

Leadership Preparation for Social Change: Creating a Continuum of Support

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About EdPrepLab

EdPrepLab is an initiative of the Learning Policy Institute and Bank Street Graduate School of Education. EdPrepLab supports preparation programs that are equity-focused, student-centered, and grounded in the science of learning and development. EdPrepLab seeks to expand these approaches systemwide through research, the dissemination of high-leverage practices, and policy.

About This Brief

This practice brief describes a new approach to education leadership development at the University of California, Berkeley (UC Berkeley) that emphasizes anti-racist leadership practices for a continuum of teacher leaders to system leaders, thus creating immediate change in classrooms and schools while offering pathways for the recruitment and retention of additional justice-oriented leaders.

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A Continuum Approach to Leadership Development

The Leadership Programs at UC Berkeley's School of Education are highly recognized for their success in preparing effective, equity-conscious site- and system-level leaders. After 20 years of operation, over 600 ethno-racially diverse Berkeley alumni have gone on to serve in various leadership roles across the San Francisco Bay Area and beyond. Yet despite alumni reporting that they feel exceptionally prepared upon graduation, alumni surveys also reveal an ongoing need for professional learning and support. University partners can help fill this gap, creating a new opportunity to have a large-scale impact on schools and school systems. Doing so requires a rethinking of leader preparation beyond traditional, time-bound, degree- and credential-earning programs. Accepting this challenge, UC Berkeley Leadership Programs have invested in building a continuum of support for educational leaders. Through creative, flexible programming that spans teacher leaders to system leaders, this continuum focuses on developing the collectivist, explicitly anti-racist leadership practices needed to lead complex public schools and education systems toward a more just future.

The goal of embracing a continuum approach to leader preparation and support is twofold. While creating immediate change in classrooms and schools, the continuum also offers pathways for the recruitment and retention of additional justice-oriented leaders. This is particularly important to support a workforce representative of individuals whose communities or identities have been systematically excluded from formal leadership. Focusing on the varied needs of early-career and experienced practicing leaders

allows the Leadership Programs to offer targeted capacity building while also creating space to strengthen the overall resilience of educational leaders. It is more critical than ever to mitigate work-related stressors and offer hope and connections as leaders navigate the new challenges presented during and through the pandemic. The opportunity for UC Berkeley to engage with leaders during multiple years and in multiple spaces directly addresses these needs. As a practicing leader participating in a post-preparation continuum offering put it, “I sincerely didn’t know if I was going to make it through the school year. It was that hard. [This learning community] has been invaluable.”

This practice brief will describe UC Berkeley’s vision for anti-racist educational leadership and the four essential elements that help match this vision with action: (1) the vertical continuum that spans in-classroom teacher leaders through executive-level system leaders, (2) the horizontal continuum that allows for differentiated supports at any one point in a leader’s career, (3) the ways in which the continuum serves to impact the field as a whole, and (4) the strategies used to operationalize this approach.

UC Berkeley’s Vision of Change: Preparing Anti-racist Leaders

For the past 2 decades, UC Berkeley’s Leadership Programs have sought to prepare educational leaders for the social justice imperative of pursuing leadership positions in highly inequitable California schools. Doing so requires programs to do far more than offer an “exclusively intellectual endeavor.”¹ Instead, programs must create a comprehensive approach to anti-racist preparation—one that is inclusive of their course content selection, pedagogical choices, fieldwork relevance, and the experience of educational leadership learners, particularly those least well-served by traditional graduate programs.² Researchers Michael Dantley and Linda Tillman summarize what is required of such leaders in five characteristics:

1. A consciousness of the broader social, cultural, and political contexts of schools
2. The critique of the marginalizing behaviors and predispositions of schools and their leadership
3. A commitment to the more genuine enactment of democratic principles in schools
4. A moral obligation to articulate a counter-hegemonic vision or narrative of hope regarding education
5. A determination to move from rhetoric to civil rights activism³

UC Berkeley's comprehensive approach infuses critical perspectives with meaningful praxis, offers concrete theory-to-practice connections, and builds in opportunities for personal transformation. The approach asserts that to be a successful graduate means to be a leader who possesses the skills and disposition to interrupt oppression and the critical resilience to persist in that effort. Particularly when layered with the other requirements a successful administrative preparation program must attend to, developing anti-racist leadership is a venture that takes time and requires differentiated pathways and supports to address the individual needs of diverse leaders. As such, a continuum of preparation that recasts leadership preparation as a career-long endeavor provides both the breadth and the depth required to bring the vision of anti-racist leadership to enough schools and communities to have a statewide impact on the field.

