

TENNESSEE'S PRINCIPAL APPRENTICESHIP PROGRAM

In 2025-2026, [Tennessee launched](#) one of the nation's first Principal Registered Apprenticeship Programs (PRAP) through a partnership between the Tennessee Department of Education, the Tennessee Department of Labor, the US Department of Labor, Austin Peay State University (APSU), and over 50 local school districts. The program was designed to strengthen educator leadership and talent development pipelines while creating a more affordable, job-embedded pathway into school leadership.

The apprenticeship emerged from Tennessee's broader educator workforce strategy, which includes "grow your own" pathways beginning in high school teaching academies, tuition-free community college, and extending through teacher and principal preparation. There were three primary, interconnected goals with this initiative: strengthen principal quality, [improve educator retention](#), and [support stronger student outcomes](#).

In the 2025-2026 school year, the PRAP included 120 registered apprentices across more than 50 districts statewide, retaining 116 apprentices through graduation at an astonishing 97% matriculation and completion rate for this program.

Redesigning Leadership Preparation Around Experience-Centered Learning and Cross-Sector Partnership

Before the apprenticeship model was developed, APSU leadership identified significant challenges within traditional principal preparation. Program leaders described earlier coursework as disconnected from the realities of school leadership and lacking consistency across instructors and field experiences.

In response, APSU undertook a full redesign of its instructional leadership program. Faculty aligned all coursework to [Tennessee Instructional Leadership Standards](#) (TILS), rewrote courses into accelerated seven-week modules, and transitioned the program to a fully online format to increase accessibility for working educators. The principal apprenticeship effort emerged alongside this broader redesign, which had already shifted toward a more practice-based, experience-centered model. As apprenticeship funding and registration opportunities became available through the state and the US Department of Labor, APSU and state partners saw an opportunity to formalize and support that existing work through a Registered Apprenticeship framework that reduced financial barriers for aspiring school leaders.

Nationally, the [average tenure of a school principal](#) is approximately 4 years, with nearly 1 in 5 leaving their school each year. Because of this high turnover rate, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) tracks ongoing district investments in "pipeline activities," with roughly 75% of school districts nationwide implementing at least one formal, on-the-job principal development domain to maintain leadership stability. Consistent with funding from [research conducted by the Wallace Foundation](#), 77% of principal candidates nationally report having some kind of internship, but only 46% feel the experience adequately prepared them. Only about half of aspiring principals get to execute core leadership responsibilities like decision-making and managing.

Program leaders incorporated several supports associated with high-quality leadership development, including:

- Monthly case studies completed in collaborative small groups
- Ongoing coaching and mentorship from practicing principals
- Regular instructor engagement and synchronous learning opportunities
- Rubrics and instructional materials to improve program consistency across faculty

This newly designed apprenticeship program was made possible through close collaboration among state agencies, higher education, and local districts.

- **IHE Leadership:** As an early pioneer in [Registered Teacher Apprenticeship Programs \(RTAP\)](#), APSU drew on prior experience navigating US Department of Labor requirements and applied lessons learned from teacher apprenticeship implementation to develop the principal apprenticeship model.
- **State Leadership:** The program secured \$800,000 in federal funding through the Tennessee Department of Education for the 2025-2026 school year, providing up to \$6,425 per apprentice to cover tuition and program costs, significantly reducing financial barriers to entry.
- **District Leadership:** Districts played an important role in implementation by identifying aspiring leaders, providing mentor principals, supporting release time for apprentices, and embedding apprenticeship assignments into school-based leadership work. Mentor principals supervised job-embedded activities, provided ongoing coaching, and completed structured evaluations aligned to apprentice growth and performance.



The resulting model positioned principal preparation not as a standalone program, but as a coordinated workforce development strategy.

Lessons and Considerations for Future Implementation

As Tennessee continues to refine the program, state and Institute of Higher Education (IHE) leaders have identified several lessons from the first year of its implementation.

1. Partners emphasized the importance of strong communication and clearly defined roles among districts, the state, and IHEs. Apprenticeships require extensive documentation; therefore, compliance reporting, coordination, and administrative capacity quickly became hurdles to implementation.
2. Leaders stressed the importance of balancing scale with selectivity for apprentice candidates. While Tennessee aimed to expand access to leadership pathways, state officials also noted the need to identify candidates with strong instructional leadership potential and a demonstrated commitment to their school communities.
3. Leaders pointed to long-term [funding](#) sustainability as an ongoing challenge. Although the program initially reduced financial barriers through state-supported scholarships and grants, funding for the 2026-2027 school year is not yet secured. This highlights the ongoing challenge of building a sustained financial infrastructure to support the program long term.
4. Tennessee leaders continue to consider how principal apprenticeships fit within the state's broader educator workforce ecosystem. Unlike teacher shortages, principal vacancies are less frequent. Many aspiring leaders may wait years before moving into building leadership positions. As a result, the state is exploring how apprenticeship models might also support instructional coaches, assistant principals, and other school-based leadership roles as principal roles remain stable.



Even with these ongoing questions, Tennessee's experience demonstrates how states can use apprenticeship strategies to redesign leadership preparation around practice and partnership. By aligning state policy, district needs, and educator preparation programs, Tennessee is building a more connected instructional leadership pipeline that supports educators and students over the long term.