

WESTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY PRINCIPAL APPRENTICESHIP PROGRAM

GROWING LEADERS AT HOME

Background

Western Kentucky University (WKU) built its principal preparation model on a core premise: ***the people closest to the work should help shape how leaders are prepared.*** Since 2017, the university has regularly worked with district partners to understand what is and isn't working in its educator preparation programs, where candidates need more support, and how it can best respond to local schools' needs. The messages they received became increasingly consistent: aspiring principals needed stronger communication skills and, more fundamentally, more hands-on experience before they were expected to lead their own school.

This shift reflects a broader finding in the research on principal preparation. [A Wallace Foundation review](#) found that **fewer than half of aspiring principals with internships reported having opportunities to practice leadership skills and apply them in real-life situations.** [Earlier research on principal internships explains why.](#) Across a survey of university preparation programs, only about one-third required interns to take a leading role in activities such as evaluating instruction and developing assessments. Fewer than half provided a progression from observing to participating to leading essential elements of school improvement. These findings reinforce the need to build preparation around sustained opportunities for candidates to apply leadership in real school settings and build the professional judgment necessary for leadership.

District leaders saw an experiential gap: principal candidates learned about leadership and practiced responding to scenarios, but lacked authentic experience of how it plays out in practice. Districts consistently reported that the transition from preparation to the principalship was a significant leap and that experiential learning opportunities are necessary.

Developing authentic leadership experience and giving candidates opportunities to lead school improvement efforts are central to successful principalship. They reflect the competencies identified in both the [Professional Standards for Educational Leaders \(PSEL\)](#) and the [Pathways Alliance National Guideline Standards for Principal Apprenticeships](#). Grounded in these frameworks, WKU's Principal Apprenticeship program balances high standards for candidate mastery with the flexibility needed to respond to each district's unique local needs.

From District Need to Program Design

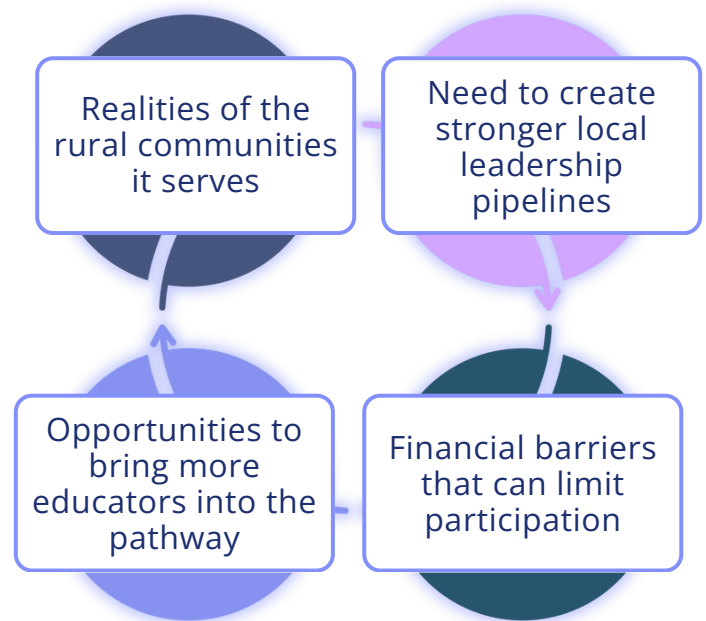
WKU had already begun shifting its teacher preparation program toward an apprenticeship model, making it easier to identify an alternative model for principal preparation. Inspired by this local program, faculty and district partners began learning about emerging principal apprenticeship programs, including models at [Austin Peay State University in Tennessee](#) and [North Dakota's Department of Public Instruction](#).

An Apprenticeship Building America grant from the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) provided an opportunity to put this idea into practice. The grant supported curriculum development and gave faculty the space to rethink preparation around experiential learning. The grant also allowed WKU to build on a need district leaders had already identified: applying skills in practice. Over several years, districts consistently told the university that aspiring principals needed stronger communication skills and more experience with the day-to-day work of school leadership. Those conversations shaped the program's design from the start. Districts helped WKU determine not only what candidates should learn, but how they could practice those skills while still working in their schools.

That district-driven approach continues throughout the program. **WKU designed the apprenticeship around several interconnected considerations:**

- The realities of the rural communities it serves,
- the need to create stronger local leadership pipelines,
- opportunities to bring more educators into the pathway, and
- the financial barriers that can limit participation

The team designed a model with shared expectations for what apprentices should learn, but enough flexibility for districts to determine what that learning looks like in practice.



Designing for Rural Districts

This flexibility was necessary since WKU serves both urban and rural districts, the majority being the latter. That meant designing for a region where many schools are small, several communities are rural, and districts often operate with considerably fewer resources than their larger counterparts.