Supporting Leaders at All Levels: The Continuum's Vertical Dimension

The vertical dimension is a design feature of the Leadership Programs' continuum of support and ensures that leaders at all levels have access to continuous professional learning. The Leadership Programs offer a variety of engagement opportunities, beginning with the often-undervalued and underprepared teacher and practitioner leaders whose tireless efforts keep our complex school systems functioning. Included in this group are those who aspire to eventually embark on a journey of formal leader preparation and those who have chosen to continue leading from the classroom, the counselor's office, or the nurse's station. Though engagement begins at this level, it persists to follow educational leaders throughout the duration of their careers, including at the highest levels of system leadership. Recognizing the opportunity to attend to the developmental needs of leaders across career stages—and operating from the assertion that social justice advocacy can occur from any seat in the school building⁴—the vertical nature of the continuum ensures that early-career and experienced practicing leaders alike have access to high-quality professional learning to address the various demands related to their particular positionality.

Support for Teacher Leaders: Early-career teacher leaders benefit from opportunities to envision how to engage in leadership and have an impact on issues of equity beyond the four walls of their classrooms. Most educators spend their days in relative isolation. The opportunity to think and operate from a schoolwide, systemic perspective is invaluable. In fact, one of the most challenging aspects of leadership development for some candidates is making the transition from a teacher identity to an administrator identity. Offering support systems for potential future preparation program participants provides a longer on-ramp to school leadership and aids in the transition from engaging in classroom-level advocacy to

shifting an entire school's adult practice in service of equity. A continuum approach designed to target the needs of teacher leaders also helps to diversify the pool of candidates who pursue administrative credentials. Given the great need to increase the number of leaders of color, women leaders, and those from similar socioeconomic backgrounds as the students they serve, attracting and cultivating diverse prospective leaders is critical to the mission of the Leadership Programs. Half of the teacher leaders who participated in the continuum of support prior to becoming administrative credential candidates in UC Berkeley's Principal Leadership Institute identify as women, 67% identify as leaders of color, and close to 40% identify as African American/Black.

To support the development of teacher leaders, the Leadership Programs offer a variety of early-career courses and services. Teacher leaders can choose courses from several different thematic categories, such as designing professional learning, utilizing data to improve practice, or developing themselves as equity-focused instructional coaches. For those wishing to develop fluency with a particular skill, multiple courses are offered within each theme. Those wanting to bundle even more professional learning opportunities together may choose to enroll in a yearlong certificate program in social justice teacher leadership. The certificate allows access to the various thematic offerings while also including foundational courses through a cohort model to support teachers in examining issues of identity in teacher leadership and developing their leadership stances. Rounding out these teacher leader offerings, the Leadership Programs coaching model supports those participants with individualized goals by pairing them with experienced coaches capable of accompanying them on their leadership journeys. Given that trust is the foundation of effective leadership coaching, coaches often continue serving these leaders throughout their enrollment in the continuum of offerings, including during their preparation and induction.

Support for Practicing Leaders: The UC Berkeley Principal Leadership Institute prepares aspiring school leaders in an intensive, cohort-based degree program lasting 14 months that includes fieldwork and leadership coaching. The corresponding induction program serves newly hired administrators for 2 additional years, again with comprehensive leadership coaching. Yet even after completing a rigorous, equity-focused preparation and induction program, novice leaders have a need for ongoing systems of support. Novice site leaders hold responsibility for the physical safety and emotional well-being of staff and students, on top of their instructional leadership responsibilities. The demands of school leadership, which have been amplified by the COVID-19 pandemic and the increasing reckoning of unmitigated racial harm in the United States, require that even the most well-prepared new leader seek out additional systems of support.

