

# Exploring new leadership pathways: comparing two partnership models for school leadership development

School-University  
Partnerships

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This paper examines two unconventional leadership partnerships in under-resourced contexts: Portland’s district–university Future Principals Program and Pune’s NGO-led School Leadership Academy. It compares how partnerships, adult-learning design, and equity commitments build practice-ready pipelines responsive to local needs, and distills lessons for flexible, culturally situated alternatives to traditional preparation.

**Design/methodology/approach** – I use a comparative case analysis. The paper centers (1) partner roles and governance/finance, (2) andragogy (job-embedded projects, coaching cohort problem-solving) and (3) translation of equity into instructional and organizational decisions. Context – district constraints, public–private partnership (PPP) conditions and licensure – guides transferability, highlighting design choices that link university expertise to school problems or rely on NGO agility when university capacity is limited.

**Findings** – Despite differing structures, both models emphasize practice-anchored learning, coached leadership work and cohort supports, centering culturally responsive, equity-oriented leadership and yielding early placements. Scalability hinges on governance/financing, the university’s role, candidate profiles and pacing. Lessons: define “school” and “university” flexibly, design financing up front, and align preparation with local cultural–political contexts in high-need settings.

**Originality/value** – The study extends partnership discourse beyond conventional university-centric programs, offering a pragmatic template that travels across public, district and PPP ecosystems. By specifying shared design logics and contextual contingencies, it shows how systems can prototype credible, equity-anchored leadership pathways quickly – without sacrificing rigor or cultural fit – thereby strengthening local capacity where traditional pipelines are misaligned or absent.

**Keywords** Leadership, Educational equity, District–university partnership, School leader development

**Paper type** Research article

In 2025, UNESCO dedicated its widely read Global Education Monitoring (GEM) Report to the theme of school leadership, examining the complex challenges faced by schools worldwide in identifying, preparing and retaining effective leaders. Principals, headmasters, directors, heads of school and rectors – those tasked with leading schools go by many titles, and I collectively referred to them here as School Leaders (SLs). One issue the GEM Report makes clear is that a pressing issues is the need to recruit and train quality SLs. Traditional leadership preparation programs, long the source of new SLs, have been critiqued for no longer serving the critical role of identifying and preparing quality SLs (Cunningham *et al.*, 2019; Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 2022). Partnerships between universities and school systems offer a promising – and often underutilized – avenue for strengthening school leadership preparation.

Against this backdrop, this paper reflects on two examples of partnerships, from two vastly different contexts, that reimagined how leadership capacity can be cultivated. The first is a nascent and fragile university–district collaboration in a mid-sized urban district in the United

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States (Narayanan *et al.*, 2025). The second is an evolving collaboration between the author and a non-governmental organization (NGO) serving low-income communities in India (Narayanan & Metre, 2026). Neither arrangement is quite a school–university partnership nor are they isolated efforts by districts or colleges of education. In both cases, the structure and long-term prospects are highly tentative, highlighting how they have been created at the margins of institutions seeking innovative solutions and at times resisting change.

As I'll describe, many of the characteristics of the programs are familiar and supported by research. What is unusual is the institutional context in which the SL development efforts have arisen. The norms, values, rules and expectations of shared human endeavors greatly impact the implementation of initiatives (Crow & Whiteman, 2016; Dimmock & Walker, 2005; Khalifa, 2020). Though unconventional, the cases described here stretch and redefine the boundaries of “partnership,” illustrating how leader preparation can be designed to serve the needs of schools in under-resourced communities.

Both are under-resourced contexts, and thus bring educational equity squarely into view. Schools serving communities contending with poverty and systemic inequity require leaders who can guide instruction, build the capacity of novice and early-career educators, set a coherent vision, manage persistent turnover and cultivate trust across lines of difference (Cosner, 2019; Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 2022). In such settings, leadership is as much about instructional expertise and organizational learning as it is about moral purpose and community engagement (Radd *et al.*, 2021; Khalifa, 2020). Thus, the partnership models examined here are not only programmatic innovations; they are equity strategies aimed at creating the conditions under which high-need schools can thrive.

In both cases, the definitions of school district, university and individual roles were not, in fact, clear. Thus, I want to use these examples to identify how the notion of partnership between districts and universities might be expanded to include the new institutional shapes of education. The specific questions guiding this comparative and reflective study are:

- (1) What can we learn about how unconventional school leadership preparation partnerships might operate in distinct, under-resourced contexts?
- (2) What similarities and differences emerge in how they construct practice-ready leadership pipelines?
- (3) How are equity commitments translated into instructional and organizational leadership practices within these partnerships, and how do local cultural, political and institutional conditions mediate that translation across contexts?

It is much too early to claim either program is a “success” or “failure.” Nevertheless, both offer initial lessons in how to imagine new structures and forms of partnerships. By looking at unconventional settings, the analysis considers how universities can contribute research-based content, supervision and methodological rigor to leadership training, while schools and districts offer authentic problems of practice and opportunities to prototype different models of leadership and leader learning. Together, these entities can reimagine how school communities – indeed, learning communities – are created and sustained in the service of equity and improvement.

The paper proceeds in four parts. First, I offer a brief review of the literature on school-leader preparation and the evolving roles of districts and universities. Next, I introduce each leadership training experience and the contexts in which they were enacted. The third section compares the two cases, showing clear contextual and organizational differences as well as important shared design commitments that supported productive partnership. The paper concludes with lessons learned for imagining partnerships going forward that expand our conceptions of the form and structures of how organizations collaborate to support preparing leaders for equity-centered leadership.

