

RHODE ISLAND REGISTERED APPRENTICESHIP PRINCIPAL PROGRAM

BUILD UPON, NOT BUILD ANEW

"What our apprentices are sharing is that they are gaining practical experience in their role, they are feeling supported in their preparation and growth, and they are ready to step into leadership."

-Joe Pirraglia, Director of Principal Preparation Programs, Center for Leadership and Educational Equity (CLEE)

As districts across the country face persistent school leadership shortages, [Rhode Island developed an innovative pathway into leadership roles](#) by building on an existing leadership residency model. Through a partnership between the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE), the Center for Leadership and Educational Equity (CLEE), four local school districts, and workforce development partners, Rhode Island built its first Principal Registered Apprenticeship Program (PRAP). The program creates an opportunity for aspiring school leaders to become certified principals with structured support while serving in assistant principal roles.

Rhode Island districts have faced persistent school leadership shortages, a challenge that intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic as the national [principal turnover rate increased from 3% to 16%](#). Inspired by [North Dakota's Principal Apprenticeship Program](#), the first in the country, Rhode Island saw an opportunity to address these challenges while expanding access to leadership preparation.

Rather than creating a new program from scratch, Rhode Island built its Registered Apprenticeship Principal Program on [CLEE's Principal Residency Network \(PRN\)](#), which has prepared aspiring school leaders for more than 25 years. Because the residency already emphasized coaching, mentoring, and embedded, practice-based learning, the apprenticeship framework was a natural extension of the existing model rather than a fundamental redesign. By aligning the residency with registered apprenticeship, state leaders were able to connect high-quality principal preparation with workforce development strategies while reducing financial barriers for aspiring school leaders.

[Financial barriers and certification requirements](#) have made it difficult for many qualified educators to pursue school leadership roles, further limiting the pipeline of aspiring principals.

A group of stakeholders built and continues to sustain the partnership, each bringing their own expertise to the program. [RIDE](#) serves as the apprenticeship sponsor while CLEE provides the related technical instruction. [Building Futures Rhode Island](#), a workforce intermediary with expertise in registered apprenticeship, supports program registration, employer agreements, and technical assistance. The district partners include Providence Public Schools, Central Falls School District, Segue Institute for Learning, and RISE PREP Academies.



Core Components Sustaining the Leadership Pipeline

The Rhode Island Registered Apprenticeship Principal Program (RIRAPP) provides a clear example of how states can leverage existing preparation infrastructure, reduce financial barriers to leadership, and connect preparation directly to practice through an apprenticeship model. Together, these strategies help Rhode Island expand access to high-quality principal preparation.

- 1. Building on an established model:** The PRAP retains many core features of CLEE's existing residency program and allows apprentices to serve as assistant principals while they complete their certification.
- 2. Removing barriers to leadership:** Through funding from RIDE and support from the US Department of Labor, apprentices receive financial assistance covering tuition, books, and the cost of the licensure assessment. The state created a Registered Apprenticeship Preliminary Certificate that permits apprentices to serve in leadership roles while completing certification requirements. In exchange, apprentices commit to serving for three years as an education building administrator in Rhode Island upon graduation. The program is designed with the expectation that many apprentices will continue into leadership positions within the schools where they completed their apprenticeship, providing continuity for both schools and districts. According to Joe Pirraglia, Director of Principal Preparation Programs at CLEE, 80% of program graduates will remain in the same district where they served as apprentices in the 2025-2026 school year.
- 3. Connecting preparation to practice:** Rhode Island's apprenticeship model is grounded in the belief that aspiring principals learn best when preparation is directly connected to the daily work of school leadership. The 12-month program integrates coursework, coaching, mentoring, and on-the-job learning. Apprentices participate in peer learning sessions, individualized learning plans, and ongoing reflection tied to their leadership responsibilities.

Programmatic and Pedagogic Elements

The inaugural apprenticeship cohort launched during the 2025-2026 school year with five apprentices embedded within CLEE's larger residency program. Joining a broader cohort of 35 aspiring school leaders allows apprentices to benefit from both the individualized support of a small pilot program and the collaborative learning opportunities offered through a larger professional network.

Mentoring, a central component of the model, begins at the application process. Apprenticeship applicants apply with their supervising principal, who serves as both mentor and instructional partner throughout the program. Together, mentors and apprentices participate in six sessions during the school year and two during the summer, developing shared language and leadership frameworks.

“The principalship is one of the most complex and rewarding positions in education. How we prepare educators for it determines how well they continuously improve learning for students and support for educators and families. The best preparation involves real-life practice with skilled support from a mentor and a rigorous training program.”

-Donna Braun, Executive Director, CLEE

[State of Rhode Island Department of Education](#)

The program's competency framework was informed by the [National Guideline Standards \(NGS\) for Principal Apprenticeships](#) developed by the [Pathways Alliance Principal Working Group](#) and the [Rhode Island Standards for Educational Leadership](#). Program leaders found substantial overlap between the two sets of standards and focused their design efforts on translating broad leadership expectations into competencies that could be demonstrated and measured. This emphasis on applied learning helps ensure apprentices are not only studying leadership but also actively developing and demonstrating the skills required of effective principals.



Looking Ahead

As Rhode Island graduates its inaugural cohort of Principal Apprentices, state leaders are taking lessons from their pilot to strengthen their model. The next cohort has funding to expand from five to six positions, while the program is recruiting additional districts to participate. Their experiences with implementation also highlighted opportunities to align their admissions timelines with district hiring cycles to ensure aspiring leaders can move into assistant principal roles when vacancies are announced.

Building on over 25 years of experience-based school leadership preparation, Rhode Island continues to refine its program design in collaboration with its expert partners. As more states explore principal apprenticeships, Rhode Island offers an example of how to leverage existing principal preparation infrastructure to create high-quality apprenticeship pathways grounded in practice and responsive to workforce needs.

“This innovative approach creates a new, hands-on pathway to leadership that not only strengthens our schools but also opens the door for more diverse and locally rooted talent to rise into principal roles.”

-Matthew Weldon, Director, Rhode Island Department of Labor & Training

[State of Rhode Island Department of Education](#)