

Federal and State Funding Initiatives in School Improvement: A Texas Focus

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This article explores the impact of federal and state funding initiatives on school improvement, focusing on the Texas Education Agency (TEA). It examines the evolution of the Texas Tech University principal preparation residency program, emphasizing the importance of partnerships, research, and continuous improvement in principal preparation. Key TEA initiatives include the Texas Incentive Allotment, Grow-Your-Own Grant, and Principal Residency Grant. These initiatives support teacher retention, recruitment, and leadership development, contributing to the success of instructional leaders across Texas. The program's design integrates practical experience with theoretical knowledge, preparing residents for effective school leadership.

Keywords: principal preparation, school-university partnerships, school improvement

INTRODUCTION

During President Lyndon B. Johnson's tenure, the federal government allocated \$1.1 billion to school funding (Mitra, 2022). This marked the beginning of a surge in funding aimed at continuous school improvement. The funds catered to schools that consistently failed the accountability system and those affected by pandemic challenges. The objective was to enhance safety protocols and bolster the recruitment and retention of educators and school leaders. Davis et al. (2015) conducted a comprehensive review of eight principal preparation programs, concluding that partnerships between districts and universities are vital. However, they emphasized the need for supportive state and local policies.

The Texas Education Agency (TEA) has mirrored federal efforts, offering school districts funding opportunities that promote teacher retention, recruitment, and principal development. Notable initiatives include:

1. *Texas Incentive Allotment*: Rewards selected teachers who meet specific performance standards (tiatexas.org, n.d.)
2. *Grow-Your-Own Grant*: Aims at aiding rural school districts in enhancing the diversity and quality of their teaching workforce (Texas Education Agency, 2018).
3. *Principal Residency Grant*: Identifies potential leaders within a district that reflect its demographics, offering them a fully-funded principal preparation residency program (Texas Education Agency, 2023).

This article discusses the effects of the principal residency grant, which channels federal funds to the Texas Education Agency. This grant enables local educational bodies and their university partners to offer a genuine principal residency experience. As a result, residents are prepared to take on leadership roles in administration upon completing the program.

Texas Tech University Principal Preparation Residency Program

Established through federal and state funding initiatives, the Principal Fellow Program (PFP) at Texas Tech University was piloted in the 2013-2014 academic year. Initially funded federally by the Supporting Effective Educator Development grant, the program now receives support from the TEA. Since 2018, TEA has fostered partnerships between school districts and universities to cultivate a pipeline of aspiring leaders. Over the past five years, the PFP has collaborated with numerous school districts, certifying principals as instructional leaders through these grant efforts funded through the Texas Education Agency's Principal Residency Grants.

Principal Fellow Program (PFP) Cohorts

The PFP cohorts typically comprise 15-23 principal residents annually. Since its inception, over 100 principal fellows have completed the program. A significant number now occupy leadership roles in various educational settings across Texas and Louisiana. The success of these instructional leaders can be attributed to the funding and opportunities availed by the federal government and TEA.

Recognition and Evaluation

In 2020, TEA and the Education Development Center (EDC) acknowledged Texas Tech University's Education Preparation Program (EPP) for its excellence. The program underwent a rigorous evaluation using the Quality Measures instrument, which is backed by the Wallace Foundation. This evaluation process revealed areas for refinement and reinforced the program's commitment to offering an authentic learning experience for its graduate students.

Continuous Improvement in Principal Preparation

TTU's EPP emphasizes three primary areas for continuous improvement:

1. **Research and Scholarship**: TTU faculty explore empirical research to understand effective principal preparation program designs, curriculum, and pedagogy.
2. **University and District Partnerships**: Collaborative efforts ensure that programs align with the evolving demands of teacher and leader development.
3. **Collaborative Critical Reflection**: Engaging in shared reflection on scholarship ensures the program remains relevant and impactful.

LITERATURE REVIEW: PRINCIPAL PREPARATION PROGRAMS AND THEIR EVOLUTION

The landscape of educational leadership has witnessed significant shifts over the years, with principal preparation programs (PPPs) at the forefront of these changes. The foundation of research and scholarship in this domain primarily revolves around discerning effective strategies in PPPs and identifying areas of improvement.

