

## Fighting Fit: Developing Racially Diverse Principal Pathways in Historically Homogeneous Communities

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### *Abstract*

*Despite a rise in school principal vacancies in recent years, principals of Color are still underrepresented in many K-12 school districts across the United States. Continued racial bias remains a barrier and deterrent for aspiring principals of Color, particularly in homogenous, predominantly White school districts and communities that allow stereotype-driven selection criteria such as culture fit in hiring decisions. Principal preparation pathways can provide a vehicle for increasing diversity in school leadership, though existing practices have yet to demonstrate significant and widespread progress in existing racially homogenous communities. This conceptual work presents a theoretical model for considering, addressing, and improving the diversity of principal pathways to increase principals of Color in predominantly White school districts and communities. Discussion of the model, with suggestions for school district leaders and researchers, is included.*

**Keywords:** *Principal Preparation; Role Fit; Role Congruity*

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## **Fighting Fit: Developing Racially Diverse Principal Pathways in Historically Homogeneous Communities**

As states across the United States continue to experience an increase in school principal vacancies (Doyle & Locke, 2014; Levin, Bradley, & Scott, 2019; Mendels, 2017; National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2017), there is a growing concern that highly qualified aspiring principals for these vacancies are becoming less available, particularly in light of an increasingly racially diverse student population, even in historically homogeneous areas (Anderson, 2016; Grissom, Rodriguez, & Kern, 2017). While this trend has been widely identified, there are still substantially fewer educators of Color in schools throughout the United States, particularly in less racially diverse districts and communities (Goldring, Taie, & Riddles, 2014; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, n.d.). Certainly, the racial diversity of teachers is slowly increasing, but the same pattern of growth is not as evident in principals (Bailes & Guthery, 2020; Fay, 2019). Increasing racially diverse principals in predominantly White schools can benefit students to work more effectively in diverse settings, while also promoting openness to broader social perspectives (Bartanen & Grissom, 2019; Wells, Fox, & Cordova-Cobo 2016) that will be important given the growing diversity in the United States. As a result, the conscious and continuous development of pathways for increasing highly qualified aspiring principals, especially those of Color, is paramount for successfully responding to the needs of the current and future education and social environment. This paper seeks to present a theoretical frame for considering, addressing, and improving the diversity of pathways to increase principals of Color in K-12 schools.

### **Importance and Challenge of Principal Pathways**

Principal pathways, also referred to as pipeline serve an important purpose in ensuring that highly qualified aspiring principals are adequately available to fill vacancies in schools. Robust pathways provide variety and depth that promote thoughtful hiring decisions based on identified needs. Effective principal pathways also contribute to the retention of principals, which has a positive impact on school performance (Mendels, 2017). The primary components of a principal pathway should include preparation, hiring, and support for those in the pathway (Syed, 2015; Turnbull et. al, 2016). Formal principal preparation programs, often associated with universities, are largely assumed to shoulder the responsibility of developing and maintaining pathways. While the percentage of students of Color enrolling in postbaccalaureate programs continues to increase, it lags far below White student enrollment. In 2016, only 14% of postbaccalaureate students in the United States were Black, with White students accounting for 64% of the total enrollment (de Brey et. al, 2019). This enrollment disparity could provide an imbalanced, even discriminatory, entry point into graduate programs, which may include those focused on principal programs.

Educators of Color often contemplate careers as principals before entering a preparation program, which indicates a multifaceted and interrelated set of influential structures beyond preparation programs. Desire to control this influence to attract and develop aspiring principals can create

tension and disconnection between structures, which inhibits the effectiveness of pathways recruiting and developing highly qualified aspiring principals. Studies that have promoted and examined educator pathway reform and effectiveness have focused on large school districts (Bastian & Henry, 2015; Mendels, 2017; Syed, 2015; Turnbull et. al, 2016) that are inherently more diverse than smaller or more rural districts. This focus is understandable given the larger data availability, but these studies can miss subtle indicators of challenges missed in previous research that would be magnified in more homogenous districts. While at least some core elements of effective principal pathways, such as program preparation standards and principal mentoring (Turnbull et. al, 2016), can be found in most existing pathways, explicit efforts at intersectionality are less evident, thus limiting the opportunity to increase racially diverse aspiring principals.

