



Increasing Principal Effectiveness

A Strategic Investment for ESEA

March 2011

Introduction

School principals are second only to teachers among school-based factors that influence student achievement and they are critical to attracting and retaining effective teachers and other school staff.¹ Or as Chris Cerf, New Jersey commissioner of education, says: “Pick the right school leader and great teachers will come and stay. Pick the wrong one and, over time, good teachers leave, mediocre ones stay, and the school gradually (or not so gradually) declines. Reversing the impact of a poor principal can take years.”² Effective principals are also crucial to implementing reforms to human capital systems for teachers, such as rigorous selection and evaluation systems and meaningful professional development.

Yet in the past, federal policymakers haven’t given school leadership much attention. This reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act should ensure that all 50 states develop definitions of principal effectiveness and next-generation principal evaluation systems that identify effective leaders based on student achievement and other rigorous measures of outcomes and practice. It should also ensure that states hold principal preparation programs accountable for preparing leaders that are effective in schools. While defining and evaluating principal effectiveness is not sufficient to ensuring strong leadership, it is a critical step to creating a coherent, statewide vision of effective school leadership that can inform other policies. States will also need to use these systems to drive all aspects of their human capital systems—from certification to compensation to professional development.

These actions should not take place in a vacuum but instead be a part of a comprehensive education reform agenda that is spelled out in a reauthorized ESEA. Nor should reform stop with reauthorization of the law. Practitioners and researchers are continuing to learn about the best measures of effective leadership and next-generation evaluation systems. Therefore, this memo is intended to offer general principles for principal evaluation that signal the important elements that should be included. It is clear that ESEA needs to set forth the conditions that will allow for a dramatic improvement in teaching and learning and provide incentives as well as the freedom for states, districts, and schools to change and innovate.

As the 112th Congress considers the reauthorization of ESEA, it must revamp Title II of ESEA and ensure that principal quality is given the funding and attention it deserves. We also believe that states and districts must engage in important reforms as a condition of receipt of their Title II funds, and we call on Congress to consider the recommendations outlined below.

Recommendations

We recommend the federal government require all states to have definitions of principal effectiveness and guidelines for next-generation principal evaluation systems as a condition of Title II funding. The definitions and guidelines must be statewide and use objective measures of student and school achievement and other indicators of rigorous practice to generate annual effectiveness ratings for all principals. The new evaluation system would not negate any current union contracts or agreements but would cover only future contracts and agreements.

States must have a newly designed principal-evaluation system in use statewide no later than four years after ESEA reauthorization to meet this condition of Title II funding. States must also put in place ongoing processes to review the evaluation system and make improvements based on stakeholder input and on studies of the relationship between evaluation elements and student outcomes. Finally, states must ensure all students have access to effective principals by looking at principal ratings within each district by school, race, and poverty and between each district by school, race, and poverty. States should look at elementary and secondary schools separately and examine the gap in average values between schools in the highest and lowest quartiles by concentrations of poverty and race. States should also consider the number of years a principal has been in a school when reviewing the ratings since new principals may not show positive achievement gains until their second or third year in a school.

While principal evaluation systems will vary widely across states and districts, we recommend that Congress establish the following minimum requirements:

1. States must develop statewide guidelines for a principal evaluation system. States may choose to develop a model system that districts may modify or allow districts to develop their own principal evaluation systems but states must have minimum quality standards.
2. States must use ratings from these principal evaluation systems to examine principal effectiveness by race and poverty and to ensure all students have access to effective principals.
3. A principal's most important responsibility is to ensure all students learn to high levels. Fulfilling this responsibility is complex and includes a variety of types of tasks.³ Therefore states should require that principal evaluation systems include the following:

- Student achievement measures should account for a substantial percentage of a principal’s evaluation and include a measure of schoolwide academic growth as well as attainment measures of achievement such as the percent of students reaching proficiency. In addition, student-achievement measures for secondary schools should include other student outcomes besides tests such as cohort graduation rates.
 - One of the primary ways a principal drives increases in student achievement is by recruiting, developing, and retaining effective teachers and other staff. Principals should also be held accountable for effectively implementing teacher evaluations that differentiate among teachers and provide feedback to teachers to improve their practice. Therefore, principal evaluations should assess a principal’s ability to improve teacher effectiveness and/or retain effective teachers at higher rates while reducing the number of ineffective performers. This assessment could be based on qualitative information such as principals’ actions to develop and retain effective teachers, quantitative information about teachers’ effectiveness, or both types of information.
 - States should design research-based rubrics that assess whether principals are taking the actions they need to improve student learning and teacher practice. These rubrics should assess principal practice against a set of performance standards. Districts could adopt these rubrics or develop their own that meet state guidelines.
 - Finally, measures of school culture and climate, such as teacher and student attendance, indicators of school discipline, and parent, student, and staff perceptions should be considered by principal evaluators as part of the evaluation process. These culture and climate measures can either be used to inform the principal’s practice rating or incorporated as a separate element of the evaluation system.
4. States must require that districts and schools use information from the evaluation system to inform other human capital decisions about principals, such as preparation program approval, professional development, certification, compensation, tenure, promotion, and dismissal.
 5. States must encourage districts to train and provide ongoing support to principal evaluators on the new evaluation system. For example, states could create technical assistance teams that can provide real-time support to superintendents or other designated evaluators and can train the trainers within districts.
 6. States must require that evaluation systems differentiate principals into at least four groups of performance. These categories should be defined by the evaluation system and do not have to contain equal proportions.
 7. States should require that evaluation systems are differentiated based on a school’s performance and grade configuration. A turnaround school that is making progress is likely to look different after one year than a school that is slightly low achieving, and

a high school would have different indicators of progress than an elementary school. In addition, it can take a year before a new principal can shape the culture of a school and an additional one to two years to begin raising student achievement. Therefore the evaluation system should include a phase-in period that looks at interim indicators of progress for principals new to a school building.