At Texas Tech University (TTU), the faculty has been proactive in immersing themselves in empirical research to ascertain effective designs, curricula, and pedagogies for principal preparation. A primary objective has been to align the program with the evolving demands of teacher and leader development, ensuring the multifaceted role of school leaders, especially in challenging established norms are addressed (Young & Eddy-Spicer, 2019; Korach et al., 2019).

A recent survey conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics highlights the challenges faced by schools, with increasing demands in accountability, decision-making, funding, and the repercussions of the pandemic leading many educators to exit the profession. The 2022 poll highlighted by the National Center for Education Statistics reveals 44% of public schools reported teaching vacancies, with 61% attributing these and other staff vacancies to the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, the leading causes of these vacancies were resignations and retirements, underscoring the challenges schools face in retaining staff amidst the ongoing pandemic (NCES, 2022, December 13). This raises a pivotal question: How are educational institutions and PPPs adapting to these challenges, especially in the recruitment and retention of teachers and potential school leaders? Eadens and Caballos (2023) embarked on a study to evaluate the alignment of an educational leadership program with the contemporary roles of its student professionals. Their quantitative analysis reveal that while the program met students' needs, perceptual differences existed in terms of academic rigor, intellectual climate, faculty support, and curriculum materials. This underscores the need for university leadership programs to collaborate extensively with school district partners, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of leadership requirements.

While empirical research forms the bedrock of preparing future school leaders, Educational Preparation Programs (EPPs) must also address the specific needs and contexts of schools. Farrell et al. (2022) emphasized the significance of Research-Practice Partnerships (RPPs) in bridging the gap between research, policy, and practice. Such partnerships, characterized by long-term collaboration, are instrumental in addressing enduring challenges and systemic disparities in education.

Furthering the discourse on partnerships, The Wallace Foundation has been instrumental in advancing research on the subject. Their exploration of six urban school districts shed light on pivotal components for establishing robust principal pipelines, including joint admission processes, cohort-based admissions, and mentorship frameworks (Cosner et al., 2015). Such partnerships, when forged between universities and districts, can be mutually beneficial, particularly for principal residents. Texas Tech's commitment to refining its principal preparation program is evident in its collaborative approach involving faculty and partners. Drawing inspiration from foundational works like Korach et al. (2019), TTU launched the Principal Fellow Program (PFP) in 2016. This initiative, characterized by its innovative design, offers principal residents a comprehensive 15-month job-embedded residency.

EVALUATION OF PRINCIPAL RESIDENCY USING WALLACE FOUNDATION'S QUALITY MEASURES TOOLKIT

The program underwent an evaluation using the Quality Measures Self-Study Toolkit. This toolkit assesses various aspects, from candidate admissions to the performance outcomes of graduates. The main objective was to comprehensively evaluate and enhance the clinical practice component of the Quality Measures instrument.

Several research studies, including those by Anderson & Reynolds (2015), Crow & Whiteman (2016), Darling-Hammond et al. (2022), Dexter et al. (2022), and Mendels (2016), have underscored the significance of in-depth clinical experience for the success of PPPs. Given this emphasis, this article focuses solely on the clinical experience as per the fourth domain of the Quality Measure.

The subsequent section delves into a comprehensive overview of the six indicators within the domain, supported by evidence. It is noteworthy that the initial evaluation of Quality Measures was based on its 10th edition, and the indicators were aligned with this version. However, post this initial assessment, the program's latest evaluation is detailed for the academic year 2022-2023, in alignment with the Texas Education Agency's Principal Residency Grant, Cycle 5. It should be mentioned that the Cycle 6 Residency Grant was still ongoing when this article was penned.

QM Domain 4: Indicator 1 – Clinical Design

Clinical designs are developed collaboratively by program faculty, district partners, and candidates and articulate specific learning and performance goals for each candidate. High-quality clinical designs incorporate “learning while doing,” combining practical experiences with structured reflection and feedback; regularly offer opportunities to connect theory with practice; and require candidates to authentically address challenges that require adaptive leadership.