## Reviewing literature on leadership development in districts and universities

School leadership is widely recognized as a critical lever for school improvement, equity and student learning, prompting sustained attention to how principals are prepared for the complex demands of the role. Principals set a compelling vision, uphold instructional and organizational standards, motivate teachers and cultivate community, while orchestrating the conditions under which teachers and students can thrive (Grissom *et al.*, 2021). Their work spans an array of complex managerial and instructional tasks that require simultaneous attention to teaching and learning, human capital, operations and external accountability pressures (Leithwood *et al.*, 2020). At the same time, the field has moved beyond portraying principals as solitary, “heroic” figures; contemporary accounts emphasize collaborative leadership that empowers others and adapts responsively to local contexts and staff expertise (Day & Gurr, 2014). For SLs working in disadvantaged communities, there is a further focus on strong moral purpose and equity commitment as defining features of effective leadership, particularly in schools serving historically marginalized students (Moral *et al.*, 2020; Radd *et al.*, 2021). Effective leadership preparation can support substantive, rather than symbolic, efforts at school improvement (Narayanan & McCluskey, 2025).

Compounding the challenge, the principal’s job is difficult and labor-intensive, and many systems face shortages of qualified leaders. Across studies, it is hard to identify stable patterns of leadership recruitment and development based on age, experience or education alone. Instead, features of the job – such as constrained professional autonomy, heavy administrative demands and complex accountability requirements – often drive attrition. Turnover is especially pronounced in high-needs schools (Snodgrass Rangel, 2018). In the United States, high turnover has been linked to stress and the persistent challenges of working in under-resourced communities, with research documenting that principal exits depress student achievement and increase teacher turnover, thereby amplifying organizational instability (Grissom & Bartanen, 2019).

Given these responsibilities and the high stakes of the role, an important question is how effectively principals are identified and developed. One way to frame this topic is the idea of leadership “pipelines” – coordinated systems of recruitment, preparation, mentoring, placement, induction and ongoing support that reliably deliver well-qualified candidates to school leadership roles (Turnbull *et al.*, 2016). Yet preparation systems remain fragmented: traditional university programs often misalign with district needs, while emergent district-led and third-sector pipelines vary in design quality, inclusion of APs and coherence across recruitment, preparation and induction (Turnbull *et al.*, 2015).

Historically in the United States, universities have been the primary providers of leadership credentials, often operating parallel to, rather than in partnership with, school districts and their human resource systems. In many locales, universities have certified individuals, and districts subsequently hire from the resulting pool of candidates, with limited alignment between program experiences and district selection, placement and support processes (Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 2022). This disjuncture has prompted calls to better integrate preparation with local contexts and workforce needs, including clearer role definitions, competency-based selection and structured, job-embedded practice (Crow & Whiteman, 2016; Turnbull *et al.*, 2015).

Multiple studies identify a persistent gap in leadership preparation programs’ attention to developing equity-focused beliefs and practices (Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 2022; Ishimaru & Galloway, 2014). University programs, in particular, have been criticized for insufficient engagement with social justice, limited attention to race and power, and admissions and curricular practices that disadvantage candidates of color (Diem & Carpenter, 2013; Jacobson & Cypres, 2012; Lochmiller & Chesnut, 2017; Reyes-Guerra *et al.*, 2022). At the district level, informal recruitment practices such as “tapping” further constrain leadership opportunities for candidates from historically underrepresented backgrounds (Myung *et al.*, 2011; Fuller & Young, 2022).

In response, US school districts – often supported by private philanthropy – have experimented with new models that do not always rely on universities as the central node.

This shift has been accompanied by a “grow-your-own” ethos that leverages local talent, contextual knowledge and career lattices within districts. Some districts have instituted mentorship structures, residency or internship experiences and cohort-based preparation that align with district leadership standards and vacancy projections (Turnbull *et al.*, 2015). Related reforms include targeted coaching, role-specific induction and competency-based assessments designed to ensure readiness for the principalship (Gurley *et al.*, 2015). The growing role of school districts in developing their leadership pipelines, including investing time and resources in candidate recruitment and providing funding to candidates, pushes districts to have “skin in the game,” (Fusarelli & Fusarelli, 2023, p. 12). Districts have also expanded their recruitment functions, at times circumventing or redefining the traditional selection role historically played by universities to better match preparation with local needs (Perrone & Tucker, 2019; Reyes-Guerra *et al.*, 2022).

Two examples illustrate the range of leadership pipeline strategies outside university-based programs. Liang and Augustine-Shaw (2016) describe a mentorship initiative pairing new assistant principals with external mentors to support role socialization, instructional leadership and system navigation through coordinated, individualized development. Similarly, the Aspiring Principals Program in New York City provides intensive coaching, mentoring and job-embedded leadership projects to prepare future principals (Gutiérrez *et al.*, 2024). Together, these cases show how mentorship and practice-based learning can be integrated into coherent leadership pathways that extend beyond coursework to meet on-the-job demands.

Much of the research on SL preparation originates in the United States and the United Kingdom, which offers a partial and often Western-centric view even as substantial variation exists within and across those systems (Hallinger & Kovačević, 2019). Outside the United States, the research on school leadership development remains thin. For example, reviews by Eacott and Asuga (2014) and Schleicher (2012) highlight both initial lessons and the limited attention given to leadership preparation in the scholarly literature. The long-running International Study of Principal Preparation (Slater *et al.*, 2018) has also developed some initial frameworks for analyzing principal preparation.

In India – one of the contexts for this study – there remains relatively little peer-reviewed research on school leadership preparation and development, leaving policymakers and practitioners with limited guidance about effective design features (Chugh, 2016; Saravanabhavan *et al.*, 2016). The policy landscape and labor market dynamics present distinctive challenges for leadership development: rapid school expansion in the private sector has tightened the supply of qualified and experienced SLs, and schools frequently struggle to recruit leaders with the required instructional and managerial expertise (Crawford *et al.*, 2022). Recent estimates suggest that nearly a third of secondary schools may operate without a formally designated SL, underscoring the scope of the capacity gap (Mythili, 2025). These pressures mirror international trends: as systems expand access, they simultaneously increase the demand for leaders with refined relational skills to serve increasingly diverse student populations (UNESCO, 2024). Traditional bureaucratic approaches to leadership development, where SLs are identified and promoted based on longevity or relationships with influential actors, appear insufficient in policy environments that emphasize accountability, decentralization and school-level decision-making (Moos *et al.*, 2011). The growth of private schools in particular, which includes many small operations and the expansion of several franchises, has diversified governance arrangements and leadership pipelines, complicating efforts to standardize preparation (Jain *et al.*, 2018).

