



The Our American States podcast—produced by the National Conference of State Legislatures—is where you hear compelling conversations that tell the story of America’s state legislatures, the people in them, and the policies, process and politics that shape them.

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### Building a Principal Pipeline | June 20, 2021 | OAS Episode 134

Ed: Hello and welcome to “Our American States,” a podcast from the National Conference of State Legislatures. This podcast is all about legislatures: the people in them, the policies, process and politics that shape them. I’m your host, Ed Smith.

*“Principals are the primary leaders within a school. Other people lead in very different ways, but without a person who is that main point for leadership and for school operations and for being sort of a connecting force within schools, things really aren’t going to work well. And I think the evidence is really compelling.”*

That was Paul Manna, a professor of government and public policy at William and Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia. Manna has written extensively about federal and state education policy. He’s my guest on the podcast.

A key focus of Manna’s research concerns the role of principals in K-12 education and ways to identify and groom candidates to become principals. Manna talks about the critical role principals play, how a principal pipeline can work, and why the investment in principal training is worthwhile.

He also shared some thoughts for how legislators can approach the issue and policies that can help foster school leaders. Paul, welcome to the podcast.

Paul: Thanks a lot, Ed. It’s great to be here and I’m looking forward to the conversation. Thanks very much.

*Time Marker (TM): 01:35*

Ed: Paul, thanks for taking the time to be on the show. You’re known for your research on school leaders. Most of our listeners are not experts in education, so I wonder if you could start with an overall explanation of why this is an important area to study.

Paul: Sure. Let me begin by making a distinction too. Often when people talk about school leaders, that’s kind of a mushy category because so many people potentially might be considered part of

that collection: superintendents, principals, assistant principals, teacher leaders, sometimes even parent leaders or student leaders within schools.

I think it's really important for policymakers to have those distinctions in mind because if we think about leadership as a mushy category, we're not necessarily thinking carefully about the different, important things that different leaders do.

And so, my work really focuses on principals, the jobs and the roles that principals take on. So, my comments today are going to focus really on that. But this is a really important area to consider for so many different reasons, really because principals are the primary leaders within a school. Other people lead in very different ways, but without a person who is that main point for leadership and for school operations and for being sort of a connecting force within schools, things really aren't going to work well.

And I think the evidence is really compelling. There is no evidence that any school that has struggled has ever pulled out of that without a great principal. And so, leaders are really, really important in those environments and in other environments too.

*TM: 03:25*

Ed: Can you talk a little bit more about why principals have such a critical impact on student performance?

Paul: Sure. I would break it down into four broad categories and everything I'm saying here is backed by research and publications across a lot of different outlets. And so, for readers who want to read more into this, they certainly can find it. I'd be glad to help steer people towards that.

But just to keep it at kind of the high-level discussion here without diving into citations and things, I would highlight four key areas where principals are really important. First, I would point to the role that principals play in creating and fostering a positive culture for learning, and that includes cultivating that culture amongst the students within schools, the teachers, the staff, and even the families.

And so, part of building that culture involves identifying other people in the school who could be leaders, who want to be leaders, who could be good at it, and distributing that leadership opportunity around. So, this is about empowering people within schools. All that helps to create the culture.

Second is principals are really hugely important for recruiting, supporting and retaining excellent teachers. One of the main reasons we know from research that teachers leave schools and go somewhere else is because they don't have a great principal, even more than their pay or other kinds of working conditions. The principal and a principal being an effective support and mentor for teachers is really, really key. So, that's number two. And we know that teachers are hugely important for instruction and learning, so if you don't have great teachers, your students are really going to struggle.

Third, I would say that great principals are also great managers who "make the trains run on time." I know this is not a sexy thing to talk about anymore because everyone wants to talk

about principals as instructional leaders, but there are important management jobs that exist within the schools that principals have to fulfill or the whole place would just fall apart. So, even someone who has a great vision, who has great ideas about instruction, but can't manage the purchasing and discipline and bus kind of things within a school, the place is just going to not work very well.

And then lastly, I would mention a fourth point, which is that principals are really important hubs in supportive networks that connect their schools to other allies and resources in communities. We've seen how this has been really, really important during the pandemic. All of the food drives, the volunteers, the other things that principals can marshal that are outside the formal chain of command within schools or school districts, principals are playing hugely important roles there. They do that always, but it has really become even more magnified during the pandemic.

So, all of those things combined feed into your original question about student performance. Students will have a better chance to succeed in school when principals are doing work in these four main areas.

*TM: 06:48*

Ed: It's interesting what you said about making the trains run on time. The value of basic competence is sometimes overlooked.

Paul: Yeah. And if I could just follow up on that too, a lot of people use the language that the principal's job has been transformed, that now we think of principals like, as I said, these instructional leaders, which sort of implies the job has been taken apart and remade. To me, that's what transformation is.

