EVALUATING PRINCIPALS

Balancing accountability with professional growth

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Effective principals are those who boost academic achievement for all students, increase the effectiveness of their teaching staffs, and consistently take leadership actions shown to improve outcomes for students. Therefore principal evaluation systems[1] should place 70% of their weight on the ability of principals to increase student achievement and teacher effectiveness outcomes, with the remaining 30% focused on their demonstration of effective practices and leadership actions. Local school systems should then use these assessments to drive not only key accountability decisions, but also to support professional learning and growth.

Currently, most principal evaluation systems tend to focus too much on the wrong things, lack clear performance standards, and lack rigor in both their design and attention to implementation (see, e.g., Reeves 2009; Goldring et al., 2010). Despite being a critical basis for determining who is an effective principal and for acting on those determinations, principal evaluation systems have simply not been a high priority for most states and local school systems. As a result, these systems do little to advance a powerful vision of principal effectiveness.[2]

This is very concerning because principal effectiveness is central to raising student achievement. Principal and teacher quality account for nearly 60% of a school's total impact on student achievement, and principals alone for a full 25% (Marzano et al., 2005). The principal's impact is so significant because of the leadership actions principals take to create the school-wide conditions that support student learning—especially those that directly influence teacher effectiveness, including hiring, professional development, evaluation, and retention or dismissal. Even in schools with high rates of students in poverty and students of color, many principals are leveraging these actions to lead dramatic gains in student achievement. However, schools and principals are not achieving these necessary results for our students at scale (Chenowith, 2007).

Bringing significant improvements in student achievement and teacher effectiveness to scale will require substantial improvements in the policies and practices that contribute to the effectiveness of principals. This is a large agenda for change and it can only succeed if we accurately and comprehensively measure the effectiveness of our principal corps. The goal of this paper is to provide policymakers with recommendations for the design and implementation of strong principal development and evaluation systems. States and local school systems that pursue these ideas can use principal evaluation to drive a powerful vision of principal effectiveness and, by consequence, improve outcomes for all students.

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[1] Throughout this paper, we use the term "evaluation system" to refer to all components of a system by which principals are evaluated, including the underlying standards upon which judgments are made, the instruments used to assess performance, and other related tools and processes.

[2] For a more complete discussion of our definition of principal effectiveness, see our 2010 paper: *Principal Effectiveness: A New Principalship to Drive Student Achievement, Teacher Effectiveness, and School Turnarounds*, available at www.nlns.org/publications.

Four Ideas for Improving Principal Evaluation Systems

1. Make student outcomes and teacher effectiveness outcomes 70% of a principal's evaluation, and base the remaining 30% on the leadership actions shown to drive better results.

Principal evaluations should put student achievement and teacher effectiveness outcomes at the center of the process, weighting those outcomes heavily at 70%. The remaining 30% of the evaluation should focus on the principal leadership actions that have been shown to drive increases in student achievement and teacher effectiveness.

New Leaders for New Schools recommends that the 70% outcomes portion of a principal evaluation be further divided as follows:

- *Student Outcomes—50% of total.* For student assessment results and measures of college readiness, attainment (reaching targets such as proficiency) and growth (increases in the achievement of individual students over time) both matter. Principal evaluation systems should tilt toward growth in order to most accurately and fairly measure a principal's impact on the students he or she serves.

- *Teacher effectiveness—20% of total.* Principals should be evaluated by their success in increasing teacher effectiveness in two ways:

   - *Growth in the percentage of teachers under a principal's supervision who make "effective" gains in student achievement outcomes.* Tying teachers' gains in student achievement to principal effectiveness sends a powerful message about the principal's role in improving teacher effectiveness. It encourages principals to attend to the practice and results of all of their teachers for whom assessment data are available.

   - *Improvement in the "differential retention" of teachers who are evaluated as effective.* This measures the degree to which principals are successful at finding and keeping teachers who receive effective ratings for student achievement outcomes and on their own standards-based evaluations, and are successful in exiting poor performers. Assessing principals on differential retention would incent principals to improve their hiring practices, their support for teachers, and their approach to evaluating teachers.

For the remaining 30% focused on principal actions, New Leaders for New Schools offers six domains of leadership actions that have been shown to drive results for students. These domains depart from the most prominent standards used by states and districts by placing greater emphasis on school culture (Domain 3) and teacher effectiveness (Domain 5).[3]

1. Vision for Results and Equity
The actions that principals take to articulate a vision, set high goals, and create an environment where all students thrive

2. Planning and Operations
The actions that principals take to diagnose the school's situation, develop and implement action plans, manage time and allocate resources in support of school goals

3. Culture
The actions that principals take to build a culture of high expectations, align adult behavior and systems with that culture, and engage families

4. Learning and Teaching
The actions that principals take to promote rigorous curriculum, high quality instructional practice, and the use of achievement data to drive improvement and interventions

5. Staff Development and Management
The actions that principals take to manage human capital, support the professional growth of staff, evaluate staff, and develop a leadership team

6. Personal Leadership and Growth
The actions that principals take to support organizational learning, maintain resolve and focus, find solutions in response to challenges, and communicate effectively

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[3] A complete rubric describing the specific actions a principal would take in these domains at four distinct levels of performance (and how a supervisor would know), is available at www.nlns.org/publications.

2. Base the evaluation of principal managers and other central office staff primarily on student outcomes and principal effectiveness, and give principal managers the tools and skills they need to effectively balance principal accountability with professional support and development.

