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# The Second Most Important Decision: Protocol for Partnering for Intern Placement

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For principal preparation program success, the selection of an aspiring school administrator's internship placement/mentor principal is second in importance only to the decision about whom to select into the program. In this article, we review the scant literature on internship placement assignment processes, none of which are specific to rural places. We then describe the Principal Preparation for Excellence and Equity in Rural Schools (PPEERS) program – a partnership of 12 rural districts and a large public university – and explain the process by which the partnership co-designed their internship placement protocol and Assignment of Internship Placements tool. We then introduce the protocol, which involves program leaders traveling to each rural partner district across a wide geographic area to meet with the superintendent and District Point Person – the cabinet-level administrator who is the lead district liaison for PPEERS – to consensually select a mentor principal/internship site for each Intern, using the internship tool, which identifies factors to select for and to avoid. After describing the protocol and introducing the tool, we outline our action research methods. Utilizing a two-phase reflective inquiry process, we drew on perceptions of leadership coaches, district partners, and program leaders to reflect on contextual considerations, the impact of the tool, and ways to improve our placement practice. Contextual considerations reflect realities of rural districts, including limited placement choices in small districts, limited number of principals who fit the mentor principal criteria, and micropolitical considerations. Improvements to our process include considering the entire leadership team of a school when selecting placements; including additions to the tool regarding consideration of equity, diversity, and inclusion, as well as addition of a "Goldilocks school" element; and ideas for increasing mentor principal readiness and intern knowledge of curriculum and pedagogy when placed in a school level that is unfamiliar to them. In these ways the partnership can leverage rural partner assets and address contextual challenges. We conclude with implications for rural school leader preparation programs.

***Keywords*: principal preparation, internship, mentor principal, partnership, intern placement**

For principal preparation program graduate success – measured in terms of placement in an administrative position, positive evaluation by supervisors, and promotion – the selection of an aspiring school administrator's internship[1] placement/mentor principal is second in importance only to the decision about whom to select into a leadership preparation program. This is the understanding that our team has come to after six years of leading a two-year, partnership-based, grant-funded rural leadership preparation program that centers on a full-time, yearlong internship. Based on this understanding, district partners and university program leaders have collaboratively

[1] Within our program, we capitalize the roles Intern, Leadership Coach, and Mentor Principal as a sign of respect, but we recognize that they are typically not capitalized in the literature.

designed a protocol and tool for making the most advantageous internship placement assignments. Drawing on the scant literature regarding internship placement assignment processes, none of which centers on rural leadership preparation, we describe the Principal Preparation for Excellence and Equity in Rural Schools (PPEERS) program, explain the process by which we have developed our internship placement protocol, and introduce the protocol and tool. We then outline our action research methods and share our findings. We conclude with implications for leadership preparation programs and future research.

## Review of the Literature

### Rural School Leadership

Rural schools offer bountiful assets. They are often centers of their communities (Tieken, 2014). They are advantaged by "abundant social capital" (Redding & Walberg, 2012, p. 31) and provide a strong sense of place and belonging (Convery et al., 2012). Rural communities have greater cohesion than their urban counterparts (McShane & Smarick, 2018) and "place emphasis on family blood lines, kinship relationships, family preservation, and a cultural emphasis on taking care of kinfolk" (Curtin & Cohn, 2015, para. 3). Rural students typically have higher reading and math scores than their urban counterparts on National Assessment of Educational Progress tests (Malkus, 2018).

Rural schools also face challenges, including "deep and persistent poverty" that is often intergenerational (LaValley, 2018, p. 4) and higher rates of child poverty. Rural communities often have low population density and geographic isolation as well as racial segregation (Fusarelli et al., 2018). Rural schools often struggle with high teacher turnover, low teacher quality, and poor working conditions (Fusarelli et al., 2018). Rural principals contend with a lack of resources, multifaceted roles and responsibilities, and the pressure associated with high visibility within the community (Klocko & Justis, 2019; Preston & Barnes, 2017; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). Rural principals must "emphasize cultural responsiveness and attentiveness to place and context" (Johnson & Reynolds, 2011, p. 1).

Further, shortages of principals are particularly acute in rural areas (Browne-Ferrigno & Allen, 2014; Versland, 2013), and rural districts struggle to recruit and retain effective principals, especially for high-needs schools (Pjanowski et al., 2009). Rural schools receive significantly fewer applications for principals (Pjanowski et al., 2009) and have higher rates of attrition than those of suburban and urban districts (Lochmiller et al., 2016; Versland, 2013). The challenges rural districts face recruiting and retaining principals are expected to grow more acute in coming decades (Cruzeiro & Boone, 2009).

### Rural School Leadership Preparation

The unique qualities of rural communities and schools, as outlined in the paragraphs above, require unique rural school leadership (Hewitt & Rumley, 2020). As such, "growing your own" school leaders is the best solution for rural districts (Wood et al., 2013). Such programs should reflect research about exemplary principal preparation.

Key features of exemplary principal preparation programs include "quality internships that provide intensive developmental opportunities to apply leadership knowledge and skills under the guidance of an expert practitioner–mentor" (Orr & Orphanos, 2011, p. 22). Internships differ in structure and duration, often varying widely in required hands-on hours from 110–300 or more (Campbell & Parker, 2016). Reyes-Guerra and Barnett (2017) identified three types of field experience designs for principal preparation: (1) full-time job-embedded internships that involve full engagement in the internship experience, typically for a semester or full school year; (2) detached internships – the most common – that are completed by educators working full-time as certificated professionals and completing internship tasks in snippets of time outside of their regular duties; and (3) course-embedded internships, which involve a number of field-based experiences integrated into various courses.

Beyond the structure of the internship itself, the Mentor Principal plays a crucial role in growing the intern. Mentoring, defined as an "intentional, strategic relationship to support and guide" (Swaminathan & Reed, 2020, p. 219), involves helping an intern assimilate into the role of leader and establish their professional network; contributing to the professional growth and satisfaction of interns; serving as a confidant; and

engaging in a reciprocal relationship such that the mentor grows in skills and satisfaction (Geismar et al., 2000). Research (Thessin et al., 2020) indicates that the degree to which administrative interns are assigned meaningful, authentic roles and tasks during the internship is based at least in part on the degree to which interns and Mentor Principals (MPs) develop a productive partnership marked by relational trust. Further, effective mentoring involves socialization into the role, constructive feedback, and reflection (Adams, 2013; Geer et al., 2014; Schechter, 2014). Yet, while there is evidence that the internship is an "important ingredient" (Reyes-Guerra & Barnett, 2017, p. 241) of leadership preparation and that MPs are key to effective internships; "much of the internship literature tends to ignore or gloss over the selection, training, and monitoring of mentors" (p. 244).

