



REVIEW OF *GATEWAYS TO THE PRINCIPALSHIP*

Reviewed By

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Summary of Review

Gateways to the Principalship: State Power to Improve the Quality of School Leaders proposes state policies for improving principal effectiveness and student achievement. It uses policy examples from eight “lagging” and eight “leading” states as a means of advocating for a wide range of policy actions aimed at influencing principal preparation, licensure and retention. The report, however, has several flaws that undermine its usefulness. It provides little explanation on how the state exemplars were selected or why they were considered to be leading or lagging. It makes little use of existing research. It does not report on extensive current state and professional activities on leadership standards, program accreditation and licensure requirements that address exactly these features. It recommends ending the “monopoly” of higher education in principal preparation and broadening (or lowering) the criteria for becoming a principal, but it provides no research or other evidence that such changes are warranted, will improve student achievement, or have other beneficial effects. The report’s endorsement of broadly accepted, almost platitudinous reform principles, coupled with unsupported and possibly counterproductive recommendations, renders the report of little value in improving the quality of principals.

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REVIEW OF GATEWAYS TO THE PRINCIPALSHIP

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I. Introduction

Gateways to the Principalsip: State Power to Improve the Quality of School Leaders, authored by Gretchen Cheney and Jacqueline Davis and published by the Center for American Progress, proposes a set of state policies as a way to improve principal effectiveness and student achievement.¹ It uses policy examples from eight “lagging” and eight “leading” states as a means of advocating for a wide range of policy actions to influence leadership preparation, licensure and principal retention. The report asserts that “state policy makers can determine who can become a principal” (p. 4) by using two “powerful gateway levers” (p. 4): the criteria and process for approving leadership preparation programs and the requirements for principal licensure or certification. The report argues that few states use these levers sufficiently and, as a result, states must “take immediate action to ensure that high quality-principals lead all schools” (p. 30).

II. Findings and Conclusions of the Report

The report begins with a reasonable explanation of the importance of principals. Following this, the report presents a research approach that contrasts eight “leading” and eight “lagging” states in training and supporting effective principles. The “leading” states are Illinois, Louisiana, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, New York, Rhode Island and Tennessee. The “lagging” states are Indiana, Kansas, Minnesota, New Mexico, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Texas and Washington. Although a boxed heading on the page 2 is titled “Our Criteria for State Selection,” no clear definition or criteria for making this distinction is provided. The report then focuses the readers’ attention on two state “gateways” for influencing principal quality: approval of preparation programs and licensing, and it presents seven characteristics of an effective principal, as defined by Robert Marzano and others: change agent, flexibility, ideals and beliefs, intellectual stimulation, knowledge, monitoring, and optimizer.

The report’s next section uses a completely different set of criteria to assert that traditional principal preparation programs and standards fall short. The programs should have specific characteristics or approaches regarding the following: competency based, recruitment, coursework, school based, continuing support, and data based. These new requirements are from the Rainwater Leadership Alliance, whose recommendations are

said in the report to be consistent with a “consensus” by several foundations and institutes (Broad, Fordham, and Bush, among others). The report lists perceived weaknesses of state licensure requirements and then illustrates how some states are changing access to the principalship (the “gateways”). It pulls one proposed or recently enacted example of its preferred practices from a state, but it never shows how prevalent these policies are among leading states or their impacts on student achievement. Nor does it compare the so-called leading and lagging states on similar types of policies. These anecdotes comprise almost a quarter of the report.

The report concludes by stressing the urgency for state action in changing policies to “strengthen the quality of principals” (p. 30) and lists a wide range of proposed policy recommendations. The recommendations are largely focused on creating and applying new leadership standards for program and policy coherence, research-based criteria for preparation program features, non-university licensure preparation options, and performance-based assessments for candidates and licensure. The report also includes miscellaneous recommendations, such as no longer offering a salary credit to teachers who earn a master’s degree in educational administration yet do not take a leadership position; doing away with master’s degree requirements for licensure; and linking ongoing licensure with competency-based principal evaluation.

