

What Kentucky Principals Need

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Abstract

This study investigates Kentucky principals' professional needs through surveys (66 principals), and focus groups (24 principals and 15 superintendents), referencing the findings from the Impact KY Working Conditions Survey (Impact KY) 2023-2024. Findings reveal critical gaps between the state educational agency (SEA), local educational agencies (LEA), and principal preparation programs and leadership realities, with principals reporting inadequate readiness and/or support to meet the complex demands of an ever-evolving role.

Key themes include the necessity of high-quality mentorship, practice-based clinical experiences, and reduced administrative burden. Superintendents identified communication skills, systems thinking, and distributed leadership as areas requiring strengthened preparation. Both groups emphasized that compliance requirements, isolation, and deficits in delegation skills impede instructional leadership and contribute to burnout.

Impact KY showed significant perception gaps with principals consistently rating higher favorability than teachers, with resources and emotional well-being rated lowest by both groups. The authors call for strengthened clinical preparation, embedded professional learning, policy streamlining, and coordinated support across state agencies, districts, and universities to ensure principal effectiveness and retention.

Keywords: principal preparation programs, mentorship, principal well-being, instructional leadership, professional development, working conditions, principal autonomy, school climate, clinical experiences, principal retention, communication skills, working conditions

What Kentucky Principals Need

Review of Relevant Literature

School principals are vital to school success and student achievement. They play a crucial role in shaping school culture, engaging families and communities, and ensuring effective instructional leadership. To be successful, principals require high-quality preparation, timely and effective professional learning, positive working conditions, and enhanced autonomy. This white paper, informed by recent findings from a statewide study of Kentucky principals and superintendents, integrates empirical research with qualitative data from surveyed principals (66) and focus group participants (24 principals and 15 superintendents). It highlights alignment and dissonance between what the research prescribes and what practitioners experience in the field, revealing persistent gaps between preparation and the complex realities of school leadership.

Principal Preparation Programs

Principal preparation programs lay the groundwork for principal success. Programs emphasizing rigorous coursework combined with field-based clinical experiences better prepare leaders for the realities of the role (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007). Wallace Foundation studies on principal pipelines highlight that districts partnering with universities to design high-quality preparation programs—grounded in leadership standards and opportunities for real-world application—tend to yield principals who are more effective and remain longer in their positions (Wallace Foundation, 2015). These features foster not only technical skills but also dispositions necessary for instructional leadership, organizational management, and equity-focused school improvement (Grissom et al., 2021). Thus, investment in preparation is one of the most significant levers policymakers can leverage to ensure principals are ready to lead and sustain positive school outcomes.

Professional Learning

Once on the job, principals require ongoing, job-embedded, and context-responsive professional learning to be successful. According to Darling-Hammond et al. (2007), effective professional learning should include authentic, practice-based training that equips leaders with skills in instructional leadership, data-driven decision-making, and human resources management. Additionally, mentorship and coaching programs have been identified as essential in supporting early-career principals, as they provide guidance in navigating complex school challenges (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007). Providing principals with professional learning communities and peer networking opportunities also enhances their ability to share best practices and receive ongoing support (Goldring, 2012) (Bryk, et al., 2015).

Working Conditions

Working conditions significantly impact a principal's ability to lead effectively. Principal burnout and turnover are fueled by excessive administrative tasks, increasingly high demands of the job, and inadequate resources (Federici & Skaalvik, 2012) (Snodgrass Rangel, 2017) (Bryk, et al., 2015). To counteract these challenges, researchers recommend reducing bureaucratic burdens on principals, increasing their access to support staff, and fostering positive district-principal relationships (Goldring et al., 2020) (Grissom & Loeb, 2011), rebalancing management tasks with focused instructional leadership improvement and relationship-building efforts. Districts that invest in leadership development, recruitment, and ongoing support on the job are more likely to experience stable, effective leadership across schools (Wallace Foundation, 2015). The Impact KY Working Conditions Survey further revealed perception gaps between principals and teachers, particularly in resources and emotional well-being—areas rated lowest

by both groups—signaling systemic needs for more coordinated support across state and district levels.

Autonomy and Self-Efficacy

Another critical factor in principal success is autonomy. Principals benefit from increased autonomy and discretion in decision-making, which allows them to tailor instructional approaches and resource allocation to their school’s unique needs (Leithwood et al., 2020). Support from district leadership in reducing unnecessary mandates and increasing flexibility in budgeting and staffing decisions enables principals to focus on instructional leadership and school improvement efforts. Addressing these constraints by providing principals with the necessary authority and support can enhance their self-efficacy, leadership capacity, and overall job satisfaction, while, in turn, reducing burnout and their motivation to quit (Federici, 2012).

Principal Turnover

Principal turnover is a persistent issue that impacts school stability and, ultimately, student achievement. According to Snodgrass Rangel (2017), principal turnover rates are influenced by a range of factors including job dissatisfaction, lack of administrative support, and challenging working conditions. High turnover disrupts school improvement efforts and negatively affects teacher retention, as new leadership often means significant shifts in school vision and instructional priorities. Wallace Foundation studies further indicate that investments in principal development can prevent costly turnover and, when paired with effective hiring practices, result in significant gains in student learning and teacher satisfaction (Grissom et al., 2021; Wallace Foundation, 2015).

Impact Kentucky Working Conditions Survey (2023-2024)

The Impact KY Working Conditions Survey (Impact KY), administered every other year to Kentucky educators (teachers, principals, assistant principals, and other education professionals), inquiring about a variety of topics relevant to their experiences as educators and the working conditions on their campuses. The 2023-24 results were a compilation of 39,406 respondents, with all categories showing a positive increase since the 2021-22 administration of the tool. Results across all respondents indicated favorable responses across all categories as follows: *staff-leadership relationships* (78%); *educating all students* (69%); *school leadership* (67%); *managing student behavior* (66%); *school climate* (63%); *professional learning* (60%); *feedback and coaching* (58%); *emotional well-being and belonging* (55%); and *resources* (50%), with *emotional well-being and belonging* showing the most growth with a 7-point percentage increase.

Key Trends and Insights of Teachers and Staff Respondents

Challenges. Areas of greatest concern were in the categories of *resources* and *emotional well-being and belonging*. *Resources* was the lowest-rated category, with only 47% of teachers responding favorably. Specific subcategories that dropped in favorability included the *facilities needing repair*, *support for students*, and *the need to hire more specialists*. Subcategories that had the greatest increase included *instructional technology* and the *quality of resources*, with a four-point gain each. The most staggering statistics included teachers' low favorability in the subcategory of *importance of hiring more specialists to assist students* (23%) and *how much money they spend on their classrooms* (21%).

Emotional well-being and belonging was the second-lowest category, with only 53% of teachers responding favorably. Only 34% of teachers responded favorably when describing concern over the emotional well-being of their colleagues, and only 44% responded favorably

regarding their own personal emotional well-being as a result of work. Although a subcategory of concern, significant gains were made in specific areas since the last survey, including *feeling effective to do the job* (7-point gain), *concerns regarding colleague's and self's well-being* (8-point gain each), and *sense of belonging* (3-point gain).

Strongest categories. Strengths across all categories included *staff-leadership relationships* (77%); *educating all students* (68%); *school leaders* (65%); *managing student behavior* (64%); and *school climate* (62%). Specific subcategories of improvement in *staff-leadership relationship* included *motivation of working with the leadership team* (5-point gain) and *trust between school leaders and faculty* (4-point gain). Subcategories of *educating all students* that increased included *where to find resources for working with students' unique learning needs* (3-point gain), *frequency of adult conversations related to sensitive issues* (3-point gain), *awareness of strategies* (4-point gain) and *assistance of colleagues to address diversity and cultural responsiveness* (4-point gain). Teachers responded to the category *school leadership* with four-point increases in the subcategories of *clearly identified goals*, *knowledge of teachers' classrooms*, *deeming teachers' satisfaction important*, and *setting a positive tone*. Teachers responded least favorably (52%) in the subcategory regarding *teacher input toward important decisions*. *Managing student behavior* had an overall high category rating; however, a subcategory regarding *student misconduct* had a staggering low favorability response of 32%, dropping two points from the previous survey. Subcategories that showed improvement included *school leaders developing rules and supporting teachers*. *School climate* showed the most gains in the subcategories of *positive working environment* (6-point gain); *attitudes of colleagues* (5-point gain); and *optimism for future school improvements* (4-point gain).

Key Trends and Insights of Principal Respondents

Strongest categories. Categories that received the highest scores among school principals were in the areas of *staff-leadership relationships* (99%); *school leadership* (97%); *managing student behavior* (92%); *school climate* (91%); and *professional learning* (90%). These ratings indicated that principals felt extremely positive about their relationships with staff, their own leadership effectiveness, professional growth opportunities, and the overall social and learning environment.

Challenges. Categories that received the lowest scores from principals were identified as *resources* (73%) and *emotional well-being and belonging* (77%). The importance of *hiring more specialists to help students* was a subcategory of resources that resulted in a low favorability score for principals, indicating a lack of access to specialists as a major concern. Concern for the emotional well-being of colleagues was a subcategory under the category of *emotional well-being and belonging* that fared low in favorability for principals.

Perception Gaps

When disaggregating the data based on role-based perceptions, gaps were highlighted. Principals rated all categories 19-33 points higher than staff, suggesting that leadership may not fully recognize teacher challenges. The largest perception gaps between principals and teachers were in the categories of *feedback and coaching* (33-point gap); *professional learning* (32-point gap); and *school leadership* (32-point gap). Other categories still showed a significant difference in favorability as shown in *school climate* (29-point gap) and *managing student behavior* (28-point gap).

