



EPISODE 5

States Can Play a Critical Role

Ed Pauly:

I'm pleased to welcome our guest today, Paul Fleming, assistant commissioner of education for teachers and leaders in Tennessee, a state that's remarkable for building a comprehensive approach to building principal pipelines. Paul is leading a major new effort to ensure that at least two-thirds of the openings for principal positions in schools across Tennessee will be filled by effective and even transformational principals. The aim of this statewide effort is to both recruit and train teachers to become principals and to provide more support for novice principals once they're on the job.

The news is that in 2017 Tennessee awarded \$1 million in grants to university and school district partnerships to develop strong and innovative programs to prepare effective principals. During this school year, nine programs are training 160 aspiring principals. Paul, thanks for being with us. You were a teacher who became a high school principal yourself. How well did your own university training prepare you – or not – for the rigors of the principalship?

Paul Fleming:

Thank you for the question, and thank you for allowing me to be part of this podcast as well. Excellent question because my own preparation, I was a high school teacher as noted. It was during when I was a high school teacher that I was very interested in going into formal building-level leadership. At that time, which was in the early 2000s, it was pretty symptomatic of what we're seeing across the state even now as well. In Tennessee, we have 19 leader preparation programs. While there were some isolated courses that I took and received and learned from, there was still not a cohesive effort to really shape what it means to be an instructional leader. I would describe it almost as pockets of excellence that I experienced in my own preparation program at the same time knowing that courses felt siloed, courses felt fragmented. Again, there wasn't a cohesive approach to saying: How do we create an instructional leader and ultimately a transformational leader to lead a school building effectively? I think that was my experience in that program.

Ed Pauly:

Now you're in a position to make change happen. In fact, I think it's fair to say that Tennessee is among the first states to act comprehensively to improve the quality of principal preparation. Tell us about the reasons why the Tennessee education department launched this new initiative.

Paul Fleming:

Thanks for the question. I think Tennessee, like a lot of states, we're seeing that there's been a real change in the expectations of principals. That's a significant shift from 10, 20 years ago of being a building-level manager to more recently the shift on instructional leadership. Now [where] we're really heading is how do we create these transformational principals who excel in shared leadership,

in other words, building capacity of their faculty, building capacity of their staff and leadership teams and doing that in a way that feels authentic and actually we know gets results? That was one big contextual piece of why we were moving in this direction.

Another, you know, Tennessee, we were one of the first to Race to the Top states back in 2011. We had a call to action to really move our state from basically in the mid-40s of all states in 2007 to how do we become one of the fastest improving states? Now, actually we're proud to say in both 2013 and 2015 on the NAEP assessment, we are actually the fastest improving state in the country. That really required that if we expect students and teachers to have higher expectations, we couldn't leave out leaders. Leaders are the gatekeepers of what happens in their building. I saw that when I was a high school principal, and it's key. We realized we needed to elevate the training for principals just like we were elevating the expectations for students and for teachers.

Ed Pauly: A key feature of the leadership work is partnerships between school districts and the preparation programs. Why is that important?

Paul Fleming: Partnership, really, I think is the engine that's going to drive this desire to create more effective and transformational leaders because what we usually do is, say we have district programs that focus on professional learning. Then we have preparation programs that focus on that beginning, the initial move towards licensure. And sometimes never the two shall meet. I think what we realize is districts really want to have a bigger role in having impact on the types of content and selection criteria for some of their candidates admitted into preparation programs. Conversely, we have a lot of preparation programs that want stronger relationships with districts. They believe they really see the need to work more closely with districts to think about: Are you a district that we are providing candidates for that is primarily for turnaround, or is it primarily rural districts?

In Tennessee, we have 146 districts. About 100 of those are classified as small or rural. There's a greater need for the strengthening of the partnership, so that both districts and preparation programs can meet the needs of each other to produce, again, this foundational approach that we've said in Tennessee is important around building transformational capacity around shared leadership. That requires a different skillset, which is why we need these partnerships to really flourish because we can't keep operating in two different silos of districts being in one and programs being in another.

Ed Pauly: Paul, you mentioned the small and rural districts. Can you tell us how the state education agency in Tennessee has the opportunity to help those districts improve principal preparation and on-the-job support? In large urban districts the districts might play that role, but how can the state help the smaller rural districts that don't have that capacity?

Paul Fleming: Again, another excellent question. We're also very fortunate to have some alignment between our governor who believes in leadership, and that was true from our previous governor who was a Democrat to now our current governor who is a Republican, and yet they never wavered about this importance of leadership. We've actually had funding from the governor, endorsed by the legislature and the state board to create programs that target in a positive way, obviously, and support beginning pipeline programs across the state. One of those is called actually The Governors Academy for School Leaders that we began two years ago. That's actually a great example of a program that's saying we're going to target aspiring principals who currently are assistant principals in primarily rural districts and give them an opportunity to be trained at Vanderbilt University. It's a partnership between the state, the governor's office and Vanderbilt to provide training for these beginning folks.