But if you actually ask principals what they do, they still do all the management stuff too. So, it's not that the job has really been transformed; it's simply that now there are more and more responsibilities piled on top of that principal's desk. All the management, budget, discipline things that used to be there, they're still there, but now you've got the instructional leadership part that's getting a lot more attention.

So, I think it's important for people not to forget about the management roles as well because they still exist. And good principals figure out ways to get those things done or to distribute that work to other parts of the leadership team within the school. The work definitely has not gone away though.

*TM: 08:00*

Ed: One of the reasons I wanted you on the podcast is that you're known in the education, research and policy communities for your research on state policies to support strong school leaders. And you're once again partnering with the Wallace Foundation to publish new research on how state policy can help build a successful principal pipeline.

To start, can you explain this notion of a principal pipeline? How do these work?

Paul: The pipeline metaphor really encourages people to think about what I would call the multiple processes that bring excellent principals into schools and support them on the job. So, that starts very early with simply identifying who might be a potential candidate for the principalship, not just waiting for people to step up and say I want to do it, because those people aren't always the best people for the job to be honest, the volunteers.

But how do you identify potential talent? How do you groom it? How do you get people ready potentially for the job? How do you get them to training, the degrees, the credentialing to bring them onto the job? How do you then support them, mentor them, evaluate them while they're on the job? And then after they might leave the career, how do you still think about them as a resource for new, up-and-coming principals?

So, the pipeline metaphor is trying to get people to think about how all those steps are interconnected and work to sort of bring a principal workforce into being, support it while they're doing the work, and then potentially relying on these folks also as great resources near the end of their career when they've entered retirement, things like that.

And so, the way to think about this is to use a couple of key adjectives, to think about all this work being comprehensive and to think about this work being aligned. And what it means to say that it's comprehensive is to think about that entire arc of a principal's career: early stages before people might even be thinking about it up to retirement.

And alignment comes in when you think about all of these different activities that I just referenced, thinking about how they fit together. They're not just disconnected things that people have to do, like licensing is not disconnected from training or professional development or recruitment, things like this.

If you think of these as interlocking activities that operate with common principles, common assumptions, that's the way to think about what this pipeline idea is. Otherwise, all these things kind of operate as just isolated, bureaucratic processes and people think of bringing principals into schools as just sort of a mundane, bureaucratic, HR type function, instead of something that's more strategic and, like I said, more interlocking across all these different stages and steps.

*TM: 11:08*

Ed: Can you talk about some examples of where policies have been implemented successfully?

Paul: There's a huge amount of research in particular on an initiative that the Wallace Foundation has supported for a long time known as The Principal Pipeline Initiative. That initiative focused on large school districts, large urban and suburban type school districts. The list from that original pipeline group is Charlotte-Mecklenburg schools in North Carolina, Denver public schools in Colorado, Gwinnett County in Georgia, Hillsborough County in Florida, New York City, and also Prince George's County public schools in Maryland.

For readers who want to really dig into the details, there's a huge array of work published about those original pipeline districts from Wallace. And what is really interesting about that work when you dive into it, is what you will find is even though these districts worked to build these

pipelines with the elements that I described just a moment ago, there was not a common sort of template in all of these places.

These places came to this work with different problems, needs, some overlapping. They were more prepared in some areas than others. So, it's really a great set of case studies in, even though they're working towards this common end of constructing a pipeline that works for them, it's not a one-size-fits-all type thing. Setting the sequencing of events and work and priorities can really vary depending on the particular needs of a locale, the particular constraints that districts work under, etc.

So, those are the original six that you might call them. I think that was six if I count them all up; you'd have to double check me. There are some other examples too and I want to mention one other in particular that's not a pipeline initiative per se, but it's an initiative that works by embracing lots of the assumptions that are within the pipeline metaphor. And this that I want to reference here is an organization called the Northeast Leadership Academy in North Carolina. It's based at North Carolina State University.

What is really useful here and really interesting to mention is NELA, as it's known by its acronym, NELA is an entity that was created with a particular focus of serving the needs of rural school districts, and so the northeast part of North Carolina is where they did it in primarily rural school districts. This is really fascinating because what you can see is that even though these individual school districts that are part of the NELA coalition, they themselves aren't big enough to support a pipeline-type initiative like the large urban systems.

North Carolina State and the people there figured out a way to create this cross-district, cross-county coalition with NELA being the hub, and so you essentially have a pipeline-type approach operating in some of the most rural communities in North Carolina and in the country as a whole.

So, I think it's a great example of how, even if you're not organizing or operating a pipeline within a school district as a standalone thing, there are ways to take these ideas and carry them out across lots of different types of locales. And I know the vast majority of counties in the country are rural. Right? And most of them pretty much all have schools or school districts operating within them.