Scholarship points to significant potential for strengthening school leadership preparation through district–university partnerships, though this literature remains largely US-centric and sparse internationally, including in India. In the United States, such partnerships have been shown to foster collaborative networks, informal mentorship and shared commitments to leading change (Crow & Whiteman, 2016; Goldring *et al.*, 2021; Gurley *et al.*, 2015). Studies also document how partnerships can support mid-career assistant principals through job-embedded learning and coaching (Hayes & Burkett, 2021), broaden access for candidates of

color, and strengthen equity-oriented leadership competencies through intentional recruitment, practical internships and joint learning across institutions (Jackson, 2026; Reyes-Guerra *et al.*, 2022).

Taken together, this literature underscores the critical role of school leaders in shaping instructional quality, organizational stability and equity, while also highlighting persistent challenges in how leaders are prepared, supported and retained. Research from the United States points to growing experimentation with leadership pipelines – particularly district-led and partnership-based models – that aim to better align preparation with local contexts, workforce needs and equity goals. At the same time, the literature remains heavily concentrated in Western contexts, offering limited insight into how leadership preparation unfolds in other national and organizational settings, including rapidly expanding education systems such as India's. This gap raises important questions about how leadership preparation models travel across contexts, how they are shaped by distinct policy and labor market conditions, and what can be learned through systematic comparison. The following section situates this study within its two comparative contexts – Portland, Oregon and Pune, Maharashtra – laying the groundwork for sharing some tentative initial insights into how school leadership preparation is constructed, experienced and interpreted across divergent urban systems.

### Two new partnerships with school systems

In this section, I compare school leadership preparation efforts in two distinct contexts: Portland, Oregon, in the United States and Pune, in the state of Maharashtra, India. At first glance, these contexts appear so different – politically, institutionally and culturally – that comparison might seem unwarranted. Yet I want to use comparison as a reflective and analytic strategy, grounded in my deep involvement in the development, implementation and study of both initiatives. In each case, I have served not only as a researcher but also as a collaborator, offering design support and conducting ongoing inquiry alongside practitioners (Narayanan *et al.*, 2025; Narayanan & Metre, 2026). My positioning provides a unique vantage point for examining how leadership preparation takes shape within – and in response to – very different systems and constraints.

As I describe in more detail below, beyond my firsthand involvement, there are several substantive reasons to place these cases in dialogue. Both Portland and Pune are urban contexts grappling with profound educational inequality and undergoing major shifts in how SLs are trained and how leadership development is imagined. Both examples represent tentative efforts to create meaningful partnerships between universities and practitioners at the district level, challenging conventional preparation pathways that are often disconnected from local needs. Most importantly, comparing these cases allows insight into how similar design aspirations – practice-based learning, collaboration and equity orientation – are pursued under markedly different conditions.

Important contextual differences between the two cases warrant attention. Portland operates as a traditional public school district within a U.S. policy environment shaped by licensure, collective bargaining and district-based governance. Pune's initiative, by contrast, is led by a nonprofit organization embedded within a public-private partnership (PPP) ecosystem. The cities also differ markedly in scale – Portland is a mid-sized US city, while Pune is a rapidly expanding metropolis – and in national policy contexts shaped by distinct historical, regulatory and institutional traditions.

Comparative work of this kind carries risks, as educational leadership is deeply shaped by local cultural, historical and political conditions, limiting efforts to generalize across contexts (Dimmock & Walker, 2005). This study does not aim for direct transferability. Instead, it draws on situated, empirical knowledge to surface design logics and tensions that may be instructive across settings. Notably, both programs operate at the margins of dominant leadership preparation models – where traditional pipelines are misaligned or underdeveloped – making

their comparison particularly useful for rethinking how partnerships can support leadership preparation in high-need contexts.

#### *A city and district in transition*

In 2023, Portland Public Schools (PPS) faced a significant leadership crisis. Several principals had left, and the district struggled to identify qualified replacements. Concurrently, PPS confronted stark inequities in achievement outcomes and graduation rates along racial lines, underscoring the need for leaders who could both stabilize schools and accelerate equitable improvement (ODE, 2025). Portland is also a city with a long history of overt racial discrimination, creating a legacy of structural inequalities (Gibson, 2007; Johnson & Williams, 2010).

Compounding matters, PPS was contending with financial and labor pressures, including a \$40 million budget gap (Pate, 2024). The teachers' union elected to go on strike for the entire month of November, eroding trust with the district and placing school leaders in the middle of an increasingly bitter dispute. The strike was resolved with a new contract guaranteeing greater teacher compensation, but the budget of the underfunded district was further strained. In the aftermath, administrators worked to rebuild trust with families and communities while navigating an emboldened workforce.

At the same time, the district had difficulty identifying leadership candidates who could meet the collection of challenges. Many stakeholders believed that leaders had limited experience with instructional leadership, culturally responsive pedagogy and change management. After visiting several schools, I generally agreed with this assessment: few classes I observed were rigorous, teachers rarely received feedback on instruction, data were not a routine part of departmental planning, and achievement disparities persisted across racial and class lines.

