From Leadership Standards to Principal Apprenticeship: A Competency Crosswalk for States and EPPs

Introduction

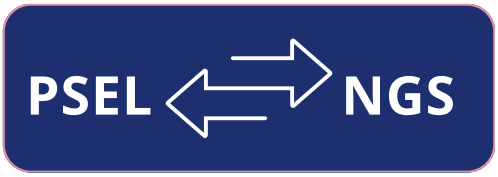
For states and Institutions of Higher Education (IHEs) with established principal preparation systems, building a Principal Registered Apprenticeship Program (PRAP) can be a matter of translation, rather than reinvention. Much of the existing preparation infrastructure and standards from a traditional principal preparation program can inform and carry over into an apprenticeship. Clinical experiences can provide the basis for paid on-the-job learning. Coursework can contribute to related technical instruction. Existing assessment and supervision processes can inform how apprentices develop and demonstrate competency.

Traditional principal preparation can present significant financial and pedagogical barriers for aspiring school leaders, including unpaid internships, high out-of-pocket costs, and a disconnect between academic experience and the day-to-day reality of leading a school. A PRAP can address these structural challenges while allowing states and Educator Preparation Programs (EPPs) to build on the leadership expectations and preparation systems they already use; they don't have to start from scratch.

The U.S. Department of Labor-approved Pathways Alliance National Guideline Standards (NGS) for Principal Apprenticeship Programs provide a framework for making that connection. The NGS uses the 10 standards outlined in the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL), a framework that guides principal preparation in many states. The NGS translates those standards and operationalizes them into specific work processes, related evidence of mastery, and roles for the employer, education provider, and mentor.

This resource outlines how PSEL-aligned programs can adapt into a PRAP without requiring programs to create an entirely new leadership framework. The result is an experience-centered preparation pathway allowing educators to enter the principalship with the skills, practical experience, and mentorship they need to lead schools effectively.

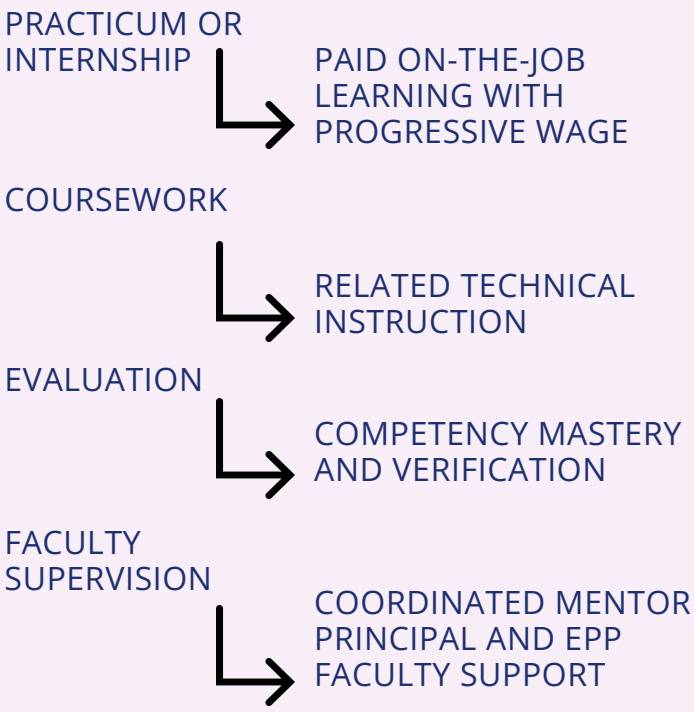
Mapping the PSEL onto the NGS



The NGS does not introduce a separate set of leadership standards for principal preparation. It carries the 10 PSEL standards into the apprenticeship framework, allowing states and EPPs to build on the leadership standards already embedded in their preparation programs. The difference lies in how the two frameworks use those standards. **PSEL defines the knowledge, skills, and dispositions principals need to demonstrate, while the NGS translates those expectations into the specific work an apprentice must demonstrate and the evidence they must produce to demonstrate competency (Appendix A).**

This distinction matters when you turn an academic preparation framework into a work-based training program. PSEL is research-backed and evidence-based, as well as a proven framework in the sector that establishes what effective school leadership looks like across areas such as curriculum and instruction, organizational management, and community engagement. The NGS connects those expectations to on-the-job training by identifying the work processes, time and competency expectations, and verification artifacts that allow an apprentice to develop and demonstrate those skills in practice.