Integrative Leadership: Bridging Theory, Practice, and Equity in the Principal Fellows Program

The Principal Fellows Program, a joint endeavor between the ISDs and the university, is meticulously crafted to mold aspiring principals into highly qualified instructional leaders. This program is the epitome of ‘learning while doing,’ as each principal fellow is employed in a paid campus leadership role, allowing for immersion in real-world administrative scenarios. These experiences are not isolated; they are intricately woven with theoretical knowledge, ensuring a seamless integration of theory and practice. Specific learning and performance goals are set for each candidate, tailored to their individual growth trajectories. Under the vigilant guidance of both an ISD principal mentor and a University Faculty Coach, fellows are equipped to navigate and address complex, adaptive leadership challenges. A significant emphasis of the program is on fostering an understanding of equity, ensuring every aspiring leader is adept at championing inclusivity and fairness in their future roles.

Summary of M.Ed. Program Handbook

The Texas Tech College of Education offers the Principal Fellows Program, a specialized 15-month, 36-hour online Master of Educational Leadership and Principal Professional Certification designed as a Residency in Practice. Exclusively tailored for partnered school districts, the program emphasizes instructional coaching, data-driven progress monitoring, leadership in Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), equity-focused strategies, and leadership enhancement through TTESS and TPESS. The curriculum integrates the Texas Education Agency’s Effective Schools Framework for on-campus residency experiences, commencing with a mandatory one-week summer institute.

Candidates undergo two internship courses (EDLD 5392) across the fall and spring semesters, focusing on fieldwork and preparation for the TExES 268 certification examination. This includes mastering the PASL 368 rubric and regular performance assessments through the POP Cycle, facilitated by university instructors who also serve as field supervisors. The supervisors, experienced in EC-12 leadership, guide candidates in aligning their internship experiences with certification requirements. The program’s overarching aim is to cultivate instructional leaders adept at fostering inclusive learning communities for students of diverse backgrounds and abilities.

QM Domain 4: Indicator 2 – Clinical Placements

Program faculty and district partners collaborate to ensure that candidates’ clinical placements are at schools well- positioned to support their development as equity-centered leaders, with attention to specific candidate learning needs, diversifying their experiences, and exposing candidates to skilled guidance from site-based mentors, clinical supervisors, and coaches.

Collaborative Clinical Placements With a Focus on Equity-Centered Leadership

The University and district partners employ a rigorous needs assessment from each collaborating school district to ensure the clinical placements of principal fellow candidates are strategically positioned to foster their development as equity-centered leaders. The meticulous process is initiated during the recruitment phase for prospective principal fellow candidates. For instance, the Independent School District (1) needs

assessment, as delineated in a grant application, underscores the district's commitment to diversifying leadership:

Demographic Overview. The ISD caters to 29,137 students, with a diverse demographic distribution of 65% Hispanic, 18% African American, 11% White, 3% Asian, and 1% from other racial backgrounds. The teaching staff comprises 2,468 educators, reflecting 20% African American, 24% Hispanic, and 51% White. The ethnicity of the leadership echelons mirrors the teacher demographics.

Strategic Recruitment. To ensure that the ethnicity of principal candidates mirrors the student demographic, ISD's leadership collaborates with the ESL/Bilingual department between January and March. The collaboration seeks recommendations from ESL/bilingual educators and coaches, aiming to identify and recruit high-performing teachers who might not be in the immediate purview.

Similarly, the Independent School District's (2) needs assessment, also detailed in a grant application, resonates with the findings from ISD (1):

Demographic Overview. The ISD serves a student population of over 32,000, comprising 4% African American, 77% Hispanic, and 16% White. The district boasts a teaching staff of 4,000, with a demographic distribution of 6% African American, 49% Hispanic, and 42% White. The leadership's ethnicity is reflective of the teacher demographics.

