

## Grow Your Own Programs: An Opportunity for Universities and School Districts to Collaborate and Reshape Principal Preparation

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### Abstract

Research suggests that traditional models for principal preparation often do not adequately prepare principals for the challenges of their daily work. This study examines how one private university in the south utilized a Grow Your Own (GYO) concept to provide principal candidates with more authentic field-based cohort learning that revolved around problem solving and meeting the needs of students in their schools in real time. The GYO collaborative model provides an opportunity for P-12 and post-secondary education to merge theory and practice in an integration of expertise and resources that utilizes a course by course exploration of the domain of educational leadership—allowing for real world training with a scholarly backdrop that offers the candidate a rich and authentic experience.

**Keywords:** principal preparation, Grow Your Own, field-based learning, collaboration, authentic learning

The challenges our P-12 schools face require principals to be diverse problem solvers equipped with practical experience from the first day on the job. According to Gill (2012), university-based school principal training programs inadequately prepare participants for the challenges that they will face, especially for schools with high student academic and life skill needs, regardless of the geography and demographics of the school. Partnerships between universities and school districts may be an important avenue for addressing this concern.

A study funded by the Wallace Foundation, in collaboration with the Rand Institute and seven universities, revealed the need for stronger alignment with the school district's specific needs, stronger syncing with state requirements and national standards, field work that exposes the candidate to 'real world' experiences, mentoring from experienced coaches and other support, and collaboration in a cohort model that creates peer support during the program as well as after the course work is completed (Herman, et al., 2022).

Sanchez, Burnham, & Zaki (2019) found that the essential components of these partnerships included redesigning the course sequence, syllabi revision, a co-teaching model consisting of one university faculty member and one or two current practicing principals, and on-going internship experiences. Based on similar university-district partnerships in North Carolina, Horner and Jordan (2020) suggest that regular engagement between district leadership and university contacts as well as joint recruitment and selection are important university-district activities.

Sutcher, Podolsky, & Espinoza (2017) found that pre-service learning in authentic contexts eases the transition into the principal

role because new principals encounter familiar tasks. Dodson (2015) surveyed 1,006 principals across seven states and found that they felt field experiences better prepared them for their role as principal. Similarly, Gumus (2015) found that primary and middle school principals frequently stated that an internship was the most important pre-service training that they received. Specifically, they indicated that working with experienced and successful principals during the internship was the most beneficial aspect.

One model of principal preparation that meets these program criteria is the Grow Your Own (GYO) Model. These programs have demonstrated success in eliminating barriers for candidate success and providing intentional authentic field experiences. They are developed through collaborative partnerships between school districts and universities with shared responsibilities for recruiting, instruction, assessment, and developing social networks (Lemoine, McCormack, & Richardson, 2018). While there currently is not a universal model for GYO programs, they are distinguishable from traditional programs in the candidates that they recruit and the amount and types of support candidates receive from these programs (Muñiz, J., 2020).

### **Purpose**

Gray (2018) presented a research model of leadership preparation that includes early and continual field and experiential learning throughout coursework, coaching through practicum and internships, and mentoring through partnerships between universities and school districts. It is within this framework that the current study is situated. This study examines the benefits of the GYO model of principal preparation in comparison to traditional models from the perspective 13 candidates who are halfway through the program, 19 program alumni, and four school

district administrators who co-teach coursework with university faculty.

The GYO Principal Programs that are part of this study are collaborative partnerships between a mid-size private university in the south and five regional public school districts. The programs are characterized by field experiences that begin during the first course and continue throughout the program focused on the needs of specific schools within the district. Major program assessments involve action research and include practice with school budgets, evaluation of faculty and staff, and meeting diversity, equity, and inclusion needs of students, families and faculties. The programs include an internship and the option to receive temporary certification to work as a school principal while candidates are completing the program. In both instances, candidates are coached and mentored by both university faculty and administrators within their school district.

Data were collected from volunteers for the study using audio recorded, in-person focus groups. These focus groups were conducted at the regional sites where each GYO cohort met. The researcher who led each focus group was also the professor who had co-taught in that cohort and so was familiar to the participants. The focus group recordings were transcribed and responses across the regional sites were grouped by question. Responses from the regional sites were color-coded to facilitate the identification of any information unique to a site. This data was then analyzed to identify main ideas and then similar main ideas were grouped into themes. Throughout this process, quotations from participants were noted that were good illustrations of the identified themes.

A convergent parallel mixed methods approach was used with the results of the focus groups and the results of an online survey

completed by district administrators who served as adjunct instructors for the various cohorts (Creswell, 2014). This survey consisted of Likert-type and multiple-choice questions that allowed the respondent to, “Select all that apply”. The multiple-choice questions also contained an “Other” option that provided for an open-ended response. The quantitative survey data was analyzed descriptively using bar charts to show the frequency distribution of the possible responses to each question. Open-ended responses were analyzed in the same manner as the focus group data. A side-by-side comparison technique was then used with the focus group and survey data (Creswell, 2014).

## Results

Candidates found the field experiences and project-based learning relevant and enjoyable, and several reported having new understanding about why their principals made some decisions in the past that they didn’t agree with. One candidate said, “I feel like having been part of the GYO program makes it more relevant. We’re able to tailor the projects and assignments to be something that’s beneficial to our schools and our students whereas, I felt like in some of my other programs, I was just completing an assignment that was completely irrelevant to my students or my school in that week.” Another candidate said, “...I think just in general, all of the classes have forced me to look outside of just my department and expanded my view of what it means to be a teacher in the system and to see things from a principal’s point of view. I would wonder why the principal did things the way he did...Now I see that they are juggling a lot of things that as a classroom teacher I didn’t notice.”

