



**State Licensure and Preparation Pathways for School Leaders:
A Policy Analysis to Expand BIPOC Access to Graduate Educational Leadership**

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Abstract

State licensure systems and graduate preparation pathways operate as gatekeeping structures that shape who gains access to educational leadership. In many states, aspiring principals and other school leaders must navigate multi-step requirements, including credential prerequisites, field-based internships, standardized assessments, and program completion rules that intersect with institutional capacity and local hiring practices. This policy analysis examines how these pathways can constrain access for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) candidates and, in turn, limit the development of culturally responsive leadership within K–12 systems. Drawing on publicly available policy documents and national reporting, including National Teacher and Principal Survey (NTPS) indicators and federal guidance on Title II program purposes, the article maps common pathway features that create friction points. An educational justice lens is then used to interpret how these features may reproduce inequitable distributions of leadership opportunity, even when systems are formally race-neutral. The paper concludes with policy-facing implications focused on transparency, equity-centered reporting, and pathway redesign strategies that support access while maintaining professional rigor.

Keywords: educational justice; leadership licensure; preparation pathways; policy analysis; BIPOC leadership

Introduction

Leadership policy is often discussed as a human-capital issue, but it is also an access issue. State rules determine who may enter principal preparation programs, what counts as a “qualified” candidate, and what sequence of steps must be completed before an individual can be licensed to lead a school. Those steps do not occur in a vacuum.

They operate in contexts where student demographics have diversified over time, while the principal workforce has shifted more slowly (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2022; NCES, 2022a).

At the federal level, policy signals that leadership quality is a matter of equity and access. The U.S. Department of Education describes Title II, Part A as supporting efforts to increase the number of effective school leaders and to provide low-income and minority students with greater access to those leaders (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). This framing situates leadership development as an equity lever rather than merely a professional credentialing step.

Policy and Governance Context

State educational agencies (SEAs), professional standards boards, and educator preparation providers share responsibility for leadership licensure pathways. In practice, pathway design reflects layered governance structures that can accumulate into access barriers for candidates. Small differences at each step—eligibility criteria, testing rules, internship approval, and program progression—can create substantial friction when combined.

Federal policy intersects with state licensure systems through accountability and reporting requirements. Title II expectations require states to report on educator preparation and licensing processes, reinforcing the idea that pathway design is a matter of public responsibility rather than institutional discretion.

State Licensure and Preparation Pathways

Across states, principal licensure pathways typically include prior teaching experience, graduate admissions requirements, clinical internships, licensure examinations, and program completion rules. While these requirements appear neutral, they interact with uneven access to mentoring, institutional support, professional networks, and financial resources. For example, clinical internship requirements depend heavily on site capacity and supervisor availability. Candidates working in under-resourced schools may have fewer opportunities to complete high-quality leadership experiences. Similarly, licensure exams impose both financial and time burdens that can disproportionately affect candidates with fewer institutional supports.

Data Sources and Approach

This manuscript uses policy and document analysis of publicly available federal and state sources. No original data were collected, and no human subjects were involved; institutional review board approval was not required. Sources include federal Title II program descriptions, state accountability summaries, NCES reporting on principals, and peer-reviewed research on leadership effectiveness.

Leadership Representation and Access Patterns

Public school enrollment data highlight the racial and ethnic diversity of students served by K–12 systems. When leadership demographics fail to reflect this diversity, questions of representation, belonging, and culturally responsive governance emerge.

NCES data show that substantial proportions of public school students identify as Hispanic, Black, Asian, multiracial, American Indian/Alaska Native, or Pacific Islander. When principal demographics change more slowly than student demographics, pathway design becomes a critical explanatory factor.

Educational Justice Lens

An educational justice lens frames licensure pathways as systems of opportunity distribution. It examines how formally neutral policies may generate predictable disparities through unequal access to resources, time, information, and institutional recognition. Licensure functions not only as a credential but also as a signal of legitimacy within educational systems.

Justice-centered leadership extends beyond interpersonal competence. It involves the capacity to interpret policy, allocate resources, and respond to community contexts in ways that expand opportunity. Pathway restrictions therefore shape who is able to enact culturally responsive leadership at scale.

Discussion: Policy Implications

Several policy implications follow from this analysis. First, states can increase transparency by consolidating licensure requirements into accessible, plain-language guidance. Complex and fragmented information often functions as a hidden barrier.

Second, equity-oriented reporting can be aligned with Title II goals by examining participation and completion patterns across licensure pathways. Such reporting increases visibility into structural burdens without targeting individual candidates.

Third, states can review clinical and internship requirements for equity effects by supporting mentorship capacity in under-resourced schools. Finally, licensure testing policies can be examined to reduce unnecessary financial barriers while maintaining professional rigor.

Conclusion

Licensure and preparation pathways shape who becomes an educational leader. When these pathways are treated as equity-relevant policy systems rather than administrative procedures, they can be redesigned to support BIPOC access while maintaining professional expectations. Doing so strengthens the pipeline of culturally responsive leaders and aligns leadership preparation with the communities schools serve.

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