Universities – including the one I was part of – offered leadership preparation programs, but they were not fully aligned with PPS's immediate needs. The district sought equity-minded leaders who were skilled at instructional leadership, vision-setting and mobilizing staff toward measurable, student-centered goals. Meanwhile, universities faced declining enrollments and budget gaps, which pushed them to prioritize maintaining enrollment in leadership certification programs rather than selecting the most promising candidates. As a result, traditional pipelines were ill-suited to producing the practice-ready leaders PPS required.

*FPP: the future principals program.* This specific leadership program grew out of an initiative funded by the Wallace Foundation to support a nation-wide effort to foster district–university partnerships in leadership development. Molle *et al.* (2024) identify early lessons from this effort, including challenges stemming from divergent definitions of equity and misaligned incentives tied to vendor versus stakeholder roles assumed by the university and district, respectively. My institution was one of the partner universities selected by PPS, and through several initial meetings on other related topics, I met two committed district practitioners focused on finding new pathways for developing quality SLs from within the district.

Along with another university colleague, the four of us worked to create an in-house district training program, which we called the future principals program (FPP). We targeted assistant principals (APs), people who already held administrative licenses but had lacked sustained opportunities to lead instructional improvement or school change. Like APs across the country (Armstrong, 2010; Barnett *et al.*, 2012; Goldring *et al.*, 2021), they reported that their day-to-day work was largely managerial – focused on operations, student discipline and other essential but non-instructional tasks. Their experiences were important, but not fully aligned with what research had identified as the most high-leverage leadership practices: ensuring high-quality instruction, using data to identify students needing targeted support, and investing in teachers to deliver consistent, rigorous instruction (Lochmiller & Chesnut, 2017).

Our team developed a plan to identify high-potential assistant principals within PPS. District colleagues drew on their close working relationships with schools to recruit a cohort of eight strong candidates. Selection criteria emphasized a willingness to lead, a demonstrated commitment to equity and a growth-oriented learning mindset. The university partners' role was to design a series of workshops that were both practical and field-embedded, requiring participants not only to learn new leadership skills and mindsets but also to apply them in their schools.

Together, we crafted an authentic performance task: participants had to use school data to identify a real challenge, assemble a cross-functional team to address it, co-construct goals and a plan, and then work toward those concrete results (Narayanan *et al.*, 2025). We called this the "Leadership Change Project," a months-long, equity-centered capstone experience designed to assess participants' ability to lead meaningful change in their school communities. Participants were asked to identify a locally grounded problem of practice using multiple sources of school-based data, draw on their leadership identity to frame the work and conduct a root-cause analysis to surface underlying adaptive challenges. Guided by principles of Improvement Science (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020), they developed a theory of change, designed an intervention and created an action plan that they then implemented by leading a team through the change process.

One example of the project comes from Ana, a second-year AP at an elementary school who led a grade team in strengthening their read-alouds. Mercedes, a fourth-year AP, provided another example; her goal was to reduce class lateness, and she invited her middle school teachers to develop a list of best practices for strong lesson openings that brought students into class rather than pushed them away. In both cases, the FPP participants tracked data – student reading engagement and student lateness, in these two cases – reflected on progress, and iteratively re-designed their interventions. The leadership projects emphasized learning through action rather than scale or guaranteed success, requiring participants to collect and reflect on evidence of impact, attend explicitly to issues of equity and communicate their work clearly through a brief presentation, a one-page written or visual product, and a reflective analysis of their leadership and learning.

Over the course of six months, the cohort met monthly at the university. We began by analyzing case studies of school leaders who had driven concrete improvements through data-informed decision-making (case study described in Narayanan, 2025), examining equity audits to surface systemic disparities (Radd *et al.*, 2021), and learned about the tenets of improvement science (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020). Each session required a tangible deliverable – such as an action plan, a meeting agenda they had led, data they had collected and analyzed, or a clearly framed problem of practice. Rather than use our time for lectures, our sessions were devoted to action. Participants engaged in structured problem-solving with colleagues, generating new strategies and stress-testing plans while considering both technical barriers and deeper adaptive challenges. Recognizing that many leaders were doing their work in isolation, each meeting also included intentional time for community building. In addition, every session featured a focused reading and discussion on a key equity issue to connect leadership practice with equity-centered theory.

The program culminated in capstone presentations to the cohort and invited district leaders. This forum allowed participants to share their results, reflect on their learning and demonstrate leadership dispositions and competencies to those with hiring authority. One participant, Helen, captured the developmental value of this culminating experience:

The project built confidence because presenting in front of the audience that we did allowed us to stand as principals. There's not a lot of spaces where you can actually, as an assistant principal, stand as a principal. You just kinda have to hold a certain space.

These capstones modeled a version of leadership – transparent, data-informed, equity-centered and collaborative – that leaders across the district could emulate.

Alongside notable progress, participants also encountered moments of struggle. Several noted limited prior experience taking the lead on projects; even scheduling meetings or stepping into a visible leadership role felt uncomfortable, given uncertainty about how they would be perceived in their schools. Reflecting the constrained leadership opportunities often available to assistant principals, participants had little experience setting goals, providing feedback or facilitating meetings. We intentionally modeled these practices before asking participants to enact them. While not every initiative achieved its intended outcomes, participants' openness, reflective stance and willingness to iterate offered a practical foundation for addressing future leadership challenges.

Following the program, three participants – including Helen – were hired as principals. Notably, one did not complete the program, one left the district for another opportunity, and the remaining three continued as APs in the district. A second cohort launched the following year; although recruitment was more challenging, the program intensified its practice-based components with site visits and deepened applied learning. Subsequently, the program has entered its third year, maintaining a focus on developing equity-minded instructional leaders prepared to meet PPS's urgent needs.

#### *A new leadership program for a new district*

My experience with the School Leadership Academy (SLA) presented a markedly different context. The core programmatic elements – decisions about design, session structures and leadership content – were broadly similar to those described earlier; however, the institutional, policy and market conditions in which SLA emerged were distinct, shaping both the program's purpose and its implementation.