## Conceptual Background

### Homogeneous and Sectionalist Structures

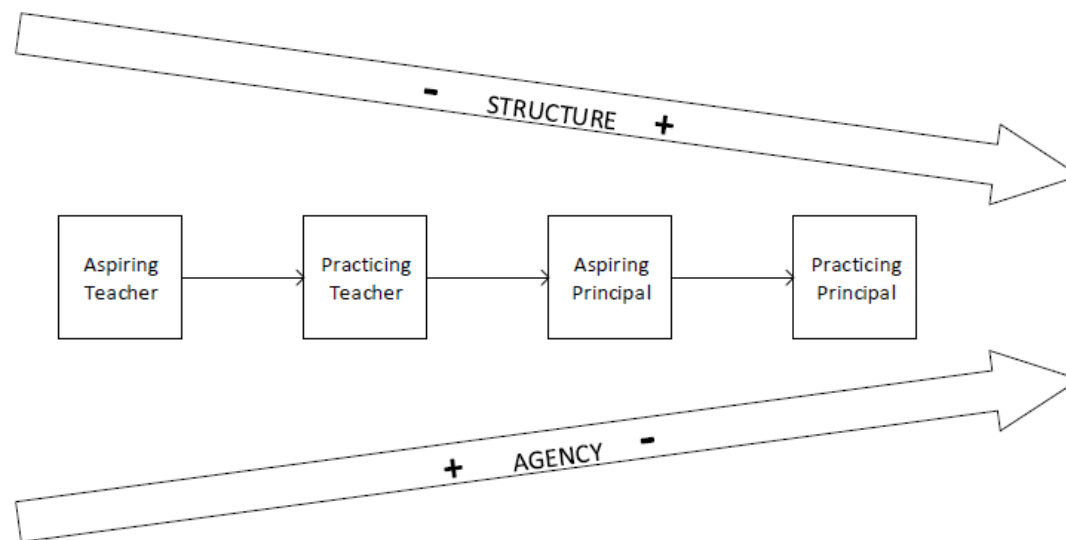
A challenge of developing and nurturing pathways that encourage aspiring principals of Color is largely driven by structure (Bailes & Guthery, 2020; Williams & Loeb, 2012). The concept of structure provides a frame for understanding mechanisms and norms that may help or hinder individuals. The principal pathway is a structure that is also influenced by other structures, such as school districts, principal preparation programs, and communities. Structures are inherently systematic, which is increasingly problematic when homogeneity is the defining characteristic of the structure. Homogeneity can be a hindering factor for increasing racial diversity, as individuals who differ from the homogeneity may not identify with those within the structure (Myung, Loeb, & Horng, 2011). Homogeneous structures can also present cultural obstacles, such as valuing specific traits and dispositions, for individuals who do not possess what is desired within the structure. Sectionality adds a potentially subversive element to homogeneous structures, particularly with efforts to increase racial diversity. Sectionality is often deliberate, justified by an overemphasis of the importance of certain traits, attributes, or characteristics within the structure (Devanny, 2018). Race, religious and political beliefs, and socioeconomic status have historically been associated with sectionality. For example, racism can be viewed as a quality of a community given that its members decide on leadership and resources through elections (Pearman, 2020), which ultimately promotes a sectionalist community structure. The narrowed, restricted nature of sectionalist structures is intentional to not only ensure homogeneity, but a specific type of homogeneity that is designed to push against diversity.

### *Blurring of Structure and Agency*

As opposed to structure, agency exists at the individual level, though is helped, or hindered, by structure (Szczeniul, & Huizenga, 2015). In a vacuum, it would be easy to associate agency with individual attributes such as self-esteem, self-efficacy, and motivation. However, structures can shape and distort these attributes, particularly when structures are homogeneous, and to a greater extent, sectionalist. Racially diverse individuals highly value agency, as it is a source of empowerment and control, especially when these are structurally limited (Quaylan, 2015;

Vitanova, 2018). Teachers of Color may teach longer before becoming school principals than their White counterparts, even in more racially diverse districts (Bailes & Guthery, 2020; Davis, Gooden, & Bowers, 2017; Fuller, Hollingworth, & An, 2019), which could speak to a heightened sense of agency, but it could also identify restrictions and limitations within structures. In hiring, those who make hiring decisions are more likely to hire someone of the same race (Bartanen & Grissom, 2019; Giuliano, Levine, & Leonard, 2009; Pager, Bonikowski, & Western, 2009). Structures that utilize a form of representative bureaucracy (Grissom & Keiser, 2011; Zajicek et al., 2020) can increase interest, and thus agency, of aspiring principals of Color by the maintenance of racially diverse supervisors within the structure. A similar pattern can be found in the encouragement of educators of Color to pursue leadership opportunities, as this encouragement is more likely to come from a leader of Color (Myung, Loeb, & Horng, 2011). Most new principals assume their first position within the district in which they taught (Bailes & Guthery, 2020), which implies the presence of representative bureaucracy. However, this may also limit the agency of aspiring principals of Color given the significantly fewer school and district leaders of Color.

