“Companies that claimed the greatest need for leadership development did the least to support it. They failed to recognize that leadership development itself requires systematic changes throughout the organization.”
(Conger & Benjamin, 1999, p. 8)

“Among superintendents in the study, 80% noted that getting qualified school principals was either a moderate or a major problem.... Districts with ample supplies of certified principal applicants still complain about the quality of their applicant pool.”
(Roza et al., 2003, p. 25)

Although calls for reform in the education of school leaders are as old as the programs themselves (McCarthy, 1999), recent documentation of school leaders’ impact on student learning has given new urgency to calls for program change. Responses include internal program redesign by universities (Davis et al., 2005), state policies that expand requirements for administrator licensing (Southern Regional Education Board, 2007), and a variety of alternative programs operated by school districts and independent organizations (Cheney, Davis, Garrett, & Holleran, 2010; Orr, King, & LaPointe, 2010). But despite these innovations, critics still question whether earning principal certification provides any guarantee of an individual’s ability to lead significant improvements in teaching and learning (Roza et al., 2003); and policy makers continue to search for new program approaches that can be brought to scale (Shelton, 2009; U. S. Department of Education, 2010).

Even with recent program innovations, most principal preparation still operates much like education for someone entering an entirely new profession, i.e., a standard series of academic experiences supplemented by an internship in a supervised school setting. This familiar program design reflects an assumption that knowledge and skills needed for the principalship are starkly different from the professional responsibilities and growth opportunities available to teachers. The practical result has been to overlook the possibilities for providing principal preparation through in-school, on-the-job leadership development.

Taken together, the opening statements for this paper suggest a different approach by pointing to school districts as the locus of important changes. Following this logic, the present paper describes what principal preparation might look like if it were conceptualized, not as education for a new profession, but as an integral part of a district’s commitment to the development of teacher leadership. Our proposal begins with a brief discussion of its two underlying premises. We then, then describe how these premises lead to a reframing of familiar challenges with new opportunities for both universities and school districts. As an illustration and to demonstrate the feasibility of this approach, we describe early experiences of the principal preparation program at the University of Washington Bothell.
Premises

Premise 1. Principals need strong knowledge of instruction and the interpersonal skills to influence improvements in instruction, but these are difficult to develop within the boundaries of traditional preparation programs.

Current research emphasizes how principals influence student learning in complex and indirect ways. This influence is grounded in knowledge of quality instruction and the ability to build teacher collaboration to improve instruction (Leithwood et al., 2004). For example, Heck (2010) identified improvements in the school’s instructional capacity as the major pathway through which principals produce gains in student learning. And the meta-analysis conducted by Robinson and her colleagues (2008) cited the principal’s efforts to improve instruction and promote teacher development, among all such leadership strategies, as having by far the largest impact on student learning. Similarly, Portin, et al. (2009) observed that successful principals influence instruction through actions such as creating and sustaining instructional teams and their work, managing the distribution of teacher leader expertise, and guiding instructionally focused conversations that occur throughout the school. Interpersonal skills are essential to these indirect methods of influencing student learning, forming a foundation for the principal’s success in recruitment, mentoring, professional development, supervision, and evaluation of the teachers responsible for instructional quality. Broader organizational scholarship supports these conclusions. While less critical for top executive roles, skills directly related to an organization’s core work have long been considered necessary for first-level managers (Katz, 1955; Mumford et al., 2000).

Acknowledging the critical importance of instructional and interpersonal skills poses significant challenges for principal preparation. Such expertise is typically acquired over a generous amount of time with a substantial contribution from personal and work experience (Mumford et al., 2000). Consequently, what are arguably among the most important capabilities for the principalship are largely developed outside the boundaries of conventional preparation programs. And, because most school districts give teachers little systematic support to develop such skills, this critically important part of principal preparation is often left up to the chance convergence of individual interest and special opportunities. With candidate self-selection and uncertain prior experience producing wide variation in candidates’ backgrounds (Browne-Ferrigno & Muth, 2009), it is not surprising that graduates of conventional preparation programs are often judged as lacking the specific knowledge and skills to influence teachers in ways that significantly improve instruction (Cheney & Davis, 2011). Deliberate development of instructional and interpersonal skills is critical if principal preparation is to produce more consistently capable graduates, but such development extends beyond the boundaries of typical preparation programs.