8. States must report out at the district level the percentages of principals in each rating category each year. The data must be made available in a way that makes it easy to compare principal effectiveness between high- and low-poverty schools.
9. States must ensure that administrators and their evaluators receive data on impact on student growth in a timely fashion.
10. States must implement an ongoing review process of the statewide guidelines for evaluation systems that considers the most up-to-date research on principal effectiveness. States should also monitor and report on the alignment between the measures of schoolwide growth, measures of principal practice, and overall principal evaluation ratings.
11. States must gather and report on principal effectiveness data for each principal-preparation program, and states must require preparation programs to improve their programs based on these data. They should also use these data to make decisions about whether to renew principal preparation programs.

Implementation timeline

We designed the timeline for states that are at the very early stages of developing the necessary elements of a next-generation evaluation system. States that are already working on one or more of these elements should be able to move at a faster pace than what is outlined below, particularly the states benefiting from Race to the Top funding. States must meet the deadlines detailed in the timeline as a condition of Title II funding. The timeline assumes the first year of implementation of a reauthorized ESEA will be 2013-14.

Year 1: Development of data and evaluation system

States will:

- Develop statewide principal evaluation guidelines that include the minimum requirements for all districts
- Develop a statewide definition of principal effectiveness and clear standards for principal performance
- Identify the schoolwide student achievement measures and determine how they will be incorporated into the evaluation system

- Conduct testing of the schoolwide student achievement measures to ensure they are fair, reliable, and able to be accurately produced on an annual basis
- Develop and pilot principal assessment rubrics
- Create any additional components of principal evaluation systems such as measures of school climate, parent surveys, etc.
- Solicit feedback from educators, administrators, and the public on all components of the system
- Identify districts to pilot the evaluation system

Year 2: Pilot data and evaluation system in selected districts

States will:

- Finalize the schoolwide student achievement measures
- Pilot the principal evaluation system including evaluation tools and student achievement components
- Begin training principals and their evaluators on the new evaluation system
- Begin public communication about the new evaluation system
- Continue to solicit feedback from educators, administrators, and the public
- Continue to ensure assessment and data quality
- Provide information on schoolwide student achievement measures to principals and their evaluators to familiarize them with the data

Districts will:

- Either adopt the state assessment rubrics or develop their own
- Submit the components for their selected evaluation system to states for approval and verification of alignment with state guidelines

Year 3: Pilot data and evaluation system statewide

States will:

- Implement the evaluation system with all schools and districts in the state with student achievement measures incorporated
- Continue training principals and their evaluators on the new evaluation system
- Continue training and public communication on the new system
- Continue to ensure assessment and data quality

Districts will:

- Execute principal evaluations for all principals using all new evaluation tools, including student achievement measures

Year 4: Implement evaluation system

States will:

- Support districts in fully implementing all new evaluation tools, including student achievement measures
- Continue to train administrators on results
- Continue training and public communication on the new system
- Continue to ensure assessment and data quality

Districts will:

- Execute principal evaluation for all principals using all new evaluation tools, including student achievement measures
- Use evaluation information to inform personnel decisions

Year 5: Monitor principal ratings

States will:

- Identify within-district and between-district inequities by looking at principal ratings within each district by race and poverty and between each district by race and poverty

Conclusion

We believe the federal government should require all states to define and evaluate principal effectiveness based on student achievement and other measures of rigorous practice. While defining and evaluating principal effectiveness is not sufficient to ensuring strong leadership, it is a critical step since states need a vision of effective leadership that informs their human capital systems and policies. We hope Congress will soon reauthorize ESEA and take action on these important reforms.

Endnotes

- 1 In fact, in a review of research on school leadership, the authors find “the total (direct and indirect) effects of leadership on student learning account for about a quarter of total school effects.” Kenneth Leithwood and others, “Review of research: How leadership influences student learning” (New York: The Wallace Foundation), available at <http://www.wallacefoundation.org/SiteCollectionDocuments/WF/Knowledge%20Center/Attachments/PDF/ReviewofResearch-LearningFromLeadership.pdf>. Another research brief summarizes the findings from several studies sponsored by the Center for Longitudinal Analysis of Data in Education Research on principal effectiveness and finds that the quality of a principal affects the academic performance of the school. Jennifer King Rice, “Principal Effectiveness and Leadership in an Era of Accountability: What Research Says” (Washington: The Urban Institute, 2010), available at <http://www.caldercenter.org/upload/calder-research-and-policy-brief-8.pdf>.
- 2 Lee D. Mitgang, “Becoming a Leader: Preparing School Principals for Today’s Schools” (New York: The Wallace Foundation, 2008).
- 3 Eileen Lai Horng, Daniel Klasik, and Susanna Loeb, “Principal Time-Use and School Effectiveness.” Working Paper 34 (The Urban Institute, 2010), available at http://www.caldercenter.org/upload/Working-paper-34_FINAL-2.pdf.