While gaps existed in all categories, interestingly the two lowest areas indicated by teachers and by principals were the same; *resources* and *emotional wellbeing and belonging*.

This finding suggests that while perceptions of the level of favorability are skewed, both populations highlighted the same categories as future growth points.

Improvement Trends

Improvement trends were shown in all categories as compared to the previous Impact KY. *Emotional well-being and belonging* had the largest increase, with teachers expressing a six-point increase and principals indicating a nine-point gain. This could indicate successful initiatives targeting educator well-being.

Summary of Principals' Strengths and Positives Based on Impact KY

1. **Strong interpersonal connections.** Principals felt they maintained excellent relationships with staff and created positive school environments.
2. **Confidence in leadership.** Principals believed they were effectively leading their schools.
3. **Student behavior management.** Principals felt relatively successful in establishing effective rules and systems.

Summary of Principals' Needs and Challenges Based on Impact KY

1. **Resource limitations.** Principals recognize they are under-resourced, aligning with teacher perceptions.
2. **Staff well-being concerns.** Principals acknowledge struggles with emotional well-being, though they rate it higher than teachers.
3. **Perception gaps.** Principals likely do not fully realize the extent to which teachers perceive gaps in feedback/coaching and professional learning.

Summary

Ultimately, a holistic approach that includes quality preparation, ongoing professional development, improved working conditions, growth-oriented supervision, and systemic support is essential for principal success. Findings from Kentucky underscore the urgency of this approach, demonstrating that preparation gaps, compliance pressures, and limited emotional support directly affect principals' capacity and likelihood of remaining in the profession.

Addressing these barriers requires collaboration across universities, districts, and state agencies to create coherent systems of preparation, induction, and professional learning. Policymakers and district leaders should prioritize these elements to ensure that school-level leaders remain in their roles long enough to lead meaningful school improvement. Strengthening clinical preparation, embedding professional learning, streamlining policy demands, and coordinating supports at all levels will be essential to improving principal effectiveness and retention across the Commonwealth.

Methodology

Under the direction of the Kentucky Department of Education, a subgroup of the University Principal Preparation Initiative (UPPI) was tasked with investigating the perceived needs of principals across the Commonwealth of Kentucky, using the Impact KY as a frame of reference, in addition to the input of principals and state superintendents through focus groups and surveys across the state.

Principal Needs Survey

Focus Questions

Focus questions explored through the analysis of survey data and interviews included the following:

1. In which domain(s) of the Impact KY do principals feel they need the most support to bring about positive change?
2. In which domain(s) of the Impact KY do superintendents (principal supervisors) feel their principals need the most support to bring about positive change?
3. In what ways do principals perceive support from the state educational agency (SEA) and local educational agency (LEA) in meeting their needs identified in the Impact KY?
4. In what ways do superintendents (principal supervisors) perceive support from the SEA

and LEA in meeting principal needs identified in the Impact KY?

Sample Pool

The principal needs survey was sent to principals at all school levels (elementary, middle, and high) across the Commonwealth of Kentucky. Initially, invitations were sent through a state listserv to provide all head principals the opportunity to participate. In addition, invitations were sent to principals and superintendents from university educator preparation provider representatives and/or education cooperatives. Sixty-six principals across the Commonwealth completed the principal survey, which is found in Appendix A.

Focus Groups

In addition to the principal needs survey, focus groups were leveraged to gain a deeper understanding of perceived needs of principals. These focus groups were designed to engage superintendents and principals in discussion with questions focused around the Impact KY data. In the event a focus group session was not possible, one on one virtual interviews were scheduled and conducted by members of the research team. Both the principal and superintendent focus group questions are in Appendix B and C, respectively. The questions and protocol received Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval. Each focus group session was recorded and transcribed, coding was used to maintain anonymity. Those transcriptions were then used to identify themes through the support of Artificial Intelligence (AI). Researchers verified those themes based on transcripts. The themes of each focus group were combined and AI was used once more to identify overarching themes, as well as to identify gaps found between the principal and superintendent focus groups. Researchers then analyzed the culminating findings to provide a report and recommendations based on the results to inform practice and support of principals at the state and local educational agency levels.

Population

Members of the UPPI team, representing various educational cooperative regions of the Commonwealth, held focus groups to gain superintendent and principal feedback. These sessions were conducted either in person or virtually through a conferencing platform. The focus groups included 24 principals and 15 superintendents. Those who agreed to participate in the focus groups signed an informed consent document to use their feedback in this research. Table 1.1 details the demographics of this population. Locale definitions and identifiers were based on the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) data that included four primary categories: city, suburban, town and rural (Institute of Education Sciences, 2025).

Table 1.1

Demographics of Focus Group

Role	Principal	Superintendent
Gender		
Female	10	2
Male	14	13
District Setting		
Rural	10	9
Town	8	2
Suburban	4	4
Urban	2	

Results

Principal Survey

The principal survey yielded responses from sixty-six principals across the Commonwealth, with all educational cooperative regions represented as follows: Central Kentucky Educational Cooperative (22%); Green River Regional Educational Cooperative (19%); Kentucky Educational Development Cooperation (6%); Kentucky Valley Educational Cooperative (3%); Northern Kentucky Cooperative for Educational Services (1%); Ohio Valley Educational Cooperative (12%); Southeast South-Central Educational Cooperative (12%); and West Kentucky Educational Cooperative (24%).

Demographic Data

Demographic data revealed that 51% of the respondents were male and 49% were female. The majority of principals described their setting as a rural school (64%), with 24% identifying as suburban and 12% urban. Seventy-five percent were principals of a Title I school. Approximately 40% were elementary principals, 30% were high school principals, 15% were middle school principals, and 15% identified as “other.”

The majority of the respondents had 0-3 years’ experience (39%); the next largest group had 4-7 years’ experience (27%); the next largest was the thirteen and greater years’ experience (19%); and the smallest group represented had 8-12 years’ experience (15%). Most principals completed their education through a traditional certification route in Kentucky (84%), with 9%

completing the traditional route outside of Kentucky, and approximately 6% completing an Option 6 route to certification. Upon completing certification, approximately 21% indicated there was no gap between certification completion and entering the principal role.

Approximately 56% percent shared that they took on the role of principal between one and four years of certification completion and 24% waited five or more years before entering the profession.

Test Question Format

Survey questions were aligned to Impact KY categories, and results of the principal survey were analyzed by corresponding topic. As principals completed the survey, many test questions allowed principals to select up to three choices for each question. Responses are shown with percentages indicating what percentage of respondents chose that item as one of their top choices. Therefore, the percentages will not add to 100%, given that respondents could make multiple selections per question.

Survey Results

School culture. Principals were asked to select the top three ways they set a positive tone for the school. The top three results were *demonstrating genuine care to students and staff* (67%); *developing, implementing and maintaining systems that support student learning* (54%); and *communicating effectively with all stakeholders* (46%). Other practices included *valuing student and staff voice* (31%); *consistently being visible in classrooms* (30%); *creating a sense of pride among students, staff and families* (24%), and *providing a sense of security by maintaining order that is structured through strongly implemented policies and procedures* (15%).

Shared decision-making. An overwhelming response by principals regarding the factor that most positively influenced their ability to engage teachers and staff in shared

decision-making was the *level of trust and openness between leadership and staff* (77%). When asked what factor hindered shared decision-making, principals' top two responses were *degree of autonomy principals have in school-based decisions* (44%) and *availability of time and clear processes for collaborative decision-making* (37%). Principals expressed that they most valued teacher input in the following areas: *curriculum decisions; instructional strategies and best practices; professional development planning; and student support and intervention programs*. The area that teacher input was not as highly valued was in areas of *school resources and budget priorities*. The most implemented activities to engage teachers were *encouraging teacher-led professional learning communities* (61%) and *establishing leadership teams or committees* (59%).

Meaningful feedback. When asked which characteristics principals felt provided meaningful feedback to improve instructional practices, the top selections included *timely feedback following an observation* (54%); *actionable steps that can be immediately applied* (46%); *focus on both strengths and areas for growth* (42%); and *clear and specific suggestions for improvement* (40%). The factor that principals believed most influenced their ability to provide meaningful feedback was having *a school culture and climate that promotes continuous improvement* (69%). The most significant factor that hindered principals' ability to provide feedback was *time* (77%).

Professional development/learning. Principals were asked to rank factors in order of importance when determining the type of professional development to offer their staff. Overwhelmingly, principals selected *alignment with school or district improvement goals* and *teachers' identified needs or areas for growth* as the two most important factors to consider, with *input from school leadership team or instructional coaches* as the next tier of importance. The

factors consistently chosen as the least important included *feedback from students or parents regarding instructional practices* and *current educational trends and research*.

Principals shared that they were promoting professional learning at their school through *ensuring time for Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)* (90%) and by *providing coaching/mentoring support* (80%). Other ways that principals promoted professional learning included allowing time for peer observations of master teachers (45%) and encouraging staff to engage in extensive, focused learning opportunities such as LETRS, Continuing Education Options (CEOs), and numeracy (31%).

Faculty and staff morale. Principals overwhelmingly chose a *supportive work environment and school culture* (84%) and *positive relationships with colleagues and school leadership* (81%) as factors that were most important in contributing to positive faculty and staff morale. When asked to identify factors that hindered staff morale, principals selected both the *lack of competitive compensation and benefits* (64%) and *lack of work-life balance and flexibility* (64%) as the major contributors.

