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Study Finds Successes, Challenges in Illinois Shift to Intensive Principal Preparation

A report released today from the Illinois Education Research Council (IERC) at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, in partnership with the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research (UChicago Consortium), assesses the progress of sweeping legislation to redesign the way school principals in Illinois are prepared, with the goal of improving schools statewide through higher quality leadership. The report summarizes findings from a two-year study assessing the progress of these ambitious reforms and describing the changes that occurred as a result of the new policy.

“This in-depth look at principal preparation programs is the latest in our series of studies of Illinois’ school leadership and provides insights into the challenges programs face after major reforms and the innovative ways that they have navigated through these challenges,” says IERC Executive Director Janet K. Holt.

Illinois’ new principal preparation policy required universities across the state to shift from a general training model geared toward multiple school administrative positions to more targeted and selective principal-specific preparation beginning in the 2014-15 school year. As a result, the study finds that preparation programs experienced substantial, but not unexpected, declines in enrollment.

However, university faculty and school district representatives believe the revised requirements provide more rigorous and realistic preparation for the job. Policymakers and statewide stakeholders have viewed this shift as a transition from an emphasis on the quantity of principals prepared statewide to the quality of their preparation. Staff and principal candidates from the preparation programs, as well as school district personnel interviewed for the study, generally agreed that the new programs are likely to produce school leaders who are more capable of improving schools and raising student achievement.

Nevertheless, questions remain about whether the supply of principals prepared in the new programs will be sufficient to meet statewide demand for school leaders. According to Bradford R. White, senior researcher at the IERC and the report’s lead author, “Finding a balance between quality and quantity is going to be a key to the success of this policy moving forward.”

The study notes that Illinois continues to be a leader in the nationwide effort to improve principal preparation, and concludes that continued efforts are needed to ensure that the redesigned programs fulfill their promise. “What we find is that, generally, stakeholders across Illinois understand the challenges, as well as the additional resources required to make this more intensive program successful,” says Amber Stitzel Pareja of UChicago Consortium and a co-author of the report. “At the same time, they continue to see the redesign as a positive change, with the potential to produce better-prepared school principals as well as improved student achievement and more successful schools.”

The study was supported by grants from The Robert R. McCormick Foundation and The Wallace Foundation. Other key findings include:

- The new policy strengthened partnerships between universities and school districts to help ensure that principal preparation reflects the needs of local schools
- Internships focused on the mastery of leadership competencies rather than hours accumulated observing leadership have improved the depth, clarity and practicality of the experience
- Instructional leadership is a clear focus of both the internship and coursework, but there is some worry that important administrative and managerial skills have been de-emphasized
- The new programs have increased training for leading special student populations, including students with disabilities, English language learners and early childhood students, but whether this is sufficient to prepare principals to lead across all contexts remains a matter of debate

The complete report, along with other reports in the series, is available at <http://ierc.education> and at <http://consortium.uchicago.edu/publications>.

For more information, call the IERC at (618) 650-2840 or (866) 799-4372.

About the Illinois Education Research Council

[The Illinois Education Research Council](#) is an independent research organization that conducts education policy research on issues of import to the state of Illinois. Since 2009, it has been the legislated research arm of the Illinois P-20 Council. Our policy research follows important educational trends in Illinois and is disseminated through our research reports, presentations to the Illinois P-20 Council and its subcommittees, and through conference presentations.

About the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research

[The University of Chicago Consortium on School Research](#) conducts research of high technical quality that can inform and assess policy and practice in the Chicago Public Schools. We seek to expand communication among researchers, policymakers, and practitioners as we support the search for solutions to the problems of school reform. The Consortium encourages the use of research in policy action and improvement of practice, but does not argue for particular policies or programs. Rather, we help to build capacity for school reform by identifying what matters for student success and school improvement, creating critical indicators to chart progress, and conducting theory-driven evaluation to identify how programs and policies are working.

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