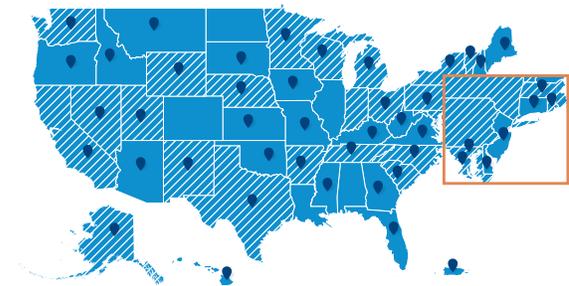


Prioritizing Leadership: An Analysis of State ESSA Plans

INTRODUCTION

In their plans to carry out the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), states universally recognize what New Leaders has long known: *leadership changes everything*. In fact, every single state has committed to directing some portion of its federal funding into investments in leadership—from teacher leaders to principals and superintendents.

-  **52** states, including DC and Puerto Rico, intend to **invest in leadership**
-  **24** states plan to use the **Title II 3 percent set-aside for school leadership**¹
-  **46** states identify, require, or prioritize **evidence-based strategies** to support school leadership or school improvement



These plans represent a marked shift from the past, when many states did not recognize the critical role principals and other school leaders play in creating schools where teachers and students thrive, together. As a result, investments in leadership have historically been inadequate.ⁱ

Getting a well-prepared, well-supported principal in every school is a critical, cost-efficient strategy for delivering on the promise of ESSA: strong, sustained implementation of evidence-based school improvement strategies that get results for *all* kids in every classroom, every year.

States that adopt a strong leadership agenda will be better positioned to achieve their goals for school and student success. A follow-up to our *Prioritizing Leadership: Opportunities in ESSA* resource, this guide is designed to help state policymakers and other stakeholders:

- **Understand** the range of leadership strategies included in states' ESSA plans;
- **Prompt new thinking** on initiatives and investments that could address leadership needs in their states as well as other challenges for which leadership could be a smart solution; and
- **Take action** to assess, strengthen, and even expand the scope of their state's leadership agenda.

Cultivating a well-prepared, well-supported principal corps requires strategic alignment across the leadership ecosystem and targeted investments along a principal's career trajectory. In their ESSA plans, states have proposed a range of strategies to address leadership needs in five critical areas:

1. **Prioritizing Excellent Instructional Leadership;**
2. **Advancing Diverse, Equity-Focused Leadership;**
3. **Distributing Leadership and Building a Leadership Pipeline;**
4. **Strengthening and Innovating Pre-Service Principal Preparation; and**
5. **Focusing and Reimagining On-the-Job Principal Support.**

1. Section 2101(c)(3) of the *Every Student Succeeds Act* allows states to use three percent of the Title II, Part A allocation they do not already reserve at the state level to invest in evidence-based school leadership strategies.

STATE PLANS: TRENDS & EXAMPLES

1 Prioritizing Excellent Instructional Leadership

The foundation of a strong leadership agenda is a clear vision of what excellent leadership looks like in action. Gone are the days when principals were seen as primarily responsible for bell schedules and making sure the buses arrived on time. In response to the increasing demands placed on school leaders today—especially supporting all teachers and students to meet or exceed college and career readiness expectations—some states are planning to update their definition of effective school leadership via revised leadership standards. Of note, many states are doubling down on a vision of the principal as *the* instructional leader of a school.² In addition, states are using leadership standards to differentiate expectations across leadership roles (i.e., for teacher leaders, principal supervisors, and other school leaders) or along a principal’s career trajectory and development.

Rhode Island will update its leadership standards and, using the 3% leadership set-aside, will launch an initiative to align competencies for district leaders, school leaders, and teacher leaders and invest in instructional leadership. **Ohio** will engage stakeholders to update school leadership standards to reflect the responsibilities of today’s principals and address the range of leadership needs in the state’s diverse school districts.

New Hampshire will similarly revise its standards with a particular focus on distinguishing the skills of leaders at all stages of their careers, from the talented novice to the distinguished veteran.

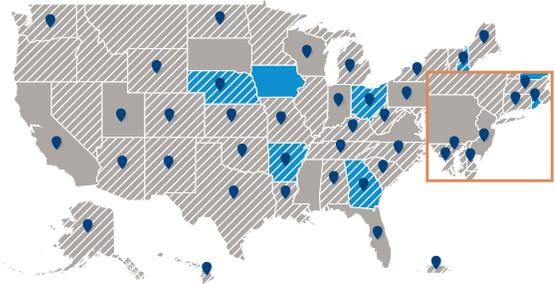
2 Advancing Diverse, Equity-Focused Leadership

A strong leadership agenda also prioritizes the schools most in need of effective, consistent leadership. Further, it reflects the reality that great principals attract, develop, and retain outstanding teachers, especially for high-need schools. States are responding to persistent gaps in the academic achievement of historically underserved children and communities—as well as the reality that there are “virtually no documented instances of troubled schools being turned around without intervention by a powerful leader”ⁱⁱⁱ—by adopting strategies to advance equity. The majority of states focus on leadership as a strategy to transform schools identified for improvement under Title I. Many also plan to invest in leaders capable of creating environments in which outstanding educators can grow and thrive so that, ultimately, students of color, children from low-income families, and other vulnerable students will have equitable access to effective teachers and leaders. Finally, recognizing the many benefits for students,ⁱⁱⁱ some states have put forth plans to increase school leader diversity so more students get to attend schools led by adults who share their racial or ethnic background.