Indeed, the existing literature offers little specific description or documentation of how mentors are selected, and "despite its importance to the success of the internship . . . mentor selection is often based more on convenience than on considerations of effectiveness" (Geismar et al., 2000, p. 235) and is "heavily dependent on district leadership and politically expedient criteria" (Reyes-Guerra & Barnett, 2017, p. 242). Additionally, "rural schools may face a shortage of expert practitioners to mentor" interns (Versland, 2013, p. 16). As an exception to these generalities, Woodrum et al. (2014) described the process used for selecting Mentor Principals for the Alliance for Leading and Learning (ALL) program, a grant-funded leadership preparation program involving a partnership among the Albuquerque Public Schools (APS), the University of New Mexico, and the New Mexico School Leadership Institute:

> Interns complete an interest inventory, which identifies their strengths, goals, leadership characteristics they value, programs with which they hope to work . . . and school grade level. Principals interested in serving as mentors also apply for their positions . . . Faculty members . . . also offer insights about the interns' strengths, needs, and dispositions. The ALL management team assembles the [materials] . . . and makes tentative matches of interns and coopering principals. APS associate superintendents make the final decision about the placements. (p. 58)

In this model, all members of the partnership played a role in internship placement assignments, with associate superintendents making the final decisions. This process is in sharp contrast to that of detached internships in which an intern's principal typically serves as de facto Mentor Principal. In the following section, we describe the PPEERS program, which centers on a full-time, job-embedded internship under the guidance of an expert practitioner–mentor.

### Principal Preparation for Excellence and Equity in Rural Schools (PPEERS)

PPEERS is a "grow your own" (Wood et al., 2013) program centered on the specialized educational leadership needed by rural principals to leverage the assets of rural places and address the challenges faced by rural schools (Hewitt & Rumley 2020). Launched in 2016, PPEERS is a mutualistic research-practice partnership of 12 rural districts and a large public university in the Southeastern United States that is focused on a persistent problem of practice in partner districts – a shallow and insufficient pool of educators to serve as effective school leaders, especially in high-needs schools. The partnership works to recruit, select, prepare, and place diverse administrators for high-needs rural schools. PPEERS is a two-year, grant-supported program that recruits high potential certified educators from partner districts (e.g., teachers, instructional coaches, counselors) into the leadership preparation program. The program – co-designed with rural district partners – results in a Masters of School Administration degree and initial principal licensure. The partnership began in 2016 and is currently preparing its fourth cohort of 20 school leaders.

Our 12 districts span a large geographic area in the Piedmont area of North Carolina and vary in demographic composition from those that are nearly all White (~90%) to some schools that are majority Hispanic. Overall, our partnership includes 222 schools serving more than 100,000 students. Of the 12 districts, two are in counties categorized as rural distant by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), and 10 are in counties

categorized as rural fringe, meaning that they are near (less than five miles) from urbanized areas (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.). Because of their proximity to urban areas, it is not uncommon for teachers and administrators to be lured to better-paying positions in large urban districts. This is one of the challenges faced by most of our districts and one of the reasons for their commitment to our "grow your own" program that allows districts to cultivate leaders who have deep and enduring ties to their rural areas.

PPEERS centers rurality in numerous ways. These include coursework (including a required course, *Rural School Leadership*) and readings across classes (e.g., Tieken's *Why Rural Schools Matter*). Additionally, across classes we utilize rural-focused case studies, simulations based on real situations in our rural partner schools, internship placements in high-needs rural schools, and an equity-change leadership project based on a persistent problem of practice in an intern's rural school. Additionally, during the second year of the program, we hold Internship Seminars biweekly on Thursdays, hosted on a rotating basis in partner districts. Interns and district leaders help to co-design these seminars, featuring innovations, curriculum programs, and experts from districts on topics such as serving Hispanic students and parents. Further, all PPEERS courses have a rural practitioner element, whether it is a partner district administrator who teaches or co-teaches the course, practitioner co-design of project-based learning, guest speaker(s), panel of rural school leaders, etc.

A central component of the PPEERS program is a full-time, yearlong paid internship under the guidance of a Mentor Principal. Additionally, interns benefit from the support of a grant-funded Leadership Coach, who is external to the partner district; is a retired educator with extensive leadership experience, including as a highly effective principal; and serves as a non-evaluative, critical friend to the Intern. Leadership Coaches make two site visits per month to each of their interns, conducting classroom walk-throughs and debriefs with them; checking in with their Mentor Principals; supporting them on their individual Leadership Growth Plans; listening; helping interns to problem-solve and navigate challenges; and reflecting with interns.

The final member of the triad of support – the internship support team – is the clinical internship supervisor – a faculty member with experience as a principal. Supervisors plan and oversee internship seminars, conduct at least two site visits per semester, formally evaluate the intern, and provide additional resources as needed for each Intern. All members of the triad of support for interns – MP, coaches, and clinical internship supervisors – while serving in distinct roles, make themselves *available*, *approachable, and affirming*.

### Internship Placements: Lessons Learned that Informed Development of the Placement Protocol

For our first cohort, district partners placed interns in high-needs rural schools. Similar to the findings of Whitaker et al. (2004), we learned from our first cohort that the experiences of interns in the internship were uneven. In some cases, interns were seen as an extra pair of hands to assist a principal who was in over their head, a principal who was struggling, or a principal who was new to the principalship or the building – or both. In these situations, interns often did not experience strong "elbow learning" (Crawford, 2011). Key to intern development, especially early in the internship, is elbow learning that interns experience by literally and figuratively learning at the elbow of their Mentor Principal through observing, engaging in meaning-making, and reflecting. Mentor principals use think-alouds (van Someren et al., 1994) to make explicit their leadership moves and decisions and engage interns in reflective discussion. Elbow learning is an important component of the broader development of interns over the trajectory of the internship by observing, then participating, and – finally – by leading (Thessin et al., 2020). We learned that MPs who were neither new to the role nor their school and whose schools were stable – even if struggling – were better positioned – and had much greater capacity – to provide meaningful think-alouds, to model adroit leadership, and to promote intern analysis and reflection.

