

REDESIGNING EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP PREPARATION PROGRAMS IN NEW MEXICO: ONE UNIVERSITY'S PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

New Mexico Governor, Michelle Lujan Grisham, signed House Bill 157 in April of 2025 with the goal of adding robust standards to the state's educational leadership preparation programs. These standards seek to transform and update PK-12 educational leadership master's programs to ensure that aspiring school leaders are prepared with current research-based skills and competencies. This conceptual paper describes how the PK-12 educational leadership program faculty at New Mexico State University (NMSU) addressed the new programmatic mandates. Updates to the NMSU educational leadership PK-12 program structure seeks to develop aspiring school leaders with the capacity to lead culturally diverse school communities in New Mexico.

Keywords: educational change, educational leadership, residency programs, principalship

Research has confirmed the importance of effective school leadership for a safe and inclusive environment that focuses on student learning, teacher development, and community involvement (Gooden, 2012; Khalifa, 2012; Noguera, 2011; Scriber & Crow, 2012; Theoharis & Scanlan, 2026). Educational administrators are key in establishing the culture and climate of their schools, serving as instructional leaders, hiring, and developing effective teachers, and initiating meaningful community engagement. On a daily basis, more than 47 million PK-12 students attend public schools across the United States (National Center for Education Statistics, 2025). From rural to urban, large to small school districts, educators tirelessly work to meet the needs of a variety of learners. The frequent disconnect with students, especially those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, English learners, students with mental health issues and special learning needs often leads to students performing poorly on state standardized assessments, dropping out at higher rates and leaving high school ill-prepared for college or careers. Large, impersonal schools often lead students to become passive and disengaged. Today's schools need what Rosa Rivera McCutchen (2021) has coined "radical care." As described in her book, *Radical Care: Leading for Justice in Urban Schools*, radical care is "a way of leading that moves beyond the individual circumstances and conditions of schooling and works to create structural change" (Rivera-McCutchen, 2021, p. 14). Radical care aims to address systemic injustices within communities and improve the conditions of schooling for students by building on existing community assets and strengths.

The radical care framework includes five components: 1) adopting an antiracist stance; 2) cultivating authentic relationships; 3) believing in students' and teachers' capacity for excellence; 4) leveraging power strategically; and 5) embracing a spirit of radical hope (Rivera-McCutchen, 2021). A lack of radical care is evidenced in the educational inequities across the national but overwhelmingly in New Mexico. As three PK-12 faculty members in the Educational Leadership and Administration Program (ELAD) at New Mexico State University, we are collaborating with our cohort universities to implement "radical care" - transformative changes to our educational leadership programs that will address the long-standing needs of New Mexico.

New Mexico has ranked at or near the bottom on education, economics and "family and community" based on the annual Kids Count report that tracks sixteen metrics of children's access to education, health, economic and social stability at home (2024). Seventy-nine percent of fourth grade students are not proficient in reading while 87% are not proficient in 8th grade mathematics (Kids Count, 2024). With a long history of low accountability scores and graduation rates with high student absenteeism, school districts in the state have struggled to meet the needs of students despite attempts to implement various education reform initiatives. In addition, New Mexico is one of the 10 lowest states for principal retention (Think New Mexico, 2025). A strong motivator for educational leadership reform derived from the 2018 Yazzie/Martinez vs. New Mexico lawsuit which asserted that the state failed to provide an equitable education to low-income, Native American, English language learners and students with disabilities (NM Center on Law and Poverty, 2022). The ruling from the lawsuit established that the state had failed to provide services and programs such as dual language, social services, small class sizes, extended learning and funding for teacher retention. In light of the Yazzie/Martinez decision, school districts in New Mexico are working to address the long standing academic inequities. This paper describes how the PK-12 educational leadership program faculty at New Mexico State University (NMSU) addressed the new programmatic mandates. Updates to the NMSU educational leadership PK-12 program structure seeks to develop aspiring school leaders with the capacity to lead culturally diverse school communities in New Mexico.

