

SCHOOL & DISTRICT MANAGEMENT

'Pre-Apprenticeships' Give Teachers a Taste of What It's Like to Be a Principal



By [Olina Banerji](#) — February 28, 2025 ⌚ 7 min read



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The path to the principalship isn't straightforward for many educators. It can be a significant investment of time and money. Plus, some educators, unless tapped by their bosses, may not see themselves in leadership roles or want to leave the classroom.

A group at Western Kentucky University's College of Education and Behavioral Sciences is trying to change that by creating new pathways to the principalship. In August 2024, the college received a four-year, \$1.3 million grant from the U.S. Department of Labor to create Kentucky's first-ever registered principal apprenticeship program, which lets aspiring principals train on the job, plus a new pilot program called the Level Up Leadership Academy, or LULA, a pre-apprenticeship.

LULA, which started August 2024, exposes K-12 teachers to key tenets of school leadership in their own districts through a variety of courses like shadowing an existing principal, professional development on concepts of adaptive leadership, and practicing, for instance, how to have difficult conversations with colleagues. Participating teachers earn credit hours that can count toward earning a certification in an education leadership role.

This early exposure to the work of a school leader has the potential to put a diverse set of candidates on the path to a principalship or other leadership roles like instructional coaches, assistant principal, or dean of students, said Marguerita DeSander, chair of the School of Leadership and Professional Studies at Western Kentucky, and one of the creators of LULA and the principal apprenticeship.

DeSander said a pre-apprenticeship could give teachers a real taste of what it's like to be a principal, which can often be a lonely and tough role.

"When they start applying for principalships, if they know what they're getting into, and they feel like they're prepared for it, they're going to stay," she added.

President Donald Trump's administration has eliminated millions of dollars in grants that cover some teacher-training programs, but Western Kentucky leaders said the apprenticeship and pre-apprenticeship programs haven't yet been affected. Still, they are exploring ways to make the programs sustainable.

Kentucky's model seeks to train principals who will stay

The impetus to create these grow-your-own pathways was twofold, said Rob Akers, a co-designer of the program, and professional-in-residence at Western Kentucky. Akers, a former principal, said the “huge” teacher shortage in the state was bound to ripple up to a leadership shortage.

“When I was a principal, we’d get six to 10 really highly qualified [teacher] candidates, and then it was about picking the best fit for us. Now, schools are trying just to find certified candidates, and so you don’t necessarily have as many high-flying teachers coming into the profession from which you can develop a really rich pipeline of potential [principal] candidates to elevate,” Akers said.

Second, principals aren’t staying in their roles for as long as they used to. DeSander said in her experience, the average tenure of principals in the state has reduced from 10 to 15 years to three to four years. (Nationally, [18 percent of principals](#) were no longer in the same position after a year.) This churn, DeSander added, means schools aren’t seeing the gains they could be in terms of student achievement, and are lacking a stable school culture.

The LULA pre-apprenticeship program, which is offered in partnership with four school districts and often taught by district staff, is a way to recruit and retain homegrown leaders.

The idea of a pre-apprenticeship isn’t necessarily new—it’s often delivered in the form of internships as part of a master’s degree in educational leadership, said Linda Darling-Hammond, the CEO and founder of the Learning Policy Institute, an education research and policy firm. But these practical programs have been “very successful at diversifying the pipeline,” she said.

Darling-Hammond, who has researched patterns in principal preparation for decades, said adding a step before a formal principal-preparation program can let teachers test the waters.

“You’re trying to cultivate leadership from the beginning for people who are interested, giving them an opportunity to see what it is, and to also begin to develop patterns of thinking and acting that are supportive of leadership,” said Darling-Hammond.

How does a pre-apprenticeship work?

Federally registered principal apprenticeship programs have recently opened up as a pathway for districts to prepare future leaders from within their own teacher ranks. An apprenticeship lets candidates get on-the-job training and a paycheck, a component often missing in traditional principal-preparation programs.

North Dakota was the first state to set up a registered apprenticeship for principal candidates in summer 2023. Now, DeSander said Kentucky is the first state east of the Mississippi River to launch this pathway. Ohio and Rhode Island are also working on proposals to launch their own apprenticeship programs.

The goal, DeSander said, is for the pre-apprenticeship program, LULA, to become a feeder into the registered apprenticeship.

LULA is currently run in conjunction with four Kentucky public school districts. District staff and university faculty offer participants 24 to 36 hours of leadership-focused professional development. Unlike an apprenticeship program, teachers enrolled in LULA don't leave their current teaching positions. Right now, participating teachers don't have to pay anything.

The 42,000-student Fayette County district which includes the city of Lexington, has layered the LULA program atop an existing leadership program called Aspiring Leaders, which includes training candidates interested in the principal or assistant principal role. Shamiah Booker, director of teacher and leader effectiveness for the district, worked with Akers to align Western Kentucky's leadership courses with the district's leadership standards to come up with a curriculum.

“One of the topics that they're always very interested in is the courageous conversations: ... being able to talk people through obstacles. We also want the principals to be result driven and making sure that they're using data in their decisions,” said Booker.

LULA also focuses on getting participating teachers to do a 360-degree evaluation, learn

good communication practices, and zoom out of their own “siloes” classrooms to see how decisions are made at the school or district level, Akers said.

The primer to leadership isn't just meant to propel candidates toward a principalship—there are other leadership positions, too, like instructional coaches, that go unfilled in rural districts, Akers added.

Creating a financially viable path to the principalship

Going through LULA also makes it more financially viable for teachers to eventually go through a principal-preparation program or apprenticeship—the PD offered as part of the program counts for six credit hours toward Western Kentucky's principal-preparation program.

At Warren County schools, the LULA program is offered by two Western Kentucky professors—and former principals in the district—after school. The coursework includes topics like how to build a school budget or make the right hiring decisions, said assistant superintendent Sarah Johnson.

Like in Fayette County, Warren County leaders realized that principals were not staying in their positions for as long as they used to, and they needed to expand their principal talent pool. Aside from the cost of hiring outside candidates, it also takes time for new principals to adapt to the school's culture, the district leaders added. They want to build their bench strength in-house.

Warren County uses federal Title II funds to pay a third of the cost to earn a master's degree or license—the other two parts are covered by the candidates and Western Kentucky University.

The 18,000-student district currently has 20 teachers enrolled in the LULA program, and at least a few are now interested in pursuing an administrator's license, Johnson said. LULA is a good start to the leadership pathway, she added, because it allows teachers, at no cost, to

experience what leading a school might look like. It also improves their own teaching and communication skills in their classroom, even if they don't plan to pursue a degree.

Darling-Hammond said the connection to the classroom is often a key consideration for teachers when they start to think about leadership roles.

“It's very important that these people be proactively recruited, because one of the things we found was that really fabulous teacher leaders don't think they want to be principals because they don't want to leave the classroom, they don't want to leave instruction, they don't want to leave the kids,” she said.

In her research, Darling-Hammond saw that once teachers who were recruited to the pipeline programs found that they “could be a leader who is engaged in instruction, they were much more enthusiastic about doing it.”

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