

AMBITIOUS LEADERSHIP: HOW PRINCIPALS LEAD SCHOOLS TO COLLEGE AND CAREER READINESS POLICY BRIEF



RECOMMENDATION 1: REVISE SCHOOL LEADERSHIP STANDARDS

Leading schools to meet more challenging standards requires that today's principals exercise **ambitious instructional leadership** — a more *intensive* and *intentional* approach to instructional leadership. To support this imperative, states and the federal government can:

- **Revise school leadership standards to focus on those most critical for ambitious instructional leadership.** School leadership standards should reflect the most important aspects of a principal's job today.¹ Moreover, to be actionable and effective, standards should be concise and evidence-based. For example, the Transformational Leadership Framework² — developed based on New Leaders' 15-plus years of experience developing leaders who get results for students³ — focuses on fewer, critical standards, including establishing a shared vision, teaching and learning, and talent management (as well as operations and personal leadership). To truly prepare today's principals to enact ambitious instructional leadership, states could consider similarly streamlining their standards or identifying "power" standards aligned to ambitious instructional leadership practices — such as the *Professional Standards for Educational Leaders* 1, 4, and 7.⁴ States can take advantage of opportunities in the *Every Student Succeeds Act*⁵ to revisit their principal standards and develop, with stakeholder input, a vision of effective school leadership based on the latest research on what works.
- **Provide technical assistance and resources.** The U.S. Department of Education, directly through its Office of State Support or by convening communities of practice led by expert organizations, can provide technical assistance and resources to states on how to effectively revise and regularly revisit their school leadership standards to ensure they reflect expectations of today's principals and sufficiently focus attention on school leaders' most important and pressing responsibilities, including leading shifts to teaching and learning in an era of higher standards.

1 Ikemoto, G., Taliaferro, L., & Adams, E. (2012). *Playmakers: How Great Principals Build and Lead Great Teams of Teachers*. New York, NY: New Leaders. Retrieved from <http://newleaders.org/research-policy/playmakers/>.

2 New Leaders (2016). *Transformational Leadership Framework*. Retrieved from <http://newleaders.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/2016.TransformationalLeadershipFramework.pdf>.

3 Gates, S. M., Hamilton, L. S., Martorell, P., Burkhauser, S., Heaton, P., Pierson, Baird, A.M., Vuollo, M., Li, J.J., Lavery, D.C., Harvey, M., and Gu, K. (2014). *Preparing Principals to Raise Student Achievement: Implementation and Effects of the New Leaders Program in Ten Districts*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation. Retrieved from http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR500/RR507/RAND_RR507.pdf.

4 Standard 1: Mission, Vision, and Core Values (especially a shared vision of effective instruction); Standard 4: Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment (aligned to college- and career-ready standards); and Standard 7: Professional Community for Teachers and Staff. National Policy Board for Educational Administration (2015). *Professional Standards for Educational Leaders 2015*. Reston, VA. Retrieved from <http://www.ccsso.org/Documents/2015/ProfessionalStandardsforEducationalLeaders2015forNPBEAFINAL.pdf>.

5 Section 2101(c)(4)(B): "Reforming teacher, principal, or other school leader certification, recertification, licensing, or tenure systems or preparation program standards and approval processes to ensure that... (II) principals or other school leaders have the instructional leadership skills to help teachers teach and to help students meet such challenging State academic standards."

RECOMMENDATION 2: STRENGTHEN AND INVEST IN HIGH-QUALITY PRINCIPAL PREPARATION AND SUPPORT

Ambitious instructional leadership requires that principals have access to strong preparation, effective professional development, and high-quality support. To ensure school leaders are well-prepared and well-supported, states and the federal government can:

- **Raise the bar for principal preparation and licensure.** States provide initial and ongoing approval of principal preparation programs to operate and they grant licenses to educators to serve in school leadership positions — two powerful tools they can use to improve principal effectiveness. In particular, states can revamp their systems for overseeing principal preparation programs to include research-based metrics for quality assessment, a focus on ongoing improvement, and clear criteria for identifying and replicating successful programs and shuttering those that, even with intervention, fail to prepare graduates with the skills they need to get results for teachers and students.⁶ Moreover, they can enact new laws or revise rules to ensure a principal license is based on demonstrated effectiveness in accelerating student achievement, strengthening teacher practice, and improving school culture. States could use the optional 3 percent leadership set-aside⁷ to support these and other efforts aimed at strengthening school leadership across the state.
- **Provide technical assistance to districts on high-quality, evidence-based principal support.** Historically, just one-third of districts have invested federal *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* (ESEA) Title II dollars in professional development for principals⁸ — a missed opportunity to invest in the individuals responsible for ensuring ambitious instruction occurs in every classroom across an entire school. Using statutory authority in ESSA,⁹ states can focus the use of Title II funds on evidence-based leadership development programs and strategies. For example, states can provide technical assistance, resources (such as a recent report by the RAND Corporation and Wallace Foundation¹⁰), or other support to districts — particularly those serving large populations of high-need students and schools. And the U.S. Department of Education can issue a companion guide for new Title II guidance¹¹ that provides additional detail on supporting principals — including specific strategies and best practices for investing in principal supervisors.
- **Invest in evidence-based principal preparation and support.** As states ramp up their efforts to prioritize smart investments in leadership, the U.S. Congress can fund, through the federal appropriations process, programs — most notably the School Leader Recruitment and Support Program (SLRSP) — explicitly designed to support evidence-based leadership programs. Moreover, Congress could reauthorize the Higher Education Act and adopt measures to align it with new or improved leadership provisions in ESSA — such as by amending the Teacher Quality Partnerships (TQP) program so that any high-quality program can apply and choose to invest specifically in a school leadership program. And Congress can provide sufficient funding for ESEA Title II state and district grants to support high-quality preparation and support for principals and other school leaders, as well as for ESEA Title I, through which states and districts can invest in school leadership as an evidence-based strategy for improving the lowest-performing schools.