Strategic Recruitment. The ISD's leadership is encouraged to prioritize the nomination of qualified Hispanic candidates to ensure the ethnicity of principal candidates aligns with the student body. Furthermore, the district actively seeks recommendations from counselors, lead teachers, and instructional coaches, ensuring a diverse recruitment pool of high-performing teachers.

QM Domain 4: Indicator 3 – Clinical Quality

Program faculty and district partners have developed a shared understanding of the components of a high-quality clinical experience, and they closely monitor each candidate's experience to ensure that quality is met.

Collaborative Standards, Clinical Oversight, and Documented Commitments

In a testament to the shared understanding between program faculty and district partners regarding the standards and criteria for a high-quality clinical experience, the TEA application, MOUs, and roles and responsibilities documents stand as pivotal evidence. The documents, acknowledged and endorsed by both the principal candidate and mentor, delineate the mutual expectations and commitments. The Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the university and the ISD further elucidates the roles and responsibilities of all stakeholders involved: the district, the university, and the principal fellow. This MOU, which undergoes rigorous scrutiny, is ratified by the ISD's school board of trustees and vetted by the university's legal team, ensuring that each candidate's experience consistently aligns with established standards and criteria. Highlighted below are some examples from the three documents:

- Identify a residency placement for each PF that is NOT the campus where the PF had previously been assigned to as a classroom teacher.
- Release the PF from assigned responsibilities during at least six (6) PF on-site coaching visits, instructional days, one (1) half day during the week to attend lecture and other instructional days assigned by TTUCOE faculty for purposes of instructional leadership.
- Allow PF to shadow your leadership (minimum 24 hours per semester) in action and facilitate reflection and conversations around those opportunities.
- Facilitate campus data that permits the PF to become school improvement leader by engaging in Progress Monitoring of six targeted areas involving deep needs assessments, root cause analysis, annual/quarterly SMART goals, targeted interventions, and systemic data collection to improve student outcomes.

Furthermore, the coaching model delineated by Cosner et al. (2015) from the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) has significantly influenced the methodologies employed by university faculty members in

delivering tailored coaching to principal residents. Presently, the composition of our principal preparation program boasts a diverse academic ensemble, encompassing two assistant professors, one associate professor, and a distinguished full-time professor. Each of the esteemed faculty members undertake the role of coaching principal residents within their respective school districts. Notably, the faculty-to-principal resident ratio stands at a commendable 1:5, signifying one faculty coach dedicatedly mentoring four principal residents.

QM Domain 4: Indicator 4 – Clinical Coaching

Throughout the clinical experience, candidates receive culturally responsive, equity-centered clinical coaching which includes regular opportunities for reflection and feedback. Coaches are trained in implementing the program’s preferred coaching model.

As outlined above, the faculty of our Principal Fellows Program maintains an average coaching ratio of 1:5. To clarify, Table 1 illustrates the coaching representation during the TEA’s Cycle 5 principal residency grant for a sample academic year.

**TABLE 1
UNIVERSITY FACULTY COACH TO PRINCIPAL RATIO, CYCLE 5**

School District	Principal Fellows	Principal Coach ID
ISD 1	4	A
ISD 2	4	B
ISD 3	4	C
ISD 4	2	C
ISD 5	5	D

Note: A – D represents the University Faculty Coach without revealing the individual’s name. The number 1 – 5 indicate individual independent school districts without revealing the name.

Faculty Expertise

The University Faculty Coaches (UFC) represent a cadre of seasoned educators, each boasting over two decades of experience in the educational realm. Their extensive backgrounds encompass roles as K-12 school administrators, notably as high school principals within the state of Texas. Furthermore, each UFC possesses a Valid Principal Certification in Texas, is accredited in the Texas Teacher Evaluation Support System (T-TESS) and holds advanced certification as a University Field Supervisor. The UFC team is composed of a distinguished full professor and experienced department chair, an associate professor who also serves as the principal preparation coordinator, an assistant professor with the unique distinction of holding a dual J.D. degree, and another assistant professor certified in both Advancing Educational Leadership (AEL) and T-TESS. Augmenting this team is a professor of practice, responsible for internship instruction and spearheading training initiatives, ensuring students are adeptly prepared for the Performance Assessment for School Leaders’ (PASL) exam and the Principal as an Instructional Leader certification exam.