TRANSLATING AN EXISTING PSEL-ALIGNED PROGRAM INTO AN NGS-ALIGNED APPRENTICESHIP



For example, Standard 4, Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment, carries the same language from PSEL into the NGS. The NGS operationalizes the standard: an apprentice must demonstrate competencies such as implementing coherent systems of curriculum, instruction, and assessment. This is done by using assessment data to monitor student progress, improve instruction, and promote instructional practices grounded in research and evidence. The mentor principal and supervising faculty evaluate the apprentice's performance and sign off when the apprentice demonstrates mastery. Here, the NGS moves the standard from a statement of what effective leaders should know into a competency the apprentice must demonstrate.

Standard 4: Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment

Effective educational leaders develop and support intellectually rigorous and coherent systems of curriculum, instruction, and assessment to promote each student's academic success and well-being.

The same idea applies across all 10 standards. The NGS connects each standard to a competency-based work process, requires at least 2,000 documented hours of on-the-job learning, and incorporates mentorship. As such, programs can retain the leadership framework they already use and include the work-based structure and documentation required for apprenticeship.

Adapting the Apprenticeship to Local Context

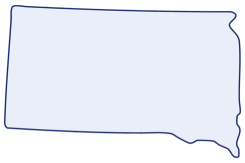
Alaska's PRAP shows how programs can use a common competency framework while adapting the apprenticeship to local conditions. In many rural and remote districts, assistant principal positions do not exist, so Alaska allows apprentices to remain in roles such as lead teacher or classroom teacher with structured leadership responsibilities and release time.



The NGS provides a framework for what apprentices must demonstrate, while states and districts can determine how those competencies are developed in ways that reflect their own unique communities and conditions. To learn more about how Alaska is adapting its PRAP model to its local context, read the Pathways Alliance Case Study.

Putting the PSEL-to-Apprenticeship Model Into Practice

This approach offers a useful example of the translation that the NGS now creates for other programs. North Dakota took the established PSEL framework and connected it directly to the work apprentices are expected to perform. PSEL provided the leadership expectations. Meanwhile, the apprenticeship program created a setting where an aspiring principal could practice them, receive feedback, and demonstrate proficiency.



North Dakota's Registered Principal Apprenticeship Program offers a concrete example of the PSEL-to-apprenticeship model. As the country's first PRAP, approved in July 2023 before the publication of the NGS, the state developed its program using the PSEL as the basis for its on-the-job competencies. Apprentices complete a state-approved related instructional partner program while working in paid assistant principal or similar roles, with a mentoring principal guiding apprentices as they develop and demonstrate their leadership competencies.

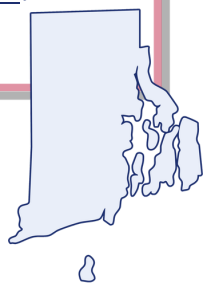
North Dakota's PRAP makes the connection between standards and apprenticeship tangible. A program does not need to develop a separate definition of what aspiring principals should know and be able to do. It can take the leadership standards already organizing its principal preparation program and determine how those expectations will be developed and demonstrated through the apprentice's work. The NGS provides a structure for making that connection within a registered apprenticeship, including the work progress, related instruction, mentorship, and verification of competencies.

Building on Existing Programs Aligned to State Standards

Tennessee and Rhode Island offer a complementary example of the same principle: both states built their PRAPs from existing preparation programs aligned to their own state leadership standards, and then incorporated the NGS into those established models. Their experience shows that translating a traditional principal preparation program into an apprenticeship isn't limited to programs built around PSEL.



To learn more about each program, read The Pathways Alliance Case Study on Tennessee's Principal Apprenticeship Program and Rhode Island's Principal Apprenticeship Program.



States can start with the leadership framework already embedded in their preparation system and align it to the NGS as they develop an apprenticeship. To learn more about each program, read The Pathways Alliance Case Study on Tennessee's Principal Apprenticeship Program and Rhode Island's Principal Apprenticeship Program.

Conclusion

The transition from traditional principal preparation to a PRAP represents an evolution of delivery, not a complete overhaul of standards. The NGS provides a clear translation mechanism for states and EPPs by bridging academic expectations with structured, paid on-the-job training. As demonstrated in states like Alaska, North Dakota, Tennessee, and Rhode Island, institutions don't need to invent new leadership frameworks from scratch; they can take the established standards they already trust and operationalize them into tangible, competency-based work processes.

Adapting traditional programs into registered apprenticeships can reduce financial barriers for aspiring leaders while giving them structured opportunities to build, document, and demonstrate leadership competency in the daily context of school leadership.

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