Additionally, some MPs were more willing and able than others to distribute leadership and assign

interns meaningful, substantive leadership roles, such as leading an effort to implement and support a social-emotional learning curriculum, working with professional learning communities (PLCs), leading an effort to support new teachers, and leading a group of teachers in designing and implementing an initiative to increase student attendance. Other interns were more likely to be assigned the "three Bs" – books, busses, and butts (discipline). While this type of service added value to the school, it provided very limited opportunities for interns to develop the skills and competencies needed to be equity-focused change agents.

Other interns, conversely, had amazing experiences in which their principals engaged with them as valued colleagues, discussing challenging issues, working through problems, and explaining their leadership moves and priorities. In these situations, the bond between MP and Intern was strong and tended to endure beyond the internship either as a valued professional relationship in the graduate's professional network or as supervisor when the Intern was hired as an assistant principal for the school. Given the isolation that rural school administrators often experience (Versland, 2013), this enduring relationship is particularly important.

As the PPEERS leadership team, we observed a stark difference among interns' experiences across placements. Fortunately, our funder pushed us to work *with* our partner districts in the future to select the best internship placements possible.

## Partnering to Develop a Protocol for Selecting Internship Placements

Within the framework of our partnership, the PPEERS leadership team and District Point Persons (DPPs) from our partner districts meet monthly (via Zoom, due to the large geographic distances covered by the partnership). DPPs are senior-level administrators (e.g., Assistant Superintendent of Human Resources) who represent the district in the partnership. During monthly DPP meetings, we engage in a co-design segment during which we redesign some element of the PPEERS program. Within this infrastructure, we developed a protocol and tool (see Figure 1) for selecting internship placements for interns. This process has been used for subsequent cohorts to place interns as described in the Appendix and summarized in Figure 1.

## Internship Selection Process

The Internship Placement Selection Tool is part of a larger process through which we engage rural partners in placement decisions. The University team travels to each partner district in January or early February prior to the commencement of the yearlong internship in August to meet with the superintendent and DPP to match each intern with a highly effective Mentor Principal in a high-needs rural school. Because our partner districts are spread across a large geographic area, travel to these rural places is time- and cost-intensive, taking upwards of over two hours to drive to some districts. The commitment to meet in person reflects the importance of these placement decisions and the value we place on consensual decision-making. Prior to this meeting, DPPs and superintendents have conversations to determine a pool of strong potential MPs. When we meet, we discuss placement options and use the tool (see Appendix and Figure 1 below) to inform selection decisions. After making a tentative placement decision consensually, the superintendent reaches out to the prospective MP to discuss the opportunity and, hopefully, to secure the person's commitment to serve as an MP.

MPs are not paid for their service in the role. From the onset of PPEERS, superintendents felt strongly – and continue to feel – that serving as an MP is an honor and an opportunity. As such, superintendents have advocated that MPs not be paid for their service. To date, the partnership has not struggled to secure principals to serve as MPs.

**Figure 1**

*Internship Placement Selection Tool*

| Priorities/Considerations | Concerns/Things to Think About |
|---|---|
| Highest priority: Selection of best Mentor Principal possible (accomplished leader, encouraging, reflective, supportive, strong instructional leader, change agent, collaborator, embodies distributed leadership, etc.). | Avoid placing Interns based on building need (another person in the building, because the principal is new to role or building, school is struggling, etc.). |
| Priority: Demonstrated record of increased student achievement and/or growth in the schools principal has led. | Avoid placing Interns in the same school where they have been teaching. |
| Priority: Demonstrated record of instructional leadership that is documented in principal's annual evaluations. | When possible, avoid placing Interns in a school their children attend or family members work. |
| Consideration: Placement in high-needs school with a strong leader who can serve as Mentor Principal. | When/Where anticipated, avoid placing Interns with principals who may be promoted during the year such that a change in placement and/or Mentor Principal can be anticipated. |
| Consideration: Principal interest in serving as a Mentor Principal and capacity to devote the time and energy necessary to devote to the Intern. | Excellent principals are excellent for all sorts of reasons, but they may not have the capacity or interest to serve as a Mentor Principal. Determining whether the principal can devote the time and energy to the Intern and whether the principal is willing and able to delegate responsibility to the Intern are important considerations. |
| Consideration: Mentor principals who will be mindful that Interns are students who are learning to be school leaders. The Mentor Principal should learn the Intern's strengths, knowledge, skills, and dispositions and be willing to provide opportunities for learning. | Interns are not assistant principals. They have the same legal standing as student teachers. Mentor Principals should take care to assign tasks and supervise Interns closely. |

| Priorities/Considerations | Concerns/Things to Think About |
|---|---|
| Consideration: Making sure Interns get K-12 experience throughout the internship, shadowing, switch experience (2-week period – around April, 2022 – during which the Intern serves at another school), etc. UNCG leadership will work with Superintendents and District Point Persons to ensure a comprehensive K-12 field experience. For each Intern, we will develop a plan for obtaining those additional experiences s/he needs at other levels.<br><br>Consideration: District needs in terms of succession planning (e.g., secondary leaders needed). | Avoid placing elementary teachers in secondary internships or secondary teachers in elementary internships, purely because they need to broaden their experience. Although some teachers may adapt to a level shift quite well, it is important to consider the capabilities and needs of the Intern before a level shift is considered. |

### Introduction to the Selection Tool

The tool (see Figure 1) includes a column of priorities/considerations (things to select *for*), as well as a column of concerns/things to think about (things to *avoid*). The highest priority is "Selection of the best Mentor Principal possible (accomplished leader, encouraging, reflective, supportive, strong instructional leader, change agent, collaborator, embodies distributed leadership, etc.)." The main thing to avoid in selection is "placing Interns based on building need (another person in the building because the principal is new to the role or building, school is struggling, etc.)." As we consider internship placements, our first priority is assuring that Interns are placed with principals who have a proven track record as accomplished leaders, who will devote the time and energy necessary to mentor an Intern, and who are strong instructional leaders. A second consideration is placement in a high-needs school where Interns can experience the challenges and opportunities presented and can serve struggling students and those who come from low-income backgrounds, often of multigenerational poverty. We also take into consideration the future leader's past experiences (e.g., 15 years in an elementary setting) and what experiences that person needs (e.g., middle or high school) as well as the person's strengths/expertise (e.g., experience in a dual language immersion school) to inform placement decisions based on the selection tool (e.g., placement in a middle school that is starting a dual language immersion program under the guidance of an experienced principal with strong instructional and external leadership skills).