Structured Coaching Paradigm

The coaching dynamics between the UFC and the Principal Fellow are meticulously structured, with sessions scheduled bi-weekly. This relationship transcends the conventional teacher-student dynamic, evolving into multifaceted roles encompassing advisor, coach, mentor, and course instructor. These

coaching interactions are versatile, facilitated through diverse mediums including virtual platforms such as Zoom, telephonic conversations, emails, texts, and crucially, in-person campus visits, conducted thrice each semester. Interwoven between the individualized coaching sessions, principal residents partake in intensive 3-hour coursework sessions, with the UFCs taking the helm as instructors, ensuring a seamless integration of theory, practice, and mentorship.

QM Domain 4: Indicator 5 – Clinical Supervision

Candidates receive culturally responsive, equity-centered clinical supervision throughout their clinical experience. Supervisors regularly communicate with candidates and relevant program and clinical faculty to best understand candidates' development needs and provide specific, actionable feedback.

Culturally-Responsive Clinical Supervision

Within our program, the University Faculty Coaches (UFCs) and the Professor of Practice, who also serves as the internship course instructor, assume the pivotal roles of site supervisors. Principal residents are entrusted with the task of meticulously logging internship hours, which are anchored to the principal standards delineated for Texas. A minimum commitment of 110 hours, including 24 mentorship-shadowing hours with their designated mentor principal, is mandated for both the Fall and Spring semesters. Given the immersive nature of our job-embedded residency experience, we have observed a remarkable range in logged hours, with residents documenting between 110 to an astounding 800 hours per internship semester.

During the course of the residency, each faculty coach employs a comprehensive clinical evaluation form, utilized during the three obligatory in-person site visits. The form is meticulously crafted, encompassing six domains that resonate with the ethos of culturally-responsive, equity-centered supervision:

1. Advocacy for a clear vision/mission and the promotion of high expectations for all stakeholders.
2. Active monitoring and assessment of classroom instruction, emphasizing the promotion of teacher efficacy and the enhancement of student achievement.
3. Provision of adept supervision, coaching, and evaluative feedback, coupled with a commitment to continuous professional development.
4. Tailored communication strategies suited to specific audiences, with an overarching focus on bolstering student outcomes through organizational collaboration, resilience, and change management.
5. Ensuring a positive, safe, and conducive learning environment while simultaneously supporting teacher effectiveness and fostering positive student outcomes.
6. Upholding ethical and professional standards, advocating for students, and ensuring unhindered access to effective educators, programs, and services. This structured approach ensures feedback is not only specific and actionable but also consistently aligned with the identified learning and performance goals, fostering a seamless communication loop between candidates, supervisors, and the broader program and clinical faculty.

QM Domain 4: Indicator 6 – Clinical Evaluation.

Evaluations of candidates' performance in the clinical experience align with the specific learning and performance goals identified for each candidate. Evaluations include assessments from multiple stakeholders who worked with the candidate, such as site-based mentors, leadership coaches, clinical supervisors, school site faculty, and candidates themselves.

Field Performance Assessment

The TTU Educational Leadership program has employed field performance evaluations to gauge the effectiveness of candidates in exhibiting leadership actions that result in positive outcomes for their schools in real-world settings. These evaluations focus on essential leadership duties required in schools that need significant improvement.

Equity Audit

Each principal candidate will perform an equity audit for their field site campus. The equity audit is a researched-based tool that includes data as related to programmatic equity, teacher quality, and achievement equity (Skrla et al., 2004). The equity audit is the foundational data analysis piece and will be referred to and updated continuously throughout the program.