The Leadership Programs have found that many alumni express interest in continuing to receive 1:1 coaching support, which is an integral part of their 3-year preparation and induction experience. The relationships that candidates develop with their leadership coaches, and the coaches' deep contextual knowledge, can extend critical support for alumni working to interrupt pervasive patterns of inequity in practice. UC Berkeley's Leadership Programs offer alumni the option to extend their existing coaching relationships through district and individual coaching contracts to continue to receive individualized support as they navigate the unpredictable waters of site leadership. As an alumna receiving ongoing coaching services put it, "My coach is my accountability system. They know me and what I believe, and they support me in doing work that I can be proud of, even when there are external messages telling me to maintain the status quo." Coaching is also available for those transitioning to system leadership, including the Executive Coaching Initiative, which is designed to support equity-conscious novice superintendents and other cabinet-level system leaders.

In addition to contract coaching, Leadership Programs alumni are invited to participate in a host of communities of practice designed to support in-service administrators. Community of practice offerings are multi-session, cohort engagements designed around topics of interest, such as trauma-informed leadership, equitable master scheduling, and groups focused on leader resilience and well-being, as well as groups designed for specific populations, such as special education system leaders or affinity-based offerings for leaders of color or those who share other social identities. These targeted communities of practice offer leaders specialized support to grapple with systemic oppression and racialized challenges of working as an underrepresented leader.

Differentiated Supports: The Continuum's Horizontal Dimension

The previously described vertical dimension of the continuum allows the Leadership Programs to meet leaders where they are along their career trajectories, from the classroom to the boardroom. Of equal importance, regardless of which career stage leaders are in, is the recognition that their needs are not universal. Differentiating supports at any given point along the continuum ensures individual leaders' continued growth and development. For instance, some teacher leaders may feel energized and supported by the ability to take one or more professional learning courses through UC Berkeley, whereas others benefit from individualized coaching to help them transfer the lessons they are learning in the group setting to practice. The ability to "stack" multiple options atop others allows for a high level of responsiveness and individualization. Similarly, while many enrolled administrative credential students find that the intensive coursework more than meets their needs and time capacities,

there are those for whom additional wraparound supports are best. Regardless of leaders' chronological placement along the vertical continuum, a horizontal dimension of support fulfills the Leadership Programs' commitment to inclusivity and contributes to many leaders' senses of belonging and self-efficacy.

UC Berkeley's degree-earning programs have long utilized differentiated supports to meet the needs of individual students or student groups, translating into an on-time graduation rate upward of 98%, according to 2019 UC Berkeley Principal Leadership Institute program evaluation data. Infusing this approach across the expanded continuum allows for similarly high levels of success for leaders at various points in their careers. An example of such an offering is the African American Male Leader Network, a monthly community of practice available to any leaders identifying as men of African descent, regardless of their current positions on the vertical continuum. The network provides one of few opportunities African American male leaders have to seek the counsel and camaraderie of others with shared identities and lived experiences in a field dominated by white women. Participants have reported that the network is a critical "lifeline" in their success, satisfaction with, and retention as leaders. One participant said, "The collective genius, the group think, the shared free game ... that kind of brotherhood ... it gets no better. It's an exhalation and also a deep breath where you are bringing back in 10 times more than what you put into it."

Another horizontal continuum offering focused on mitigating work-related stressors is Change Makers, a community of practice that centers leader wellness and resilience. Through monthly group engagements and frequent check-ins among individual members of the group, the Change Makers group fosters a space for leaders to reflect with vulnerability and courage on their experiences in the field. Through reflective journal writing and sharing of that writing, facilitated dialogue, mindfulness practices, art-based exercises, and professional reading, the Change Makers group offers principals a collective space to grapple with the myriad challenges they face as educational leaders for equity.

As with the vertical continuum, this horizontal continuum supports the recruitment, retention, and reinforcement of leaders who have been historically excluded from opportunity due to race, class, gender, or other social identities. Access to multiple services or offerings at any one time provides a range of supports to help leaders persevere through complex challenges. This menu approach helps promote sustainable leadership by intentionally wrapping around individual leaders' unique constellation of goals and needs with tailored, just-right supports. One leader served through multiple offerings remarked, "It makes you feel like you can get through it in a way that you didn't know if you could before."

