood that new leaders enter their roles feeling underprepared and isolated, two conditions the literature identifies as primary drivers of early-career stress and attrition (Cosner, 2019; Darling-Hammond et al., 2022; Rogers & VanGronigen, 2023). Principals who enter the role with a strong mentoring foundation are better equipped to manage the cognitive and emotional demands of the job and less likely to experience the isolation that characterizes early career attrition (Cosner, 2019; Richard & Cosner, 2024). Conversely, weak or inconsistent mentoring leaves leaders underprepared and isolated, a condition that compounds occupational stress rather than buffering it and that the literature associates with lower resilience and earlier professional exit (Cosner, 2019; Rogers & VanGronigen, 2023).

Pay Satisfaction and Retention

Pay satisfaction is a meaningful predictor of principal retention, and its relationship to mentoring, while indirect, operates through the constructs of role fit, preparedness, and perceived professional value (Mitani, 2025; Service et al., 2016). Principals who report feeling underprepared for their roles are more likely to experience their compensation as inadequate relative to their demands while those who feel efficacious and well supported are more likely to evaluate their pay as fair given their sense of professional competence and impact (Mitani, 2025). This suggests that mentoring's contribution to efficacy may partially mediate the relationship between compensation and retention, meaning that improvements in mentoring quality and policy support could strengthen retention even without immediate compensation increases (Grissom et al., 2018; Mitani, 2025; Service et al., 2016). In states where both mentoring mandates and compensation structures are stronger, principals are more likely to report satisfaction with their roles and to remain in the profession, a combined effect that underscores the importance of attending to both policy levers simultaneously (Bastian & Henry, 2015; Darling-Hammond et al., 2022).

Student Achievement

The relationship between principal preparation, mentoring, and student achievement is indirect but substantiated across the literature. Principals who receive stronger mentoring-supported preparation are more likely to engage in instructional leadership behaviors such as conducting classroom observations, providing feedback to teachers, and building coherent instructional systems that research associates with improved teacher effectiveness and student outcomes (Darling-Hammond et al., 2022; Grissom et al., 2021). Grissom et al. (2021) synthesized two decades of evidence showing that principals who focus on instructional leadership produce measurable gains in student achievement, and this instructional orientation is most consistently developed through structured mentored preparation experiences (Bastian & Drake, 2023; Darling-Hammond et al., 2007). The pathway from mentoring to student outcomes thus runs through principal efficacy and instructional leadership behavior, and it is conditioned by the same policy and workforce factors that shape whether mentoring is coherently available in the first place (Anderson & Reynolds, 2015; Grissom et al., 2021; Rogers & VanGronigen, 2023).

Data Use and System-Level Accountability

Data systems serve not merely as accountability tools but as the feedback infrastructure through which mentoring programs can identify and address implementation gaps over time, making them integral to the policy-to-practice relationship this article examines (Cosner, 2019; Honig, 2006; Virella & Cobb, 2022). Without systematic data on the impact of mentoring programs, it is difficult to identify strengths or weaknesses in design and practice, and the absence of actionable data inhibits learning from successful models and the scaling of evidence-based approaches (Cosner, 2019; Grissom et al., 2018; Virella & Cobb, 2022). Many states lack systems to track and evaluate the outcomes of mentoring initiatives, and policy designs without monitoring mechanisms often fail to produce consistent results even when mandates exist (Cosner, 2019; Honig, 2006; Virella & Cobb, 2022). Programs where universities incorporate systematic data collection into their mentoring cycles demonstrate that tracking candidate learning and mentor engagement over time

can strengthen program quality but only when data use is intentionally integrated into program design rather than treated as a compliance exercise (Herman et al., 2022).

When coursework, clinical experiences, and mentoring operate in silos without coordination or shared accountability, the result is inconsistent messaging, limited mentor involvement, and a widening gap between the leadership theory candidates learn and the practice they experience in the field (Anderson & Reynolds, 2015; Browne-Ferrigno & Muth, 2004; Tucker et al., 2012). Drake et al. (2023) documented how some interns experience little more than logistical oversight while others benefit from sustained integration into school leadership, and these disparities in implementation quality underscore the importance of both systematic data collection and principal voice in understanding what state mentoring mandates actually produce in practice. Data systems that capture principal outcomes over time and across efficacy, stress, pay satisfaction, and school performance are not just accountability tools; they are the infrastructure through which preparation systems can learn and improve.

Gaps and Directions for Future Research

The literature reviewed here establishes the theoretical and empirical case for mentoring as the primary mechanism through which preparation translates into leadership capacity, but it also reveals a set of unresolved questions that point toward a clear research agenda. Most fundamentally, the existing literature documents state policy variation thoroughly without testing whether states with formal mentoring mandates produce measurably better principal outcomes across domains (Anderson & Reynolds, 2015; Grissom et al., 2021). Studies on principal self-efficacy, occupational stress, pay satisfaction, and student achievement are largely conducted in isolation, making it difficult to determine whether state mentoring policy exerts consistent effects across these outcomes or whether its influence is conditional on workforce, funding, and implementation context.

A second gap concerns principal perceptions and sensemaking. Policy data and program-level measures capture what mentoring looks like structurally, but they do not capture how principals make sense of the preparation they received or how those interpretations shape their leadership identity, persistence, and professional decision making (Bros & Schechter, 2022; Weick, 1995). Research that integrates sensemaking frameworks with policy analysis would help explain the divergence between mandate strength and preparation outcomes that the literature currently observes but cannot fully account for. A third gap concerns equity: specifically, whether and how the differential distribution of mentoring quality across candidate populations and school contexts is reproduced or disrupted by different types of state mentoring mandates (Bastian & Drake, 2023; Richard & Cosner, 2024; Virella & Cobb, 2022).

These gaps collectively point to the need for research that examines multiple principal outcomes together in relation to state-level mentoring policy variation, disaggregating effects by policy type, workforce context, and principal population to capture the conditionality that characterizes this relationship. Such research would not only advance the scholarly literature but also provide the evidence base that state policymakers, preparation program leaders, and district administrators need to make consequential decisions about how principal preparation is designed, supported, and evaluated.

The conceptual model that emerges from this review positions mentoring as the central mechanism through which preparation becomes leadership capacity, state policy as the upstream structuring condition that determines whether mentoring is coherently and equitably available, and

workforce conditions as the downstream moderating force that determines whether what was learned through mentoring can be enacted in practice. Understanding principal outcomes requires attending to all three simultaneously, and future research that disaggregates their effects will provide the most actionable evidence for reform.

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