Our team engaged in action research to identify strengths and affordances of the internship Placement Protocol and Tool as well as constraints to identify ways to improve the process and effectiveness of internship placements for successive cohorts. The following section outlines our action research process.

## Methods

With our rural partners, we used an action research approach (Efron & Ravid, 2020; Mills, 2011; Sagor, 2000) to examine the use of the placement tool and protocol. Our focus was to improve our placement practices, and the study was conducted by "insiders" to the partnership (Efron & Ravid, 2020), namely the PPEERS leadership team consisting of the director, co-director, and project manager as well as Leadership Coaches and District Point Persons. We used a reflective stance, including a "willingness to critically examine" our practice to improve it (Mills, 2011, p. 8). Through the two-phase inquiry process described below, we engaged in reflective practice. Reflective practice is the process of intentionally reflecting on one's practice in order to refine, enhance, or further articulate our strategies and practices moving forward (e.g. Schön, 1983; Smith

et al., 2015; Smith & Skolits, 2021). Reflective practice requires the practitioner to question their own behaviors and actions, take space to listen to and/or consider different perspectives, theorize, and deliberate regarding how to move forward in their practice, and take action based on their reflections, repeating the cycle for continued improvement or renegotiation of practice.

The question that guided our inquiry was this: How has the use of the placement protocol, centered on the placement tool, impacted the quality of rural intern placements, and how can the process and tool be improved? To address this question, we engaged in a multi-step inquiry.

## Inquiry Process

### *Phase 1: Reflective inquiry with Coaches*

To begin, the PPEERS Program Director met individually with each Leadership Coach for a reflective conversation, termed such because both director and coach reflected upon previous placements, and – while the coach mostly talked and the director mostly listened – there was dynamic interaction between the two. Because Leadership Coaches are typically on-site in the Intern's school twice a month and speak with the Mentor Principal during visits, Leadership Coaches often have the most frequent and richest opportunities to gauge the effectiveness of the internship placement.

During these conversations, the director methodically reviewed each Intern whom the Leadership Coach had served over previous cohorts, and for each asked: (1) Was this placement, in retrospect, strong, acceptable, or weak? Why? (2) What thoughts do you have about this placement? The terms "strong," "acceptable," and "weak" were intentionally left undefined by the director in order to tease out during the discussion what characterized each category in the Leadership Coach's mind. Definitions of these categories began to emerge organically through conversations with the coaches and have informed the drafting of a Placement Rubric that is being constructed by the team, based on extant research, data from these conversations, and input from DPPs. The rubric itself is beyond the scope of this paper; however, the data from the conversations with coaches helped to examine how we make sense of the quality of an internship placement.

The director scripted notes from the Leadership Coach's responses (see Figure 2 for sample) and asked clarifying and probing questions, such as "You described the MP as 'supportive.' How was she supportive?" Additionally, the director would at times share her own observations about a placement and ask the Leadership Coach if their perceptions were similar or different. For example, "My sense was that while the MP wasn't particularly strong in instructional leadership, he recognized that strength in [Intern] Erin[2] and gave her the opportunity and support to take on a lot of instructional leadership roles and duties, which helped him [the principal]. What are your thoughts on that?"

**Figure 2**

*Sample Notes from Phase 1 Reflective Conversation*

| |
|---|
| MP as good as it gets; well planned; had plan for Kirsten day she walked in; reviewed plan with Kirsten; whole [administrative] team supported her; everyone's charge to get Kirsten ready to be principal; MP still interested in growing in her own career. Learner alongside Kirsten. MP focused on leading school and leading change; released [duties and responsibilities to Kirsten] at right time; slow release. Increased responsibilities at great pace and rate. One of best -- if not best – [MP] ever seen. |

[2] All proper names are pseudonyms.

The reflective conversations with coaches were also *cumulative*, in the sense that with each successive conversation, the director shared musings, hypotheses, and ideas from preceding coaching conversations to get feedback on them during successive conversations. For example, in one reflective conversation, the coach concluded that each placement of her Interns for the second cohort was a good principal but not all good principals were strong mentors. Through dynamic interaction between Coach and Director, an idea emerged to begin working with MPs earlier, prior to the commencement of the internship, and to provide more structured expectations for early mentoring activities. This idea was then shared during the next reflective conversation. During that successive conversation, the second Coach affirmed the idea and built upon it by recommending that program leaders "be more direct and assertive about our expectations" for MPs and include the Coaches in the MP training to start to build relationships among MPs, Coaches, and program leadership even earlier. Through dynamic interaction, the Director and Coach discussed the possibility of coaches collaboratively facilitating preparation of MPs. The two agreed that – at the very least – Coaches should attend to observe, participate, and build relationships.

***Phase 2: Reflective inquiry with DPPs.***

Key takeaways from reflective conversations with Coaches were then summarized and shared with DPPs during the co-design segment of their monthly meeting. See Figure 3 for a list of the takeaways from Phase 1, which were presented by the director to DPPs.

**Figure 3**

*Takeaways from Phase 1 Conversations with Coaches*

- Over time, we're doing better (but not perfect) at ensuring that each Intern is with a strong principal.
- Being a strong principal does not necessarily entail being a strong mentor.
- The placement tool is a good guide and should continue to be used – and refined (e.g., Goldilocks school).
- What distinguishes good MPs from great MPs tends to be 1) focus on instructional leadership; 2) action for school improvement; 3) building the capacity of others, including Intern; and 4) investment in Intern's learning and success.
- The main area for improvement is in the support and explicit guidance of MPs – and earlier in the process (in the spring semester that placements are made instead of waiting until July).

During the co-design segment, DPPs were then broken into three Zoom breakout groups for reflection. In each group was a member of the PPEERS leadership team who took notes. DPPs were asked to reflect using the following prompts:

1. What has been your experience participating in the internship placement process? (plus/delta) [positives and things to change]
2. What are your thoughts on the takeaways from reflection discussions with coaches [as reflected in Figure 3]?
3. Be ready to share out.

The following section reflects findings from phases 1 and 2 of the action research process regarding the impact of the placement protocol and tool upon the program. The succeeding section then outlines reflections on how to refine and improve the quality of internships, based on the inquiry processes outlined above.