**Figure 1**  
Structure-Agency Dichotomy Continuum



*Note.* Author created.

Figure 1 illustrates the gradual increase and restrictiveness of structures within education, and thus the decreasing opportunities for agency, as educators of Color interested in school leadership move through a career beginning as a teacher and becoming a principal. In general, aspiring teachers have increased agency with fewer limiting structures inhibiting their pathway for preparation and certification. Agency, though still opportunistically present, is somewhat lessened as program completers seek employment as teachers (Calvert, 2016; Imants & Van der Wal, 2020). The high demand for highly qualified teachers promotes agency, though structures may become further restricted in schools and districts with less vacancies and demand. As teachers of Color consider

becoming principals, structures increase in both quantity and restrictiveness, primarily driven by role complexity, increased competition, and community influence. Added structures for aspiring principals include recruitment, preparation, and opportunity assessments (Mendels, 2017; Syed, 2015; Turnbull et. al, 2016). However, there can be a subversive and conflating element to these structures, particularly when they are homogeneous and sectionalist based on race, that allows for the presence of role congruity that unfairly and unethically penalizes aspiring principals of Color under a distorted definition of role fit within those preparation and hiring structures.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Role Theory and Role Fit**

Role complexity, a concept derived from role theory used largely in the context of supervisory and managerial positions, describes the level of challenge leading in an unpredictable, sometimes volatile environment (Baltaci & Balci, 2017) fueled by varying levels of tasks and responsibilities. The position of principal is commonly viewed as a complex leadership role (Leithwood, Patten, & Jantzi, 2010; Morrison, 2010; Pollock, Wang, & Hauseman, 2015) given the multiple dimensions involved with leading a school, such as instructional leadership, finance, supervision, and community involvement. Care is needed when considering someone to assume the position of principal given its inherent complexity. In general terms, role fit, also referred to as person-job fit, attempts to define a role so that it can more easily match to a specific type of individual (Bui, Zeng, & Higgs, 2017), which is common when hiring for complex positions. Role fit can be either be supplementary or culture driven (Elfenbein & O'Reilly, 2007), with individuals possessing similar characteristics as found in the organization, or complementary, with individuals possessing different characteristics found to be missing and valuable to the organization (Boon et. al, 2011).

Role congruity, a more recent extension of role theory, occurs when aspiring and practicing leaders are assessed using behavioral stereotypes based on an individual's demographic traits, attributes, or characteristics. Individuals who act contrary to associated stereotypical behavior may be assessed negatively, thus unfairly limiting opportunities to access and excel within leadership roles. Role congruity, originally conceived in the examination of prejudice against female leaders (Aziz et al., 2017; Eagly & Karau, 2002), has expanded over time to include prejudices against other groups, including leaders of Color (Grappendorf et al, 2013). When present, role congruity is the antithesis of intersectionality, as stereotypes can be used to limit diversity. Role congruity also negatively impacts role fit by allowing stereotypes to distort the attributes needed to hire for a specific role.

Role fit may seem innocuous to some at first glance, as it may promote the recruitment and hiring of those who would not conflict with existing values and demographic attributes of the larger organization (Elfenbein & O'Reilly, 2007). However, this term, particularly when used for supplementary or culture fit, has also been identified as a potential discriminator (Asare, 2018; Lewis, 2015) based on its subjective interpretation, yet the term continues to be used based on its perceived importance in the hiring process. Damages from hiring based on fit can range from

regressive staff homogeneity to prejudiced human resource practices, further illustrating the problematic nature of fit. Given that school staff can be more homogeneous than the students they serve (Hansen & Quintero, 2018), there is little professional encouragement for aspiring principals of Color to challenge that homogeneity, which may also reinforce potentially discriminatory practices of fit and hinder interest of aspiring principals of Color to enter the principal pathway.