Revisiting School Leadership Development

Students need equity-oriented leaders who wish to provide equal educational opportunities and a high quality education to all students regardless of socioeconomic and cultural background (Cooper, 2009). School leaders with the capacity to lead culturally diverse school communities are critical to the future of public education, especially in New Mexico.

On April 10, 2025, Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham signed New Mexico House Bill 157 to develop and support school and district leaders. University education preparation programs were tasked with applying for the new SAPP (Site Administrator Preparation Program). This state-funded program seeks to boast candidate quality, preparation and retention of graduate students interested in pursuing the masters degree in educational leadership in New Mexico. The New Mexico Public Education Department (NMPED) must approve each university SAPP to include:

- Comprehensive curriculum aligned to national and state standards
- Deliberate candidate recruitment and selection

- Robust clinical experiences; and
- Formal partnerships between university programs, districts and charter schools (NMPED, 2026).

The Current NMSU Principal Preparation Program

The Division of Educational Leadership and Administration in the School of Teacher Preparation, Administration and Leadership at New Mexico State University has a goal of graduating proficient, competent and social justice minded leaders to serve the southern New Mexico borderland communities.

The NMSU Master of Arts (M.A.) plus Licensure Program in Educational Leadership and Administration emphasizes school administration and organization, effective leadership strategies, campus business management, and federal, state, and local school regulations. Students in this program cultivate skills necessary to evaluate programs for overall school improvement, implement research to improve instruction and curricula and understand how diverse populations and special programs affect a school and its community. Our program consists of 11 courses, two of which are clinical based, for a total of 33 credit hours. Courses focus on instructional leadership, strategy and operations, policies and regulations, curriculum development, evaluation methods, sustainable change, pedagogical theory, and the application of data for school improvement. Our program consists of 11 courses, two of which are clinical based, for a total of 33 credit hours.

The Department of Educational Leadership and Administration Principal Preparation Program boasts the following:

- **Hybrid Coursework:** Coursework is online except for the residency in a student-friendly format that is interactive, engaging, and practical. This is helpful to students with full-time work in schools and districts. With a total of 450 hours in the field throughout the two years of coursework and four hours a month, per course synchronous online professor-led instruction; students get practical support and learning in a school leadership environment and practical and theoretical support from coaches and faculty in a hybrid environment.
- **Time Efficient:** This two-year program begins in the fall and ends the following spring.
- **Nationally Recognized:** Our program is a member of the University Council for Educational Administration, a collective of top research institutions specializing in advancing educational leadership and policy.
- **Highly Effective:** Prepare for Principal certification while you satisfy program requirements (you will need a level 3B teaching license in the state of NM, pass the state certification test, pay the fee for the state certification test, and pay the fee for the NM administrator's license). Our pass rate in 2021-2022 and 2022-2023 for the NM Assessment for School Leaders exam was 100%.
- **Hands-on Learning:** Due to our hybrid format, students can apply the knowledge they learn in class to their principal residencies as well as apply their experiences during their NMPED required 450 hours in the field to the coaching and theory provided in their coursework.

- **Supportive Faculty:** Students benefit from engaged and dedicated faculty who offer career guidance and personalized assistance and have real-world experience in school administration.
- **Affordable:** Students can advance their career in a top-rated program at a fraction of the cost compared to similar institutions.
- **Social Justice:** Our program has a continuous focus on social justice and equity for southwest borderland communities and responds and acts upon the requirements provided by the state of NM, CAEP, and the mandates from Yazzie v. Martinez court case.

Overall, ELAD provides high-quality instruction, direction, and support for students in a hybrid format allowing a combination of practice and theory. Our online classes are facilitated using updated and appropriate technologies and platforms to allow for engagement in discussions, and online and face-to-face group activities, promoting active learning. Timely feedback and guidance are provided to students on their coursework, discussions, and assessments. Assignments and syllabi are linked directly to the new NMPED standards for aspiring principals.