SLA was an initiative of iTeach Schools, a network of English-medium public schools in India. Founded in 2015 in Pune – a metropolitan area of over seven million residents in western India – iTeach's mission was to provide quality education to children in disadvantaged communities. In Pune, very few public schools extended beyond seventh grade; with limited free public secondary options, many students dropped out after primary school. In response, iTeach was started and, over the years, opened schools aligned to local demand for English-medium public education. The network operated nine schools in Pune and four in Mumbai, serving over 5,000 students.

iTeach explicitly targeted communities of migrants and daily wage earners; most families earned approximately \$3,600–\$4,800 per year and were priced out of even the lowest-cost private schools. The network reported notable outcomes in graduation and exam pass rates, with 92% of students matriculating to degree college – more than three times the national average of 28% (Ministry of Education, 2023). iTeach also innovated around college pathways, student support services and staffing models to meet community needs.

iTeach operated as a PPP between a nongovernmental organization (iTeach) and the municipal government of Pune. PPPs were a relatively new governance structure for schools and remained controversial. As a PPP, municipal authorities provided resources such as infrastructure while contracted organizations assumed responsibility for teacher hiring, performance management, school operations and the provision of instructional quality. PPPs have been controversial; proponents argue that PPPs foster innovation, bypass entrenched bureaucracies and expand organizational capacity (Patrinos *et al.*, 2009), while critics contend that PPPs risked widening inequality and privatizing public goods, diminishing the role of public districts and undermining teacher unions (Verger *et al.*, 2016).

iTeach served students who largely lived in informal settlements across the city and came from highly mobile, low-income households. Many students were children of daily wage laborers who had migrated to Pune in search of work in the city's rapidly expanding economy. As a result, the student population reflected considerable linguistic, caste and religious diversity, with home languages including Marathi, Urdu, Kannada, Hindi and others. Despite this diversity, schools in the iTeach network operated as English-medium institutions,

reflecting a contested but widespread emphasis on English proficiency as a pathway to participation in the global economy (Jain *et al.*, 2018). Within this multilingual context, the network was only beginning to grapple systematically with students' varied learning needs, posing important challenges for school leaders seeking to support teachers, strengthen instructional practice and advance equity amid constrained resources.

Beginning in the years leading up to SLA, as iTeach expanded, they struggled to identify and develop excellent SLs. India had few training programs dedicated to school leaders, and the development of new SLs remained largely absent from the national education landscape (Chugh, 2016; Mythili, 2025). Few universities offered degrees or coursework in educational administration, and the field lacked a robust, shared body of knowledge and practice (Crawford *et al.*, 2022; Saravanabhavan *et al.*, 2016). In practice, many SLs were promoted through bureaucratic relationships rather than competency-based pipelines.

### *The school leadership academy*

To address this gap, iTeach secured private funding, adopted a cost-sharing model in which candidates contributed a modest fee, opened applications in fall 2024 and enrolled the first cohort of 18 candidates by January 2025.

SLA's structure combined virtual and experiential components. The program began with four months of virtual sessions followed by a three-day, in-person boot camp that included school visits, conversations with sitting school leaders, student and teacher panels, and observations of how exemplary schools built strong cultures. I was invited to help design portions of the curriculum and assessment. Given the different licensure landscape and the flexibility afforded to PPPs, my university had limited formal involvement; nevertheless, my experience teaching leadership courses and serving as faculty informed the program design. iTeach also engaged experienced practitioners – former school leaders and leaders from adjacent sectors – to co-design and facilitate several sessions. The culminating performance task required candidates to lead a three-week summer school: designing curriculum; building a cohesive adult culture; ensuring student attendance and persistence (particularly salient because summer school attendance in India was not compulsory) and staging an end-of-program showcase.

SLA participants were being prepared to serve as school leaders – specifically, full heads of school – rather than vice principals or assistant leaders. In the Indian context, the duties of school leaders vary dramatically by sector. In most government schools, leadership roles are largely administrative, with responsibilities focused on data completion, reporting, managing parents and overseeing budgets, and relatively limited engagement with classrooms, curriculum or teacher development (Mythili, 2025). SLA was intentionally designed to challenge and expand this prevailing model by introducing a more globally informed conception of school leadership. The program emphasized instructional leadership, teacher coaching, problem-solving around teaching and learning, and attention to school culture. Participants were expected to support teachers in adapting instruction to diverse student populations and local community contexts, reflecting SLA's broader effort to redefine “authentic” leadership work in non-government and partnership-based schools. They were trained in conducting rigorous teacher observations, analyzing classroom data to identify struggling students and leading coaching conversations with teachers.

Unlike the FPP, SLA participants entered without prior school-level leadership experience. Some had served as instructional coaches, but none had been principals or assistant principals. As a result, the experience was demanding. During the three-week summer term, however, candidates received daily coaching, engaged in structured cohort debriefs, and learned from one another's trials and adjustments. The most persistent challenge was student attendance: many students were accustomed to leaving mid-summer to return from urban informal settlements to their home villages. In response, candidates adapted instructional plans to incorporate compelling projects and extracurricular activities and conducted targeted family

outreach to communicate that the three-week summer school would be both beneficial and enjoyable.

The program concluded with a showcase in which students presented a range of art, science, and mathematics projects to families and community members. Although initial learning goals were not uniformly achieved, measurable progress was evident. More importantly for leadership development, candidates practiced setting clear goals, providing actionable feedback to teachers and making iterative, real-time changes based on evidence. At the conclusion of the program, four participants were hired as assistant school leaders, and two were appointed as SLs, signaling that SLA functioned as a practice-based pipeline responsive to the network's leadership needs.