Alumni commented about the relevance of the school-based projects that they completed through the program. One stated, “All of the school improvement projects that I did, I presented to the site based [council]. I

presented to the principal, you know a lot of things about math...the field experience and just the conversations helped me view things more from a school-wide perspective.” Another alumnus said, “...we got access to assignments that were built into what our district needs. It wasn’t a generic, ‘here is a blanket assignment.’ It was something that was going on in your district and [you] try to solve it as if you were an administrator. And that was appealing to me.” One hundred percent of participating adjunct faculty also reported that one of the benefits of the program was that the GYO model ensures that principals are intentionally prepared to meet needs specific to the school district in which they are prepared.

The study also found that candidates felt the program prepared them dispositionally for the role of principal in their schools. One alumnus commented, “One of the last things we talked about was dispositional hiring, there towards the end of our studies. That was something that helped me prepare, but that it also allowed me to go in and start revamping some of the things how we hired the rest of the summer.” Another alumnus stated, “It’s one thing to think that way; it’s another thing to act that way. So, it’s really this program, cohort, profession, really honed in on how to act that way. And I feel like I’ve got a good firsthand example of what that can look like and then how can I take that into the job I have and try my best to every day, walk in and serve others and lead by serving. So now, you know, in the books you wrote and then the things that we talked about, it provided us a good starting path to kind of jump into.” Several alumni specifically mentioned that the program prepared them to be servant leaders in their schools. “Servant leadership is... our job as principals, to support teachers so they can support our kids, and I feel like every class, you know, everything we did, helped us to be able to support teachers.”

Another finding of this study was how much candidates appreciated the community of practice into which they developed. An alumnus said, “I enjoyed the cohort very much because I was working with my peers, people that are working in the same district or a neighboring district, so we were dealing with generally the same population of kids. Things of that nature, we were able to bounce ideas off of each other. I thought it was much more beneficial to do it this way than being around a group of people from other districts that I don’t work with on an everyday basis. So, I thought we were able to talk about more relevant subjects.” A candidate observed, “And we also became invested in their lives, I feel like. I mean, it’s not just you’re registering for classes online and you don’t really know anybody in there. Over the course of a year and a half, we’ve all kind of got to know each other in some capacity and we want to help each other succeed. And we know we’re going to be with each other next semester, in the next course.”

## Discussion

It was no surprise that candidates and alumni found the field experiences and projects relevant as they were developed around the specific needs of their school districts; however, it was notable how many of the candidates and alumni also reported that they enjoyed this work. Wang, Gates, Herman, Mean, Perera, Tsai, Whipkey, & Andrew (2018) found that experiential and project-based learning were more “worthwhile” to the candidate (p. 30), citing projects aimed at school improvement, instructional leadership, and balancing the budget as examples. It could be that this perception of worthwhileness of the experiences led to feelings of enjoyment of the experiences themselves for the candidates in the program. In a study focused on the university classroom environment and creating communities of practice, Kapucu (2012) found that field-based experiences were ... the most

enjoyable segments of the class for students and contributed the most to their learning” (p. 604).

The candidates also reported feeling prepared with the dispositions needed to be servant leaders in their schools. This is in fact a goal of the program, the School of Education, and the university as a whole. Dispositions and content for the program are taught through the lens of leading by serving all stakeholders in the schools. Allen, Harper, and Koschoreck (2017), found that in a principal preparation program, dispositions can be influenced and even changed through a single course. In the GYO programs for the current study, servant leadership is the lens through which all instruction and assessment of content knowledge, skill, and dispositions occur.

Kapucu (2012) identified collaboration and learning as “mutually reinforcing phenomena” (p. 605). The collaborative action research projects and district specific location of the GYO programs contributed to not only feelings of camaraderie and belongingness, they also led to dynamic learning and creative problem solving.

### **Study Limitations**

Although 32 of the 37 candidates (86%) have participated in the GYO program and 4 of the 7 adjunct instructors (57%) joined in the study, the small number of individuals from which data could be collected is a limitation of the study. An additional limitation of the study is the dearth of previous studies about GYO programs to provide methodological direction and guidance regarding gaps in the literature in need of exploration. Lastly, the researchers have spent much time in the development and execution of the GYO program. This could have led to researcher bias.

The authors are presently in the process of further researching our newest GYO cohorts, expanding our interview questions and recording process. We invite other institutions to consider exploring the GYO model—as it aligns well with the most recent Wallace Foundation/Rand findings (which strongly support university/P-12 partnerships in training aspiring school principals).

We will also be in discussions with a neighboring state school, as it was a part of the seven-school consortium the Wallace Foundation funded and Rand studied in its research of university/P-12 principal preparation partnerships. As a result of that funding, we are a part of our state’s University Principal Preparation Initiative.

### **Implications**

In moving forward, further research on the Grow Your Own model is needed, with more university/school district partnerships exploring the concept. And, such partnerships are wise to take a closer look at the GYO template’s array of possibilities, which include:

- Hybrid, face to face, and online study
- Increased utilization of guest lecturer expertise
- Multi-district GYO cohorts
- Regional GYO cohorts
- Increased alignment with clinical internship experiences
- Utilizing the small group culture to increase attention on leadership dispositions
- New principal induction and mentoring via the GYO framework

### **Conclusion**

In training aspiring school principals, university/school district partnerships offer

much promise in better preparing the current and next generation of school leaders. Authentic project-driven course work, abundance of clinical experiences in the P-12 setting, personable and collegial partnership with cohort members within the school district, a dispositional bent focused on growing leaders and organizational health with an emphasis on a culture of care and effective school improvement, weekly access

to the expertise of current school leaders within the district, and access to university instructors who have served as past P-12 administrators create a learning community rich in depth of knowledge and leadership development--both through scholarship and the practitioner lens.

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