



EDUCATION

Leaders, Please Report to the Principal's Office

Today's principal is less a school boss and more a supportive leader.

BY ASHLEY IDREES

It's easy to remember our favorite teachers, but can you recall a favorite principal?

Despite its importance to a school's success, a principal's work is not always visible. Principals' responsibilities run the gamut from administering budgets, overseeing facilities and coordinating fire drills to monitoring student achievement and supporting the teachers who might become a student's favorite.

Traditionally, the principal's role has been to project authority, assert power and carry out discipline. Today, principals are synonymous with leadership, instructional support and student advocacy.

They are responsible for all who enter their buildings and are expected to create and maintain an environment and culture reflective of their school's mission.

Leadership matters, and good principals have a direct, positive correlation to student learning and growth, as research from The Wallace Foundation has shown. But, at a time when school leaders are needed more than ever, principal turnover is increasing.

Turnover Hurts Kids

As a recent MIT study explains, low-achieving and high-poverty schools tend to have higher rates of principal turnover. "Given research linking leadership

turnover to negative impacts on student performance, policy attention to strategies aimed at keeping effective principals in high-need environments may yield large dividends," the report stated. For the sake of their students, it's imperative that leaders in high-needs areas get the support they need to stay on the job.

The MIT study shows that, with a focus on best practices, appropriate hiring and placement, and supportive evaluation, districts can mold leaders who transform schools, enhancing the growth of teachers and students alike. If principals are supported from the start of their training through their leadership in practice, they are more successful. And when they suc-

ceed, they are less likely to leave their jobs.

“I think effective leadership is key,” says North Carolina Representative Hugh Blackwell (R), a member of NCSL’s Education Policy Working Group. “Teachers deserve a leader who understands what is needed in the classroom and a leader who can support them in appropriate instruction. With this strong support system, teachers are motivated and enabled to lead their students to successful educational outcomes.”

Principal Pipelines

To develop leaders with those skills, The Wallace Foundation, one of the leaders in educational research, launched the five-year, \$85 million Principal Pipelines Initiative in 2012. The goal was to improve school principals in six cities and large urban counties, from New York to Denver, by instituting reforms in training, hiring, mentoring and review. The foundation then commissioned the Rand Corp. to evaluate and report on the success of the initiative.

Among the findings detailed in Rand’s new report, “Principal Pipelines: A Feasible, Affordable and Effective Way for Districts to Improve Schools”:

- After three or more years, schools in the initiative with newly placed principals outperformed comparison schools with newly placed principals by 6.22 percentile points in reading and 2.87 percentile points in math.

- Newly placed principals in the initiative were 5.8 percentage points more likely to remain in their school for at least two years and 7.8 percentage points more likely to remain in their school for at least three years than newly placed principals in comparison schools.

- The initiative had statistically significant, positive effects on achievement in elementary and middle schools and some evidence of positive effects for high schools.

Among the initiative’s most effective tools, Rand found, was the Leader Tracking System, a set of webpages with dashboards and other tools to inform man-



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agement decisions on training, hiring and evaluating school principals. Besides cataloging information on principals’ experience, performance and competency, the tracking system can forecast vacancies, determine ideal enrollment sizes for district-run principal-training programs, monitor the diversity of hiring pools and provide feedback to university programs on graduate placements.

Notably, researchers found the Principal Pipeline Initiative to be cost-effective. “[F]or every \$100 spent per student attending the district over five years on [principal pipeline] reforms, district-wide student achievement increased by between 1 and 2.4 percentile points in reading and about one-third of a percentile point to 1 percentile point in mathematics,” according to Wallace Foundation estimates.

Building a Pipeline

Schools and districts following the concepts of the Principal Pipeline Initiative can:

- Adopt standards of professional practice and performance (such as the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders)

and use those standards in shaping policies related to school leader preparation, hiring, placement and support.

- Offer preservice preparation via university partners, nonprofit partners or in-house programs that align with the district’s leadership standards and competencies. The district would play a substantial role in shaping the programs. Preparation would include on-the-job training and a long-term clinical experience.

- Use a selective hiring and placement practice to match principal candidates with school vacancies, aligning candidates’ capabilities with the district’s standards for school leaders.

- Align evaluation and support for novice principals to standards. Systematically assess principals’ instructional leadership capabilities over their first three years on the job and provide feedback and support so they can meet expectations.

Next Steps

State legislators can help by adopting the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders. To date, 12 states have adopted the standards. Providing clear standards for educational leaders will help states prepare and retain school leaders, which will in turn foster the continued growth and success of the educators and staff they lead.

“Being a school leader is a lot like directing an orchestra,” says Colorado educator Courtney McAnany, who has a doctorate in school leadership and policy studies. “You have to treat each stakeholder as an individual, while still guiding them toward the same goal. The global view of the leader works to bring each of the individual specialists into harmony. As a teacher you are so strongly focused on your content and the success of your students that you may not see where other teachers are struggling or where student behavior in other areas is faltering. It is the job of the leader to support all aspects of the school community in order to bring the vision and mission into reality.”

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