### **Comparing two training programs: convergent aims, divergent designs**

A central aim of this paper is to place the two leadership preparation efforts in direct comparison. Although both initiatives can be described as leadership preparation programs, their similarities and differences warrant a comparison of similarities and differences. Viewed comparatively, the programs diverge in their organizational homes, governance and funding arrangements, relationships to universities and underlying purposes, even as they converge around shared commitments to practice-based learning and equity-oriented leadership. Most relevantly, there are marked differences in the nature of the partnership between implementers of the programs; in fact, in the case of SLA, even the terms "university" and "district" don't fully apply.

These contrasts reflect broader shifts in the school leadership landscape, including changing district expectations, variable resource constraints, growing privatization and uneven university involvement across contexts. In this section, I systematically lay out key similarities and differences across the two sites with the goal of exploring how and why these programs took the forms they did. Additionally, I want to highlight the range of partnership configurations that leadership preparation can assume under different institutional and policy conditions.

#### *Key differences across partnerships*

Unique factors shaped each partnership, and these contingencies mattered. The availability of institutional space and time, the presence or absence of dedicated funding, the governance structures that defined who could authorize professional learning, and the histories of university engagement in each locale all conditioned what was possible. Naming these elements up front helps clarify why two programs that share common goals – strengthening instructional leadership, building pipelines, a focus on educational equity, and connecting learning to practice – nonetheless took different forms.

First, in FPP, my role as a university-based partner was central. Though my university did not explicitly support the program, I was able to use university resources to host monthly training sessions and collaborate with a university colleague to design the curriculum. We placed particular emphasis on creating a practice-based task that our participants could carry out between sessions – authentic, feasible and directly connected to problems of practice in their schools. This authentic learning task required design, tinkering, reflections and multiple iterations as our participants began implementing their learning. Our district partners were essential in participant recruitment and supported with planning and facilitating the sessions. Participants consistently reported valuing the protected space, the sense of community, the chance to exercise leadership and the structured opportunity to try things out.

Furthermore, a private grant played a major role. The university partnership was essential to eligibility for Wallace Foundation funding; the grant was awarded to PPS, but the district was required to have a university partner. Wallace's explicit goal included reshaping university educational leadership curricula as part of its broader effort to strengthen principal pipelines.

This funding architecture set expectations, created accountability mechanisms and incentivized tighter alignment between district needs and university-based preparation. However, as the university was not prepared or committed to institutionalizing such changes, our effort represented a first step to developing a district-university partnership in support of a leadership pathway.

FPP focused on training district personnel already working in PPS. This choice rested on two premises: first, that talented future leaders were already in the system; and second, that the district needed to cultivate its own pipeline rather than conduct wider regional or national searches. The approach, therefore, coupled talent identification with targeted development, aiming to translate local knowledge and relationships into readiness for leadership roles. In this sense, the program was both selective and developmental: it sought to meet immediate district staffing needs while building long-term capacity.

We were also able to use influence within the district to execute essential organizational moves. Recruitment ran through formal channels – such as the principal’s weekly leadership memo – and informally through pitches made during leadership-coach visits. Crucially, we persuaded principals and central office leaders to allow APs to be out of their buildings for a full day each month. This was not a trivial ask; APs had rarely, if ever, received contextualized professional development in PPS, and protecting that time required negotiation and follow-through. We considered the request both reasonable and necessary, but it was still novel. Finally, we regularly invited key district decision-makers – assistant superintendents, HR representatives and veteran principals – to program sessions. This served a dual purpose: leaders could see promising candidates in action, and participants could make a substantive case for their readiness for the next step in school leadership.

SLA provided several contrasts. My role as a university affiliate was much more tangential. iTeach operated in a broader ecosystem that higher education had largely abandoned. In fact, my participation was almost happenstance; I met the founders of iTeach, and they invited me to help with their development of SLA. Their agility as an NGO allowed this relationship to happen, and my prior experience as a school leader myself was more relevant than my current role as a university faculty member. I wasn’t able to figure out how to draw on my university resources – other than my time – to support SLA.

Furthermore, many SLA participants were “homegrown,” a response to a lack of SL preparation programs in India. School leaders in private schools in India did not require formal certification and were therefore not typically sourced through university leadership programs. Universities in India paid little attention to iTeach. I couldn’t find any studies describing their work in school leadership; there were scant professional development collaborations or formal relationships with universities. As a result, the connective tissue between iTeach and higher education was weak to nonexistent. This institutional distance shaped not just who designed and delivered training, but also whose knowledge counted as authoritative and which forms of evidence were seen as legitimate in guiding improvement.

Within iTeach/SLA, my role was partially facilitative and partially advisory. I co-facilitated a subset of sessions, offered input on curriculum design, and visited schools to see SLA candidates both during workshops and the three-week summer school experience. I also documented several aspects of the program, capturing reflections as candidates moved through SLA. In this sense, my contribution was less about leading SLA and more about supporting with facilitation, making the work visible, offering formative feedback and helping with elements of the program design.

SLA was a partnership, but one involving nontraditional partners. As a PPP, it depended on private funders who not only supported iTeach financially but also provided feedback on the model’s design and evolution. Close relationships with private-sector leaders – spanning industries such as energy and construction technology – brought a strong orientation toward innovation, rapid iteration and disciplined responsiveness. Initiatives that did not produce value did not persist; pain points were named and addressed quickly. This partnership thus had a different cadence and sensibility from university–district collaborations: agile, experimental

and expressly pragmatic about reallocating attention to what worked. The result was a distinctive sense of partnership – one less anchored in formal credentialing or academic oversight and more in shared problem-solving under real operational constraints.

These two cases highlight how leadership preparation is shaped not only by local context but also by the kinds of partnerships that are possible within those contexts. In Portland, FPP was embedded in a public school district that could protect time, identify internal candidates and leverage grant funding, with the university serving as a central – though not fully institutionalized – partner in curriculum design and professional learning. In Pune, SLA developed in a setting where universities played little role in leadership preparation, positioning an NGO and private-sector partners at the center and emphasizing speed, experimentation and practical problem-solving. These differences reflect contrasting policy environments, organizational capacities and histories of collaboration, as well as fundamentally different conceptions of what a partnership between schools, universities and other actors can look like. At the same time, looking across the cases also reveals shared commitments and design choices that cut across these distinctions, which the next section explores.