Supporting and Impacting the Larger Field

Beyond the obvious benefit of developing a pipeline of prospective leadership preparation students and continuing to support these same students once they become alumni, the continuum approach has the potential to impact leadership preparation and development across the broader field of education. Leaders in surrounding school districts and beyond are invited to participate in communities of practice, affinity-based spaces, webinars, and workshops designed to help build their networks of support and to encourage reflective practice and collective problem-solving through thought partnership with cross-organizational colleagues.

This inclusiveness and willingness to partner with multiple districts allow the Leadership Programs to be nimble and responsive to the needs of the leaders working in various contexts. As a result of long-standing partnerships with local districts, the Leadership Programs are able to understand district needs and design professional learning to match. Whether it is helping a district enact a strategic plan focused on math achievement or assisting common needs, such as addressing the challenges of reopening schools after COVID-related closures, the Leadership Programs serve as a hub of resources relevant to the immediate needs of leaders working toward equitable outcomes for youth.

Far from a stand-alone service, this engagement with the field can also be generative in expanding the reach of Leadership Programs alumni. Considering that 50% of alumni work in local partner districts, inviting their colleagues and collaborators to join mission-aligned workshops, communities of practice, and webinars can serve to amplify their equity-focused efforts by creating a common language, a shared vision, and consistent strategies. In this way, the Leadership Programs' continuum of support contributes to a growing network of like-minded leaders both within and across districts, all working to advance equity and social justice.

Operationalizing the Continuum Approach

Cost is one of the biggest barriers to engaging educators in meaningful leadership development. To be committed to such work requires an equal commitment to finding strategies to make offerings affordable to public school educators. To this end, the Leadership Programs are purposeful in utilizing a braided funding approach to seam together funds that lower or eliminate participant cost when possible. These strategies include the following:

- Seeking partnerships with mission-aligned foundations and other grant-makers dedicated to promoting sustainable, equity-centered educational leadership. For

example, the Change Makers project was initially funded through the generous support of the Stuart Foundation, and—if eligible—leaders interested in individualized coaching may receive the service for free through the 21st Century California School Leadership Academy's Alameda Regional Academy, which is managed by UC Berkeley.

- Identifying opportunities to offer scholarships or financial sponsorships for eligible participants, including by leveraging other available resource pools at the university. For instance, many participants in various teacher leadership offerings are eligible for financial sponsorship if they work in eligible Title II schools. Likewise, some district system leaders—including alumni of the Leadership Programs—offer district-specific scholarships to local leaders to enable them to participate in Leadership Program offerings and return lessons learned back to the district.
- Staying connected with partnering districts in which multiple alumni are employed to understand their needs and goals and creating customized programs to target these different districts' needs. Such conversations have led to the creation of networks of leaders of color for both classified and certificated leaders in one of UC Berkeley's partnering districts. Simultaneously, many districts invest in ongoing coaching for leaders, ensuring they have opportunities for individual thought partnership and support by the Leadership Programs' skilled cadre of social justice coaches.

While not enough, such strategies help to mitigate the financial impact on educational leaders, enabling them to participate in and benefit from much-needed professional learning and support.

Conclusion

The current state of our education system necessitates leaders willing to work across levels and silos to transform unjust systems and find innovative solutions to ever-expanding challenges. The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed widening gaps in services and outcomes that have intensified the responsibilities that leaders must bear. These challenges do not exist within a vacuum, contributing instead to existing concerns about leader recruitment, preparation, and retention. To make good on their promises to develop and support the transformative leaders that students and communities deserve, educational leadership programs must grow to match the amplified need. To realize their ambitions for change, they must invest in the structures that can enable such change to take root.

The UC Berkeley School of Education's continuum approach to leadership development is one such effort. This approach enables teacher, site, and system leaders to engage in ongoing, often-overlapping communities of practice, coaching, affinity groups, and anti-

racist content through workshops and webinars aimed at affirming their commitment to social justice leadership. The approach is predicated on the belief that transforming schools requires a robust continuum of support that extends from teacher leaders to system leaders and addresses the requisite skills, habits, and dispositions to effect and sustain change. It challenges us to reconceptualize leadership development as an ongoing endeavor rather than as a time-bound degree or credential-earning program. By designing multiple pathways for support to include as many actors as possible, this model creates the conditions under which schools and systems can realign toward equity.

Endnotes

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