Positive student engagement. The survey revealed that, by far, the most important factor that leads to positive student engagement is *positive relationships with teachers and staff*. The second most important factor, although ranked considerably lower in importance, was engaging and relevant curriculum. Other notable items selected were opportunities for student voice and choice in learning and a supportive and inclusive school environment. The most commonly selected factors that principals believed would improve the staff's ability to support students with diverse learning needs were increased *access to specialized staff* (65%); *increased collaboration time with colleagues to discuss strategies* (53%); and a *reduced workload to allow more time for individualized support* (51%). The factors that hindered the staff's ability included the lack of the

aforementioned factors, as well as the *lack of additional funding for specialized tools and technology*.

Well-being and sense of belonging. Principals clearly shared that an *improved work-life balance* (80%) would be the factor that most improved emotional well-being among staff. Other factors included increased support staff (54%); collaborative culture (51%); and supportive leadership (46%). The factors that contributed most to a negative sense of well-being included *challenging student behaviors* (73%); *being asked to take on too many responsibilities* (71%); and the *lack of staffing to address critical issues* (59%). Factors selected that led to a positive sense of belonging included *established supportive leadership* (76%); a *collaborative culture* (59%); and staff empowerment (59%).

Contribution to effectiveness. In each of the categories described above, principals shared that *experience* was the greatest contribution that led to their effectiveness in each area of leadership, ranging from 67-83%, with *experience* contributing most to *well-being and sense of belonging*. *Mentoring support* was a contributor, ranging from 47-57%, with the greatest impact in the area of *professional development/learning*. Principals indicated that *district support* contributed to their effectiveness in areas ranging from 43-61%, with the greatest influence in the area of *professional development/learning*. *Continuing education* was a contributor, ranging from 35-53%, with the greatest contribution to principal effectiveness in the area of *meaningful feedback*.

Principal Focus Groups: Portrait of Principal Practice and Perception

The following narrative synthesizes the perceptions of practicing principals who participated in focus groups and interviews as part of a statewide inquiry into principal readiness, stressors, and systemic support needs. The findings highlight the realities of the principalship

across Kentucky's districts and provide insight into the professional learning, mentoring, and systemic supports necessary to ensure principal effectiveness and sustainability in the role.

Theme 1: Readiness for the Principalship and Importance of Mentorship

Across all discussions, principals consistently emphasized a substantial gap between perceptions of preparedness and the realities of the day-to-day demands of the role. Many described entering the position with little or no transitional support, sharing experiences such as being hired days before the school year began or moving directly from the classroom into the principal's office. One noted feeling "very unprepared," while another reflected, "I felt confident going into it; but when I got there, I realized how misguided ... I was."

This sense of unpreparedness points to a gap between certification attainment and on-the-job readiness. Principals described the transition as "shockingly fast," "overwhelming," and "isolating." Several expressed that, while theoretical knowledge was helpful, "the reality of managing a building full of adults, students, and families all at once" required a different skill set.

Participants credited certain experiences as particularly valuable in shaping their readiness—leading professional learning communities, managing discipline, mentoring staff, creating schedules, and navigating conflict. As one stated, "Being a PLC leader taught me how to navigate disagreement professionally—it was my first real leadership test."

The importance of mentorship emerged as a central theme. Principals described mentors as indispensable to their early success, highlighting that exposure to different leadership styles, opportunities for feedback, and a network of trusted colleagues were critical supports. Even experienced leaders indicated that continued access to mentorship and collegial dialogue would enhance their effectiveness. One participant summarized this sentiment succinctly: “We don’t just need theory—we need someone walking beside us when the theory gets tested in real time.”

Theme 2: Administration Isolation and Decision-Making

Principals described decision-making as both isolating and emotionally taxing. Many emphasized the burden of being the final authority on matters ranging from personnel and student discipline to ethical and legal dilemmas. “Until you become the principal, you don’t realize they really want you to make them—it’s your decision,” one reflected.

The confidentiality inherent in such decisions often left principals feeling they had limited outlets for support. As one shared, “You can’t always talk about what’s weighing on you. Sometimes you just carry it.” The fast pace of the work compounds this challenge. Leaders described days filled with “a thousand decisions” and expressed the difficulty of prioritizing urgent matters amid competing demands.

The weight of decision-making also carries emotional implications. Principals noted the tension between doing what is ethically right and managing the emotional consequences of those actions, such as reporting families to authorities or addressing staff misconduct. The combination of high stakes, confidentiality, and pace contributes to a pervasive sense of isolation.

Theme 3: Daily Challenges

The principals identified multiple factors contributing to the growing complexity of their work. The most frequently cited were teacher shortages, increased student mental health needs, special education demands, and the emotional toll of leading in high-poverty or linguistically diverse settings, without the support of specialized support staff to meet student needs. One principal reflected, “Fourteen years ago, I’d get 70 applicants for one position. Now, I’m lucky if I get five—and sometimes none of them are qualified.”

Another shared that special education consumes the majority of their workday, leaving little time for instructional leadership. “I spend 75 to 80 percent of my day managing special education issues,” one leader explained. Participants noted that these demands have intensified over time and are compounded by the challenges of recruiting and retaining skilled educators.

Staff mental health and morale were recurring concerns. Several described the difficulty of maintaining energy and optimism among faculty and staff throughout the school year. One noted, “Keeping adults inspired is harder than keeping kids focused.” Others observed that growing burnout among staff has led to a “3:30 mentality,” where employees disengage at the end of the workday due to exhaustion.

Theme 4: Policy Implications

Frustration was also expressed regarding state and federal policy demands that detract from instructional priorities. Delayed assessment results, shifting accountability measures, and overlapping mandates were viewed as barriers to effective leadership. Principals voiced particular concern about the timing and utility of state assessment data, noting that “science scores, for example, don’t arrive until December,” making it impossible to use results for instructional improvement within the same year.

Several expressed a perceived disconnect between what is expected by the Kentucky Department of Education (KDE) and what actually supports student learning. One stated, “It’s compliance, not improvement,” with many mandates contributing little to student value. Another commented on the state’s frequent shifts in direction: “I need to know a year in advance if we’re going ACT or SAT. How do I plan for something that changes every summer?” There is a critical need for clearer policy communication, greater consistency, and alignment between KDE initiatives and the operational realities of schools.

Theme 5: Principal Wellness, Boundaries, Time and Sustainability

Principals openly acknowledged the toll that the position takes on personal well-being. The 24/7 nature of the job, the constant connectivity of digital communication, and the pressure to be ever-present contribute to emotional exhaustion. As one reflected, “I took five days off in June, but my phone rang all day, every day.”

To sustain themselves, many principals described deliberate self-care and boundary-setting strategies. Several principals emphasized the importance of modeling these habits for their staff. “If you don’t feel cared for, you’re not going to perform,” one said. Many expressed a desire for district and state-level recognition of the importance of principal wellness, including structured time off, mental health supports, and reasonable workloads.

Participants also discussed the need to reimagine professional learning structures to reduce disruption to school operations. They recommended district and state meetings that occur virtually, regionally, or through embedded coaching rather than requiring extensive time away from their schools. “Every time I leave, something happens,” one remarked. “We need learning that comes to us, not takes us away from our schools.”

Summary

This synthesis offers a portrait of the principalship as both deeply rewarding and profoundly demanding. Principals demonstrate extraordinary dedication to their school communities, but they face increasing systemic challenges that threaten sustainability in the role. Bridging the gap between preparation and practice requires collaborative partnerships among KDE, universities, and districts to align leadership development, mentoring, and wellness support. As one participant concluded, *“We love the work. We just need a system that loves us back.”*

Superintendent Focus Group Themes

Fifteen superintendents participated in principal needs focus groups. Several themes emerged as areas of potential focus as it relates to the current needs of principals. These themes included: practical experience and mentorship, strong executive and interpersonal leadership skills, and high-stress decision making.

Theme 1: Practical Experience and Mentorship

Superintendents, like principals, overwhelmingly emphasized the value of preparation that includes hands-on, applicable experiences such as shadowing and high-quality mentorship. Superintendents noted that the quality of these experiences are critical to building foundational knowledge and skills necessary for school leadership. One superintendent cautioned, "Are you assigned a mentor that is really going to embrace you as a mentee, and be very intentional about sharing the experiences and being 100% transparent about what the job entails? Or are you going to get a mentor that just wants to sign off on the check boxes..." This comment iterates the need for mentorship transparency and accountability, ensuring mentors are equipped with the ability to provide quality mentorship is necessary. Superintendents should use caution when using current

principals as mentors since the time commitment required to provide quality mentorship could add to the strain and stress that experienced principals already feel. One experienced principal spoke to this issue, “I’m on year 13 in this district and I’m working with principals that are on year 1, 2, and 3, so I’ve been (a) mentor for the last 5 or 6 years. I do feel like there’s somebody else I need to go watch, but I’m busy helping these (new principals) ...” This statement highlights not only the time commitment but the desire experienced principals have to learn and grow.

Theme 2: Executive and Interpersonal Leadership (Relationships and Communication)

Superintendents noted deficits in principal candidates' ability to delegate leadership capacity. The ability of school leaders to collaborate and delegate appropriately to teacher leaders and collaborative teams is an essential component of the job, “leaders must develop teams, they cannot do it alone.” In addition, the lack of high-level executive skills like relationship-building, effective communication across different groups and personnel management are perceived weaknesses. Superintendents expressed a desire for EPP’s to prioritize executive skills, “I can teach somebody about instruction. I can teach them some of those things later, but I need people who can develop relationships, who can lead a meeting.” Superintendents felt a principal's ability to build relationships could also assist with recruiting, hiring and retaining proficient educators.

