

NATIONAL GUIDELINES FOR APPRENTICESHIP STANDARDS K-12 PRINCIPAL OCCUPATION

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION FOR

PRINCIPAL APPRENTICESHIP PROGRAMS

OVERVIEW

There is growing momentum around using the apprenticeship model as an affordable, hands-on pathway into school leadership. Since 2023, several registered principal apprenticeships have been launched, and interest at the state level is increasing. As of May 2026, at least six states have built, or are building, principal apprenticeship programs. Moreover, there is broad federal support for expanding apprenticeships, with an Executive Order calling for a plan “to reach and surpass 1 million new active apprentices.”

To inform the development of new principal apprenticeship programs, the Pathways Alliance established a working group in May 2025 to develop National Guideline Standards (NGS) for K-12 Principal Apprenticeships. The goal of the NGS is to provide a high-quality framework for establishing registered apprenticeship programs, setting clear expectations for competencies, training, and mentorship—while allowing for local flexibility to meet unique needs. The NGS does not provide a one-size-fits-all approach, but rather a “customizable template” that allows for programmatic flexibility to account for local needs and requirements while ensuring core quality measures are met across states and programs.

Apprenticeship Terms

Apprentice = Principal Candidate

Journeyworker = Mentor Principal

On-the-job Learning (OJL) = Clinical Practice

Related Instruction =
Principal/School Leadership
Preparation Program Coursework

Work Process Schedule = Principal
Professional Standards (modeled on
the Professional Standards for
Educational Leaders)

Program Sponsor = The sponsor is responsible for the administration and operation of the Registered Apprenticeship. The sponsor may be an employer, an educational institution, a union, a government agency, or another entity.

Related Instruction Provider = Related instruction providers are colleges, universities, or other education providers that offer coursework to apprentices that leads to a recognized credential, such as a principal license.

Employer = The employer hires apprentices and pays their wages and, as applicable, benefits. In a principal apprenticeship, the employer is a local education agency.

The working group was co-chaired by the Learning Policy Institute and Arizona State University's Mary Lou Fulton College for Teaching and Learning Innovation. It included representatives from the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE), the Collaboration for Effective Educator Development, Accountability, and Reform (CEEDAR) Center, InnovateEDU, National Association of Elementary School Principals, National Association of Secondary School Principals, New Leaders, as well as several EPPs that are currently offering registered principal apprenticeship programs. The guidelines have been approved and published by the U.S. Department of Labor. This fact sheet summarizes key information from the NGS for principal preparation programs. Anyone interested in applying for a registered apprenticeship should read the [entire NGS](#).

DURATION OF THE APPRENTICESHIP

Appendix A of the NGS describes on-the-job learning (OJL) and related instruction. K-12 principal apprenticeships are classified as competency-based, so completion of the program is dependent on the apprentice demonstrating mastery of the competencies described in the Work Process Schedule. It is expected that apprentices will need at least one school year of full-time OJL to demonstrate these competencies. Based on this, the estimated program length is 2,000 hours of on-the-job learning. If a program is longer than one year, OJL may be part-time.

WORK PROCESS SCHEDULE

To demonstrate how a Work Process Schedule may be structured, Appendix A of the NGS is adapted from the widely used and industry-recognized [Professional Standards for Educational Leaders](#). Applicants may substitute other state or national standards. Program sponsors are responsible for ensuring that apprentices have the opportunity to practice and ultimately demonstrate mastery of the competencies. This includes ensuring that apprentices serve in schools led by experienced and accomplished mentor principals and that these schools have student populations reflective of the district's population, including students with disabilities and English language learners.

RELATED INSTRUCTION

The apprenticeship must include at least 144 total hours of related instruction. A three-credit, one-semester course typically requires three hours in class per week during a 15-week semester, or 45 total hours of class time. Related instruction is determined by one or more of the following:

- the apprentice's chosen degree program, field of study (e.g., school leadership), and the participating EPP's requirements;
- state requirements for approved principal preparation programs;
- state principal licensure requirements;
- coursework already completed by the apprentice and accepted for transfer;
- credit provided to the apprentice for previous work experience.

Regardless of the type of degree to be awarded, OJL and related instruction are designed to be interdependent and complementary. The employer and EPP should work in partnership to co-construct the apprenticeship experience so that OJL and related instruction are mutually reinforcing.

PROGRAM ADMISSION

Apprentices must meet hiring and admission requirements established by the employer and EPP. Program sponsors—in collaboration with employers and EPPs—must seek to recruit apprentices who reflect the local community. At a minimum, apprentices must hold at least a bachelor's degree, full state certification or licensure as a K-12 teacher or Pupil Personnel Service provider (or other state-designated titles), and have at least 3 years of experience serving in a K-12 teacher or PPS role at the time of entry into the program.

The selection process should also include a process for the employer and EPP to ensure an appropriate match between apprentices and mentor principals, such as an interview, and consider a match based on expertise (e.g., particular skills, school level), disposition (e.g., empathy), and availability (e.g., location). Selection processes for mentor principals should consider experience (3 years of successful principal experience preferred), a track record of effectiveness as a principal, and strong interpersonal skills.

APPRENTICE ROLES

Principal apprentices may serve in a range of roles while participating in the apprenticeship, provided appropriate release time is provided and/or the role is structured to allow for the development of the competencies outlined in the Work Process Schedule. Examples of potential roles for principal apprenticeships include: assistant or vice principal, dean, director of special education, director of English Learners, or instructional coach. Apprentices may not serve as the principal of record.

The NGS encourages recruiting current classroom teachers into the apprenticeship and transitioning them to new roles (including potentially a teacher on special assignment). However, the NGS recommends against placing current full-time classroom teachers in a principal apprenticeship because they would need substantial release time built into their daily schedule to support progress towards the minimum 2,000 hours they will need to successfully develop and demonstrate the required competencies outlined in the Work Process Schedule.

PROGRAM WAGES AND COSTS

Apprentices must be paid a progressively increasing wage. The NGS outlines a set of principles to guide decision-making while preserving local flexibility and provides three examples of progressive wage schedules. A key principle is that no current employees should have their salaries reduced as a result of entering the principal apprenticeship program. Apprentice pay is based on a percentage of the estimated national average salary for beginning principals. The NGS does not specify how the cost of related instruction is paid. However, principal apprenticeship programs typically use a combination of financial aid, institutional funds, and apprenticeship funding—including federal and state grants—to defray all or most of the cost of attendance.

Within this basic framework, and consistent with the NGS, EPPs and their K-12 partners have the flexibility to design programs to meet local needs.