## Findings

The key takeaways from reflective conversations with Leadership Coaches, which were listed in the Methods section, are discussed below, as are the findings from the reflective conversations of the DPPs. From these two phases of the inquiry, we identify multiple strategies for improving the placement process. Interestingly, the takeaways from reflective inquiry with Coaches do not center rurality while takeaways from inquiry with DPPs do, reflecting the importance of engaging rural partners in reflective inquiry and improvement processes.

### Takeaways from Reflective Inquiry with Coaches

**Over time, we're doing better (but not perfect) at ensuring that each Intern is with a strong principal.** With our second cohort, for the most part, each Intern was placed with a good principal. While not all of those principals were strong mentors, they did – for the most part – model strong leadership across dimensions (e.g., strategic leadership, instructional leadership, cultural leadership, human resources leadership, managerial leadership, external leadership, micropolitical leadership, and leadership for school improvement; North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2006, 2009, rev. 2013). While we are committed to doing "ever better," one Coach pointed out:

> Whenever you're dealing with humans, it's not going to be perfect. There is alchemy, not science, in this. You can get better, but you're never going to be 100% perfect. You can't be. We're dealing with humans. There are so many variables . . . it's very complex.

She gave as an example of an MP who was a stellar mentor to an Intern from Cohort 1 and served again as a mentor for Cohort 2. While she was a solid mentor to her Intern in Cohort 2, the two were, in retrospect, too alike. The Mentor was reserved and cerebral as was her Intern. The Intern could have grown more from someone who more proactively engaged with various stakeholder groups and modeled more visible empathy-based leadership. It is difficult to match for personalities when selecting internship placements and – indeed – that consideration is not on the placement tool. Given the limited selection of MPs and sites in some of our rural districts, it may be difficult to add an additional layer to match for personalities.

**Being a strong principal does not necessarily entail being a strong mentor.** This is a key takeaway. While one might conjecture that what makes someone a good principal (e.g., strong social-emotional skills, ability to give feedback, ability to scaffold support and provide gradual release of responsibility, etc.) would translate smoothly to the role of mentor, that is not always the case. Regarding one placement, a Coach spoke about an MP who did not feel comfortable being vulnerable to her Intern about what she was struggling with and therefore "kept things" from her Intern that the Intern really needed to know. In another case, an MP released responsibilities to the Intern too quickly, and the Intern "got burned" from the experience and then had to work to shift some people's early negative opinions of her. Conversely, another MP was too slow to release to the Intern meaningful, substantive leadership roles and, in doing so, constrained the Intern's learning. As a program, we must recognize that MPs do not automatically become great mentors as a function

of being strong principals. As such, as a program, we must rethink when and how we train and support MPs. We revisit this in the following section.

**The placement tool is a good guide and should continue to be used and refined.** While the placement tool has been incredibly helpful in providing clarity of expectations regarding placement sites and MPs, it should be seen as a living document that is refined over time as we learn more about what works and what does not work in terms of rural internship placements. One such example is the concept of a Goldilocks school. This is a term we coined after a reflective conversation with a Coach in which she discussed one placement at which everything was going so swimmingly at the small rural elementary school where an Intern was placed that the principal was not doing much leading for school improvement. Efforts were focused on refining practices that were – for the most part – effective as reflected in the school's data. Because this school was "too good," there was less opportunity for the Intern to learn about change leadership and school improvement work. On the other hand, a current Intern is in a school that is in crisis, and the principal is mostly in reactive mode and struggling to shift from reacting to proactively leading intentionally for targeted school improvement. As such, we coined the term "Goldilocks school" to refer to an internship site that is neither too small and thriving nor that is too chaotic and in crisis. The larger point is that the placement tool should be seen as a living document that is refined based on data from and reflection upon placements. That said, as discussed below, DPPs feel that sometimes there is a dearth of Goldilocks schools in rural districts.

**What distinguishes good MPs from great MPs tends to be (1) focus on instructional leadership; (2) action for school improvement; (3) being a collaborative and distributive leader focused on building the capacity of others; and (4) investment in an Intern's learning and success.** In trying to tease out what makes a placement "acceptable," as opposed to "strong," the distinguishing elements of strong placements seem to be – at least in part – the aforementioned. Most of our MPs, for example, are strong cultural leaders who have built a positive rural school environment that centers student learning. All are solid managers. MPs are generally adroit at navigating micropolitical environments in serving their rural school communities, which can often involve complex webs of relationships where *everybody knows everybody*. Not all the MPs, however, are particularly strong at instructional leadership. Some are regularly in classrooms, analyzing instruction and *moving the needle forward* on teaching practice, such as collaborative small group instruction, using math talks, etc.; others tend to lean away from instructional leadership, instead relying on the school's instructional coach to facilitate Professional Learning Communities, analyze data with teachers, and support planning and assessment. While some MPs center school improvement throughout the year, working toward and measuring progress on learning goals, others are more focused day-to-day on managing. While some MPs invest in growing the capacity of faculty as teachers and leaders – and work specifically to grow the leadership capacity of the Intern – others evaluate teachers – and the Intern – as required but tend to stop their efforts there. While some MPs work intentionally to build the Intern's identity as a rural school administrator and socialize them into the role by, for example, helping them build their professional network (which counters the isolation that rural school leaders often feel), others see the Intern as a temporary addition to the building whom they allow to take on roles and tasks and complete their required leadership projects (e.g., equity change leadership project). While as a program we need to examine more closely and more methodically what distinguishes good from great MPs and – ultimately – how we as a program can help lift all MPs toward being great ones, these initially identified areas give us a place to begin that focus.