Texas Accountability Intervention System

The Texas Accountability Intervention System (TAIS) aims to lay the groundwork for consistent enhancement of Texas schools and districts by establishing foundational systems, actions, and processes. It provides a unified structure and terminology for improvement, consolidating all accountability metrics within a cohesive support system. Six case studies will employ the TAIS, encompassing root cause analysis with stakeholders, goal formulation, intervention strategies, and progress monitoring throughout the school year. Additionally, the Effective Schools Framework (ESF) is leveraged for transformative purposes.

POP Cycles for Coaching Teachers

POP Cycles contain a pre-conference, an observation, and a post-conference cycle involving the principal resident coaching the growth of two teachers needing professional assistance. There are a maximum of four cycles during the two internship semesters of Fall and Spring. The POP cycles are in 9-week periods to correspond to the district's common formative assessments. The coaching protocol is tailored to meet the unique needs of principal interns. By aligning with the Effective Schools Framework (ESF), the aim is to enhance individual competencies and skills, ensuring a holistic approach to school leadership and student advocacy. The comprehensive coaching approach not only aligns with the state's vision for effective schools but is also grounded in the guiding principles of Jim Knight's Instructional Coaching Model (Knight, 2007) as illustrated in Table 2.

TABLE 2
JIM KNIGHT'S INSTRUCTIONAL COACHING FRAMEWORK (2007)

Step	Action	Description
1	Establishing a Partnership	Build Trust: Set Partnership Principles
2	Goal Setting	Identify Needs: Set Clear Goals
3	Learning Together	Research-Based Strategies: Modeling: Practice & Feedback
4	Observation & Data Collection	Classroom Observations: Collect Student Data
5	Reflecting on Progress	Review Data Together: Reflect on Practice
6	Adjusting Goals & Strategies	Re-evaluate Goals: Choose New Strategies
7	Celebrating Successes	Acknowledge Growth: Share Successes
8	Continuous Support	Ongoing Dialogue: Provide Resources
9	Evaluating the Coaching Process	Feedback on Coaching: Self-Reflection
10	Concluding the Coaching Cycle	Plan for Independence: Set Future Goals: Celebrate the Partnership

Graduate Comprehensive Exam/Showcase

The principal fellows conduct a Showcase including a corresponding slide deck in consultation with the mentor principal and faculty coach/field supervisor in real-world context of their field site campus. Students will post and defend their completed and refined campus involving case studies utilized in previous field performance assessments. This presentation could possibly involve their district's superintendent or superintendent's designee, mentor principal, faculty coach(es)/ field supervisor, district partner's designee(s), and peers as audience members. The Showcase presentation also serves as the TTU Graduate Comprehensive Exam requirement for the University.

CONCLUSION

The program evaluation underscores the transformative role of federal and state funding initiatives in shaping the landscape of principal preparation programs, with a particular emphasis on Texas Tech University's Principal Fellows Program. Initiated during President Lyndon B. Johnson's era, the federal government's allocation of funds for school improvement set the stage for subsequent state-led efforts, such as those by the Texas Education Agency, to bolster teacher and principal development. The PFP, established in collaboration with various school districts, stands as a testament to the efficacy of funding initiatives, having certified over 100 principals as instructional leaders. The program's design, which emphasizes a blend of theory and practice, is further enriched by its commitment to equity and inclusivity.

Moreover, the program's emphasis on collaborative partnerships, both at the university-district level and within its own faculty, underscores the importance of collective effort in shaping future educational leaders. The article also highlights the significance of continuous improvement, with Texas Tech University's Education Preparation Program focusing on research, partnerships, and reflective practices. The evolving nature of principal preparation programs, as evidenced by the literature review, emphasizes the need for programs to be responsive to contemporary challenges, particularly in the realms of teacher recruitment, retention, and leadership development. The article concludes with a detailed exploration of the PFP's clinical design, coaching, and supervision paradigms, emphasizing its commitment to culturally-responsive, equity-centered practices.

The role of funding in enhancing school improvement cannot be understated. Through federal and state initiatives, institutions like Texas Tech University have been able to develop and refine programs that prepare the next generation of school leaders. As the educational landscape continues to evolve, so too, must the strategies and programs designed to navigate it.

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