Communication skills are a critical attribute for relationship building within the school and the broader school community. “It’s not the amount but the quality of communication that matters.” Communication skills are a perceived deficit superintendents highlighted. Superintendents shared that a principal's ability to ‘read the room’ and understand the quality

messaging that stakeholders need at a given time, is an important leadership quality. To highlight the need for strong communication skills, one superintendent added, "I see a lot of times our principals really struggle with communicating to one or the other group... being able to clearly communicate and articulate your point to a variety of audiences, it's not just to parents...". Communicating with multiple stakeholders is an extremely important component of the role of a principal and an area where superintendents felt improvements could be made.

Theme 3: High-Stress Decision Making

The ability of leaders to move from surviving to thriving was another issue addressed by superintendents, "Too many leaders have a 'hair-on-fire' mentality instead of systems thinking." Creating systems and improvement cycles is a major component of school leadership (PSEL 9, PSEL 10) and when principals have limited understanding of how to design, monitor and improve these systems they quickly become overwhelmed.

Summary

The superintendents' perspectives revealed a shared vision: principals must be highly skilled instructional and systems leaders, yet deeply human leaders who balance operational precision with empathy, reflection, and well-being. The goal is not only readiness at entry but sustainability across the career—ensuring that principals can lead effectively without losing their professional identity or personal health.

Conclusion

Principal Needs in Kentucky Schools

The voices of principals reveal a profession under strain but also deeply committed to improvement. The Kentucky study reveals that burnout, isolation, and inadequate systemic support were key drivers of principal attrition. Principals cited emotional exhaustion, compliance fatigue, and lack of mentoring as reasons colleagues considered leaving the role. Findings from the study also suggest that coordinated support among universities, districts, and state agencies could improve principal retention by addressing workload and well-being simultaneously. Principals' insights suggest that future preparation and policy efforts must prioritize authentic experience, relational support, and sustainable leadership development if Kentucky's schools are to thrive under increasingly complex conditions. Research shows the powerful impact highly effective school principals have on student outcomes, "Replacing a principal at the 25th percentile in effectiveness with one at the 75th percentile can increase annual student learning in math and reading by almost three months, annually" (Grissom et al., 2021, p.4).

Both principal and superintendent's perception of need converge on the following areas highlighted in Impact KY: (1) strong interpersonal connections; (2) student behavior management; (3) well-being and belonging; (4) resource limitations. The research highlights a gap in the perception of principals and their impact in some of these areas when compared to feedback from teachers (Impact KY) and superintendents (focus group). The research also

highlights the consensus of staff well-being and belonging and resource limitation as identified needs identified across all three populations; teachers, principals and superintendents.

Strong Interpersonal Connections

When principals were surveyed regarding their ability to set a positive tone for their school, the following top three traits were cited: *demonstrating genuine care to students and staff* (67%); *developing, implementing and maintaining systems that support student learning* (54%); and *communicating effectively with all stakeholders* (46%). *Demonstrating genuine care to students and staff* and *developing, implementing and maintaining systems that support student learning* align with the Impact KY. However, *effective communications with all stakeholders* is a more nuanced trait when compared with other data. These nuances are especially important to consider as communication skills were specifically an area of need identified by superintendents. According to the Impact KY, school leader responsiveness to feedback highlighted a large gap between favorable responses from teachers (62%) compared to principals (98%). This 36% difference could indicate issues with how principals are interpreting these interactions. The ability of principals to “read the room” was also an area identified by superintendents as an area for growth.

Communication has a reciprocal relationship to trust. How much trust exists between principals and faculty is impacted by the quality of communication between teachers and principals. Trust (77%) was one of the top factors that principals gave for their ability to most positively influence teachers in shared-decision making; however, it was one of the lowest subcategories in the *staff-leadership relationship* category, according to the Impact KY. In focus

groups with principals, decision-making was identified as an area that was isolating and emotionally taxing. This finding coupled with superintendents identifying deficits in principal candidates' ability to delegate leadership capacity, “Delegate and equip leaders—don’t do it all yourself.”, suggest that principals recognize the importance of establishing trust but fail to recognize how to execute high leverage trust-building strategies such as shared leadership through delegation.

Student Behavior Management

Principals in focus groups cited increased complex needs (mental health, special education, EL) of students in their schools as a major contributing factor to increased stress and challenges of the profession. Teachers and principals reported high incidents of student misconduct disrupting the learning environment in their school. While this category, *educating all students*, in the Impact KY saw a slight increase (2%), it still was below the 2019-20 data (5%) suggesting that this is a persistent issue in the commonwealth. This data also aligns with the principal survey, where principals (73%) contributed *challenging student behaviors* and *being asked to take on too many responsibilities* (71%) as factors that led to negative well-being.

These stresses can be exacerbated if a school leader is unable to develop, leverage and monitor systems for improvement, a deficit that was highlighted by superintendents. According to Impact KY, school leaders are effective at *developing rules for students* (64%), which suggests that possible issues related to student behavior management are a result of being able to leverage and monitor student behavior systems. The inability to leverage these systems could be connected to the feeling of having to take on too many responsibilities as indicated by the principal survey.

Well-Being and Belonging

Well-being and belonging is one of two categories that both principals and teachers identified as a high need area (Impact KY). Principals believe that improved *work-life balance* (80%) is a major factor to improved emotional well-being among staff. In focus groups, principals expressed concern for the emotional toll that is created from the constant pressure to be available and the impact that expectation has on their personal well-being. Superintendents also acknowledge the challenging nature of the position and highlight the importance of transparency and exposure for principal candidates. Principals also contribute this pressure to the added responsibilities created by SEA and LEA policy and mandates that they perceive to add little to no impact on day-to-day operations or student outcomes.

Resource Limitation

Resource limitation is another category that both principals and teachers identify as a high need area. *Teachers' use of their own funds on their classrooms*, was one of the lowest favorability rated subcategories of Impact KY, teachers reported only a 19% favorability where principals reported 51% favorability, highlighting a 32% gap between teacher and principal perception. This gap in perception by principal is accentuated by the low value principals placed on *teacher input in areas of school resources and budget priorities* (principal needs survey), suggesting principals are not accurately assessing classroom resource needs and possibly not prioritizing budgets appropriately. However, principals and teachers both indicate a need for more specialists to help with student needs, connecting limited resources to well-being and student behavior management. This area of need aligns with the principal's desire for more time. *Time* was another resource limitation cited by principals that hinder their ability to provide instructional feedback to teachers.

Recommendations

The effectiveness of a school system is reliant on the strengths of its principal. A comprehensive analysis, pulling from principal survey results, principal focus groups, and superintendent focus groups, reveal critical deficiencies in principal readiness. Superintendents, principals and research agree; the current model must evolve from a course-based, compliance-focused approach to one that is grounded in principals such as job-embedded, practice-based learning, high quality mentorship, and systemic quality support.

The Kentucky study confirmed Wallace Foundation national findings, revealing that many principals felt underprepared for key leadership demands such as decision-making, coaching, and operational management. Participants emphasized the importance of stronger clinical components, authentic field experiences, and coaching aligned to real-world leadership challenges. Superintendents in the study also identified systems thinking, communication, and distributed leadership as critical areas for strengthened preparation—elements that mirror national recommendations for effective leadership pipelines.

Key Recommendations for Principal Preparation Providers

Recommendation 1: Utilize role-playing, scenarios, case studies and simulations to create opportunities for candidates to experience and respond to potential high-stress situations.

Examples

- Provide exposure to difficult conversations and conflict resolution
- Include curriculum on maintaining staff culture and morale
- Address self-care and work-life balance explicitly
- Incorporate practice-based learning on politically sensitive issues

- Leverage SEA Student Information Systems (SIS) sandbox accounts to create authentic data analysis situations

Recommendation 2: Preparation programs should build competencies through practice-based and clinically rich models. Seventy-seven percent of principals cited *experience* as a contributing factor to their effectiveness in promoting a positive school culture.

Examples

- Increase shadowing and field experiences across diverse school context

Recommendation 3: Strengthen training on budgeting, scheduling, and SEEK/ADA processes in order to increase finance fluency. Many new principals enter the role lacking deep fluency in budget, procurement, and alignment between resources and outcomes. One superintendent warned, “We buy programs without checking impact.” Preparation programs must move beyond compliance instruction to budget modeling, cost-benefit analysis, and “resource-to-outcome” simulations.

Examples

- Strengthen training on budgeting, scheduling, and SEEK/ADA processes

Recommendation 4: Preparation programs should include communication simulations (parent conflict, media inquiries, board engagement) and explicit instruction in motivating language theory—framing messages that offer direction, meaning, and empathy (Sullivan, 1988). Improved communication was cited by superintendents as an area of growth.

Examples

- Leverage AI to create dialogue with principal candidates around topics, providing space for communication practice and feedback.
- Increase hands-on experience by embedding authentic assignments with

opportunities for candidates to practice executive leadership skills.

Key Recommendations for LEA & SEA

Recommendation 1: KDE and local districts must ensure continuing structures of mentorship. A recurring superintendent theme was that mentoring cannot end at certification. As one leader explained, “Confidence comes only when you know any error you make, you can fix (it) with support.” Districts should formalize multi-year mentorship structures pairing new principals with veteran mentors outside their direct supervision line to ensure trust and vulnerability (See Appendix F and H for recommendations as they relate to PSEL standards).