#### *Shared logics across two programs: partnerships, adult learning and equity*

Having described important differences between FPP and SLA, I now turn to their similarities. In this section, I argue that their success rested on three common threads: robust partnerships that extend schools' capacity, adult-learning design anchored in andragogy (Knowles *et al.*, 2005) and an explicit commitment to equity that guided instructional and organizational decisions. Tracing these similarities clarifies how varied ecosystems can support pragmatic future collaborations.

First, both programs were supported by partnerships. The success of both the FPP and SLA relied on strong, well-structured collaboration. In my experience, these partnerships demonstrated that schools and school systems cannot do everything by themselves. The training of talent is one area in particular where schools often struggle. Effective training takes time, planning, access to cases and exemplars and repeated practice working with adult learners. Schools can certainly engage in human talent development; it is simply not a natural or primary function of most school systems, which are designed around student-facing operations and the practical realities of managing large organizations. Partnerships help bridge that gap by supplying dedicated design capacity, coaching expertise and protected time – resources that are scarce in day-to-day school work.

Another similarity is the reliance on principles of andragogy. Though the forms and contexts of the two programs differed, both were grounded in adult-learning principles (Knowles *et al.*, 2005). We designed well-scaffolded, authentic learning experiences – supported by strong coaching – to foster leadership competencies. As many scholars have noted, preparing candidates for the complex work of school leadership requires careful attention to providing practical learning opportunities that can be applied in actual school contexts (Crow & Whiteman, 2016; Havard *et al.*, 2010). Knowles *et al.*'s (2005) model outlines six foundational understandings: adults must understand and believe in the purpose of learning; they value self-direction and choice; their prior experiences should be recognized and leveraged; they are motivated by the chance to apply learning immediately; they are “life-centered” rather than “content-centered,” seeking learning that enables them to perform relevant tasks; and they respond to both extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. These principles help interpret leadership design and training. For example, Thessin *et al.* (2020) applied andragogical principles in a mentorship framework for educational administration, similarly emphasizing adult learning. Similarly, Havard *et al.* (2010) explored how authentic leadership experiences – placing candidates in real leadership positions with real stakes – could lead to meaningful learning opportunities and increase the confidence of future leaders. Schools can, of course, become skilled at applying andragogical principles; nevertheless, university-based

practitioners – under the right mindsets and conditions – can bring specialized experience in designing learning for adults, in service of school-based training.

Third, both programs shared an explicit commitment to equity. With political pressure on school districts and other institutions in the United States to purge references to equity and diversity (Ishimaru & Galloway, 2014; Jayakumar & Kohli, 2023), there have been moves toward teacher censorship, book bans, and the sidelining of marginalized scholars' voices. Meanwhile, structural inequities in US education endure, including pronounced disparities in funding, community investment, criminalization and school quality (Lewis & Diamond, 2020).

In India, the educational landscape shares many of the same qualities, with added tensions stemming from increasing religious fundamentalism that discriminates against Muslim and low-caste communities. Ethnonationalism has also pushed caste assimilation and religious defamation (Natrajan, 2022), accompanied by overt discrimination and state-sanctioned violence (Bhatia, 2024). Education is a central site for these politics of difference (Chandras, 2019; Lall & Anand, 2022). Alongside this are the continued marginalization of caste-oppressed communities and heartbreaking poverty, often concentrated in urban informal settlements. Schools that take these challenges seriously need leaders who place equity at the center of their work (Ishimaru & Galloway, 2014; Radd *et al.*, 2021).

In this spirit, both programs made equitable outcomes for students an explicit focus. Candidates in both programs were trained to be responsive, empathetic and self-aware about cultural biases, and to support their teachers in identifying and addressing bias in practice. In FPP, this took the form of examining case studies and reading about equitable leadership. In SLA, this took the form of fostering continual reflection on candidates' leadership identities and positioning a focus on student achievement data within the context of India's stark educational inequality. Furthermore, in both programs, we practiced concrete ideas for confronting discriminatory discipline, addressing gaps in early literacy, moving away from disengaging pedagogy and rejecting curricular materials that were alienating, outdated or disconnected from students' lived realities.

For example, in one iTeach classroom, I watched a teacher lead a lesson on *No-Nonsense Nandhini*, a picture book about the remarkable efforts of a single mother in rural India supporting her child's dreams. The story reflects the reality of many students' lives, yet such family experiences are rarely represented in India's mainstream curriculum. In another classroom, a teacher screened a powerful scene from the television series *Adolescence* and then facilitated a conversation among teenagers about toxic masculinity. In that case, the SL candidate had explicitly encouraged her staff to explore resources that opened space for these topics while connecting them to core academic skills. These moments illustrated the practical ways equity commitments were translated into classroom decisions, professional learning and leadership routines.

### Conclusions: comparative perspectives and expansive ideas of partnerships

This comparative analysis addressed three guiding research questions by examining how two unconventional leadership preparation partnerships operated in under-resourced contexts, how they constructed practice-ready pipelines, and how equity commitments were enacted in each setting. The analysis demonstrates that leadership preparation can function outside traditional university-centric models, particularly where dominant pipelines are weak or misaligned. Across Portland and Pune, partnerships emerged as adaptive responses to local constraints and capacities, highlighting the central role of context in shaping preparation models.

