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Principals on the path to excellence: Longitudinal, multisite cluster-randomized controlled trials of the National Institute for School Leadership's Executive Development Program



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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a research protocol for three longitudinal, multisite cluster-randomized controlled trials of the National Institute for School Leadership's Executive Development Program. This program is a comprehensive professional development initiative designed to improve leadership knowledge and skills of school principals across the United States. Through classroom instruction, simulations, interactive online sharing of ideas, and other resources, this program provides for a yearlong, cohort-based professional development program. To measure the effects of the program and coaching, longitudinal, multisite cluster-randomized trials (MSCRT) will be conducted in three states involving 270 schools to estimate the impact of principal access to the program and coaching on such relevant outcomes as student achievement, principal leadership skills, school climate, and teaching conditions.

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1. Intervention background

The intervention for this study is the National Institute for School Leadership's (NISL) Executive Development Program (EDP) with ongoing coaching. This program is a comprehensive professional development initiative designed to improve leadership knowledge and skills of school principals across the United States. Through classroom instruction, simulations, interactive online sharing of ideas, and other resources, the EDP provides for a yearlong, cohort-based professional development program that includes four courses and 12 units.

The EDP is the culmination of a 4-year, \$11 million research and development initiative undertaken by the National Center on Education and the Economy, NISL's parent company, with strong philanthropic support from Carnegie Corporation of New York, The Broad Foundation, New Schools Venture Fund, and the Stupski Foundation. The research and development effort included benchmarking the best educational leadership development practices worldwide and identifying the best adult learning methods and strategies used in business, medicine, law, education, and the military.

Leadership development approaches that were culled from international best practices, leading professions, and the military now permeate the EDP. The program offers sustained, cohort-based, job-embedded, and applied learning, using a blended learning model of face-to-face and technology-enhanced learning, such as video interviews from leading educators, case studies, best practice videos, game playing, simulations, and online journaling.

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In 2005, after a pilot of the EDP, the National Center on Education and the Economy launched the NISL to manage the implementation and scale-up of the program. NISL's proven train-the-trainer model, in which state and district leaders are fully trained in the EDP and certified as facilitators to deliver the program with fidelity, builds state and district capacity to take ownership of the training at a cost that is affordable and sustainable. More than 8000 school leaders in more than 20 states have successfully completed the program.

The EDP is closely aligned with the most current and highly regarded standards for high-performing principals, including the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium Standards ([Council of Chief State School Officers, 2008](#)) and Public Impact's competencies for turnaround leaders ([Public Impact, 2008](#)). NISL updated the EDP in 2010 and again in 2013 to incorporate the latest research and align with the Common Core State Standards. However, the key building blocks of the EDP—educational best practices, instructional leadership skills, subject-area knowledge, and dynamic adult pedagogy—have remained intact.

In terms of prior empirical investigations into the overall program's efficacy, several key research projects have been conducted thus far ([Corcoran, Reilly, & Ross, 2015a, 2015b](#); [Nunnery, Ross, Chappell Moots, Pribesh, & Hoag-Carhart, 2011](#); [Nunnery, Yen, & Ross, 2011](#)). First, NISL has been running a successful state-wide novice principal program for the past 6 years in Pennsylvania and has already demonstrated its positive impact on student achievement. Since 2008, Pennsylvania law has required all novice principals to complete a rigorous leadership development program. The only program that qualifies to meet this requirement for state funding is the EDP. Independent researchers evaluated the Pennsylvania EDP implementation ([Nunnery, Yen et al., 2011](#)) and found statistically significant gains in student learning in English Language Arts (ELA) and mathematics, as measured by state test scores. The effect sizes were 0.08 and 0.07 in ELA and math, respectively. This finding translates to roughly one to two months of additional learning, on average, for the 57,000 students in 101 Pennsylvania treatment schools. Another way to measure student learning is state proficiency. In the Pennsylvania study, researchers found that 2.16% more students achieved ELA proficiency in treatment schools than otherwise would be expected, and 1.92% more did so in math. This finding translated to 1225 more proficient students in ELA and 1089 more proficient students in math.

NISL also has run a statewide leadership development program in Massachusetts since 2006. Whereas the Pennsylvania project focuses on novice principals across all schools, the Massachusetts project focuses on all principals in high-need schools, including novice principals. Researchers evaluated the results of the second round of training ([Nunnery, Ross et al., 2011](#)) and found a statistically significant impact on student achievement in both ELA and math. The effect sizes were 0.11 in ELA and 0.14 in math for the 21,000 students in 38 Massachusetts treatment schools (average poverty level of 69%).

Finally, one study identified seven exemplar leadership training programs ([Cheney, Davis, Garrett, & Holleran 2010](#)), which all cost between \$100,000–\$200,000 per graduate. The EDP has produced better student achievement results than have all seven programs for an average of \$10,000–\$25,000 per graduate (depending on implementation design). This result makes this project particularly important: it will test whether a different approach to school leadership produces stronger results for a fraction of the investment.

2. Confidentiality protection

The outlined study, *Principals on the Path to Excellence: a validation study of the National Institute for School Leadership Executive Development Program*, was submitted by the principal investigator (Dr. Corcoran), has been reviewed and approved by the JHU Homewood Institutional Review Board (IRB; Protocol/FSA Number: HIRB00002940). As such, the procedures and methods utilized by this project meet the federal regulatory standards of the United States Department of Health and Human Services Office for Human Research Protections.

Further district-level research approvals mandated in certain participating districts have also been submitted and were approved. As such, the following IRB-approved procedures will be utilized to protect the confidentiality of data.

Assessment data and demographic information, focus group comments, interviews, surveys, and other materials collected from participants will be maintained by researchers in coded form (names and other identifiers will be replaced by a code number), stored electronically, and password protected. Participant names will be maintained in a separate codebook, with access limited to research personnel, and it will be password protected. Access to the electronic folder where all data are stored is limited to research personnel via their individual log-in and password, in addition to the password protection applied to individual electronic folders. All computers used by research personnel are subject to security safeguards, including antivirus controls, malware protection, firewall configuration, and scheduled automatic backups. Hard copies of all de-identified data will be kept in a locked file cabinet in a secured office.

Further, the research team made up of researchers from JHU and NISL will be responsible for the collection and storage of data. Only this research team will have access to the research data. Data will be stored in secure, password-protected computers housed at JHU.

Based on Homewood IRB research protocol, all data will be kept for 3 years following the completion of the study, or until all research participants reach adulthood (18 years of age).

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