



OPERATING IN THE DARK:

What Outdated State Policies
and Data Gaps Mean for
Effective School Leadership

A Special Report by



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The United States faces a shortage of high-quality school leaders at a time when the importance of principals is more obvious than ever. Principals oversee the hiring, development, and management of teachers who account for the largest share of a school's impact on student learning. Because principals manage the teaching force, they are the ones who are best positioned to ensure that every student has a great teacher year after year and thus the student learning growth needed to be college and career ready. The key to improving schools is giving students consecutive years of access to effective teachers.

Being a principal is not easy work. Effective principals need strong instructional and leadership skills to promote growth in student learning, manage their human capital, develop and support teachers, use data to drive student learning improvements, and build a culture of high expectations for the adults and students in the building. We need to do more to boost the supply of high-quality principals to ensure that every school is led by a highly prepared leader who can drive student achievement.

States play an important role in cultivating leadership talent. While districts hire principals, states control the entry point to the principalship, overseeing the preparation and licensure of school leaders.

The George W. Bush Institute's Alliance to Reform Education Leadership launched a study to explore how states are using their authority to increase the supply of high-quality principals who could raise student achievement in schools.

The *Principal Policy State Survey* focused on specific state roles and policies impacting principal quality:

Principal Preparation Program Approval: States are responsible for approving the programs that train future leaders. States have the power to set program requirements, including specific coursework, school-based learning experiences, and faculty qualifications. States also define and oversee the program approval process to determine if programs meet the required criteria. Programs are then required to apply for re-approval on a periodic basis.

Principal Licensure: Every state requires that its K–12 public school leaders be licensed. States set the standards for both initial licensure—certifying principals as qualified to be hired for the job—as well as renewal of those licenses after principals are on the job after a determined period of time.

Principal Outcome Data: States can collect and monitor data to know if the principals who are being recruited, selected, and prepared are then effective once on the job and compare the effectiveness of the programs that prepare them.

All 50 states and the District of Columbia responded to our survey, allowing us to create a first-of-its-kind dataset and 51 individual snapshots. This report presents our cross-state findings.

WHAT WE LEARNED

Our analysis led us to conclude that states are not effectively using their authority and are failing to collect and monitor the outcomes of principal preparation and licensure policies. In too many cases, we found states making decisions without using current research or critical data and essentially operating in the dark.

States are not using their principal preparation oversight, licensure, and data-monitoring powers to improve the supply of high-quality principals for their schools. There is a growing body of research highlighting the wide range of skills and behaviors that principals need to succeed in the highly complex and demanding job of school leader.¹ Unfortunately many of our nation's principal preparation programs reflect out-of-date notions of the principal's role and do not take into account the latest research findings in their design. Some states have limited their principal preparation options by requiring programs to be operated by institutions of higher education rather than focusing on the characteristics and quality of program providers.

When setting principal licensure requirements, states are generally relying on input-based measures, such as previous experience in teaching or obtained level of education rather than performance-based measures requiring aspiring leaders to demonstrate competency and skills. There is little to no research supporting these input-based measures as accurate proxies or predictors of principal effectiveness.² Nor do most states take into account principal effectiveness on the job or require principals to demonstrate their impact on teaching and learning when renewing their licenses.

Many states lack critical data on their principal supply and could not report, for instance, how many principals were graduating from principal preparation programs or earning licenses on an annual basis. Most concerning, many states have almost no information about how their newly prepared and licensed principals perform once they are on the job. States do not know whether graduates are successful in earning licensure, securing a job, retaining that job, and being effective in raising student achievement. Without this critical information, states are unable to distinguish their most successful principal preparation programs from their weakest or hold them accountable for producing successful principals. Additionally, most states are not using outcome data when re-approving principal preparation programs or renewing graduates' licenses.

The prevalence of missing data hampers the ability of states to plan strategically and be proactive in influencing the quality and quantity of their principal supply to serve their districts and schools.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

In conducting this survey, we did find that states recognize many of these shortfalls and are committed to building systems that support effective principals. Many states are already embarking on efforts to strengthen their policies and practices impacting school leaders. To assist states undertaking this important work, we offer policy recommendations, including:

Principal Preparation Program Approval

- States need to understand the growing body of research highlighting the wide range of skills and behaviors that principals need to succeed in the highly complex and demanding job of school

leader. This research should be incorporated into state requirements for principal preparation programs to ensure that programs produce high-quality candidates. Effective preparation programs include a number of key elements, including: being expressly designed to produce and place principals who improve student learning; having clearly defined principal competencies; strategically recruiting high-potential candidates into the program; using a rigorous candidate selection process; providing relevant coursework taught by faculty with practitioner experience; incorporating authentic learning experiences in real school settings; and ensuring that graduates demonstrate mastery of competencies.

- States should allow organizations other than higher education institutions to be approved to provide principal preparation, as long as those programs meet the same rigorous standards.
- States should monitor principal preparation program outcome data and hold programs accountable for producing effective principals.

Principal Licensure

- States should move away from input-based principal licensing requirements such as years of teaching and degrees, which are not accurate proxies or predictors of principal effectiveness. For licensure to signal proof of competence, states should seek out a new form of performance-based assessment that measures the more complex skills research shows effective school leaders need to succeed.
- States should base principal license renewal decisions on job performance and demonstration of competencies that correlate with principal effectiveness measures, including impact on student achievement. Leaders repeatedly receiving poor ratings should not have their licenses renewed.

Principal Outcome Data

States need to do more to ensure that their statewide longitudinal data systems can track principals as they move from principal preparation to licensure to school leadership positions. States need to be able to measure principals' ability to secure jobs, retain jobs, demonstrate an impact on student achievement, and receive effective evaluation ratings. With this information, states can make strategic decisions and investments that result in a more highly qualified principal pool.

The research is clear that principals are a critical force in school improvement in that they are responsible for attracting and retaining teacher talent and driving the improvement of student learning.

It is our hope that this set of baseline data from the *Principal Policy State Survey* will promote further conversations and state-led efforts to ensure that every school in the nation is led by a highly prepared school leader who can produce student gains.

Endnotes

1. The Wallace Foundation, *The School Principal as Leader: Guiding Schools to Better Teaching and Learning* (January 2012); Timothy Waters, Robert J. Marzano, and Brian A. McNulty, "Balanced Leadership: What 30 Years of Research Tells Us About the Effect of Leadership on Student Achievement" (Aurora, CO: Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning, 2003).
2. The issue of administrator certification is less studied than that of teacher certification, but the issues are very similar. A policy statement from The Broad Foundation and the Thomas B. Fordham Institute in 2003 noted that the current set of certification requirements do not assure principal quality. Another relevant study focusing on superintendents is Ronald G. Ehrenberg, Richard P. Chaykoski, and Randy Ann Ehrenberg's "Are School Superintendents Rewarded for Performance?," in D. Monk, ed., *Micro Level School Finance: Issues and Implications for Policy*. (American Educational Finance Association Yearbook, 1988).