So, there's a lot to learn from the pipeline work from the large districts that Wallace has tended to focus on, those original districts, but also some of these other types of settings too.

*TM: 15:14*

Ed: Well, I'll be sure to link to some of these resources from the [ncsl.org](http://ncsl.org) page so people can read more.

It's impossible to talk about education and state policies without talking about money. I know legislatures often emphasis putting every dime into the classroom, but you see strategic investments in principals as an important long-term investment. Can you talk about why?

Paul: I think one way to think about this if we have the overall goal of improving schools across the country, one of the things we know is that principals, through their work, have very powerful multiplier effects on teaching and learning within schools. And so, that's not to say we should not invest money in classrooms, and we should not try to help teachers become the best teachers they can be - we definitely need to do that – I don't think it should be necessarily a zero-sum game.

But in a world of limited resources as you just alluded to, we have to make some choices. One way to stretch our dollars and make them go farther is to ensure that principals are great leaders and can be great mentors to excellent teachers, mentors to new, novice teachers, know how to distribute leadership within those buildings, which is something I was mentioning earlier, and know how to, again, be good stewards of district funds, know how to work with partners and communities to stir up additional funds and resources.

So, there is just so much... a dollar spent on a principal can go quite far if we think about it and if we do it in an effective way.

The other way to think about this... and you could ask your state legislator colleagues to think about their own experiences in their own professional lives. I know many of them are probably businesspeople, military veterans. These institutions spend millions of dollars every year on leadership, right? Think about all the money that corporations spend on things like executive coaching, executive education, training for their CEOs and upper management, even middle management.

Think about the military service academies that the country maintains as a way to ensure that we have a steady flow of well-trained leaders coming into the military. I mean, this is not just education as a field that needs it; this is a well-known fact that we need to invest in leaders if we want certain sectors of our society to thrive.

In some ways, it's strange that we have to even remind people of that because it's so present in all these other fields, but it's equally needed in education too.

Ed: Thanks, Paul. We're going to take a quick break and come back with the rest of our discussion.

MUSIC and Gene VO

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*TM: 18:57*

Ed: I'm back with Paul Manna. We were talking about education spending. Paul, what do you see as the best balance between investing in the immediate classroom needs and the long-term project of building strong principals?

Paul: Honestly, and I don't want to get out of my lane and make claims that I can't back with evidence. This is going to sound like a wishy-washy answer, but I think it's a true answer. In a lot of ways, it depends on community needs and where communities are.

Anytime you try to make sort of one-size-fits-all recommendations for state policy when we talk about schools, it can be difficult because a rural school district that simply has horrible safety conditions in schools because of outdated water or HVAC systems, it's like yeah, they should probably upgrade that stuff, so kids and teachers don't get sick all the time. Who am I to say spend the money on executive training for principals instead of that?

It requires, though, legislators to get familiar with those situations and conditions and to have some operational flexibility in how they think about striking that balance. I don't think there is one right way to split the budget pie, so to speak.

*TM: 20:16*

Ed: Well, that reminds me of the observation I've heard that if you know one legislature, you know one legislature. Every one of these organizations is different and you have to see what's going to work in that individual setting.

Let me stick with the money for just one minute. Is there any prospect for using the federal money coming to states to help bolster this effort in the short term, the next couple of years?

Paul: Yeah, there is. I suspect you're talking about some of the new money going along with the economic recovery, the rescue plan type funds. There is, and there's also money still that flows through the Every Student Succeeds Act, SSA, that is available as well. So, in addition to the emergency funding that we're seeing now, there is other funding that is more kind of steady stream through federal policy that fits. And there are lots of ways to tie that in.

So, for example, in SSA, there are certain criteria, for example, that policies need to meet if they're going to use money in certain ways. You have to show certain levels of evidence or credibility to be able to use policy in, let's say, a school improvement setting, in a school turnaround effort, something like that.

Based on some of the recent research on principal pipelines, that research is meeting those standards in SSA. So, state legislators could think of investments in principal pipelines or different elements of the principal pipelines and principals themselves as key forces in their overall strategy for school improvement, for school turnaround.

Another example that you could think of, and this gets me back to the NELA, the Northeast Leadership Academy example that I mentioned earlier – NELA came into being about a decade ago as a result of the combination of state and federal funds, so Race to the Top money which some of your legislative colleagues will remember – Race to the Top was a similar infusion of funds to education, and NELA came into being as a result of those funds and funds that the state and the university put in.

And so, it's now become a self-sustained activity. States could also think about ways that they might operate at that higher level, like at a university or creating some other types of leadership

academies that might be more sustaining over time. They could provide ongoing help for this work and not just kind of a get us through the emergency type moment that we're in.