## ***Perceptions as Influencers of Role Congruity and Fit***

Given the complex nature of the school principal position, there may be a heightened sensitivity towards some traits, including behavioral stereotypes associated with those traits. Jantzi and Leithwood (1996) proposed a framework, based on previous work by Lord and Maher (1993), for understanding how teachers formed perceptions of leaders and their potential effectiveness. Lord and Maher identified two models of perceptual processes, recognition and inferential, that are core to Jantzi and Leithwood's framework. Recognition-based perceptions are formed using traits and behaviors, while inferential-based perceptions are formed using events and outcomes. Both types of perception processes are easily influenced by bias and stereotypes, which Jantzi and Leithwood (1996) recognized, proposing that traits such as gender and age have influence when possessed by either the teacher or leader, or both. For example, an older teacher may perceive an older leader to be more effective than a younger leader simply based on age. In homogenous structures pursuing a supplementary, or the more pervasive culture fit (Elfenbein & O'Reilly, 2007), recognition-based perceptions can be drivers in hiring decisions, thus isolating those who do not possess the desired traits.

While the inclusion of traits in a leadership theoretical framework may seem commonly understood, even a bit outdated, it is within these traits that opportunities for role congruity to exist that limits and prevents aspiring principals of Color from accessing and obtaining positions of interest. A notable trait missing from the Jantzi and Leithwood (1996) framework is race, which can be easily included in the recognition-based perceptions part of the model and aligns well with role congruity. Race has been investigated as a trait in leader perceptions both before and after the creation of this framework (Rosette, Leonardelli, & Phillips, 2008; Scontrino, Larson, and Fiedler, 1977), so its omission from the framework may speak to a certain level of homogeneity that was understood to exist in school communities, including the inaccurate assumption that the race of a leader should match the demographic of the school community (Anderson, 2016). Regardless, role congruity and supplementary and culture fit continue to be problematic for aspiring principals of Color given the disproportionate number of principals of Color in the United States (Goldring, Taie, & Riddles, 2014; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, n.d.).

## **Developing Pathways to Attract Racially Diverse Principals**

To overcome the structural impediments of homogeneity and eliminate role congruity, principal pathways should be designed to encourage and attract racially diverse aspiring principals by featuring the following characteristics:

