

Principal Concerns: Addressing Statewide Principal Pipelines With Data and Strategy

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Discussions about human capital and school improvement typically center on teachers, not administrators, and that's a mistake. Principals, who are responsible for selecting and developing the teachers we know are so important, are a critical driver of school success. So it is imperative that we do everything we can to find, deploy, and keep good principals.

Unfortunately, when it comes to cultivating school leaders, current state-level practices are, at best, haphazard. In the worst cases, they actually may be keeping talented people out of the job. States are only just beginning to address the weaknesses in their principal pipelines—and even then, they are not yet developing the strategic approaches necessary to truly improve the talent pool and enhance student outcomes.

Some states have taken first steps toward improvement by tackling some issues around alternative paths to preparation and certification, but their plans are not comprehensive or driven by data, and there is still a long way to go. In addition, these piecemeal efforts may not result in a stronger principal labor market or get talented principals to the schools that need them the most. Instead, states need to first understand their circumstances. They need to analyze their principal data to identify their upcoming needs. Then they need to step back and look at a broader, comprehensive set of solutions that improve the job, attract the most promising candidates, and get them in the places that need them the most.

The time to act is now. We need strong principals to carry out federal and state education reforms such as school turnaround efforts and teacher evaluation. Yet every state has a shortage of great leaders and some states will see the shortage grow with looming retirements. For example, almost half of Iowa's 1,200 principals will be eligible to retire in the next 5 years. Indiana, on the other hand, has a relatively middle-aged workforce, and 70% are expected to still be there 5 years from now. These examples show the importance for state action to be driven by data and strategy—targeted recruitment and improved preparation is the right focus for Iowa, while the steady workforce in Indiana would benefit by increased mentoring and on-the-job support. To help make these strategic decisions, states need to develop a principal pipeline based on what the data reveals and tailor it to their distinct needs.

States need to track upcoming vacancies, the quality and capacity of their training programs, and note which principals are likely to need targeted support (new principals, turnaround principals, and principals who for several years have not seen student growth).

A deeper look at the data can help states and districts help to start answering more strategic questions. Is there a shortage of strong principals because of a wave of retirements, or are people in place but lack strong leadership skills? Do successful principals from some schools flounder when they take on school turnarounds? Do some schools have

their pick of talented candidates, while others across town are lucky to take what they can get? Are good, entrepreneurial candidates not entering the field because of barriers to entry or because of bureaucratic constraints on principals once on the job? Is the supply of good leaders low only in rural areas, urban ones, or is it widespread across the state?

To address the issues revealed by the data, states need to develop policies around conditions that support the pipeline.

- *The right work:* The principalship must be designed as an attractive job that challenges and rewards capable people. States can help by encouraging:
 - Principal autonomy over staff, curriculum, budget, and pay.
 - Growth through targeted professional development.
 - Accountability systems that connect principals to school performance.
 - Competitive compensation and career ladders.
- *The right people:* States must draw the most talented prospects to the field. States have important roles to play by:
 - Limiting credentialing barriers.
 - Expanding alternative preparation and certification.
 - Finding promising internal candidates.
 - Attracting promising external candidates.
 - Ensuring that human resources officials are open to different kinds of leaders.
- *The right places:* The best, most determined leaders should have incentives to take on the most challenged schools. States can support better deployment by:
 - Setting up a job clearinghouse (think “craigslist” or “LinkedIn”).
 - Providing pay incentives for working in a challenging school.
 - Giving an elite corps of experienced

principals more autonomy in challenging schools.

- Expanding the reach of high-performing principals by having them open more schools or oversee networks of schools.

The ultimate goal? To have every school led by an engaged leader who knows how to drive achievement and how to develop and retain talented teachers.

To meet this goal, state education leaders must:

1. Collect and analyze data to prioritize efforts.

With resources scarce, the data analysis can help states be deliberate as they choose where to invest. States already collect some principal and school performance data; they now should merge those to track high- and low-achieving principals and look for trends by location and school level. Only when they know where their needs lie can states best define their priorities.

2. Choose some high-impact options to start.

In combination with the state data analysis, a comprehensive set of policies can help states improve the job of principals, attract strong candidates, and target their placement. Some options are cost-free, some are high-impact, and some are more expensive. Some policies will be easy to implement; others might be more challenging. Map out what can be done now, next year, and three years from now.

3. Collect and publicize data on preparation programs.

Most states don’t know how many people graduate every year from principal preparation programs, where they work, or what impact they have on student achievement. Most states don’t know where

their best, or weakest, principals come from, because they don't link performance back to preparation programs. States must begin to collect this information to determine where to expand and where to withdraw, and to direct candidates to quality options.

4. Pilot new opportunities among the districts most ready to try new things.

New preparation options, alternative sources of leaders, new school leadership arrangements, and new job freedoms have the best chance of yielding results if they are implemented by those who want to try them. Pilot new ideas and measure the outcomes. Grow the ones that are working; stop those that aren't. Proof of good examples is the best way to promote and grow change.

5. Link principal policies to teacher policies.

Almost every state is legislating change with regard to teachers. Rarely do principal policies get included. States should make it a practice to attend to principal policy whenever they tackle teacher policy. Aside from not missing opportunities, it's important that school leader policies like evaluation, accountability, and compensation align with teacher policies on those same issues.

With retirements on the horizon and strong leaders in short supply, states need to act now—and act thoughtfully—to ensure that schools, and students, have the excellent principals they need.