

PLAYMAKERS: HOW GREAT PRINCIPALS BUILD AND LEAD GREAT TEAMS OF TEACHERS

POLICY BRIEF

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New Leaders 

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Iconic coaches are remembered for their ability to take talented individuals and bring them together into a well-oiled team with relentless drive to succeed. Don Shula demanded perfection, Vince Lombardi exemplified determination and Tom Landry stayed flexible. Great coaches invest time and resources in training the talent on the team, make smart choices about where and when to play their skill-players and instill a drive to win. You can't have a championship team without a gifted coach because teams need leaders.

So do schools.

It is not surprising that a decade of research supports principals' critical role in shaping the quality of teaching and learning at the school level. On average, a principal accounts for 25 percent of a school's total impact on student achievement—significant for a single individual. A 2012 study found that principals have a stronger effect on all students in a school than teachers do because teachers affect only their students¹. While ineffective principals drag down the performance of their schools, effective principals enable effective teaching, at scale, across the whole school.

Indeed, the difference between an average and an above-average principal can impact student achievement by as much as 20 percentage points.² This is because effective school leaders play a significant role in improving student achievement by strategically and effectively managing teaching and learning at the school level each and every day, and along the continuum of learning from year to year—impacting student learning beyond the scope of even the most effective teachers.

Through a variety of federal reforms and competitive funding programs (such as Race to the Top; the Teacher Incentive Fund; and the opportunity available to states for flexibility under the Elementary and Secondary Act³) the U.S. Department of Education has incentivized states and districts to develop and implement, among other reforms, new approaches to educator effectiveness. These federal programs alone account for almost \$6 billion in spending, not including the over \$2 billion allocated annually for teacher and principal development in Title II and the millions of dollars spent separately by states and districts to recruit, develop and evaluate high-quality teachers.

Though federal programs generally include options for investments in principal quality, states have focused most dollars and time on teacher quality initiatives that are separate from the principal. If included, school leaders are often an afterthought or add-on to teacher initiatives as opposed to an integral element of any effort to transform instruction and schools. At the district level, even something as fundamental as principal job descriptions often fail to state that one of the principal's responsibilities is to build strong and consistent instruction across a school.

But this is akin to drafting every player in the “top 10” without installing an effective head coach to lead the team.

If policymakers do not invest sufficient resources and attention in principal quality as a key element of teacher quality efforts, these reforms will have trouble demonstrating marked improvement in student achievement and risk public disapproval and ultimate abandonment over time. Such a fate would be tragic given the incredible potential of these reforms, if done well, to transform the quality of teaching and learning in our nation's public schools.

1 Branch, G., Hanushek, E. A., & Rivkin, S. G. (2012). Estimating the effect of leaders on public sector productivity: The case of school principals (pp. 45). Washington, D.C.: National Center for Analysis of Longitudinal Data in Education.

2 Based on a 2005 study by McREL that analyzed 70 different studies from over three decades of research.

3 Also known as No Child Left Behind.

THE PLAYBOOK: HOW GREAT PRINCIPALS MAXIMIZE TEAM PERFORMANCE

Just like head coaches who lead a set of talented assistant coaches and team leaders, great principals cultivate and distribute leadership to other school leaders. Recent New Leaders' research found principals are critical to teacher success in three ways:

1. **Developing teachers**—working with teachers to improve skill and classroom practice
2. **Managing talent**—hiring, placing teachers and monitoring performance
3. **Creating a great place to work**—shaping schools into places where teachers want to stay

Principals who prioritized improving teacher effectiveness—and who were skilled at it—saw dramatic gains in student achievement. These findings suggest that investments in principal effectiveness are a strategic lever for effective teaching at scale.

RULES OF THE GAME: POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS THAT INVEST RESOURCES, TIME AND ATTENTION IN PRINCIPALS

We need principals who develop teachers, manage talent and create a great place to work. While these are by no means the only responsibilities principals have, they are essential to building a winning team. Our

recommendations below speak to the very specific role that policy has to play in fostering great principal actions that amplify great teaching. For broader recommendations see www.newleaders.org.

AT THE LOCAL LEVEL

Local school districts define the majority of conditions that support or inhibit principals. Districts have multiple important opportunities to change the status quo. We recommend that school districts tackle:

Principal hiring.