Premise 2: The gap is narrowing between what accomplished teachers need to know about leadership and what is expected of beginning principals.

Many school districts have dramatically increased their investments in teacher leadership as a central strategy for improving teaching and learning (Knapp et al., 2010). It has become
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common for teachers in schools across the country to fill a variety of new roles, including instructional coach, data analyst, mentor, and professional development provider (Killion & Harrison, 2006). Even where these roles are not formally established, teachers still engage in a variety of learning-centered leadership activities, reflecting broader expectations for collaboration, teamwork, and collegial learning (Katzenmeier & Moller, 2009). The prevalence and growth of these new teacher leadership roles is evident in the availability of resources for professional development (Knight, 2009; Merideth, 2007), expanded scholarly study (Lieberman & Miller, 2007; Murphy, 2005), and proposed standards for knowledge and skills needed by teacher leaders (Teacher Leadership Exploratory Consortium, 2011).

These new roles have narrowed the gap between what accomplished teachers need to know about leadership and what is expected of beginning principals, but changes have outpaced supportive infrastructures in both districts and universities. In the schools, much remains to be done to provide the professional development, policies, role descriptions, and administrative supports essential to making teacher leaders more effective (Donaldson et al., 2008; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). For universities, as the capabilities for accomplished teaching become more similar to those needed by new principals, distinctions between teacher professional development and principal preparation invite review. Of course, not all teacher leaders will choose to become principals. But for those who do aspire in this direction, their accomplishments as learning-focused teacher leaders should be recognized as an integral part of principal preparation and reflected in appropriate accommodations in program requirements and costs. There is less reason than before to frame principal preparation like education for an entirely new profession.

Reframing Principal Preparation

As suggested above, these two premises argue for a greater role for school districts in principal preparation. Critically important instructional and interpersonal skills are best developed over time on the job, and emerging teacher leadership roles provide opportunities to apply and practice these skills. The more significant implication, however, is the need to conceptualize the principal process differently. In effect, our premises argue that critical parts of principal principal preparation occur far sooner and take much longer than is possible in the current structure of principal preparation. Improvements in principal preparation will depend on systematic attention to these early preparation stages, not just further refinements within the frames of current programs.

While there may be several ways to respond to the challenges embedded in the above premises, they provide strong impetus for reframing principal preparation as a long-term job-embedded process that begins early in a teacher’s career (see Figure 1.) As teachers work with their colleagues and assume leadership roles, they receive support that allows them to develop new capabilities that can lead to several different career options, including continued leadership from the classroom. One of these pathways leads to the principalship by progressing through intermediate roles in instructional leadership (such as coaching and mentoring), and organizational leadership (such as an assistant principal).
Figure 1: The Leadership Pathways Design for Principal Preparation

Reversing the familiar course-centered pattern, the leadership pathways design centers leadership development in challenging job experiences, with academic learning as supplementary. Principal development proceeds through progressively responsible leadership roles, each requiring new skills and providing opportunities to demonstrate their impact on student learning from new positions in the school organization. As teachers take on challenging assignments, learning is supported at each level as they develop related academic knowledge, seek feedback, and reflect on their performance. A university or other external organization can assist with organizing academic learning, assessing candidate capabilities, and supporting related district operations.

The Leadership Development for Educators (LEDE) program at the University of Washington Bothell serves as a partial pilot of the leadership pathways design. LEDE began as a university-led partnership with nine school districts in the Puget Sound region, each including teacher leadership as an essential component in its theory of action for learning improvement. The program design separates preparation into two distinct phases. Candidates are admitted to the first phase only if they have already been assigned significant responsibility for instructionally focused leadership in their schools. As candidates fulfill these positions over a 1-3 year period, the curriculum emphasizes expertise in areas such as classroom observation and analysis, teacher consultation, facilitation of data analysis meetings, instructional modeling, and data use.
A leadership capabilities framework organized around such accomplishments and on which schools depend to improve student learning (Bellamy et al., 2007) organizes the curriculum and augments familiar principal preparation standards with instruction and interpersonal expertise.