Examples

- Create more leadership positions within the school system to allow for a gradual induction into leadership positions
- Identify future leaders within the district and encourage their participation in leadership opportunities.

Recommendation 2: KDE and local districts must ensure continued training. While superintendents affirmed the importance of rigorous principal preparation, they also emphasized the need for sustained development and systemic supports once principals are in the role. Findings from the Kentucky research highlight a misalignment: principals described evaluation processes as largely procedural and lacking developmental feedback. Both principals and superintendents advocated for supervision that includes coaching, reflective dialogue, and accountability focused on instructional improvement rather than compliance (See appendix D, F, and G for more recommendations).

Examples

- LEA’s hold regular administrative meetings where principals have opportunities

to engage in role-play scenarios on delivering difficult feedback, crafting transparent communications to families, or facilitating emotionally charged staff meetings.

- SEA (KDE) provides access to resources that can be used by districts that support on-going executive leadership development at the LEA level, such as simulation software.
- Strengthen coaching and feedback support for sitting principals
- Revise principal evaluation systems

Recommendation 3: KDE and local districts must ensure wellness support for sitting principals by re-balancing the role through reducing/streamlining non-instructional loads and adding operations support. A reduction of compliance and reporting tasks is necessary to allow principals to focus on instructional, cultural, and relational leadership. The Kentucky study found that compliance expectations, isolation, and inadequate emotional supports were primary stressors contributing to burnout. Principals reported spending disproportionate time on managerial and operational duties rather than on instructional leadership. These findings mirror the Wallace Foundation’s research on working conditions, which links excessive managerial load to reduced instructional effectiveness and diminished well-being (Wallace Foundation, 2015).

Examples

- Protect time for principals to model a healthy work/life balance.
- Increase support staff (School Administration Managers) for principals in areas like special education and ELL.

Recommendation 4: KDE and local districts must ensure systems improvement that enhance self-efficacy by offering opportunities that bring principals together to share best

practices to promote principal autonomy. In the Kentucky study, principals frequently cited limited decision-making authority and policy overload as barriers to effective leadership. They described feeling constrained by district and state compliance requirements that limited their ability to respond to local needs. Superintendents in the study agreed, noting that greater flexibility and trust from central-office supervisors would empower principals to act as instructional leaders rather than compliance managers. These findings support Federici's (2012) conclusion that autonomy and self-efficacy are intertwined, as increased professional trust enhances both confidence and performance.

Examples

- Design activities that allow principal collaboration through analyzing key metrics, sharing improvement cycles, and co-designing tools that reduce redundancy and reactive management (Bryk et al., 2015)
- Create systems that allow principals greater autonomy
- Share exemplar practices regularly with principals

Key Recommendations for Inter-Institution/Agency Partnerships

Recommendation 1: Coherence between SAE, Council for Post-secondary Education (CPE), and university principal preparation programs is essential to developing a stable, high-quality leadership pipeline. Prioritizing mentorship, aligned field experiences, and principal well-being will strengthen both retention and effectiveness.

Examples

- Build a quality system of training and support for future school leaders by establishing a network that bridges the work of these entities.
- Partner with universities to provide access to sandbox accounts such as: data

management systems (student information systems), financial applications systems (GMAP), comprehensive school/district planning system for training purposes.

- Develop a principal data base for EPP's to better measure complete impact and student outcomes.

Recommendation 2: High quality mentorships were identified as key components to promote principal effectiveness. Principals consistently emphasized that the most meaningful learning comes not from attending workshops, but from working alongside experienced practitioners who can provide practical, situational guidance in real time. Findings from the Kentucky study reinforce these national conclusions—principals reported that high-quality mentorship and opportunities for collaboration were critical supports, yet inconsistently provided across districts. They emphasized that professional development was often compliance-driven rather than reflective of on-the-job realities.

Examples

- Establish a formal, paid principal mentorship program that spans two years and includes peer-networking and diverse mentorship opportunities.
- Provide targeted state-funded grants for districts to develop strong mentorship models for future and current leaders.
- Collaborate to identify, train and support principal mentors

Recommendation 3: Streamline communication that ensures the most critical information is shared in a timely manner. Allowing principals time to effectively lead their schools strategically. Wallace Foundation research further underscores that successful principals are those who focus on shaping a vision of academic success, fostering a climate hospitable to

learning and teaching, cultivating leadership in others, and improving instruction (Wallace Foundation, 2013). The Kentucky data echo this focus, revealing that time constraints and bureaucratic reporting requirements limit principals' capacity to engage in sustained instructional leadership.

Examples

- Protect schools from unnecessary mandates by conducting a comprehensive review looking to eliminate zero-value paperwork and establishing a process that requires clear, evidence-based link between a new mandate and a quality impact on student learning.
- Establish clear, long-term policy roadmaps for core educational initiatives.
- Streamline and accelerate state assessment reporting.

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Appendix A

Principal Need Survey

You are invited to participate in a research study being conducted by Dr. Deborah Powers and Dr. Kyle Ingle at the University of Louisville. We have contacted you because you currently serve as a principal of a Kentucky school district. In this role, you have insights, experiences, and perceptions of principal needs in Kentucky schools and districts as well as potential ways that educational leaders and principal preparation programs can address these perceived needs. We are asking you to participate in a survey, which will take approximately 15 minutes to complete. All of the willing participants are currently serving as principals of Kentucky schools. Participation in this survey is completely voluntary and no personally identifiable information will be collected. Your responses will be kept confidential and will only be reported in aggregate form. While there are no direct benefits to you, your participation will provide valuable insights to help us to understand your perceptions of principal needs in Kentucky schools and districts and potential ways that educational leaders and principal preparation programs can address these perceived needs. Your information may be used for future research studies or shared with other researchers, and we will not request additional informed consent from you. You can opt out at any time during this survey.

- Yes, I understand the nature of this survey and agree to participate

- ☐ No, I do not wish to participate in this survey

Demographic Questions

Q1 What is your gender?

- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female
- ☐ Prefer not to say

Q2 Which best describes your school's location?

- ☐ Rural
- ☐ Suburban
- ☐ Urban

Q3 Is your school designated as a Title I school?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

Q4 What level do you serve as a school administrator?

- ☐ I am not a head principal
- ☐ Elementary
- ☐ Middle
- ☐ High
- ☐ Other

Q5 How many years have you served as a head principal?

- ☐ 0-3 years
- ☐ 4-7 years
- ☐ 8-12 years
- ☐ 13+ years

Q6 Please identify the type educational training you completed for your principal certification

- ☐ Traditional Certification Route (University within Kentucky)
- ☐ Traditional Certification Route (University outside of Kentucky)
- ☐ Option 6 (University)
- ☐ Other _____

Q7 How many years between receiving your certification (principal) and becoming a practicing school administrator?

- ☐ 0

- 1-4
- 5+

Q8 With which educational cooperative is your school affiliated?

- CKEC (Central Kentucky Educational Cooperative)
- GRREC (Green River Regional Educational Cooperative)
- KEDC (Kentucky Educational Development Corporation)
- KVEC (Kentucky Valley Educational Cooperative)
- NKCES (Northern Kentucky Cooperative for Educational Services)
- OVEC (Ohio Valley Educational Cooperative)
- SESC (Southeast South-Central Educational Cooperative)
- WKEC (West Kentucky Educational Cooperative)

Survey Questions: School Leadership

Q9 As a school administrator, how do you set a positive tone for your school? (Select up to three)

- ☐ Consistently being visible in classrooms
- ☐ Communicating effectively with all stakeholders
- ☐ Developing, implementing and maintaining systems that support student learning
- ☐ Demonstrating genuine care to students and staff
- ☐ Valuing student and staff voice
- ☐ Creating a sense of pride among students, staff and families
- ☐ Providing a sense of security by maintaining order that is structured through strongly implemented policies and procedures
- ☐ Holding self and others to high expectations
- ☐ Other (please specify) _____

Q10 What factor most positively influences your ability to engage teachers and staff in shared decision-making?

- ☐ Structural: Availability of time and clear processes for collaborative decision-making.
- ☐ Cultural & Relational: Level of trust and openness between leadership and staff.
- ☐ Policy & District Influence: Degree of autonomy principals have in school-based decisions.
- ☐ Individual & Team Dynamics: Teacher experience and willingness to engage in decision-making.
- ☐ Other (please specify) _____

Q11 What factor hinders your ability to engage teachers and staff in shared decision-making?

- ☐ Structural: Availability of time and clear processes for collaborative decision-making.
- ☐ Cultural & Relational: Level of trust and openness between leadership and staff.
- ☐ Policy & District Influence: Degree of autonomy principals have in school-based decisions.
- ☐ Individual & Team Dynamics: Teacher experience and willingness to engage in decision-making.
- ☐ Other (please specify)

Q12 To what extent do you value teacher input on the following issues?