Seek out the best. When hiring principals, districts often stress graduate degrees or number of years in the system, rather than the competencies and skills necessary to excel on the job. Instead, districts should implement more rigorous hiring processes that screen and assess for necessary mindsets and skills, such as an unwavering belief in all students' ability to succeed, adult management experience and instructional expertise.

Principal evaluation and development.

Districts should provide clear and consistent expectations of success for principals. They should focus evaluation, professional development and accountability for the student outcomes that principals need to achieve, and on the important roles principals play, including the development and retention of high-quality teachers. In particular, districts should provide sufficient training for principals on the new expectations for teacher evaluation and development and hold principals accountable for successfully demonstrating these skills.

Principal management and support.

School districts should dedicate sufficient time and training for district leaders to conduct principal evaluation and performance management activities, including clear goal setting, school visits, formative feedback and support for individual principal development. They should hold principal managers accountable for results of the schools and principals they manage.

Decision making.

District leadership should empower principals with flexibility to make managerial decisions that impact teaching, such as discretion to:

- Make **strategic staffing decisions**, including hiring, promotion and when necessary, the efficient and fair removal of ineffective teachers.
- Manage **budgets** and staffing allocations to meet specific school needs.
- Restructure school **schedules** to enable common planning time for teachers to foster communities of practice led by the principal and teacher leaders.

AT THE STATE LEVEL

State legislatures and departments of education face a changing world in education where they are outgrowing a largely compliance-focused role. Instead, many states are building policy systems for school district improvement across an entire state. They can embrace this new role by:

Emphasizing skills for improving teaching at every stage of the principal pipeline.

From standards to evaluation, states should clarify that principals are expected to focus on strengthening teacher practice and make sure all related systems are aligned, including:

- **Principal standards.** States should include standards for selecting, developing and retaining effective teachers.
- **Preparation.** There should be a requirement for preparation programs that build aspiring principals' skills in developing teachers, managing talent and creating a great place to work, and an assessment of candidates on their demonstrated abilities in these areas. Preparation programs should invest in more selective admissions processes, integrate field practice

and ensure that candidates demonstrate the required skills before program completion.

- **Certification.** For renewal, states should require principals to demonstrate success in improving teacher effectiveness and improving student outcomes.
- **Evaluation.** States should set guidelines for districts to hold principals accountable for improved student outcomes and for demonstrating the key practices of improving teaching practice, performance management and building a strong school culture.

Investing funding in principal effectiveness.

States should make an investment in the tools, training and support needed to build a strong principals corps. Also, they should use flexibility in state and federal funding to focus on principal effectiveness; for example, they should encourage Title II formula funding to be used for investments in principal effectiveness.

AT THE FEDERAL LEVEL

Federal policymakers help set the tone and importance of education policy for the country. From new initiatives that foster innovation to continued funding for bedrock programs, these policymakers can integrate principals into education reforms in several ways:

Leverage existing formula funds.

Federal policymakers should set aside Title II formula dollars specifically for principal effectiveness and promote the use of Title II funds for school leadership strategies that support teacher effectiveness. Additionally, they should continue to require rigorous teacher and principal evaluations as part of the requirements for flexibility under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.

Champion the cause.

Policy makers should bring the importance of school leadership to national prominence. For example, they could expand the Champions of Change program to leverage highly-effective principals nationwide, or use the strong blueprint provided by the Administration's proposal for a Master Teacher Corps. They should talk publicly, consistently and at the highest levels about the importance of principals in amplifying great teaching.

Break down barriers to entry.

Federal policymakers should encourage states to cultivate talent from all sectors. While all great teachers require a strong background in teaching and instruction, professionals returning to the field may have gained valuable adult leadership skills from other experiences such as time in the public or private sector or service in the military. By removing arbitrary barriers to entry for returning talent, states and districts can fortify the pipeline of emerging principals and leaders.

Invest in tools and consortia focused on leadership.

Policy makers should help states find wheels, not recreate them. Federal policymakers are in the unique position to invest in tools and convene states together to bring ideas, discuss challenges and share best practices in all areas of education, especially in school leadership.

Competitive grants.

Federal policymakers should continue to expand efforts to promote principal effectiveness in competitive grant programs and underscore the need for teacher effectiveness efforts to include principals.