**The main area for improvement is in the support and explicit guidance of MPs -- and it needs to happen earlier in the process.** Largely as a conclusion from the previous key takeaways, the Coaches identified our main area for improvement in earlier and more explicit guidance of MPs. As one Coach put in, we need to be "more assertive about our expectations" and "build that relationship even earlier" between MPs and the

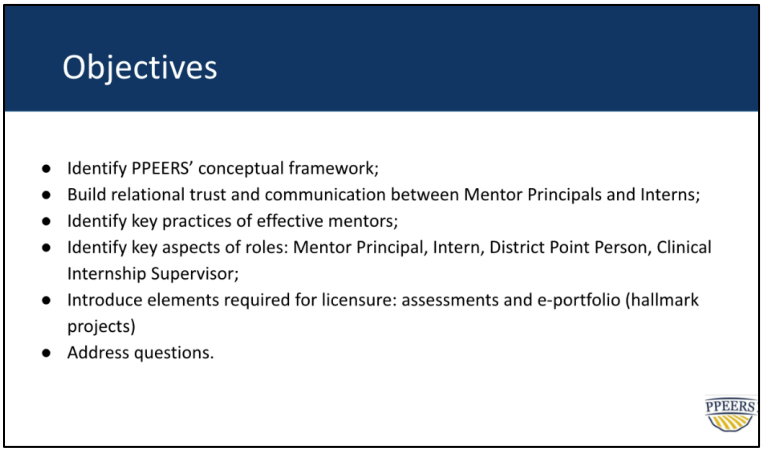
program, as well as between MPs and Coaches. When this idea was shared in a successive reflective coaching conversation, the Coach agreed and suggested that Coaches participate in any work with MPs earlier in the process to observe and build relationships and even collaboratively facilitate sessions with MPs. She encouraged the PPEERS leadership team to "at least have coaches attend to hear what is said" in order to be on the same page and use the same language regarding expectations for MPs and to "begin to build those relationships" with MPs.

Currently, once MPs are selected in February (before the internship begins in August), the clinical internship supervisors reach out to each by phone to introduce themselves, welcome MPs to the program, and thank them for their willingness to serve as an MP. That initial contact is followed by sending MPs a short video about the PPEERS program and – specifically – the format and expectations of the yearlong, full-time internship. Then, the Intern reaches out to the MP during that spring semester to get acquainted and conducts field work in the school as part of coursework in two classes (ELC 688: Rural School Leadership and ELC 694: Cultural and Political Dimensions of Schooling) and conducts projects within their (future) internship sites to start to get to know the stakeholders and culture of the school as well as the culture and assets of the community. In July, we hold a four-hour Internship Orientation, the objectives of which are featured in Figure 4. Based on the takeaways from Coaches' reflective conversations, we need more explicit learning opportunities for MPs regarding the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of strong MPs and what new MPs can do specifically, before the internship, early in the internship, and throughout the internship to be great mentors. What is clear is that selecting MPs is the *start*, and not the *end*, of the placement process. Once MPs are selected, the real work of preparing and supporting them begins.

Interestingly, the takeaways from reflective conversations with Coaches focused little on the particularities of rural contexts. Phase 2 of the action research process, with DPPs, was different in this respect, reflecting the importance of engaging rural district partners in reflective inquiry and improvement processes.

**Figure 4**

*PPEERS Internship Orientation Objectives*



**Takeaways from Reflective Inquiry with District Point Persons**

**Consensually selecting placements is an important process that should continue.** One DPP stated, "I love the consensual process for selecting" placements. Another DPP, who has been involved with the placement selection process for all cohorts since PPEERS began, endorsed the process, explaining, "It's a strategic process that involves considering the school, the experiences of the Mentor Principal, and the best fit. We want people to be successful so that we can hire them."

**Realities of rural districts impact placement decisions.** In reflecting with district partners, the high standards for Mentor Principals and internship placements met with the realities of their rural districts in several ways: (1) In the cases of small districts, MPs/site selections are limited. One DPP explained that they have three Interns currently and six schools total in the district. Placements were made in February preceding the commencement of the internship in August, but shortly before the internship began, one MP left the district for a position in another district. The DPP explained that they felt "hamstrung" and had to then place the Intern in a less than ideal situation, given limited options. He explained, "The Goldilocks school doesn't always exist . . . we have what we have." (2) While all partner districts strive to have an excellent principal leading each school, sometimes there are a "limited number of principals who fit" the PPEERS MP/site selection criteria. That limited number of principals is tapped for placements not only for PPEERS Interns but also for placements for other employees in other leadership preparation programs and for those needing placements as counselor Interns. (3) Micropolitical elements add extra complexity to placement decisions in at least two ways: (a) As one DPP explained, the "same principals seem always to get Interns," which causes some disgruntlement amongst other principals, in that they feel slighted by the decisions; (b) as another DPP explained, even though the district is committed to the PPEERS internship Placement Process, the superintendent still pushes sometimes to "place an Intern at a site where help or assistance is needed." He stated that you "can't always get away from this superintendent request," and it is "somewhat inherent in placement decisions."

**Districts engage in preparation work before meeting with the PPEERS leadership team to select placements.** Multiple DPPs spoke about the steps that they and their superintendent take prior to meeting with the PPEERS leadership team to collaboratively select internship placements. For example, in one district, the superintendent and cabinet members bring the PPEERS Intern in for an interview to get to know them better. From there, they consider what principal would be a good match for the Intern based on their personalities. Thus, while rural districts may have limited placement options, it is possible to consider the additional layer of personality match between Intern and Mentor Principal.

Another DPP shared that the superintendent and she "consider the trajectory" of where they anticipate the Intern will end up, based on district succession planning, and consider how to give the Intern a different experience from what they are used to. They also discuss what placement will "stretch the Intern skill-wise." Another DPP shared that he and the superintendent "collectively come up with three choices" – a placement at the elementary, middle, and high levels – for each Intern to bring to the discussion with the PPEERS team. Another DPP shared that when considering placements, they discuss "what opportunities [they] and the school have to offer the Intern." Thus, district partners invest additional time and steps into planning for placement decisions above and beyond the PPEERS placement protocol.

**Districts consider their needs when selecting placements.** Multiple districts spoke about their main need for school administrators being at the secondary level. This identified need informs where they look for placement options for Interns. This is an element of the selection tool ("Consideration: District needs in terms of succession planning (e.g., secondary leaders needed)."). However, some districts think more broadly about placements based on succession planning. Two districts specifically have looked at middle school and high school placement options and considered not only the principal of those

buildings but also the entire leadership team when considering placements. While the formal placement tool focuses on selecting the Mentor Principal, these districts also look at site level (middle and high) and the composition of the entire leadership team to determine where the Intern will learn the most and have the most support. For example, in one case, the DPP and superintendent were not convinced about the principal of the building being an MP, but the other members of the leadership team were very strong, and they knew the Intern could learn from and be supported by the two assistant principals, one of whom was expected to become a principal within the year. As such, looking at the entire leadership team of a potential internship site may be one way to address limited options for selecting Mentor Principals in rural districts.

