

Communities of Practice Along the Texas–Mexico Border: A University and School District Leadership Partnership

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter focuses on how one university leadership preparation program along the Texas-Mexico border made a deliberate and concerted effort to build a principal pipeline by establishing a local university school partnership with several local school districts along a border that is bilingual, bicultural, and binational. The preparation program focused on realigning to national standards, actively sought out collaborative feedback from district partners on the development of course assessments, the co-design of clinical experiences, establishing accessible in-district program scheduling, course instruction provided by highly qualified faculty, developing and implementing multiple program and course assessments, and established and implemented dispositions.

INTRODUCTION

The role and level of responsibilities for school principals has evolved over the past two decades. The job of the principal is beyond just managing afterschool bus duty, classroom schedules and the book room. Principals are now expected to serve as instructional leaders for their campuses. Whereas principals of yesteryear may

have been promoted based on years of seniority, advancement to the top campus leadership position is now focused on a principal's ability to establish and sustain a collaborative culture, lead learning, understand the complexities of human capital, apply theories of leadership, implement strategic operations, and support & promote equity, diversity, and ethical decision making. Principals can no longer serve as all-knowing superheroes and autocratic leaders focused on managing only the building; instead they're expected to build a "community of learners that focus on the moral purpose of schooling which is improved student learning" (Pankake & Abrego, 2017, p. 6).

In this case study, the community of learners was driven by a shared concern about developing effective school leaders; thus, this common goal is the premise behind the creation of a community of practice. The community of practice [COP] consisted of university faculty and local school districts with a passion for developing effective leaders. The goal of the *COP partnership* was to strengthen principal preparation with the understanding that effective principal and campus leaders require learning opportunities created by the preparation program and local school district's principals and central office staff.

According to the Wallace Foundation (2016), strong university-school district partnerships are crucial to high-quality preparation but are far from being widespread. Furthermore, the Wallace Foundation reported that "district leaders are largely dissatisfied with the quality of principal preparation programs, and many universities believe that their programs have room for improvement and that the course of study at preparation programs does not always reflect principals' real jobs" (p. 5).

Coincidentally, the academic debate about principal & leadership preparation is not new and continues to be a major topic of discussion even as principal preparation programs continue to grow across the nation. There exists a growing number of literature regarding the matter. The issue of leadership preparation has been debated by a number of researchers (Young et al., 2018 & 2010; Bowers, Shoho, & Barnett, 2016; Levine, 2005; Leithwood, Seashore Louis & Wahlstrom, 2004; Basom & Yerkes, 2004; Hull, 2003; Knapp, Copland & Talbert, 2003; Peterson, 2002). Consequently, concerns about how to address educational leadership preparation have become a priority for universities and school districts.

In response to that concern, numerous colleges have implemented a variety of program design elements and practices to address weaknesses and challenges. Hence, the case study for this book chapter will focus on how a community of practice along the Texas Mexico border, actually went about implementing best research practices – specifically, a) alignment to professional national standards, b) actively seeking out collaborative feedback from district partners on the development of course assessments, c) the co-design of clinical experiences with campus and central office leaders, d) accessible in-district program scheduling, e) course instruction provided

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