	1 (Not at all) (1)	2 (Slightly) (2)	3 (Moderately) (3)	4 (Highly) (4)	5 (Very highly) (5)
Curriculum decisions	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Professional development planning	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
School policies and procedures (3)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Student discipline policies	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Instructional strategies and best practices	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Use of school resources and budget priorities	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Student support and intervention programs	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Q13 How do you actively engage your staff in shared decision-making? (Select up to three)

- ☐ Establishing leadership teams or committees to provide input on key decisions

- ☐ Seeking teacher input through survey or focus groups
- ☐ Holding regular staff meetings with open discussion on school initiatives
- ☐ Encouraging teacher-led professional learning communities (PLCs)
- ☐ Providing opportunities for teachers to take on leadership roles in decision-making
- ☐ Using data and teacher feedback to collaboratively set school improvement goals
- ☐ Consulting with teachers before implementing new policies or programs
- ☐ I do not actively engage staff in shared decision-making
- ☐ Other (please specify) _____

Q14 In which area(s) do you feel support/training contributed to your effectiveness as a school leader ? (Select all that apply)

- ☐ Pre-service training (certification/coursework)
- ☐ District support
- ☐ Mentoring support
- ☐ Continuing Education (EILA)
- ☐ Policy or state mandates (laws)
- ☐ Experience (time served in position)
- ☐ Other (please specify)

Survey Questions: Feedback & Coaching

Q15 Which of the following characteristics do you believe make feedback meaningful in improving instructional practices? (Select up to three)

- ☐ Clear and specific suggestions for improvement
 - ☐ Timely feedback provided shortly after observation
 - ☐ Focus on both strengths and areas for growth
 - ☐ Actionable steps that can be immediately applied
 - ☐ Collaborative discussions for professional growth
 - ☐ Tailored feedback based on individual teacher needs
 - ☐ Constructive feedback that supports teacher confidence and motivation
 - ☐ Continuous feedback with opportunities for follow-up
 - ☐ Feedback focused on student outcomes and engagement
 - ☐ Other (please specify)
-

Q16 Which of the following factors most influence your ability to provide meaningful feedback to teachers? (Select up to three)

- ☐ Time available for observations and feedback meetings

- ☐ Access to data and evidence of teacher performance
- ☐ Teacher openness and receptiveness to feedback
- ☐ Availability of professional development resources for teachers
- ☐ Coaching support from district or school leadership for feedback initiatives
- ☐ School culture and climate that promotes continuous improvement
- ☐ Teacher workload and capacity to act on feedback
- ☐ Consistency in the evaluation and feedback process
- ☐ Preservice training in providing feedback
- ☐ Other _____

Q17 Which of the following factors (or lack of) hinder your ability to provide meaningful feedback to teachers? (Select up to three)

- ☐ Time available for observations and feedback meetings
- ☐ Access to data and evidence of teacher performance
- ☐ Teacher openness and receptiveness to feedback
- ☐ Availability of professional development resources for teachers
- ☐ Coaching support from district or school leadership for feedback initiatives
- ☐ School culture and climate that promotes continuous improvement
- ☐ Teacher workload and capacity to act on feedback
- ☐ Consistency in the evaluation and feedback process
- ☐ Preservice training in providing feedback

Q18 In which area(s) do you feel support/training contributed to your effectiveness as a school leader related to professional learning in your school? (Select up to three)

- ☐ Pre-service training (certification/coursework)
- ☐ District support
- ☐ Mentoring support
- ☐ Continuing Education (EILA)
- ☐ Policy or state mandates (laws)
- ☐ Experience (time served in position)
- ☐ Other (please specify)

Q19 In which area(s) do you feel support/training contributed to your effectiveness as a school leader related to feedback & coaching? (Select all that apply)

- ☐ Pre-service training (certification/coursework)
- ☐ District support
- ☐ Mentoring support
- ☐ Continuing Education (EILA)

- ☐ Policy or state mandates (laws)
 - ☐ Experience (time served in position)
 - ☐ Other (please specify)
-

Survey Questions: Professional Development

Q20 Please rank the following factors (in order of importance) when determining the type of professional development to offer your staff (1 = Most Important, 7 = Least Important) Please move the statements to reflect rank:

- _____ Alignment with school or district improvement goals
- _____ Teachers' identified needs or areas for growth
- _____ Availability of resources and funding
- _____ Current educational trends and research
- _____ Teacher interest and engagement in the topic
- _____ Input from school leadership team or instructional coaches
- _____ Feedback from students or parents regarding instructional practices

Q21 In what ways are you promoting professional learning at your school? (Select up to three)

- ☐ Ensuring time for Professional Learning Communities (PLC)
- ☐ Allowing time for peer observations of master teachers
- ☐ Providing coaching/mentoring support
- ☐ Encouraging professional growth through book studies
- ☐ Encouraging staff to pursue additional certifications or degrees
- ☐ Encouraging staff to engage in extensive, focused learning opportunities (LETRS, CEO, Numeracy, etc)
- ☐ Encouraging staff to participate in state-wide committees, initiatives, organizations, etc.
- ☐ other (please specify) _____

Q22 PD In which area(s) do you feel support/training contributed to your effectiveness as a school leader related to professional development? (Select all that apply)

- ☐ Pre-service training (certification/coursework)
 - ☐ District support
 - ☐ Mentoring support
 - ☐ Continuing Education (EILA)
 - ☐ Policy or state mandates (laws)
 - ☐ Experience (time served in position)
 - ☐ Other (please specify)
-

Survey Questions: Climate and Culture

Q23 Which of the following factors do you believe are most important in contributing to positive faculty and staff morale for their work at school?" (Select up to three)

- ☐ Positive relationships with colleagues and school leadership
- ☐ Opportunities for professional growth and development
- ☐ Supportive work environment and school culture
- ☐ Recognition and appreciation for their contributions
- ☐ Autonomy and decision-making power in their role
- ☐ Competitive compensation and benefits
- ☐ Work-life balance and flexibility
- ☐ Clear expectations and communication from leadership
- ☐ Meaningful involvement in school improvement efforts

Q24 What are the contributing factors (or lack of) that hinder staff morale in your building? (Select up to three)

- ☐ Positive Relationships with colleagues and school leadership
- ☐ Opportunities for professional growth and development
- ☐ Supportive work environment and school culture
- ☐ Recognition and appreciation for their contributions
- ☐ Autonomy and decision-making power in their role
- ☐ Competitive compensation and benefits
- ☐ Work-life balance and flexibility
- ☐ Clear expectations and communication from leadership
- ☐ Meaningful involvement in school improvement efforts

Q25 Rank the following in order of importance, 1 (most important) to 9 (least important), as it relates to factors that lead to positive student engagement in your school. (please move the statements to reflect rank)

- _____ Positive relationships with teachers and staff
- _____ Engaging and relevant curriculum
- _____ Opportunities for student voice and choice in learning
- _____ A supportive and inclusive school environment
- _____ Recognition and celebration of student achievements

- _____ Extracurricular activities and student clubs
- _____ Safe and well-maintained school facilities
- _____ Strong connections to the community and local events
- _____ Effective communication with parents and families

Q26 In which area(s) do you feel support/training contributed to your effectiveness as a school leader related to climate & culture? (Select all that apply)

- ☐ Pre-service training (certification/coursework)
 - ☐ District support
 - ☐ Mentoring support
 - ☐ Continuing Education (EILA)
 - ☐ Policy or state mandates (laws)
 - ☐ Experience (time served in position)
 - ☐ Other (please specify)
-

Survey Questions: Student Learning

Q27 Which of the following would improve staff ability to support students with diverse learning needs? (Select up to three)

- ☐ More professional development on differentiating instruction
- ☐ Increased access to specialized staff (e.g., special education teachers, interventionists)
- ☐ Increased collaboration time with colleagues to discuss strategies
- ☐ Clearer guidance from school leadership on available resources
- ☐ More user-friendly and accessible instructional materials
- ☐ Additional funding for specialized tools and technology
- ☐ Reduced workload to allow more time for individualized support
- ☐ Stronger communication between general education and special education staff
- ☐ Other _____

Q28 STULearn Which of the following (lack of) hinders the ability of staff to support students with diverse learning needs? (Select up to three)

- ☐ More professional development on differentiating instruction
- ☐ Increased access to specialized staff (e.g., special education teachers, interventionists)
- ☐ Increased collaboration time with colleagues to discuss strategies
- ☐ Clearer guidance from school leadership on available resources
- ☐ More user-friendly and accessible instructional materials
- ☐ Additional funding for specialized tools and technology

- ☐ Reduced workload to allow more time for individualized support
- ☐ Stronger communication between general education and special education staff
- ☐ Other _____

Q29 In which area(s) do you feel support/training contributed to your effectiveness as a school leader related to student learning? (Select up to three)

- ☐ Pre-service training (certification/coursework)
- ☐ District support
- ☐ Mentoring support
- ☐ Continuing Education (EILA)
- ☐ Policy or state mandates (laws)
- ☐ Experience (time served in position)
- ☐ Other (please specify)

Survey Questions: Well-Being/Belonging

Q30 Which of the following factors do you feel would improve emotional well-being among staff in your school? (Select up to three)

- ☐ Supportive leadership
- ☐ Collaborative culture
- ☐ Increased support staff
- ☐ Special wellness programs
- ☐ PBIS type systems
- ☐ Increased professional development
- ☐ Work-life balance
- ☐ Other (please specify)

Q31 What factors do you feel contribute to a negative sense of well-being among staff in your school? (Select up to three)

- ☐ Unsupportive leadership
 - ☐ Negative/Toxic culture
 - ☐ Lack of support from colleagues
 - ☐ Lack of staffing to address critical issues
 - ☐ Being asked to take on too many responsibilities
 - ☐ Challenging student behaviors
 - ☐ Feeling unprepared/ineffective in current role
 - ☐ Other (please specify)
-

Q32 What factors do you feel contribute to a positive sense of belonging among staff in your school? (Select up to three)

- ☐ Established supportive leadership
 - ☐ Created a collaborative culture
 - ☐ Increased support staff
 - ☐ Promoting school pride and community
 - ☐ Better communication
 - ☐ Staff empowerment
 - ☐ Provided social events for staff outside of school setting
 - ☐ Other (please specify)
-

Survey Questions: Training 3

Q33 In which area(s) do you feel support/training contributed to your effectiveness as a school leader related to well-being and belonging? (Select all that apply)

- ☐ Pre-service training (certification/coursework)
- ☐ District support
- ☐ Mentoring support
- ☐ Continuing Education (EILA)
- ☐ Policy or state mandates (laws)
- ☐ Experience (time served in position)
- ☐ Other (please specify)

Appendix B

Principal Focus Group Questions

1. What challenges, if any, do you face as a school leader?
2. What barriers, do you believe, have the most impact on student learning outcomes?
3. What resources, supports, or changes would most improve your school's ability to effectively implement and sustain school improvement initiatives?