**While placing Interns in a new school level is meaningful, they need preparation in the curriculum and instruction of that level.** As an element of the selection tool, we seek to ensure that Interns get K-12 experience (elementary, middle, and high) throughout the internship through the placement itself as well as through shadowing/site visits and a differentiated "switch" experience to another school, which can be up to two weeks in April–May of the internship year. Interns, DPPs, and Clinical internship Supervisors (the latter of whom are university faculty) develop a switch/shadow plan for each Intern (see Figure 5). Thus, while we often place Interns in a level that is new to them (e.g., a former high school teacher in a middle school placement), we avoid placing an Intern in a specific level solely to give them a novel experience. While the PPEERS approach is generally lauded by stakeholders, one DPP voiced an important concern: "With the instructional leadership piece, it can be difficult to throw people in [to a new school level] when they do not know the curriculum." Instead of recommending that we rethink placing Interns in unfamiliar school levels, he instead suggested that prior to entering their internships that Interns "need a short course in secondary curriculum 101 or elementary curriculum 101" that is targeted and supplementary to their courses on instructional leadership. Doing so would help Interns enter their placements with at least an initial grounding in the curriculum of the school that they could then build from. Preparing Interns to lead at all school levels provides rural district leaders with greater flexibility regarding hiring PPEERS graduates.

**Figure 5**

*Placement in a New School Level as an Element of the PPEERS internship Placement Tool*

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | **Consideration:** Making sure Interns get K-12 experience throughout the internship, shadowing, switch experience (2-week period – around April, 2022 – during which Intern serves at another school), etc. UNCG leadership will work with Superintendents and District Point Persons to ensure a comprehensive K-12 field experience. For each Intern, we will develop a plan for obtaining those additional experiences s/he needs at other levels. | | **Avoid** placing elementary teachers in secondary internships or secondary teachers in elementary internships, purely because they need to broaden their experience. Although some teachers may adapt to a level shift quite well, it is important to consider the capabilities and needs of the Intern before a level shift is considered. |

In summary, reflective inquiry with Leadership Coaches and DPPs yielded new insights about placements and new ideas for how to improve them. While the collaborative placement protocol and tool are generally respected and considered strong, these elements are living documents that need to be refined, such as by including a Goldilocks school criterion. Selecting strong principals to serve as mentors is the beginning and not the end, as we need to work earlier and in a more structured way to help strong principals be strong mentors. Realities of rural districts – in terms of limited placement options and micropolitical dynamics – inform placement decisions beyond the placement tool. Rural partner districts consider their needs and invest in various activities prior to meeting with the PPEERS leadership team to be ready to select the best placements possible for Interns. Finally, Interns may need targeted instruction in the curriculum and pedagogy of a different level of schooling prior to starting their internship.

**Overall Impact**

The selection tool has without doubt helped to improve placement decisions. No more do we have Interns placed with first-year administrators or with those who are in over their heads and need an extra set of hands. Nonetheless, the tool and selection process are not a panacea, and we continue to be challenged – especially during the time of Covid – with securing a highly productive placement for each Intern. For example, with our current cohort, we have an Intern named Anesha originally placed with a Mentor Principal who – prior to the internship commencing – was moved to turn around a high school in the district. Because the MP would be new to the school and would be taxed with turnaround efforts, Anesha's placement was changed to an MP – Silvia – who had served as a strong MP for our program in the past. Our DPP in the partner district did not realize that an Intern from another program had requested placement – and been approved for it – with Silvia by the new head of human resources (HR) in the district. Silvia made neither the DPP nor head of HR aware that she had agreed to mentor two Interns. This oversight was discovered at the district's administrative retreat in early August, at which time both Interns were introduced as working with Silvia. Given the late realization of the double-placement, we originally decided to move forward with the placement, given that Anesha had already completed multiple tasks for the school over the summer. However, within the first weeks of the internship, it was clear that Anesha was not getting the elbow learning and investment of time and focus that are needed for an Intern. Complicating this situation was race: Anesha is a Black woman, Silvia is a White woman, and the other Intern is a White man. It is highly problematic to shift the placement of a Black woman *twice* while honoring the original placement of the white man. It seemed a testament to deep and enduring – and often denied – racial inequities in rural areas (Billings, 2016; Tieken, 2014). Silvia did not feel that she was favoring the other (White) Intern and believed that if serving as MP to two Interns was not feasible that she should mentor the White man, Conroy, since she had committed to him first. The program director and assistant director read this situation as one of implicit bias and race (Banaji & Greenwald, 2016; Irving, 2014). We held many conversations amongst ourselves and with the DPP about the micropolitical and racial dynamics and what was best for Anesha, who felt strongly that she cared less about her placement than about taking great care not to "burn bridges." The team ultimately decided that the situation was untenable and that Anesha's learning was suffering under the double-placement. We worked with the DPP to shift Anesha's placement to another MP in October. Her new MP welcomed her into the school community, was highly engaged in mentoring Anesha, and invested a great deal of care, time, elbow learning, and trust by assigning authentic leadership experiences to Anesha. Consequently, Anesha is now thriving. Thus, while the placement tool and protocol have substantially improved placement success, they are not guarantees, which this example demonstrates, and racial and micropolitical challenges within rural contexts will continue to require thoughtful decision-making. Further, to date there has been no element of the placement tool that speaks to issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion. As such, the following addition has been made to the Placement Tool: "Consideration: Consider issues of race, gender, and other dimensions of difference when

making placement decisions. Reflect on how implicit bias may inform decisions and work to disrupt such bias."

### Ideas to Build On

In addition to speaking candidly about challenges associated with enacting the MP/site placement process, DPPs and Leadership Coaches also surfaced ideas that the partnership can use to refine and improve our practice. One of these is in the area of curriculum readiness for Interns. While the partnership generally works to ensure that Interns are placed in a level where they have not previously served (e.g., an Intern with elementary experience may be placed at a middle school) and then have a "switch" experience in another level, as needed (e.g., high school), we can go above and beyond our initial instructional leadership coursework (one course pre-internship and the other during the first semester of the internship) by providing a mini-course or intensive experience shortly before the commencement of the internship that dives into the curriculum of that level. We can leverage the assets of rural partner districts by tapping district curriculum leaders, principals, and building instructional coaches to co-design and facilitate the short courses – one for each level (elementary, middle, and high). As one DPP explained, "With the instructional leadership piece, it can be difficult to throw people in when they do not know the curriculum." This can be especially problematic because there are "lots of principals who don't know curriculum and instruction," so having curriculum specialists lead short courses before the internship may be a way to supplement coursework in a targeted, intensive way to allow Interns to hit the ground running in their internship.

