

National Association of State Boards of Education

→ States Start Up Registered Principal Apprenticeships

By Shyla Lensing

A handful of states have been launching federally registered apprenticeships to better prepare new principals, remove barriers to entering the profession, and combat turnover. More states may do so soon. In December 2025, the US Department of Labor (DOL), approved National Guideline Standards for the K-12 Principal occupation, which is expected to streamline the process for states to submit applications for their own registered apprenticeships.¹

Submitted to DOL by the National Center for Grow Your Own on behalf of the North Dakota Department of Public Instruction, the guidelines can inform state boards of education as they seek to bolster their principal pipelines and develop their own apprenticeship programs.

According to the RAND Corporation, principal turnover hit 8 percent in the 2023–24 school year. While a significant decline from the 16 percent rate in 2021–22, it still exceeds pre-pandemic levels,² and it remains of greatest concern in underresourced districts.³ The National Center for Education Statistics found that principals who leave the profession are more likely to have led schools serving students of color and students from low-income families.⁴ This turnover is associated with a significant decrease in student test scores across grade levels and subjects, and that relationship is stronger in high-poverty, low-achieving schools.⁵ Principals who leave most frequently cite a lack of preparation and professional development as reasons.

Conversely, principal retention is often associated with high-quality preparation

programs that carefully select and deeply prepare principals.⁶ Effective principals are also most likely to retain high-quality teachers, as teachers' perceptions of their schools' leaders factor heavily in their decisions to remain at a school. School leaders also help to build more productive school environments in general.⁷

BARRIERS TO THE PRINCIPALSHIP

Demands on time and the costs of certification often discourage potential candidates. "When we talk to superintendents, they would always say, 'Every time I have a principal job opening, I have the same 10 or 15 people applying for it. Don't you think I would have hired one of them by now if I thought they were any good?'" said David Donaldson, founder of the National Center for Grow Your Own. "'Who I want is the third grade teacher who's been here for 12 years [and] has the respect of her peers, but because we don't pay teachers enough, she's still paying off her student loans and ... not willing to go back to school to get a master's in school leadership.'

States and districts have created school leadership preparation academies, principal standards, and on-the-job opportunities to sustain and engage high-quality leaders.⁸ But registered apprenticeships are a newer approach. Validated by DOL and state apprenticeship agencies, the apprenticeships offer candidates paid, on-the-job experience as assistant principals while they complete coursework through a state-approved educator preparation program, certification, and licensure.⁹

Tennessee proposed the first educator apprenticeship model for teachers that DOL approved in January 2022. Such programs are now in 30-plus states and have opened

doors for thousands of aspiring educators, according to the National Center for Grow Your Own. Building from that model, DOL approved the Principal Registered Apprenticeship Program in July 2023 at the request of leaders and stakeholders in North Dakota and nationally.

The principal apprenticeship emerged naturally from discussions about teacher apprentices, Donaldson said. "We started considering, Why does anyone leave a job? They leave because of who they work for," he said. "So if we're going to invest all this time, effort, and money into teacher registered apprenticeship, but they [do not] work for ... a good leader, then what are we doing here?" adding, "Let's also develop high-quality school leaders via registered apprenticeships because they have a great impact on schools. But they're also talent magnets, attracting and keeping the great teachers who are there as well."

These apprenticeships "are really looking internally at who in our district we can nurture, who are aspiring great leaders, and how we can help them along the way so that we can then keep them within our district and community in a different capacity," said Laurie Matzke, chief of program development and growth at North Dakota's Department of Public Instruction.

LEADING STATES

A DOL grant program offers about \$2,000 to \$6,000 per apprentice to qualifying educator preparation programs.¹⁰ Such funding streams can help surmount financial and administrative barriers for states, programs, districts, and candidates. States such as North Dakota, Virginia, and Alaska have received DOL grants to begin their programs.

North Dakota. The success of the teacher apprenticeship model, a shortage of quality principals, and the emergence of digital learning motivated the state to become the first to seek a federally supported principal apprenticeship program, Matzke said. Two cohorts have begun the program since 2023.

In its first year, the state agency partnered with North Dakota State University (NDSU) and three districts. NDSU offered aspiring candidates master's degrees tuition free and the state-required Level 1 Professional Principal Credential.

In 2024–25, the University of North Dakota and four more districts participated. “They had 100 percent completion of the participants, a 3.95 grade point average, and 80 percent placement into school leadership positions,” Matzke said.