I think the last thing, and this is probably the lowest-hanging fruit for states, and they often forget that they can be really powerful here, is states can be really powerful convenors of knowledge. State legislatures can call special hearings out in the field, bring experts together, like bring the experts to communities. They can create workshop-style events, conferences, other things that pool knowledge across their state and draw knowledge across the nation as ways to help get these ideas out there.

Because it's so, so hard for local schools to do that on their own. There is so much they're struggling with right now just literally to honestly put food in the mouths of children in many of their communities and try to attend to the physical health, mental health of their communities, that if states can help to jumpstart some of this thinking around leadership and principals through their ability to convene folks, that can be a huge, huge help. And it doesn't really cost a lot of money to do it.

*TM: 24:13*

Ed: So, let's talk some more about state policies. Based on your research, what are the key policies that legislators might consider implementing to build an effective principal pipeline?

Paul: One of the things the state policymakers need to remember is they actually have a foray over lots of these activities that feed into pipelines or that influence pipelines. And this is a theme that is coming out of a new paper that you alluded to earlier, something I'm doing with Wallace, to try to help state leaders and local school district folks to think about the intersection between what's happening at the local level in terms of pipeline work and what is happening at the state level in terms of kind of the umbrella set of policies that states control, but they're on the pipeline.

And so, part of the need for this type of thinking is state people often think about what they do, and they often think of local things as the things that locals do, and there is not a lot of strategic thinking about the overlaps. So, there are several different areas where states have a role and have authority to shape the environment in which pipelines operate.

These would be in terms of setting standards for leaders including principals. This would be in terms of the kinds of incentives or other kinds of things that states can help set up to recruit people into the principalship. The State of Maryland for a while... I can't remember if they still do this... but, for example, the governor had an initiative to each year identify a handful of rising assistant principals within local school districts, bring them together, create cohorts of future leaders, that kind of thing.

States have the authority to oversee principal preparation institutions, either through state boards that do this or legislators that approve different kinds of degree tracks. States also, through boards or legislatures, control principal licensing, what it takes to get a license to be a new principal or a continuing license if you're a veteran principal.

An area where some states have made efforts, but often when budgets are tight, this goes away, is through things like professional development and mentoring. So, what kinds of things are states willing to support there? And that's where that switchboard role can be really important too even if states aren't spending a lot of money if they can help connect people up with resources, that's great. And then, obviously, a big one again where states control this, either legislatures or boards or both, is principal evaluation.

And so, all of these policy areas bear on the operation of pipelines, and I think really the advice to legislators is to find out: Where is the low-hanging fruit right now? What could you do right now to help move these things forward in positive ways? You don't have to tackle all of this at once. Find out what your local districts want and need and start working with them and start pushing things forward.

There are some great models across the country that show how this is done. The pipeline work I mentioned earlier is an example. Another great example – legislators from Illinois will be familiar with this, but Illinois is one of the iconic case studies of a state that really spent a lot of time in a very methodical, strategic way to shift how principal preparation and support works across an entire state, and they're seeing some really positive results on that. There is actually a book that's been written about this topic and lots of shorter pieces.

So, there are illustrations of the way this work can be done. But I think the important overall advice is first, size up where you are: where are you strong, where are you weak, what do the localities say they need to be supported in this kind of work, and then start there. Don't try to think you've got to do everything at once. It's just too complex. There's no money to do everything at once anyway. So, make some progress where you are and then just keep building on that.

*TM: 28:41*

Ed: As we get ready to wrap up, I wonder if you have any final thoughts you'd like to share with our listeners.

Paul: First, thanks for your attention to these topics. They often don't get the kind of high-level discussions that they merit and, again, because of all the things we've been talking about, the multiplier effects, the key roles that principals play, these areas do merit more attention, I think. So, I'm glad to have a chance to talk with you and get these ideas out to your listeners.

At the same time, I would just offer as a nudge, when legislators do wade into these issues more deeply, I'd encourage them to do it with some modesty and some recognition that they might not know everything. I think education is a tricky area because legislators all went to school and so they think that they're experts in how schools operate often, right? They know how their principal did it. And so, they think that's the basis of all knowledge for improving... not every legislator thinks this, but that's a common knee-jerk reaction.

Sometimes that lifelong familiarity with schooling because we went to school and our kids went to school, it kind of moves us to where we think we know more than we do. So, I would encourage legislators especially to listen to what the people on the ground are talking about, read the research or at least have their staff research, read the great syntheses of that research

that I know NCSL does – you all put out a lot of great documents. I’ve relied upon them myself at various points in my own work.

It’s just that last nudge for some modesty and some open-mindedness and a willingness to learn, and not think that you know it all because you went to school, or your kids went to school.

Ed: Well, I think as anyone who works in public policy would probably agree, the more you learn, the more you are humbled, because there is always so much more to know. Paul, thanks again for taking the time to explain the critical role of principals in our schools. Take care.

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