After candidates demonstrate their impact on student learning by supporting other teachers’ instruction (among many requirements) candidates progress to LEDE’s second phase. In this next phase the emphasis shifts to leadership for the school as a public institution, as a renewing organization, and as an inclusive community. Our initial design links this part of preparation to an internship experience rather than to a formal school-assigned role; however, we describe below our plans for beta-testing modifications that will fully align the program with the leadership pathways design.

A New Perspective on Reform Strategies

By reframing principal preparation as a job-embedded leadership pathway that starts much earlier than typical programs, the leadership pathways design provides alternative ways to reach the goals of several popular reforms. One such reform proposal is to apply rigorous selection criteria to ensure that candidates enter a program already possessing the requisite foundational skills (e.g., Cheney et al., 2010). While some programs may succeed using this approach, applying it at scale requires having a sufficiently large pool of highly qualified teachers currently working in schools and also interested in the principalship. Yet, research in a variety of organizations shows that this kind of leaving to chance the development of foundational leadership skills practically ensures a shortage of qualified candidates (Ohlott, 2004).

Instead of depending on recruitment and selection (and sufficient inducements) to attract qualified candidates to one program over another, the pathways design has the more basic goal of simply expanding the pool of qualified candidates. The design incorporates an extended period of preparation to allow sufficient time to practice skills and build expertise for instructional and interpersonal leadership. Then, instead of a single process of admitting candidates to a preparation program, candidate quality is ensured through a series of selection steps. Schools use competitive criteria to select, first, instructional coaches, then organizational teacher leaders, and ultimately, exceptional new principals. Such a cumulative process involves closer scrutiny of candidates’ work accomplishments over time, including their ability to influence student learning at each stage of leadership development. This process can also allow candidates to demonstrate sustained professional commitments, engage more people in evaluating candidate credentials, match the size of the development pool to anticipated district needs, and communicate clear messages about expectations for leadership within the school district. Consequently, implementing an instructional pathways design could substantially increase the number of prospective leaders fully prepared with the critical instructional and interpersonal leadership capabilities, at the same time providing several opportunities to ensure that the most qualified move toward the principalship.

The leadership pathways design also offers an alternative to another popular target of reform proposals: lengthening the period of the internship component of principal preparation in order to provide more experience in leading learning improvements (e.g., Cheney et al., 2010).
Indeed, programs that have been able to provide year-long internships have been recognized for superior results for at least the last two decades (Barnett, Copeland & Shoho, 2009; Milstein, 1993; New Leaders for New Schools, 2010). But such programs are expensive, making them difficult to sustain and bring to scale. The candidate, for example, must either relinquish a year’s salary, or that salary must be covered by the district or through special fundraising.

The leadership pathways design replaces these special internships with regular job experience in a series of progressively responsible leadership positions. Emerging leaders have far longer periods of mentored leadership development and many more opportunities to demonstrate that their leadership results in measurable positive changes in teachers’ work and students’ learning. For example, Washington State’s requirement of 520 internship hours is considerably above the program average of 300 hours reported by Barnett and his colleagues (2009); but this is tiny next to the thousands of hours accumulated as teachers progress at a reasonable pace through instructional coaching and assistant principal positions. Compared to typical internships, this kind of job progression naturally accommodates different rates of development and links individual engagement in leadership development directly to the school’s learning improvement efforts. Research on the exceptional amount of time needed to develop expertise for executive roles further underscores the importance of this much-extended period of practical preparation (Mumford, et al., 2010).

Addressing the limitations of both selection and internship approaches to program improvement, the pathways design suggests solutions with strong potential to be substantially more scalable than popular reform proposals. Although not all programs need to be designed in scalable ways, a national system of high quality principal preparation ultimately depends on program designs that are financially sustainable and can be readily adopted in widely diverse settings.

A similar scalability challenge confronts those who see district-operated programs as the key to increasing quality in principal preparation. Many large school districts have been able to implement quite effective leadership development programs on their own. But, as Orr and her colleagues (2010) document, such programs can be expensive to operate and difficult to sustain during periods of executive transitions. Although they may be an attractive solution for some school districts, independently operated programs may not provide the foundation for a scalable national effort, particularly one that also meets the needs of smaller districts. To address this gap, we conceptualize the leadership pathways design as both district-operated and university-supported (or supported by a leadership-training organization). The challenge for universities and other external organizations is to create a set of services and supports that make it possible to implement and sustain job-embedded programs in districts with a wide range of characteristics.