Just to go back to our Tennessee Transformation Leadership Alliance, as you mentioned, we're funding nine models. The governor's academy really was one of those models that we wanted to replicate across the state. That's where the transformational alliance is also focusing and targeting rural districts and also even in urban districts that are high-need because as we know high-need is not exclusive to urban. High-need really is going across the state. Those kinds of programs like the governor's academy and the transformational alliance are really trying to recognize: How do we support and train principals in high-need schools as well?

Ed Pauly: Does the new federal education law known as ESSA help Tennessee and other states strengthen school leadership?

Paul Fleming: Yes. In fact, I think we are one of a handful of states now that under specifically the federal Title II funding, there's what's called a 3 percent set aside. That's actually funding that we can use to train and build the principal pipeline in Tennessee. That's how we're funding our nine models under the Tennessee Transformational Leadership Alliance. I think both the spirit and the funding of ESSA, the federal law, is really designed to say 'we need to help states think about principal training differently and principal preparation differently.' Then here's some Title II funding that you have at your disposal to do that. I know other states are utilizing the same approach. We were very excited to use that funding to drive models that are united around some shared competencies and some shared best practices.

Ed Pauly: Paul, can you tell us a bit more about the work of getting these nine selected preparation programs to basically disrupt their practices and encourage preparation programs statewide to improve?

Paul Fleming: Another great question because what the result of funding these nine models, if we back up about two years, we actually created in the state, in collaboration with the governor's office, this Tennessee Transformational Leadership Council. We spent about a year with about 30 leaders all across the state, principals, superintendents, higher ed folks to get together and say, 'If we're going to go

down this road and fund and try to really train principals differently, what are the components that need to be replicated of high-performing principal preparation programs?' We worked for about a year through the council to identify eight common elements that we believe are necessary and are evidence-based and research-based that high-flying principal programs around the country – and also globally – utilize.

That's the foundational element for these nine models that we funded, have to be in alignment. That, we believe, is both setting the goal line and setting the target for what programs should do but also giving them flexibility, knowing that every program has different funding and different approaches. That's what we're excited about is trying to really help them have a common foundational set of competencies that they're going to use to disrupt and approve for their program, but these competencies are research- and evidence-based as well.

Ed Pauly: What about the effort to promote equity? How can the university-district partnerships contribute to that goal?

Paul Fleming: We're also really fortunate in Tennessee to have really strong data. We realize not a lot of states have strong, for example, teacher evaluation data. We can actually track how many teachers are leaving a district. We can track the performance levels of these teachers. We can even track now certainly for the teacher element and also on the principal side when you come out of a program, how well are your candidates and your completers from a program doing in the field based on evaluation? I think that data really allows us then to help districts have some better forecasting tools to think about what are their needs, and allow districts, going back to the partnership question you asked, to really then go back to preparation programs and say 'we really have a need now for turnaround principals because in our district we have a lot of high-priority schools.' That kind of data really helps strengthen this equity notion that we need highly effective leaders in every school, not just our high-performance schools, as well.

Ed Pauly: Paul, have there been challenges that you've encountered in Tennessee's principal pipeline initiative?

Paul Fleming: Yes, I think one of those is a lot of the programs, we're trying to figure out how to bring them together regularly because they're spread out, obviously, across the state. Both our formal principal preparation programs and these nine models. Some of these funded models that we did through the alliance are actually district partnerships. They're not formal principal preparation programs, if that makes sense. Part of this is how do we form a network to allow best practices to flourish across these nine models? That's what we're in the process of trying to think very carefully of how do we give them the tools and the support? All of these districts and programs are hungry for support and tools to develop these candidates, these leader candidates. We're working on how we provide tools to help them and also how do we form a more formal network?

This is not just the state, for example, funding a model and then saying, 'Goodbye and good luck,' but actually saying, 'You are part now of a network where we expect and we want your best practices and your challenges to be shared from model to model.' The state, we are facilitating that network approach. I think we're building that right now since [this] is the first year these models are up off the ground. We're excited to do it, but I would say that building a statewide network creates a unique challenge but one that we're ready to embrace.

Ed Pauly: When you talk to people from other states, what's the biggest lesson or piece of advice that you would share with them about this work?

Paul Fleming: One, I would say, talking to someone, my counterpart in Missouri, for example, I think they've been involved in Wallace initiatives as well, is both this idea and opportunity but also challenge around scale and knowing. For example, in Tennessee, we have 1,800 schools. We have 1,800 principals, let alone all the assistant principals that are in those schools, this idea that how do we really impact all of our leaders in a way that feels authentic, in a way that feels helpful and in a way that doesn't feel top-down or compliance-driven? I think talking with other states is always helpful to learn how they approach that common problem because I think every state is facing this idea of: we know leadership training has to change to help principals think differently around equity, to help them think about shared leadership and building the capacity of their teachers and also how to help give better feedback to teachers as well, that it gets back to this idea of how do we do that at scale statewide as opposed to doing that for a district or for a select group? It's been helpful to learn from other states about how to approach, which is really the spirit behind our approach with the transformational alliance.

Ed Pauly: I'd like to thank our guest today, Paul Fleming, of the Tennessee Department of Education for being with us. Paul, thank you for your efforts in Tennessee to benefit teachers and students.

Paul Fleming: Thanks so much.