6 University Council of Educational Administrators and New Leaders (2016). *State Evaluation of Principal Preparation Programs (SEP²) Toolkit*. Retrieved from www.sepkit.org.

7 Section 2101(c)(3): “PRINCIPALS OR OTHER SCHOOL LEADERS.—Notwithstanding paragraph (1) and in addition to funds otherwise available for activities under paragraph (4), a State educational agency may reserve not more than 3 percent of the amount reserved for subgrants to local educational agencies under paragraph (1) for one or more of the activities for principals or other school leaders that are described in paragraph (4).”

8 U.S. Department of Education (2016). *Findings From the 2015–2016 Survey on the Use of Funds Under Title II, Part A*. Washington, DC. Retrieved from <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/teacherqual/leasurveyfunds rpt82016.pdf>.

9 Section 2101(c)(4)(B)(viii): “Providing assistance to local educational agencies for the development and implementation of high-quality professional development programs for principals that enable the principals to be effective and prepare all students to meet the challenging State academic standards.”

10 Herman, R., Gates, S.M., Chavez-Herrerias, E.R., and Harris, M. (2016). *School Leadership Interventions Under the Every Student Succeeds Act: Volume I – A Review of the Evidence Base, Initial Findings*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation. Retrieved from http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR1500/RR1550/RAND_RR1550.pdf.

11 U.S. Department of Education (2016). *Non-Regulatory Guidance for Title II, Part A: Building Systems of Support for Excellent Teaching and Leading*. Washington, DC. Retrieved from <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/essa/essatitleiipartaguidance.pdf>.

RECOMMENDATION 3: PROVIDE PRINCIPALS WITH BALANCED AUTONOMY

To create school-level conditions that support ambitious instructional leadership, principals need balanced autonomy — flexibility balanced with appropriate oversight and support — to make decisions about staffing, curricula, schedules, and budget. To support this critical need, states and the federal government can:

- **Remove barriers to providing principals with balanced autonomy.** As appropriate and required by statute,¹² states can reduce state-level barriers to operational flexibility for principals of the lowest-performing schools and those with large achievement gaps. Moreover, states can ask districts to include in their plans for the lowest-performing school, as appropriate and required by statute,¹³ how they will adjust local practices to provide principals of those high-need schools with balanced autonomy to implement improvement plans. Though not required by law, states can also consider providing similar flexibilities to principals of other high-need schools.
- **Invest in programs that provide principals with balanced autonomy.** Through the appropriations process, the U.S. Congress can fully fund specific programs that require grantees to provide principals of schools serving large populations of high-need students with greater operational flexibility — in particular, the Teacher and School Leader Incentive Grants (TSLIG)¹⁴ and the Promise Neighborhoods¹⁵ programs.
- **Direct federal funds toward projects that provide principals with balanced autonomy.** Even where not required by statute, the U.S. Department of Education can use a grant priority¹⁶ to direct federal dollars toward programs and initiatives that provide principals with balanced autonomy as an evidence-based strategy¹⁷ for improving the lowest-performing schools and other high-need schools. Such a priority could be particularly valuable for the Supporting Effective Educator Development (SEED) and Education Innovation and Research (EIR) programs — both of which have funded projects designed to improve leadership, teaching, and learning in high-need schools.

12 Section 1003(b)(2)(C): “reduc[e] barriers and provid[e] operational flexibility for schools in the implementation of comprehensive support and improvement activities or targeted support and improvement activities under section 1111(d).”

13 Section 1003(e)(1)(f): ensure each LEA that submits an application to support schools implementation CSI or TSI plans, “modif[ies] practices and policies to provide operational flexibility that enables full and effective implementation of the plans described in paragraphs (1) and (2) of section 1111(d).”

14 Section 2212(e)(2)(c): “(C) Providing principals or other school leaders with—(i) balanced autonomy to make budgeting, scheduling, and other school-level decisions in a manner that meets the needs of the school without compromising the intent or essential components of the policies of the local educational agency or State; and (ii) authority to make staffing decisions that meet the needs of the school, such as building an instructional leadership team that includes teacher leaders or offering opportunities for teams or pairs of effective teachers or candidates to teach or start teaching in high-need schools together.”

15 Section 4624(e)(2): “OPERATIONAL FLEXIBILITY.—Each eligible entity that operates a school in a neighborhood served by a grant program under this subpart for activities described in this section shall provide such school with the operational flexibility, including autonomy over staff, time, and budget, needed to effectively carry out the activities described in the application under subsection (a).”

16 as Supplemental Grant Priority 10—Improving the Effectiveness of Principals, which supports “Projects that are designed to increase the number and percentage of highly effective principals by... (b) Identifying, implementing, and supporting policies and school and district conditions that facilitate efforts by principals to turn around Lowest-performing Schools.” Secretary’s Final Supplemental Priorities and Definitions for Discretionary Grant Programs, 79 Fed. Reg. 73425 (December 10, 2014). Retrieved from <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2014/12/10/2014-28911/secretarys-final-supplemental-priorities-and-definitions-for-discretionary-grant-programs>.

17 Ikemoto, G., Taliaferro, L., Fenton, B., and Davis, J. (2014). Great Principals at Scale: Creating District Conditions that Enable All Principals to Be Effective. New Leaders and the George W. Bush Institute, Alliance to Reform Education Leadership. Retrieved from <http://newleaders.org/research-policy/great-principals-at-scale/>.