4. How do you measure the impact of professional development, feedback, mentoring and coaching on teachers' ability to improve student achievement?
5. What support/training would likely increase your ability to lead effectively?
6. As the school leader what actions do you contribute to setting a positive climate and culture in your school?
7. What aspects of the principal position keeps you up at night?
8. What, if anything, do you do to decompress from the position?
9. What support do you receive from your superiors or other entities that help you be better at your position?
10. How would you describe your level of happiness with your current position? What could be done to improve or maintain that level of happiness?

Appendix C

Superintendent Focus Group Questions

1. Discuss the “schools we desire to create” and what leaders of those schools should be able to know and do to help those schools meet the needs of all learners.
2. Discuss current common elements of existing principal prep programs (field placement, clinical hours, instructional leadership, coaching, etc.) and delve into the reasons behind programs having those elements in common. Do these elements comprise best practices?
3. Are there specific elements or experiences of a principal prep program that helps one become a better principal? How do we know?

4. How might we better engage with partner districts to make principal prep programs more impactful on future school success?
5. Discuss the essential knowledge, skills, and dispositions that may comprise the profile of a principal preparation program completer.

Appendix D

Cross-Cutting Gaps and Recommendations

(Based on principal focus groups and analysis of themes)

Area	Observed Gap	Systemic Recommendation
Transition to Practice	Disconnect between certification completion and immediate on-the-job readiness.	KDE and CPE should jointly support a statewide “Principal Induction and Mentorship Framework” to scaffold early career leadership.
Workload and Well-being	Principals report blurred boundaries, burnout, and limited support for wellness.	KDE should embed principal wellness metrics into district leadership evaluations and fund mental health days or regional retreat opportunities.

Area	Observed Gap	Systemic Recommendation
Professional Learning Design	District and KDE meetings often remove principals from their buildings, exacerbating stress.	Redesign professional learning to be embedded, virtual, or cohort-based; align content with current principal challenges.
Consistency and Coherence in Policy	Frequent policy shifts create instability in planning and implementation.	Establish a three-year KDE communication roadmap to provide predictability and coherence across policy areas.
Mentorship and Peer Networks	Lack of structured, ongoing principal mentoring programs.	Create regional mentor cohorts and formal mentor training for veteran principals through university partnerships.

Appendix E

Supporting Principals In Place: Rethinking District Leadership Meetings

(A potential Kentucky Model for Job-Embedded Professional Learning)

Principals across both urban and suburban settings consistently expressed that leaving their buildings for district meetings adds stress, disrupts supervision, and delays responsiveness to school needs. This is especially problematic during critical operational windows (testing,

staffing, behavior management cycles, etc.). Yet, these same meetings—when well designed—could be the most powerful form of professional learning and collaboration if restructured around principal needs and authentic work.

Core idea: Transform meetings into job-embedded learning labs

District “leadership meetings” should be redesigned from sit-and-get compliance briefings to applied, collaborative sessions where principals work on current, real-world leadership problems, often remotely or within their own buildings.

Design principles:

1. In-place participation (Hybrid + Asynchronous Access)

- o Allow principals to attend virtually from their schools via structured hybrid formats.
- o Record sessions and archive tools in a shared district portal to reduce redundancy and time away.

2. Instructional Rounds—in-Reverse

- o Instead of traveling for building walkthroughs, invite district specialists to *virtually visit* classrooms via streamed lessons or shared artifacts, followed by brief PLC discussions.

3. Rotating Facilitator Model

- o Assign principals (in triads or clusters) to lead monthly 45-minute “problem-of-practice” discussions on current challenges (e.g., chronic absenteeism strategies, teacher retention, parent communication).

4. Compliance Integration

- o Build “compliance mini-modules” into meeting time with district teams completing required submissions collectively—reducing after-hours clerical work.

5. Data-In-Action Segments

- o Dedicate meeting portions to real data dialogue—using principals’ own formative data sets to drive coaching and peer benchmarking.

6. Wellness and Reflective Closure

- o End each meeting with 10 minutes of reflection, resource sharing, or peer recognition to support well-being and community (PSEL 2, 5).

Benefits:

- Reduces out-of-building time and logistical stress.
- Repositions district meetings as *professional learning*, not *information delivery*.
- Strengthens cross-school relationships and shared leadership practice.
- Aligns directly to PSEL 6 (Professional Capacity), PSEL 7 (Professional Community), and PSEL 10 (Continuous Improvement).

Appendix F

Gap Analysis Table: Principal Preparation Alignment to PSEL Standards and KDE/CPE Expectations

(Based on principal focus group interviews and thematic analysis)

PSEL Standard (2015)	KDE/CPE Expectations for Principal Effectiveness	Principal Perceptions and Identified Gaps	Implications / Recommendations for KDE and University EPPs
Standard 1: Mission, Vision, and Core Values	Develop and articulate a shared vision of learning that promotes the academic success	Principals report that state and district mandates frequently conflict with school-based priorities and long-term planning. Frequent policy changes	KDE should provide consistent, multi-year direction on accountability and assessment systems. University programs should include scenario-based learning on adaptive

PSEL Standard (2015)	KDE/CPE Expectations for Principal Effectiveness	Principal Perceptions and Identified Gaps	Implications / Recommendations for KDE and University EPPs
	and well-being of each student.	(e.g., shifting assessment systems) disrupt goal alignment and undermine coherence.	leadership amid shifting mandates.
Standard 2: Ethics and Professional Norms	Model ethical behavior, integrity, fairness, and professional norms.	Principals expressed emotional strain when navigating confidential or ethically complex decisions alone. The lack of structured reflection or support systems increases decision fatigue.	Districts should create confidential peer consultation or mentoring groups for principals. EPPs should integrate ethical dilemma simulations and reflective supervision models.
Standard 3: Equity and Cultural Responsiveness	Advocate for equitable access, inclusion, and success for all students.	Principals report increasing linguistic diversity, growing numbers of students with disabilities, and inequities in available supports. One noted 75–80% of their day involves special education issues.	Strengthen EPP coursework and fieldwork in special populations, equity-centered leadership, and multilingual family engagement. KDE should allocate funding for specialized district-level supports and resource sharing.
Standard 4: Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment	Cultivate instructional practices that promote rigorous and culturally responsive teaching and learning.	Delays in receiving state assessment data prevent timely instructional adjustments. Principals cite frustration that “science scores arrive in December,” limiting impact.	KDE should streamline assessment reporting and provide interim data tools. University programs should embed data literacy experiences with real-time performance data analysis.

PSEL Standard (2015)	KDE/CPE Expectations for Principal Effectiveness	Principal Perceptions and Identified Gaps	Implications / Recommendations for KDE and University EPPs
Standard 5: Community of Care and Support for Students	Ensure a culture of care and support for the academic, social, emotional, and physical needs of students.	Principals report that rising student mental health needs and trauma overwhelm available school supports. Staff emotional exhaustion compounds the issue.	KDE and districts should increase access to mental health professionals and trauma-informed PD. Preparation programs should integrate community resource mapping and crisis response leadership.
Standard 6: Professional Capacity of School Personnel	Develop staff capacity through effective supervision, coaching, and professional learning.	Principals cite difficulty recruiting and retaining qualified teachers, coupled with limited time for meaningful instructional leadership.	EPPs should expand practicums on staff supervision, evaluation, and retention strategies. KDE could support leadership academies focused on teacher pipeline development and coaching frameworks.
Standard 7: Professional Community for Teachers and Staff	Build collaborative professional cultures that support improvement.	Many principals experience isolation and lack of trusted professional networks. Leadership meetings often add stress rather than build capacity.	Districts and KDE should create regional principal networks or professional learning communities (PLCs) designed around peer support and shared problem-solving.
Standard 8: Meaningful Engagement of Families and Community	Collaborate with families and community members to support student learning and well-being.	Principals highlight growing community and family needs but limited time to build authentic partnerships due to competing administrative demands.	EPPs should include community-based learning projects. KDE should support family engagement specialists and emphasize principal-community collaboration in evaluation frameworks.

PSEL Standard (2015)	KDE/CPE Expectations for Principal Effectiveness	Principal Perceptions and Identified Gaps	Implications / Recommendations for KDE and University EPPs
Standard 9: Operations and Management	Manage resources, systems, and operations efficiently and equitably.	Principals identified budgeting, SEEK/ADA processes, and scheduling as major skill gaps. Several requested explicit training in finance and operations.	Expand university coursework on finance, scheduling, and facilities management. KDE could provide statewide workshops on SEEK funding and financial management for new administrators.
Standard 10: School Improvement	Act as a systems-level change agent who uses data, feedback, and reflection to improve outcomes.	Principals expressed a desire for targeted mentorship, applied field experiences, and ongoing feedback loops to sustain continuous improvement.	Develop joint KDE–university induction programs for new principals, including coaching, data-driven decision-making, and reflective practice. Establish a first-year principal cohort model aligned with continuous improvement cycles.