III. The Report’s Rationale for Its Findings and Conclusions

The report is loosely structured on three inherent premises: that the wrong people are being prepared to become principals; that the principal preparation field is too reliant on universities; and that leadership preparation programs do not offer high-quality, relevant preparation. Very little in the way of supporting data is presented to justify these claims. Because the report’s organization is disjointed and lacks any framework or guiding ideas, it is difficult for the reader to understand the authors’ logic. But as discussed in the next section of this review, the conclusions are based on weakly supported claims found primarily in non-scholarly reports² or on prior recommendations from non-university providers. The report contends that states will “reap the results in terms of student performance” (p. 30) if they attend to the authors’ concerns, but again no evidence is provided to support this claim. In this manner, the report sets up its policy recommendations as a moral obligation, because to avoid these would be to neglect children’s education. But readers are essentially asked to take the authors’ word for it.

IV. The Report’s Use of the Research Literature

Although research on the principalship is abundant, very few references in the report are from generally accepted or peer-reviewed sources. Instead, the report’s framework and analysis of findings are loosely based on literature drawn primarily and uncritically from organizational and foundation reports.

The manuscript often states the importance of “research based” evidence (see pages 1, 3, 5, 6, and 7 of the report), but very little research is presented. What might be considered a

traditional research review section is limited to two paragraphs (p. 5) consisting of broad and sweeping claims. Perhaps the most used citation is an earlier, non-peer-reviewed report by these same authors.³

As a result, the report, although focused on leadership preparation, ignores a large and well-developed body of research from the educational leadership preparation and broader leadership development fields. This non-addressed, non-included evidence includes national and international research recently reviewed and synthesized in two research handbooks⁴ and other work synthesizing research by leading experts in the field,⁵ as well as a growing body of research published in specialized peer-reviewed journals: the *Journal of Research on Leadership Education* and the *Academy of Management Learning & Education*. It also omits a recent review that synthesizes professional field recommendations and research on how preparation influences leader outcomes.⁶ In addition, the report ignores research on policy strategies to improve the quality and effectiveness of school leaders through principal preparation, licensure, professional development and evaluation.⁷

Perhaps the most glaring omission is the absence of research findings on the Wallace Foundation's investment in state policy making for cohesive leadership systems—findings that argue for far more robust, systematic and nuanced policy strategies than presented in the CAP report.⁸ It also ignores the policy tracking reports compiled with the Education Commission of the States (ECS) and the National Conference of State Legislators (NCSL), which show trends in state policymaking on teacher and principal education. Analyses of the ECS and NCSL reports would have been useful in putting the CAP report's policy analysis within a larger context.

V. Review of the Report's Methods

The report is built around two primary analyses, each of which has significant flaws.

The first analysis presents what the authors consider to be shortcomings of traditional leadership preparation programs. It uses as its framework the authors' list of key elements, such as program standards, rigorous selection process, relevant and practical coursework, and experiential, clinical school-based opportunities.⁹ These elements are certainly reasonable; they, in fact, reflect well-established and long-held standards and expectations for quality leadership preparation programs in the field, as reinforced by reviews of best practices and field-initiated recommendations beginning in the early 1990s.¹⁰ Such expectations have been reinforced by federal policy guidelines and foundation grants for leadership preparation programs.¹¹ Most important, the leadership preparation field's own professional standards and guidelines have stressed these and other critical standards and use them to evaluate programs' effectiveness and to provide program approval.¹² A growing body of research has already used high-quality program features to document program practices,¹³ compare innovative and conventional preparation,¹⁴ and demonstrate variability of program quality among programs in specific states, with recommendations for policy action.¹⁵ But the report draws on none of this work.

The second primary analysis problem involves its sampling of states, categorizing them as either “lagging” and “leading” in improving principal effectiveness. The report provides very little information about its criteria for this distinction or how states were selected. It merely explains that states were identified based on unreferenced “literature review and

The report ignores a large and well-developed body of research from the educational leadership preparation and leadership development fields.

interviews with field experts” (p. 2), and it acknowledges that these states are not the only ones meeting the undefined criteria, but are simply used as “concrete examples.” The report does explain that “leading” states may only have “examples of specific component reform” (p. 2) rather than a more comprehensive set of policies and practices. It also suggests that the sampled states were selected for contextual variation—geographic and demographic—but never presents the information on the policy and contextual features.