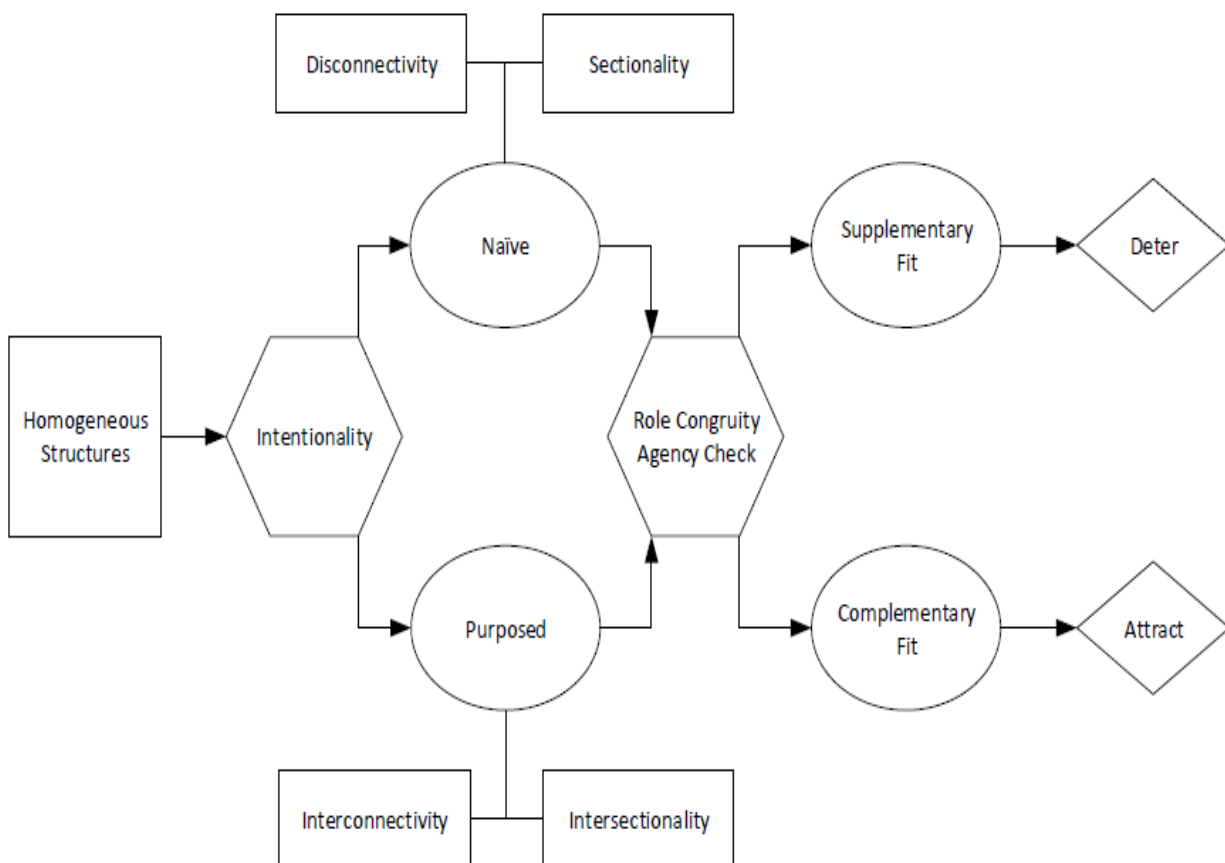


- *Intentionality* – includes leader preparation standards, formative and summative evaluation, and induction and mentoring (Mendels, 2017; Turnbull et. al, 2016)
- *Interconnectivity* – includes university-district initiatives, community input and engagement, and business partnerships (Espinoza & Cardichon, 2017; Syed, 2015)
- *Intersectionality* – includes advocacy-oriented preparation and training and conscientious recruiting, hiring, and mentoring practices (Fuller, Hollingworth, & An, 2019; Grissom & Keiser, 2011; Zajicek et al., 2020)

These characteristics are captured in the model in Figure 2 as part of a proposed purposed effort to attract aspiring principals of Color in homogeneous, predominantly White structures, which include principal preparation programs, school districts, and communities.

**Figure 2**

Model for Developing Pathways to Attract Racially Diverse Principals



*Note.* Author created.

## **Intentionality for Overcoming Trait-Biased Structures**

Homogeneous structures have an increased likelihood to value specific traits that align with cultural norms, creating the opportunity for recognition-based perceptions (Lord & Maher, 1993) to drive a culture fit approach (Elfenbein & O'Reilly, 2007) to attract and hire principals. To begin attracting aspiring principals of Color, leaders with influence over these structures must initiate an examination of existing practices to identify potential discouragers and opportunities for change. This is where intentionality begins. Assuming the broader elements of effective principal pathways (Mendels, 2017; Syed, 2015; Turnbull et. al, 2016) are already in place, leaders can focus on opportunities for interconnectedness and intersectionality that may not be present in the existing pathway. Leaders can examine how collaboration between principal preparation programs, districts, and organizations can present a united front that identifies the value of diversity in school leadership. Leaders can also assess structures such as certification procedures and recruitment and hiring practices (Turnbull et. al, 2016) to ensure that not only potentially discriminating policies are removed, but to also revise policy language to demonstrate a clear commitment to, and advocacy for, diversity. In making these changes, homogeneous structures begin to show an interest in complimentary, rather than supplementary, fits (Boon et. al, 2011) when hiring principals.

Naivety, either recognized or unknown, can occur for a variety of reasons. Leaders of homogeneous structures may feel that existing practices are sufficient, even despite the lack of principals of Color or a limited pathway of aspiring principals of Color. This complacency can be driven by a supplementary, culture fit mindset (Elfenbein & O'Reilly, 2007) or a belief that the existing pathway attracts the desired aspiring principal types given the traits of past principals, which can reaffirm potentially biased traits formed through recognition-based perception processes (Lord & Maher, 1993) that promotes the continued hiring of homogenous principals. Implicit bias, including against individuals of Color is potentially problematic (Carter et. al, 2017) in these homogeneous structures given the lack of self-awareness that unconsciously hides a need for change. Sectionalist attitudes in the community (Devanny, 2018) can also promote leader complacency, sometimes out of fear, as it increases risk to leaders to break from the sectionality. Community-based sectionality is the most challenging form of naivety to overcome, as the justification, and thus push, for culture fit is strong enough to deliberately avoid consideration of complimentary fit. Additional foundational advocacy work within the community may be needed to overcome any sectionality before reforming the principal pathway.