Matzke recommends that other states delineate partners’ roles clearly and find sustainable funding sources for crucial parts of the program: the “three doses” of mentorship and support that their candidates received, university support, and a residency coach.

Virginia. Through its State Apprenticeship Expansion funding grant, DOL awarded the Virginia Department of Education \$510,000 in September 2025 to launch a pilot program for 37 apprentices at six educator preparation programs in partnership with 17 school divisions. The funding allows candidates to earn their master’s degrees or certificates with licensure, to be endorsed no later than June 30, 2027.

Willis Walter, dean of the Virginia State University’s College of Education and Melissa M. Johnson, program coordinator for the graduate certificate for educational leadership and supervision, saw the grant as an opportunity to strengthen school leadership pipelines they had already built with support from the Wallace Foundation.¹¹

The university worked with the state to redesign parts of their program, using field assignments to concurrently fulfill the 320 required internship hours while not overwhelming candidates who were already in other school roles. Field assignments encompassed more than administrative tasks; they had to include impactful learning about what makes a quality principal.

“We’re hoping that this [apprenticeship program] sparks interest in other teachers who have the desire to become administrators but don’t want to take on the additional

burden of financing it,” Johnson said. “It’s a win-win situation, where they are getting the on-the-job experience while still receiving their certificate and paycheck.”

Walter hopes funding continues. “If you really want continuity and improving schools, then it’s very important that you are looking at where you currently are as opposed to bringing in a new principal to start over,” he said. “Schools see themselves on a treadmill, working hard but not gaining traction or getting anywhere. This apprenticeship opportunity allows schools to uplift those they’ve already trained along the way. Policymakers need to understand that.”

Alaska. Struggling with a principal turnover rate that hit 27 percent in 2024, the state’s Department of Education and Early Development saw registered apprenticeships as a way to address community needs.¹² Alaska’s state apprenticeship agency approved the program with the University of Alaska Southeast and the University of Alaska Anchorage in fall 2025.

Kelly Manning, the agency’s deputy director of innovation and education excellence, said the grants bolstered a growing coalition of partners. “Our frame is, How we can build an apprenticeship pathway that is going to meet the needs of rural Alaska, where travel is difficult and resources are limited?” Manning said. “Recruiting and growing individuals from that community is the most likely way to create retention in areas that are very challenging to live in. It’s about building leadership that really understands what they can do at a local level to reduce teacher turnover and improve school culture and climate.”

STATE BOARD CONSIDERATIONS

State boards can ask pivotal questions about registered apprenticeship programs for principals.

- What principal pipeline programs are already in place? Do preparation guidelines have job shadowing or mentorship built in? How can we augment their successes or address the gaps? What resources are needed to maintain them?
- How could registered apprenticeships sustain or expand principal pipelines?

- Which districts are more vulnerable to principal shortages? How can we best address their challenges?

- How can we measure success?

“Look at those current pipelines,” Donaldson said. “No matter what states do, they should always be looking at continuous improvement.”

Shyla Lensing is an intern for NASBE.

NOTES

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3 Ed Fuller and Andrew Pendola, “Did Principal Attrition Increase after the Pandemic? The Cases of Pennsylvania, Texas, and Nebraska,” *research brief* (Center for Education Evaluation and Policy Analysis at Pennsylvania State University, March 2023).

4 National Center for Education Statistics, “Principal Turnover: Stayers, Movers, and Leavers, Condition of Education,” *web page* (US Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, 2024).

5 Gary T. Henry and Erica Harbatkin, “Turnover at the Top: Estimating the Effects of Principal Turnover on Student, Teacher, and School Outcomes,” *EdWorkingPaper no. 19-95* (Providence, RI: Annenberg Institute at Brown University, 2019); Stephanie Levin and Kathryn Bradley, “Understanding and Addressing Principal Turnover: A Review of the Research,” *report* (Learning Policy Institute, March 19, 2019).

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7 Jason A. Grissom, Anna J. Egalite, and Constance A. Lindsay, “How Principals Affect Students and Schools: A Systematic Synthesis of Two Decades of Research,” *report* (The Wallace Foundation, February 2021).

8 Joseph Hedger, “Strengthening the Principal Pipeline through State Leadership Academies,” *State Innovations* 29, no. 1 (NASBE, February 2024).

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11 Jenna Doleh, “University’s Revamped Principal Training Yields Changes for Districts,” *article* (The Wallace Foundation, September 14, 2022).

12 Jamie Diep, “New Data Shows Teacher and Principal Turnover in Alaska Continuing to Rise,” *Alaska Public Media*, December 8, 2025.