More importantly, no analytic framework or set of measures is outlined in the report’s methodology, and no data are consistently presented across the 16 states. State policy evidence on licensure in lagging states is included—for initial licensure (type of master’s degree, years of teaching experience, completion of an approved program, and licensure exam) and for licensure renewal—but is not presented for leading states. This leaves unanswered the question of how, if at all, these latter states are actually different. Finally, while the report argues that the leading states’ policies are the types that can improve student achievement scores, no evidence of any sort is presented to justify this claim. In fact, several policy examples are still under development and not yet enacted, so no outcome evidence would be possible.

VI. Review of the Validity of the Report’s Findings and Conclusions

The report ends with a series of unsubstantiated conclusions and recommendations that are not well linked to the limited evidence provided earlier in the report. For example, the characteristics of a high-quality program and Marzano’s “correlates of deeper school change” bear little apparent relationship to the authors’ preferred policy recommendations on standards setting, preparation program requirements, adding non-university providers, and candidate assessment. The report never justifies its overarching claim that those recommendations will somehow address or improve “the academic stakes for children” (p. 30).

In addition, the report’s recommendations incorrectly imply a general absence of policy and practice akin to these recommended approaches. In reality, most of the recommendations parallel existing reform efforts (e.g, adopt program quality standards and competency-based assessments) or existing best practices in the field that capitalize on established and accepted accreditation and accountability systems (e.g., standards setting). Many of the recommendations are centered on already well-regarded and commonly implemented policies, priorities and recommendations in the field.

To some extent, the offering of non-groundbreaking recommendations is fine, except that the report gives the impression that the current situation is in need of substantial reform and that those recommendations would break from current thinking and practices. Consider, for example, the recommendation, “States should define and set standards of principal effectiveness that are more robust and reflective of the latest research and experience of practitioners” (p. 31). The report simply fails to note that most states have already done this.¹⁶

Most troubling, the report’s recommendations (pp. 30-33) are an amalgam of vague suggestions with little discernible focus. For example, the report tells its readers that states should define the characteristics of good programs, have more stringent and explicit requirements, be held accountable, develop data systems, collect student achievement data, and sunset all existing programs (also see section II above).

While it would be difficult to disagree with some of these abstract recommendations, it is just as difficult to know what these diffuse characteristics mean in practice and whether they are necessary or preferable to other, possibly stronger, policy options. For example, an oft-repeated recommendation in the report is, “States should end the monopoly of higher education on principal preparation, and be open to approving district, state and nonprofit principal preparation programs that meet the state-required characteristics.” The recommendation is presented without any substantiation of why this is a good idea. With over 500 public and private university-based leadership preparation programs nationwide, ranging from national research universities to small regional colleges and on-line universities, plus a handful of district- and state-based leadership preparation programs, there is currently little shortage of competitors.

Yet the report’s recommendation goes further, arguing for non-university providers without evidence of the need for more providers or evidence concerning whether existing programs are unable to produce high-quality school leader candidates or whether non-university providers can produce high-quality leadership candidates. This points to the recurring problem of this CAP report: readers are asked to accept the advocated proposals on the mere say-so of the authors—without compelling evidence that there is a problem or that the proposals will beneficially address any such problem.

In sum, the report includes a great number of recommendations that are broadly accepted in the field, others that are so universal as to be considered folk knowledge, and still others that push with no basis or substantiation for extensions or expansions of current practices.

VII. Usefulness of the Report for Guidance of Policy and Practice

The report has little utility for policy or practice. By not articulating a policy framework with defined criteria, the report gives state policymakers little guidance on specific policy actions. For the most part, the guidance that is provided simply reinforces preexisting and broadly accepted state policies, programs and reforms.¹⁷ The recommendations for alternative providers for licensure may be of some interest, but no cogent rationale for the proposal is presented. And analyses and information that would inform consideration of

the recommendations are never mentioned or evaluated. Little of use is provided by the report's mere labeling of some states as "lagging," without defining the criteria for this labeling and demonstrating, in some reasonable fashion, that the criteria make a difference. In the end, this report distracts from more relevant and potent policy strategies to improve leadership preparation – ones that build on the large existing public and private university infrastructure, recent upgrades in the national accreditation systems, and the trend toward standards-based, multi-pronged state leadership policy systems.

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