Fall 2026 Proposed Changes to Our Program: Principal Residencies

The New Mexico Public Education Department will fund full year residencies for aspiring principals through university leadership preparation programs. The goal of the residencies is to provide authentic, field-based opportunities to practice competencies that will prepare graduates for future administrator roles in the state. With more intensely prepared school leaders, the hope is to retain campus leaders who have become transformative administrators who have increased student achievement, tackled chronic absenteeism, increased family and community engagement and increased graduation rates in New Mexico.

The NMSU educational leadership program will pilot three full-time residencies in the fall of 2026. The principal residency grant opportunity will allow us to better prepare all our students and pilot full-time, full-year residencies alongside our regular cohort-based program. The three chosen students will be able to move directly into a leadership role having been coached and working alongside their mentor principals at two different levels of schools. Through the SAPP, we will further partnerships with our participating district(s) and assist them to “grow their own” well trained school leaders. The new Fall 2026 cohort will benefit from 450 hours of field experiences between their residency courses and practical time built into the newly revamped coursework.

The 2026 aspiring principals’ residency grant application encompasses the following to align with the characteristics of high-quality residencies as defined in the NMPED RFA:

- Full-year release time paid residency experience (candidates should retain current salary and benefits or be paid the equivalent to a level 2 or 3 teacher salary/benefits);
- Authentic field-based opportunities to practice competencies aligned to the New Mexico performance evaluation system for site administrators;
- Common performance assessment tasks that demonstrate competencies;

- Experiences in multiple school environments (early childhood, elementary, middle, and high school);
- Candidates receive at least 8 hours of individualized coaching from program staff (including faculty or other staff that includes feedback on practice);
- Program selected residency sites with mentor(s) who have at least three years of experience and demonstrated effectiveness;
- Training for mentors, coaches, and faculty supervisors;
- Strong partnerships with districts;
- Ongoing self-evaluation and improvement of the residency program.

The goal will be to continue this practice with 100% of our graduate students in the future, with funding and support from the NMPED, partnering districts, and external organizations. Continuing to build partnerships with NM districts, especially our local school district (Las Cruces Public Schools) and rural southwestern NM districts with a shortage of school leaders, will be a priority. Ongoing support will be provided to the coaches and mentor principals as they give much of their time and energy to aspiring principals. Future full-time residencies will allow districts to have a cadre of well prepared and socially just minded aspiring school leaders to hire during this time of school leader shortage.

Through principal residency coursework and practical field experience, students will develop advanced competencies in:

- Establishing and implementing a shared vision and culture of excellence among students, staff, parents, and the community.
- Partnering with fellow administrators, teachers, and parents to support student learning.
- Developing and executing high-quality instruction through collaboration.
- Supervising and evaluating classroom instruction.
- Providing feedback and professional development to educators and staff.
- Hiring and retaining effective teachers.
- Improving student outcomes.
- Strategic operations for a school setting.
- Promoting ethics and support for all learners within the school organization.

Conclusion

All students have the right to a rigorous education that prepares them for careers and college. As the instructional leader, the principal must set the tone for high expectations, high standards and a rigorous curriculum. With the best instructional practices, positive relationships and effective leadership, students can succeed. As former public school administrators, we have direct experience with the skills and competencies necessary to become a successful school leader. By investing in research-based changes to the principal leadership programs across the state of New Mexico, we hope to develop more competent school leaders who can transform schools. We want to see students with literacy and mathematical grade level skills, culturally responsive teachers developing curious minds and actively engaged communities. The well-being of New Mexico children is at stake. Real change often requires risk. As the instructional leader, the principal must set the tone for high expectations, high standards, a rigorous curriculum and best

leadership practices including instructional pedagogy, relationship development, and effective leadership. As former public school administrators, we have direct experience with the skills and competencies necessary to become a successful school leader. By investing in positive and productive changes to the principal leadership programs across the state of New Mexico, we hope to develop school leaders who can transform schools beyond rhetoric. We want to see competent students with literacy and mathematical grade level skills, culturally responsive teachers, and school leaders within actively engaged communities. There is no limit to the success of students in New Mexico when schools provide the vision and opportunities to make their hopes and dreams a reality.

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