Appendix G

Gap Analysis: Principal Preparation Alignment to PSEL Standards and KDE and CPE Expectations

(Based on superintendent interviews and thematic analysis)

Domain / Expectation Area	KDE / CPE Expectations for Principal Preparation	Representative Comments from Superintendents	Identified Gaps	Program Recommendations
Instructional Leadership (PSEL 1, 4, 6)	Principals lead rigorous, standards-aligned instruction; analyze data to improve learning outcomes.	“Principals must understand curriculum standards and what mastery looks like.” “We need strong instructional leaders, not just building managers.”	Candidates lack applied practice analyzing instruction and giving standards-based feedback.	Add Instructional Leadership Studios with HQIR internalization, walkthrough calibration, and Tier 1–3 MTSS analysis.
Systems Management & Continuous Improvement (PSEL 9, 10)	Principals implement coherent systems for improvement and use data to monitor progress.	“Too many leaders have a ‘hair-on-fire’ mentality instead of systems thinking.”	Limited coursework on systems design, monitoring, and improvement cycles.	Create a Systems Engineering & Improvement Cycle course—design, implement, monitor, and adapt school systems.
Finance and Resource Management (PSEL 9)	Principals manage budgets strategically and ethically to advance learning goals.	“Principals don’t understand how to use resources effectively... buying programs without checking impact.” “Leaders must articulate how money moves learning forward.”	Current prep emphasizes compliance (Red Book) but not finance-for-impact analysis.	Require Budget-to-Results Projects linking expenditures to student achievement data.
Human Capital /	Principals recruit,	“We must equip principals to	Insufficient focus on adult	Integrate Coaching for Adult Behavior

Adult Learning (PSEL 6)	develop, and retain high-quality staff through coaching and professional learning.	coach teachers—not just evaluate them.” “People management goes beyond HR.”	learning and coaching skill development.	Change modules with practice simulations and feedback cycles.
Communication & Stakeholder Engagement (PSEL 2, 8)	Principals engage families and the community through transparent, responsive communication.	“It’s not the amount but the quality of communication that matters.” “You’re going to get screamed at by parents—must stay professional.” “Leaders must articulate vision or all you have is noise.”	Principals unprepared for conflict resolution, community messaging, and social media management.	Create Strategic Communication and Public Engagement Training with simulations, crisis scenarios, and response standards.
Equity and Cultural Responsiveness (PSEL 3, 5)	Principals advocate for equitable, culturally responsive learning environments.	“Closing gaps for EL and SPED students is still a big challenge.”	Gaps in applying culturally responsive strategies to supervision and resource allocation.	Add case-based modules on equity-driven data inquiry and inclusive instructional leadership.
Data Literacy & Decision-Making (PSEL 10)	Principals analyze multiple data sources to inform instruction and operations.	“Principals need to triangulate and utilize data to move the school forward.”	Data use often superficial; lack of practice interpreting multiple sources for improvement cycles.	Embed Data-Driven Decision Labs with integrated performance dashboards and scenario-based analysis.

Collaborative Leadership & Delegation (PSEL 5, 7)	Principals distribute leadership and build collaborative teams for shared accountability.	“Principals must equip and delegate to teacher leaders, not micromanage.” “Leaders must develop teams—they can’t do it alone.”	Prep programs seldom assess delegation or distributed leadership capacity.	Develop Distributed Leadership Projects assessing candidate plans to build teacher-leader pipelines.
Professional Dispositions & Growth Orientation (PSEL 9, 10)	Principals model integrity, resilience, and continuous learning.	“Growth-oriented, resilient, stick-to-it-iveness... we can teach skill, but not disposition.” “Confidence comes from knowing you can correct your mistakes.”	Candidate selection and assessment rarely measure dispositions systematically.	Incorporate Dispositional Assessments (resilience, reflection, growth mindset) into admissions and exit reviews.
University–District Partnerships (CPE Quality Standards 2.3)	Programs collaborate with districts for authentic field experiences and mentoring.	“Principals should learn from high-performing mentors.” “Districts could host multi-day mentoring rotations.”	Need stronger co-design with districts for internships and mentoring.	Build Clinical Partnership Agreements for co-supervised internships, summer rotations, and mentor vetting aligned to district goals.

Appendix H

Merged Gap Analysis: Principal Preparation Alignment to PSEL Standards and KDE & CPE Expectations (Based on combined superintendent and principal perspectives)

Domain / Expectation Area	KDE / CPE Expectations	Superintendent Perspective (anonymous quotes)	Principal Perspective (anonymous quotes)	Identified Gaps (combined)	Program Recommendations
Instructional Leadership (PSEL 1, 4, 6)	Lead rigorous, standards-aligned instruction; ensure equitable learning; use evidence to improve outcomes.	“Instruction is why we exist... leaders must know what mastery looks like.”	“I needed more help turning standards into daily practice—what it looks like in walkthroughs.”	Inconsistent ability to recognize, build, and monitor high-quality instruction; Tier 2/3 MTSS weakest.	Instructional Leadership Studios: HQIR/internalization cycles, calibrated walkthroughs, Tier 1–3 MTSS analysis.
Data Literacy & Resource-to-Results (PSEL 9, 10)	Use multiple data sources and align resources to improvement goals; monitor impact.	“We buy programs without checking impact—triangulate data to guide spending.”	“We have lots of data but not clear routines to use it for decisions.”	Data use is superficial; weak ROI logic linking budgets to outcomes.	Finance-for-Impact projects: budget→outcomes maps, quarterly ROI reviews, simple performance dashboards.
Communication & Stakeholder Engagement (PSEL 2, 8)	Engage families/community with clear, timely, professional communication; manage media/social media.	“It’s not the amount but the quality—and a timely response matters.”	“Handling parent conflict and social media was the steepest curve.”	Uneven conflict navigation; delayed responses; inconsistent public messaging.	Strategic Communication training: crisis briefs, parent forums, social media protocols; 24-hour acknowledgement standard.

Human Capital & Coaching (PSEL 6, 7)	Develop staff through coaching, feedback, and professional learning; distribute leadership.	“It’s one thing to give feedback; another to coach people up.”	“I need concrete language and practice for difficult coaching conversations.”	Evaluation ≠ coaching; low confidence moving adult practice; micromanagement leading to burnout.	Coaching for Adult Change modules (rehearsals, resistance scripts); teacher-leader pipelines; delegation plans with check-ins.
Systems Design & Continuous Improvement (PSEL 9, 10)	Build coherent systems; implement, monitor, and adjust using cycles of improvement.	“Too many leaders run in ‘hair-on-fire’ mode—build systems and monitor them.”	“We lacked routines—meetings drifted without agendas, measures, or follow-through.”	Reactive management; weak operating cadences for PLC/MTSS/behavior/attendance.	Systems Engineering course: design→implement→monitor→adapt; meeting rhythms, short cycle data reviews, owner/metric charts.
Finance, Law & Operations (incl. SPED law) (PSEL 9)	Manage budgets, facilities, procurement, and compliance ethically and effectively.	“Leaders must show how money moves learning forward—not just Red Book compliance.”	“Budgeting, SPED law, and procurement were overwhelming at first.”	Novice deficits in finance, SPED law, and ops—especially in smaller/independent districts.	Regional Ops/Finance/SPED bootcamps with case files; authentic budgeting labs tied to instructional plans.
Creative Staffing & Scheduling (PSEL 6, 9)	Innovate staffing and schedules to meet student needs amid	“We need creative staffing with a depleted	“Building schedules and coverage plans took far more	Limited tools for staffing tradeoffs; inadequate MTSS/EL/SPED coverage modeling.	Staffing & Schedule Labs: scenario design, role charters, coverage maps for MTSS/EL/SPED;

	workforce constraints.	workforce.”	skill than I expected.”		scheduling in SIS sandboxes.
Equity & Cultural Responsiveness (PSEL 3, 5)	Advance equitable, culturally responsive environments ; close subgroup gaps.	“Closing gaps for EL/SPED remains a big challenge.”	“I need help leading equity conversations and aligning supports.”	Equity strategies weakly integrated into supervision, resource allocation, and PLC work.	Equity-driven inquiry cases; resource reallocation protocols; inclusive PLC facilitation tied to subgroup data.
Well-being, Isolation & Workload	Model professional norms; design manageable roles and access support networks (aligned to PSEL 2, 6, 7, 9).	“Delegate and equip leaders—don’t do it all yourself.”	“I felt isolated; time out of the building hurt my school.”	Principal isolation; overload from compliance meetings; limited in-building mentorship.	District-specific mentorship; in-building coaching; redesign principal meetings for job-embedded support.
Clinical Partnerships & Assessment (CPE Quality; PSEL 6, 7, 10)	Co-design clinicals with districts; assess performance, not seat time.	“Learn from high-result mentors; rotations across contexts.”	“Residences and shadowing made me day-one ready.”	Variable mentor quality; uneven clinical depth; certification ≠ readiness.	Vetted mentors; cross-district cohorts; capstone demonstrating: (a) instructional cycle, (b) staffing/budget redesign, (c) monitored system routine.