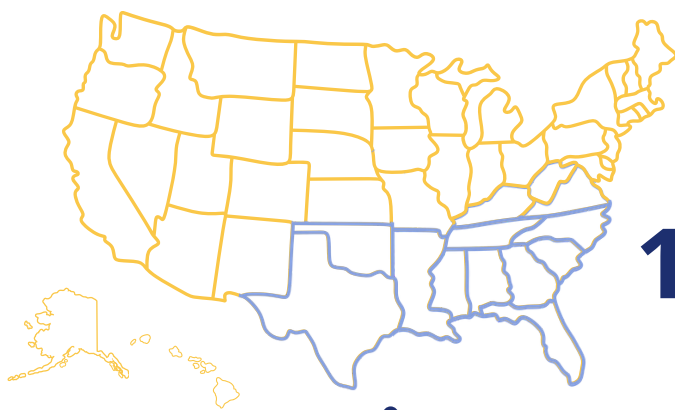
WKU currently works with 10 district partners. Fayette County, Daviess County, and Warren County are among Kentucky's largest districts. The remaining partners include groups of smaller districts that collaborate regionally in northwestern and southwestern Kentucky.

That mix of size and reach pushed WKU toward a model that can operate at different scales to meet each community's unique needs. A large district may have enough candidates and infrastructure to support its own apprenticeship activities. Meanwhile, smaller districts may need to collaborate with neighboring systems to build viable cohorts and give candidates meaningful leadership experience.

The model also reflects how educators build careers in their home communities. According to Dr. Marguerita DeSander, Associate Dean and Professor at WKU's School of Leadership and Professional Studies, teachers often remain in the district where they grew up, building professional relationships and community knowledge over many years. This creates an opportunity to develop school leadership within the local teacher workforce, rather than a pathway into a job elsewhere.

Local investment matters, especially when principal turnover can have consequences beyond the principal's office. **As Dr. DeSander put it, "When your top is churning, your bottom is churning."** Building a pipeline of educators who can move into leadership without leaving their communities offers an important way to maintain continuity in schools and keep experienced educators connected to the communities they serve. The program currently has 30 apprentices, with the first cohort of nine set to graduate in December 2026.

Preparing teachers from within a community to become its school leaders does more than fill an immediate vacancy. These candidates already understand the students, families, schools, and communities they serve, allowing districts to build leadership from within and strengthen a long-term local pipeline.



15% Average School Leader Attrition in the South (2023-2024 School Year)



[Southern Regional Education Board](https://www.sreb.org/)

Strengthening the Pipeline: Pre-Apprenticeships

Strengthening the pipeline requires broadening access to educators who might not otherwise consider school leadership. To create a larger pool of potential candidates, WKU created a flexible entry point through its pre-apprenticeship program, the [Level Up Leadership Academy \(LULA\)](#). Instead of having every candidate move through a rigid, one-size-fits-all timeline, LULA gives educators a low-risk opportunity to test the waters of leadership before committing to a full principal apprenticeship.

LULA is a pre-apprenticeship pathway for educators interested in school leadership but who may not yet be ready to enter the full principal apprenticeship. Candidates begin with six graduate credit hours through LULA, allowing them to develop leadership skills while gaining a clearer understanding of the principalship.

The model also creates a more accessible entry point into the pathway. Districts pay for one credit hour, while the program covers the remaining five hours. This reduces upfront costs for candidates, giving districts a way to identify and support potential leaders before they enter the apprenticeship. The combination of early exposure and lower cost creates another avenue for recruiting educators into the leadership pipeline, particularly in districts where the pool of prospective principals may be limited.

Making the Pathway Accessible

WKU didn't just restructure the program to prioritize experience; it prioritized what often dissuades educators and districts from this work – cost. WKU reduced graduate tuition for educator prep from roughly \$600 down to \$350 per credit hour to keep the program affordable. The university also matches district contributions up to one-third of total tuition, capping a candidate's out-of-pocket cost for a master's degree and principal certification at \$3,500. WKU funds these matches directly from its own revenue, a deliberate choice rooted in the belief that investing in local educators directly strengthens surrounding communities. Completing the LULA pre-apprenticeship lowers barriers even further, letting candidates enter the main program with six credits already earned.

Conclusion

WKU's approach starts with a straightforward idea: preparing principals well requires understanding the schools and communities they will lead, the barriers to entry, and the learning experiences that drive impact. Those ideas shaped the program from its earliest conversations with district partners to its design of the apprenticeship, pre-apprenticeship, and funding model. Candidates gain experience while continuing to work in their schools, districts can shape how the apprenticeship works locally, and lower costs make the pathway more accessible to educators who might otherwise be unable to pursue it.

These choices allow WKU to build its leadership pipeline around the educators and communities it serves. Rather than asking districts to adapt to a fixed preparation model, the apprenticeship lets them help shape how future leaders are prepared for the work they will actually do.