

The New North Carolina Principal Fellows Program

Navigating North Carolina's Bold School Leadership Strategy



Executive Summary

Reimagining Principal Preparation in North Carolina

Decades ago in the United States, principals were viewed primarily as supervisors, responsible for ensuring student and teacher compliance with school policies and procedures. This has not been true for some time, as the education shifts of the past half-century have placed increasing demands on the principal and have transformed the role from supervisor to visionary change leader.

Best Practices in Principal Preparation

- Proactive, intentional recruitment efforts;
- A high bar for entry;
- Rigorous, relevant coursework;
- A focus on authentic partnerships with districts; and
- Targeted preparation for service in high-need schools and districts.

Unfortunately, in the early part of the 21st century, most principal preparation programs failed to adapt and address the new demands on principals. For instance, in North Carolina prior to 2015, the process for becoming a principal was misaligned with recruiting top talent. Teachers mostly self-selected into a leadership track, with very little proactive recruitment. In this outdated model of leadership development, teachers were the primary “consumer” of their leadership training, rather than the state of North Carolina and its students. Programs were incentivized, therefore, to offer the least expensive, fastest option – to the detriment of principal candidates and the teachers and schools they would eventually lead.

Recognizing the shortcomings of North Carolina's principal recruitment and preparation system and the need to more closely align with established best practices, BEST NC worked successfully with state lawmakers in 2015 to create and provide seed funding for a new approach to principal preparation. The initiative was known as “Transforming Principal Preparation,” or TP3. Through state funding, TP3 incentivized the adoption of key research-based components of successful principal preparation nationwide (see box above).

Creating One Strategic Principal Preparation Program for North Carolina

Beginning in 2019, TP3 was merged with the Original North Carolina Principal Fellows Program, a long running principal scholarship program, in order to reduce administrative redundancies and apply best practices from each model into one cohesive program. The combined program assumed the Principal Fellows name and its commission-based governance, while retaining the competitive grant structure, university-district partnerships, and rigorous candidate selection and preparation of TP3.



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Key Structural Factors of the New NC Principal Fellows Program

- **Competition:** Leverages a competitive grant program to ensure the state's top-tier programs are supporting a robust North Carolina principal leadership pipeline.
- **Selectivity:** Incentivizes Grantees to accept, prepare, and support the highest-quality candidates with accountability for program quality every six years through the grant selection cycle.
- **Accountability:** The State provides funding to Grantees and prioritizes a focus on the quality of the principal graduates and not on the cost/time burden on the candidate. In this model, the State becomes the primary customer of principal preparation programs, rather than the candidate (see page 6 of the full report).

Impact of the New North Carolina Principal Fellows Program

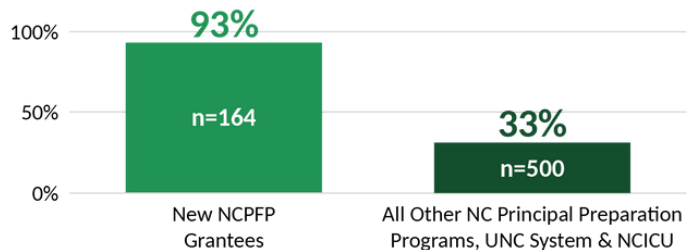
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highly qualified principal candidates have completed their preparation since 2018.

At current funding levels, the New NCPFP can meet
40% of NC's annual principal need.

Source: North Carolina Principal Fellows Program

The most compelling evidence of the effectiveness of New NCPFP programs thus far is the consistency with which graduates are hired into school leadership positions – a direct result of a more highly-qualified candidate pool and more thorough, research-based principal preparation in New NCPFP programs. Focusing on the most recent graduates, New NCPFP candidates were almost **3 TIMES MORE LIKELY** to move directly into a school leadership position compared with graduates of other principal preparation programs.

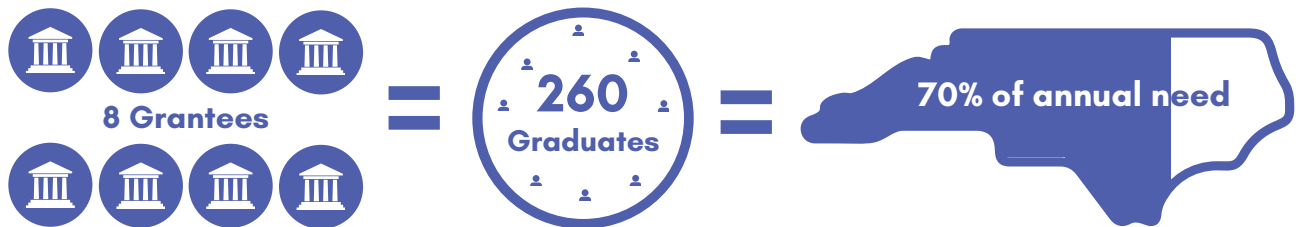
Percentage of Principal Preparation Program Graduates in School Leadership Role in First Year After Graduation (Class of 2022)



Source: NC DPI (Data Request)

Competition and Capacity: Meeting 70% of Annual Principal Need

The New NCPFP's competitive grants approach incentivizes NC principal preparation programs to adopt proven, research-based best practices. Competition also acts as a catalyst for continuous improvement amongst programs striving to secure New NCPFP grant funding. Capping the program at eight Grantees ensures that approximately one-third of principal preparation programs in the state receive grant funding, creating a healthy balance between accessibility, capacity, and competition. With increased funding, Grantees also have the capacity to produce 70% of the principals needed statewide.



Source: North Carolina Principal Fellows Program

Recommendations to Strengthen North Carolina's Commitment to High-Quality Principal Preparation

The report's recommendations call on a variety of stakeholders – including the New NCPFP Leadership Team, the North Carolina Principal Fellows Commission, and policymakers at the State Board of Education and the North Carolina General Assembly – to:



Set clear goals and priorities for the New NCPFP.



Measure what matters, including student outcomes, the cost-effectiveness of the program, and principal attrition.



Protect and maintain best practices for principal recruitment and preparation.



Enhance and expand the New NCPFP to meet 70% of the annual need for new principals in North Carolina through key advances in program leadership and targeted policy solutions.