Accountability for principals should be accompanied by results-oriented accountability for central office staff. Principal managers (i.e., those who supervise principals directly) should be held accountable for growth in student achievement in the schools they supervise, improvements in the effectiveness of the principals they manage, and a set of leadership actions (similar to the expectations for principals).

While principal effectiveness ratings should be used for a wide range of consequential actions, including selection of principal managers, compensation decisions, and dismissal of consistently ineffective principals, principal evaluation systems are only complete if they include a substantial investment in principals' professional growth. After all, for the vast majority of leaders in a school system, the purpose of evaluation is to support principals to reflect on their performance and identify what they need to do to reach the next level of performance. Principals specifically need their managers to make the evaluation process and expectations of performance clear, to craft tailored growth plans that address individual learning needs and serve as the basis for regular conversations, and to invest in ongoing, professional growth activities embedded in a robust professional learning community. The evaluation process should serve as a source of alignment and coherence across all of these activities. To provide these professional supports, many school systems may need to narrow the scope of principal managers' work and reduce the number of principals they manage.

3. Develop performance expectations that are universally high and differentiated in ways that drive continuous improvement.

Principal evaluation systems should hold very high expectations for all principals. At the same time, there are three ways in which the systems might usefully be differentiated:

- *Novice* principals require additional support for professional growth and school systems should consider placing more weight on the accomplishment of leadership actions and less weight on student achievement results than for other principals.

- The principal actions and indicators embedded in the evaluation system should be tailored to the *school level* to recognize key differences between elementary and secondary school leadership.

- Likewise, these actions and indicators should vary by the stage of school development. Though expectations remain high, a principal's actions should look quite different in persistently underperforming schools compared to those already at higher levels of performance.

4. Ensure that the evaluation system is informed by principals and other experts and is adapted over time to reflect new understandings of the practices that contribute to increased student achievement.

Based on our experience evaluating our own work, we believe that states can and should develop effective learning cycles, gathering data about the specific principal actions and school practices of schools making dramatic gains. Such information would not only be made available to school systems and schools to support their ongoing learning; it would also inform the design and periodic updating of principal evaluation systems.

Engaging principals, principal managers, and teachers in the design and implementation of a new principal evaluation system is an important part of this learning cycle. In addition to tapping their expertise, it recognizes that a new system calls for substantial changes in practice and culture. Principals, principal managers, and teachers should all be deeply engaged in designing, implementing, and revising new systems of evaluation.

Recommendations for Policymakers

Principal evaluation has traditionally been a local endeavor and should remain so. However, both the federal government and states can have important roles in fostering stronger evaluation systems. As they step up their involvement, they should guard against creating excessive bureaucracy and work to support the development of learning-centered school systems that hold everyone accountable for improving student achievement. All actions by policymakers should be focused on this goal, and it is in this spirit that New Leaders for New Schools offers recommendations to policymakers at all levels of government.

Federal government

Use core policymaking vehicles (especially Title II of ESEA) to promote principal effectiveness:

1. Reduce conflicting layers of accountability and ensure alignment of federal school-level and principal-level evaluation and accountability.

2. Align school accountability provisions in federal law to a new vision of principal effectiveness that includes a focus on increasing teacher effectiveness and improving student-level outcomes.

3. Require states, as a condition of receiving ESEA Title II funds, to adopt and implement principal evaluation systems that define principal effectiveness based on student achievement and teacher effectiveness outcomes (70%) and the leadership practices to accomplish those outcomes (30%).

Other recommendations for the federal government:
4. Require states, as a condition of receiving ESEA Title II funds, to regularly publish data on principal effectiveness.

5. Require states, as a condition of receiving ESEA Title II funds, to track the success of principal preparation and training programs in increasing principal effectiveness and to change or close those programs that are unsuccessful in doing so.

6. Set a goal for states to triple the amount of ESEA Title II funding used for principal development.

States

Create the conditions for local school systems to adopt enhanced principal evaluation systems and then build the capacity for successful implementation:

1. Revise existing leadership standards for principals to embrace student achievement and teacher effectiveness outcomes and to reflect the most current research on effective principal leadership.

2. Establish a model principal evaluation system that defines principal effectiveness based on student achievement and teacher effectiveness outcomes (70%) and the leadership actions to accomplish those outcomes (30%).

3. Reduce conflicting layers of accountability and ensure alignment of state accountability for individual schools and principals.

4. Support ongoing improvement of principal evaluation systems through learning and innovation.

Other recommendations for states:
5. Increase state investments in principal development strategies that can demonstrate that they produce greater principal effectiveness.

6. Provide resources for districts to engage principals and others with relevant expertise in the development of new evaluation systems.

7. Ensure that state labor laws, education codes, and other systems support both the implementation of rigorous evaluation systems and the consequences that flow from them.

8. Create flexible tools so that local school systems do not have to reinvent the wheel.

Local school systems

Create the conditions for principal and teacher effectiveness through enhanced evaluation as well as broader, coherent strategies:

1. Adopt or create both leadership standards for principals and a principal evaluation system that define principal effectiveness based on student achievement and teacher effectiveness outcomes (70%) and the leadership actions to accomplish those outcomes (30%).

2. Align the evaluation of principal managers and central office staff to the new principal evaluation system. Include accountability for student outcomes, the effectiveness of any direct reports, and key work practices such as providing professional development and support.

3. Reduce conflicting layers of accountability and ensure alignment of local accountability for individual schools and principals.

Other recommendations for local school systems:
4. Invest in the professional development of principals and ensure that all such investments are tied to needs surfaced through principal evaluations.

5. Use principal effectiveness data to drive rewards and consequences for principals.

6. Embrace a revision of principal evaluation as a key element of a learning-focused agenda for the school system.

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