Additionally, we can consider the entire leadership team of a school – and not just the principal – when making placement decisions, which can help to address limited options of Mentor Principals who meet selection criteria. Another key idea to build on involves preparation for MPs that is earlier and more structured such that they enter the internship experience not only as strong principals but also as strong mentors. We can co-design this support with Coaches and some of our strongest rural MPs from past/current cohorts. Other more minor ideas include tweaks to the placement tool itself, including adding an element about Goldilocks schools, although we need to be mindful that such schools may not always exist within rural partner districts.

## Implications

The internship placement protocol and tool are invaluable for establishing strong internship placements for full-time, job-embedded internships; they may also be productive in establishing strong course-embedded internships (Reyes-Guerra & Barnett, 2017). Their utility for detached internships, which often occur, de facto, in an Intern's own school under their supervising principal, is less certain.

While the placement protocol and selection tool have resulted in much stronger placements for Interns, the selection of the MP is the beginning, and not the end, of work to build a strong internship. Indeed, beyond the *will* to be an excellent mentor, MPs also need the *skill* (Jackson, 2013). As Wilmore and Bratlien (2005) found, over 60% of MPs received no formal training. MPs must know the expectations for the role and build skills in conducting think-alouds, promoting reflection, and scaffolding support through the gradual release of responsibility as Interns take on more substantial leadership roles. Additionally, Interns themselves play a role in cultivating a successful internship experience in which they are given substantive leadership roles by demonstrating a strong work ethic and making value-added contributions to the school to build trust and credibility in their skills (Thessin et al., 2020) – all of which increase their opportunity to lead.

Thus, within the rural partnership structure, we can leverage assets (e.g., curriculum leaders to provide intensive short courses on curriculum; entire leadership teams to mentor an Intern) and solve for challenges (e.g., limited placement options in districts with few schools). Additionally, the commitment of program leaders to travel great distances to meet with rural partners and partners' additional work beyond the placement protocol (e.g., interviewing Interns before placement meetings to inform placement decisions) reflect the

joint commitment to and value for internship placements.

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## Appendix: *Internship Placement Selection Tool*

### Assignment of Internship Placements

As we consider internship placements for PPEERS Interns, our first priority is assuring that Interns are placed with principals who have a proven track record as accomplished leaders, who will devote the time and energy necessary to mentor an Intern, and who are strong instructional leaders. A second consideration is placement in a high-needs school where Interns can experience the challenges and opportunities presented and can serve low-performing students and those who come from low-income families.

As we consensually choose Intern placements, we should think about the priorities, considerations, and concerns listed below, which were generated from co-design among leaders in our partner districts and PPEERS personnel during District Point Person meetings and are also informed by research (e.g., Reyes-Guerra & Barnett, 2017).

In preparation for the internship placement meeting in your district (which will include the Superintendent, District Point Person, and Hewitt, Rumley, and Jordan from the UNCG leadership team), please begin thinking about which great leaders in your district reflect the characteristics in the table below. You can use this document, as you wish, to check off considerations and concerns as you think about who would be the best Mentor Principal for each Intern.

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| | Priorities/Considerations | | Concerns/Things to Think About |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Highest priority: Selection of best Mentor Principal possible (accomplished leader, encouraging, reflective, supportive, strong instructional leader, change agent, collaborator, embodies distributed leadership, etc.). | | Avoid placing Interns based on building need (another person in the building, because the principal is new to role or building, school is struggling, etc.). |
| | Priority: Demonstrated record of increased student achievement and/or growth in the schools that the principal has led. | | Avoid placing Interns in the same school where they have been teaching. |
| | Priority: Demonstrated record of instructional leadership that is documented in principal's annual evaluations. | | When possible, avoid placing Interns in a school their children attend or family members work. |
| | Consideration: Placement in high-needs school with a strong leader who can serve as Mentor Principal. | | When/When anticipated, avoid placing Interns with principals who may be promoted during the year such that a change in placement and/or mentor principal can be anticipated. |
| | Consideration: Principal interest in serving as a Mentor Principal and capacity to devote the time and energy necessary to devote to the Intern. | | Excellent principals are excellent for all sorts of reasons, but they may not have the capacity or interest to serve as a Mentor Principal. Determining whether the principal can devote the time and energy to the Intern and whether the principal is willing and able to delegate responsibility to the Intern are important considerations. |
| | Consideration: Mentor principals who will be mindful that Interns are students who are learning to be school leaders. The Mentor Principal should learn the Intern's strengths, knowledge, skills, and dispositions and be willing to provide opportunities for learning. | | Interns are not assistant principals. They have the same legal standing as student teachers. Mentor Principals should take care to assign tasks and supervise Interns closely. |

| | Priorities/Considerations | | Concerns/Things to Think About |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Consideration: Making sure Interns get K-12 experience throughout the internship, shadowing, switch experience (2-week period – around April, 2022 – during which the Intern serves at another school), etc. UNCG leadership will work with Superintendents and District Point Persons to ensure a comprehensive K-12 field experience. For each Intern, we will develop a plan for obtaining those additional experiences s/he needs at other levels. | | Avoid placing elementary teachers in secondary internships or secondary teachers in elementary internships, purely because they need to broaden their experience. Although some teachers may adapt to a level shift quite well, it is important to consider the capabilities and needs of the Intern before a level shift is considered. |
| | Consideration: District needs in terms of succession planning (e.g., secondary leaders needed). | | |

**Our Process for Selecting Mentor Principals:**

DPPs and superintendents will have conversations and determine a pool of strong potential MPs/sites with preferences identified. Then discuss thinking/reasoning with UNCG team and come to consensus on placements.

The timeline we will follow:

Nov/Dec/beginning of Jan: DPPs and superintendents discuss MPs/sites for pool and identify their preferences.

- Jan. 14–Feb. 8: UNCG folks (Kim Hewitt, Mark Rumley, and Onna Jordan) will meet with DPP and superintendent via Zoom meetings for 45–90 minutes (depending on how many Interns the district has) to discuss and decide on placements. Due to Covid we are unable to conduct these meetings in person.
- Feb. 2-15: DPPs/superintendents speak to selected MPs.
- Feb. 9-21: Upon final confirmation with districts, UNCG leadership will announce to cohort members where their intended (tentative) placements will be.

Please avoid:
Making an Intern school testing coordinator. An Intern can serve as assistant testing coordinator.