**New Opportunities for Collaboration**

To illustrate how a university or leadership organization might support a district-operated pathway program, we describe below three program components, highlighting implementation challenges and areas where creative supports could increase effectiveness and scalability.
1. A Capabilities Framework to Guide Deliberate Leadership Development

By taking a longer term view of principal preparation, the leadership pathways design creates possibilities for deliberate cultivation of leadership skills, beginning in the earliest stages of teacher professional development. Deliberate cultivation implies an intended progression of skill development, which in turn requires a comprehensive leadership capabilities framework to guide progress. At present, guidance for such development is divided into discrete sets of standards for accomplished teaching, teacher leadership, and the principalship, each reflecting consensus among different specialty areas in the education professions (e.g., Council of Chief State School Officers, 2008; National Board for Professional Teaching Standards; 2011; Teacher Leadership Exploratory Commission, 2011). For example, reform proposals now recommend greater attention to instruction and adult development topics in the capabilities frameworks for principal preparation (Cheney & Davis, 2011). These areas, however, already receive considerable emphasis in standards and expectations for teacher leaders (Center for Strengthening the Teaching Profession 2009).

Universities and support organizations thus have an excellent opportunity to integrate these various expectations into a single capabilities framework that aligns with a district’s theory of action for learning improvement. Doing so, of course, will challenge educators to overcome longstanding organizational boundaries that have tended to separate instructional and administrative expertise into different district units, university departments, and external support organizations (Murphy, 1999). Other possibilities for academic partners include developing resources and academic learning opportunities linked to such a framework and structuring related assessment procedures that can guide candidate planning and development.

2. A Job-embedded Pedagogy for Developing Leadership Expertise

In addition to its potential for addressing shortages of qualified candidates for principal preparation, the leadership pathways design offers districts an opportunity to closely link leadership development with their efforts to accelerate student learning. In job-embedded approaches, individuals gain new skills as they take on difficult assignments and work to meet high expectations in sometimes unfamiliar contexts (Ohlott, 2004). Performing these assignments often requires a significant amount of personal and professional effort beyond the expectations for daily work in schools, just like completing courses and other requirements in conventional programs. An important difference, however, is that configuring principal preparation as job-embedded learning can direct more of this extra effort toward the district’s learning-improvement agenda and overall goals.

A related challenge is to develop a set of supports—a pedagogy—that leads to reliable and efficient learning as a result of these job experiences. Professions often debate the relative value of practical experience versus academic learning in preparing new practitioners (Sullivan, 2005), but most acknowledge that neither approach, by itself, reliably develops needed capabilities. University preparation programs and leadership development organizations have much to offer as supports for job-embedded learning. Advances in pedagogies for principal
preparation include, for example, comprehensive strategies for building expertise, procedures for problem-based and action learning, reflective practice, case teaching, and designs for electronic and blended learning programs (e.g., see the recent review by Taylor, Cordeiro, & Chrispeels, 2009).

As one example of this job-embedded pedagogy, our support for job-embedded learning is based on a six-part strategy:

- **Challenging job experiences.** Job experiences that require an individual to develop and practice new skills in order to succeed, can be a powerful means of helping individuals learn about leadership, and they are most effective when they contain moderate levels of difficulty and allow individuals to succeed with progressively greater levels of complexity (McCauley & Van Velsor, 2004).

- **Assessment for customized learning.** Regular assessment and planning for individual development helps each prospective leader select appropriate experiences linked to specific and well-sequenced learning goals that demonstrate current abilities. A comprehensive capabilities framework such as that described above serves as a natural foundation for such assessment.

- **Academic support.** Academic learning timed to coincide with practical experience fosters the development of leadership expertise by helping emerging leaders develop knowledge of specific domains that are related to new responsibilities. It further helps leaders to build differentiated knowledge structures that integrate academic and applied learning (Hallinger, Leithwood, & Murphy, 1993).

- **Expert support and feedback.** Learning from challenging assignments is enhanced when support is combined with feedback from individuals who possess the relevant expertise (DeRue & Wellman, 2009). For teachers, this naturally includes one’s principal, colleagues, and instructors.