The cases also reveal convergences and divergences in partnership design. Despite differences in governance, funding and university involvement, both programs emphasized practice-based learning, coaching, cohort support and attention to equity. Equity, however, was enacted differently across contexts – shaped by local political histories, labor markets and

institutional norms. In Portland, equity was tied to district accountability and instructional leadership within public systems, while in Pune, it took the form of pragmatic problem-solving within a semi-private ecosystem. These findings underscore that equity-oriented leadership preparation may share guiding principles, but its enactment is necessarily contingent on local cultural, political and institutional conditions.

A key insight from this comparative analysis is that the idea of “partnership” itself can be expanded to encompass a wider range of institutional forms. Drawing on my dual role as researcher and participant in two innovative efforts – one embedded in a US district–university collaboration and the other emerging from an NGO-led network in India – this comparison illustrates how context and institutional arrangements shape leadership preparation. Examined side by side, the cases reveal how unconventional partnerships respond to local constraints and possibilities. From this analysis, I distill three broad lessons for building partnerships in under-resourced settings: the value of flexible definitions of “school” and “university,” the need to engage directly with funding realities, and the importance of grounding leadership preparation in local cultural contexts.

#### *Partnerships in practice: insights for leadership preparation across contexts*

I draw three broad lessons from my comparison of SLA and FPP. These lessons are not offered as prescriptive solutions, but as orienting insights grounded in my lived experience across contrasting systems, intended to surface possibilities and caution against early constraints – particularly for partnerships grounded in equity-focused aims.

First, ideas about what counts as a school and what role the university should play are in flux. In the United States, the role of universities – especially Graduate Schools of Education – has been called into question, with their functions shifting in response to policy, market and accountability pressures (Jacobson & Cypres, 2012; Reyes-Guerra *et al.*, 2022; Turnbull *et al.*, 2015). Similarly, in India, there are fierce debates about what schools can and should look like, with variations in staffing, governance structures and scale actively contested (Härmä, 2021; Jain *et al.*, 2018). Furthermore, the role of universities in leadership preparation has largely been absent in India (Crawford *et al.*, 2022; Saravanabhavan *et al.*, 2016). Accepting this reality means being flexible about the shapes and types of partnerships we attempt – district-led, university-enabled, third-sector-supported or hybrid forms that do not fit traditional categories. A related consequence is recognizing that any school–university partnership, in whatever form, may not last long. That impermanence is not a reason to wait. Rather, it underscores the need to enact thoughtful partnerships now, to try new modes and to learn from prototypes that meet immediate needs while remaining open to evolution.

Second is an urge to be pragmatic about financial realities. This may mean being open to new funding sources, which inevitably complicates governance and accountability. FPP, for example, was driven by the Wallace grant – not only the funding but also the time, space and legitimacy from the grant fostered collaboration. An important consideration is the university’s need to sustain student enrollment as a key source of funding to help sustain staffing and infrastructure. Other successful pilots might emphasize tying partnership agreements to enrollment in a university program; such models have merits but may not meet the immediate needs of a district or develop current and prospective leaders already positioned to serve schools.

In India, the funding terrain is different but no less critical: educators often need to follow the interests of private funders to launch innovative work, but that does not mean being beholden to them. The broader lesson is straightforward: people serious about new partnerships must be equally serious about funding – treating finance as a design element, aligning resource models with purposes and timelines, and erecting guardrails that protect educational aims.

Finally, drawing on Dimmock and Walker’s (2005) argument that educational leadership is culturally bounded, this comparison underscores that partnerships must be designed with

attention to local political, social and organizational conditions rather than relying on Western-centric or universalized models. Different contexts require different structures and supports. In Portland, histories of racial exclusion and inequality necessitated a focus on cultivating leaders equipped to engage communities and rebuild trust through instructional leadership. In India, by contrast, leaders needed to operate effectively within a semi-private, entrepreneurial environment, where pragmatism and a willingness to navigate – or bypass – bureaucratic constraints were often essential. These cases illustrate how leadership preparation must be culturally and institutionally situated, even when guided by shared principles.

These commitments – flexible institutional roles, serious attention to funding and cultural attunement – should be applied within an explicit framing of equity in education. We must recognize that schooling has long produced social inequality; it can function as a mechanism for hoarding privilege and creating uneven opportunity (Ishimaru & Galloway, 2014; Paglayan, 2024; Radd *et al.*, 2021). This is every bit as true in India (Kumar, 2015) as it is in the United States (Lewis & Diamond, 2020), and likely holds globally.

My advocacy is for openness to different solutions – some driven by philanthropy, some privatized, many challenging long-standing norms of public education. Critics have warned that privatization can deepen inequalities along lines of race, class, caste and other markers (Härmä, 2021; Jain *et al.*, 2018). I do not think such outcomes are inevitable, but I agree they are plausible – indeed, they are plausible under any governance regime that lacks explicit, enforceable commitments to justice.

If we are serious about believing that education can contribute to an equitable society, and we take seriously the evidence for the role of transformative school leadership (Grissom *et al.*, 2021; Leithwood *et al.*, 2020), and we are committed to universities and districts working for mutual benefit, then our actions must be enacted within a shared value system that centers equity and social justice (Ishimaru & Galloway, 2014). We should also be clear-eyed that past invocations of equity have, at times, reproduced injustice (Lewis & Diamond, 2020). That history underscores the need for professional norms that prioritize the design of more just and equitable opportunities for all. In that spirit, the lessons I have offered can function as orienting questions for future collaborations: How can we flex institutional roles to meet community needs now? How will we seek resources to support leadership preparation without compromising foundational values? And how will local cultural realities guide program design and leadership practice? Engaging these questions through partnerships with communities, schools and educators committed to leadership preparation will strengthen the likelihood that collaborations are not only durable but also oriented toward meaningful equity-focused transformation.

### Ethical statement

This manuscript is based on studies that received approval from the appropriate Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to commencement. All research procedures were conducted in accordance with applicable ethical guidelines and regulations for research involving human participants. Documentation is available to provide evidence of the ethics review board clearance upon request.

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