## **Role Congruity and Agency**

The intent of a principal pathway should be to increase the interest of all highly qualified aspiring principals, regardless of an individuals' traits or the recognition-based perceptual processes (Lord & Maher, 1993) used to substantiate the value of those traits. Agency only exists at its maximum potential if individuals can be in control of their choices. While structure and agency can be blurred, aspiring principals of Color want to exercise agency and will seek out cues within principal pathways and other connected structures that could be limiting and potentially discriminating



through a role congruity (Grappendorf et al, 2013) assessment, or check This check is a key element of agency. Aspiring principals of Color are more likely to make the choice to enter a principal pathway if they feel that their differences will be valued as a complementary fit (Boon et. al, 2011) to the school and connected structures, as well as can make a positive impact as a principal without the restriction of trait-based structures fed by stereotypes.

This choice becomes more complex for aspiring principals of Color if the traits of district employees and the community do not match the aspiring principal, as is often the case in homogenous structures, given an absent representative bureaucracy (Grissom & Keiser, 2011; Zajicek et al., 2020) and an increased concern of role congruity. Aspiring leaders of Color are particularly aware of not matching the physical traits of the community given the historical and continued presence of racism (Mullings, Morgan, & Quelleng, 2016). In this case, leaders of these structures must clearly demonstrate the desire for a complimentary fit in both policy and practice, but also emphasize a support structure beyond hiring to grow appreciation of the complimentary fit beyond the school to the connected structures. There can be risk for an aspiring principal of Color to enter homogeneous structures as a complimentary fit given the unknown appreciation of differences and possible cultural conflict, so the burden of demonstrating value to the connected structures cannot be left solely to the new principal of Color.

## **Future Considerations for the Model**

The changing demographic nature of the United States presents an opportunity for homogeneous districts to evolve thinking about fit for the position of principal. Rather than dismiss, even fight, the idea that a historically homogeneous community may become more diverse, districts can instead embrace the notion of racial diversity as a service to its students (Bartanen & Grissom, 2019; Wells, Fox, & Cordova-Cobo 2016) and the community, both of which will undoubtedly face diversity that is different than the current state. The model presented in Figure 2 seeks to frame a pathway for existing homogenous, predominantly White districts to attract and encourage aspiring principals of Color to serve as principals in their schools. Principals of Color can bring an authentic voice and perspective to school and community efforts focused on equity and advocacy (Wells, Fox, & Cordova-Cobo 2016), while also creating a nimbleness within the school community to adapt to sometimes unpredictable cultural changes both within and outside of the community.

## ***Shifts for Practitioners***

Reforming pathways requires significant work from a variety of stakeholders, including preparation program coordinators, district leaders, and state policy makers. However, the work must not remain static (Turnbull et. al, 2016) to allow for changes and updates based on practical needs and shifts in the field and community. Since states award more principal certifications than vacancies (Myung, Loeb, & Horng, 2011), the shift must focus to attractiveness, including the identification of specific structures that can be changed to attract more aspiring principals of Color. Districts must also make deliberate efforts to recruit aspiring principals of Color, which has not

been a formalized process for many districts in the past, largely relying on principal preparation programs to feed the pathway. Homogenous, predominantly White districts may be challenged to identify a starting point for this shift in racial diversity, but they must hire principals of Color to increase the likelihood of other educators of Color identifying their district as a possible place of employment (Grissom & Keiser, 2011; Zajicek et al., 2020). Representative bureaucracy is important for expanding the racial diversity of principals, as well as all school employees.

## *Shifts for Researchers*

Researchers should begin to shift examination of principal pathways to areas not previously studied, including smaller and more remote districts, to assess elements that are key to attracting racially diverse aspiring principals in otherwise homogeneous areas. The overarching elements of effective principal pathways already identified from previous research (Mendels, 2017; Syed, 2015; Turnbull et. al, 2016) can be used as a starting point, as without those elements in place, pathways are less likely attract highly qualified aspiring principals, regardless of race. However, with those elements in place, researchers can focus on the potential of currently homogeneous pathways to attract more racially diverse aspiring principals when few, if any, considered those pathways in the past. Researchers can also help expose the strengths and opportunities of smaller and remote districts to aspiring principals of Color who may not have that knowledge, thus increasing potential interest in working in these areas. Finally, researchers should continue to further disaggregate the monolithic representation of people of Color, though still considering how homogeneity in principal pathways may still exist but in different, but similarly deterring, ways. While the model proposed in this paper seeks to open historically predominantly White principal pathways to aspiring principals of all racial groups, it will be important to monitor specific groups who may face unique adversity that a broader approach proposed in the included model may still not successfully support after its implementation.

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