- **Individual engagement.** Organizational supports are important, but leadership development ultimately depends on individual effort to perform new assignments successfully, reflect on new learning, and remain motivated to learn new skills (DeShon & Gillespie, 2005; Schwartz, Brophy, Lin, & Bransford, 1999).

- **Professional community.** An additional support for blended academic and applied learning is the opportunity to form professional networks by regularly joining colleagues in informed and reflective discussions of experiences and results (Alexander, 2003; Ball & Cohen, 1999).

Combining and bringing to life these six pedagogical components is hard work. Assignments ideal for individual growth do not always match organizational priorities. Providing timely feedback is difficult when academic mentors are distant from practice and when work
supervisors are occupied fulfilling their own school-based responsibilities. And responding to each emerging leader’s level and pace of development requires a level of customization that schools and universities are just beginning to develop. Such practical challenges, however, open up a variety of opportunities for universities and support organizations, ranging from offering traditional courses and cohort programs to a variety of organizational and technological supports.

3. Structuring Leadership Roles for Progressive Selection and Development

As described above, the practical difficulties of individualizing developmental assignments and pedagogical supports have led many organizations to structure a series of pathway positions that involve progressively challenging responsibilities. Figure 1 illustrates this pathway with three steps leading to the principalship: (1) informal leadership opportunities to allow full-time teachers to develop skills for collaboration with colleagues; (2) part- or full-time instructional coaching positions; and (3) school-level administrative positions such as serving as an assistant principal. Similar to leadership progressions in many organizations, each step can be associated with a new set of learning expectations, tailored supports for performance, and additional opportunities to demonstrate success.

Although most districts already offer positions like these, forming them into a defined pathway may require considerable restructuring, but at the same time offers many possibilities for supportive partnerships. For example, policies are needed to: link each position to specific qualifications; structure selection processes that take into account documentation of prior accomplishments; ensure sufficiently frequent turnover in these positions to meet the district’s leadership needs; and ensure that work assignments within the pathway positions do not become so specialized as to inhibit new learning. Further work is also needed to organize academic learning opportunities that support each pathway position and to create professional communities for individuals in similar positions to share experiences and reflections.

District-university partnerships supporting principal preparation continue to evolve. In an important sense, the partnerships needed to address the challenges inherent in a comprehensive capabilities framework, a practical job-embedded pedagogy, and a functional set of pathway positions represent just one more step in this evolution. This is evident in the way these partnerships have already changed as emphasis has shifted from supporting individual candidate internships to collaborative support for cohorts of candidates throughout a program, and, more recently, to mentoring newly placed principals on the job (Grogan et al., 2009). The leadership pathways design continues this evolution by emphasizing collaboration prior to the beginning point of conventional principal preparation. The current task is to work together to make deliberate leadership development affordable and sustainable in school districts of various sizes and in different locations. We must/should make it possible for our brightest teachers to be able to work simultaneously toward student-learning improvements, job advancement, academic credentials, and principal certification.
Summary and Conclusion

This paper argues that preparation programs are unlikely to graduate new principals with strong instructional and interpersonal skills unless such skills are deliberately developed over time and on the job in schools. Similarly, school districts are unlikely to find principals who can lead significant learning improvements without systematic development of their own teacher leaders. The resulting convergence of interests in supporting comprehensive teacher leadership development offers an exciting opportunity to reframe principal preparation as an extended job-embedded pathway, and as such, opens new approaches to familiar challenges.

The leadership pathways design embeds principal preparation in the work of teacher leaders and emphasizes the development of instructional and interpersonal leadership skills well before the onset of conventional program configurations. The expected results are to link the preparation process more closely with each district’s work to improve student learning and to affordably extend the period of principal preparation enough to allow development of real leadership expertise.

At the UW Bothell, we have piloted significant parts of the leadership pathway design in the first year of the Leadership Development for Educators (LEDE) program. The first half of the program is linked to candidates’ work as instructional coaches, where they can practice and demonstrate their ability to influence colleagues’ instruction and student learning. A capabilities framework that combines this work of influencing others’ instruction with organizational leadership provides the foundation for candidate assessment and academic support. But many questions still remain regarding how districts will manage the various components of the program. Until now LEDE has functioned as a partnership-led program. We are currently assembling a group of district and philanthropic partners for a beta test of the leadership pathways design. The issues outlined above illustrate what must be done in this next step of our work.
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