Vermont and **Colorado** will invest in training for principals to advance equitable access to great teachers in CSI and TSI schools³ (Vermont) and high-poverty and high-minority schools (Colorado). **Connecticut** and **Oklahoma** will continue to prioritize training for turnaround school leaders: the LEAD CT Turnaround Principal Academy prepares school leaders for the lowest-performing school districts and Oklahoma’s Moving UP program develops and supports the leaders of CSI schools. **Louisiana** is partnering with districts across the state to increase the number of effective teachers serving students in rural communities, including by expanding a fellowship for rural principals. In **Montana**, Montana State University’s Indian Leadership Education Development Project will continue recruiting American Indian educators into leadership positions for schools that serve large populations of indigenous students.

EXCELLENT, EQUITABLE, DIVERSE INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP

- 8** states plan to **upgrade school leadership standards**, including to align with or adapt the Professional Standards for Education Leaders
- 41** states acknowledge leadership in their plans to improve the **lowest-performing** schools, those with **large, persistent achievement gaps**, or **other high-need schools**
- 41** states address **leadership in educator equity plans**



3 Distributing Leadership and Building a Leadership Pipeline

The best principals do not conduct their critical work alone—they intentionally cultivate and are supported by diverse, talented teams of teacher leaders and other school leaders. There is a growing body of research that shows carefully selected, well-prepared teacher leaders can achieve immediate results for kids across multiple classrooms^{iv} and that shared,

2. According to a forthcoming publication by New America, half of states’ school leadership standards currently include an instructional leadership standard.

3. Schools identified for comprehensive support and improvement (CSI) or targeted support and improvement (TSI).

sustainable leadership models are key to improving schools.^v Not surprisingly, states are supporting a budding ecosystem of education leaders by investing in teacher leadership, distributed leadership models, and leadership teams. In addition, there is evidence that the best principals—those able to achieve early results and sustain school improvement over time—enter their preparation programs with instructional expertise along with team management or other adult leadership experience.^{vi} There is an emerging movement among states to intentionally build leadership pipelines to meet schools' and school systems' future leadership needs. Finally, a small number of states call out assistant principals as distinct from principals, suggesting a need to distinguish expectations, training, and support for each role.

Iowa's Teacher Leadership and Compensation (TLC) System will continue to invest in salary bumps for teacher leaders who take on additional responsibilities. In **Texas**, districts will have an opportunity to compete for additional Title I dollars to support their high-need schools, including by adopting such evidence-based strategies as building the instructional leadership capacity of school leadership teams. And **North Carolina** will continue to invest in AP Ready, a professional development program that prepares assistant principals for the demands of the principalship tailored to regional needs.

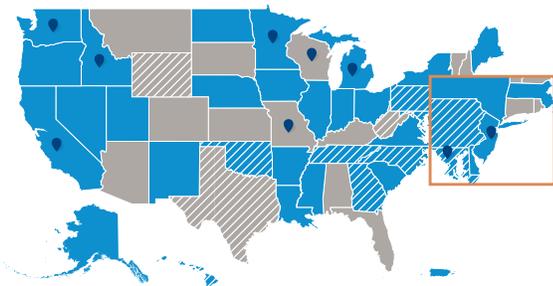
4 Strengthening and Innovating Pre-Service Principal Preparation

Too few^{vii} principal preparation programs contain research-backed elements⁴ that equip graduates with the skills they need to succeed—especially real-world experience working and learning in a school, similar to a medical residency. In addition, many programs neglect to collect and use key data on program quality—especially related to graduates' ability to measurably improve teaching, learning, and school culture—to help them improve principal training year over year.^{viii} To address these realities, states are rethinking the way principals are trained for the job by identifying and investing in innovative new programs or by expanding programs already producing effective leaders. Some are also upgrading principal certification to ensure licenses are granted only to individuals who have demonstrated the skills necessary to lead a school.

Tennessee will use the 3% leadership set-aside for a grant program through which high-need districts can apply for funding to support school leader residencies. The state has also committed to supporting districts interested in applying for other federal grant dollars.⁵ **Delaware** will strengthen leadership across the state by evaluating the effectiveness of programs that prepare new school leaders. Of note, the state will look at graduates' effect on student achievement as one measure of program quality. **New York** will require aspiring principals to demonstrate their effectiveness in an authentic school setting, verified by student learning data and a superintendent or mentor, to secure an initial license.

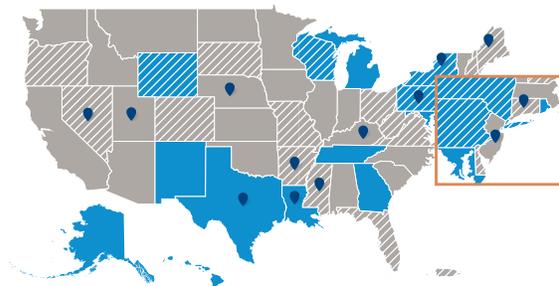
DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP & LEADERSHIP PIPELINES

- 36** states are investing in **teacher leadership**
- 10** states are focused on strategically rethinking and investing in **assistant principals**
- 9** states are advancing shared leadership models by strengthening **school leadership teams**



SCHOOL LEADER PREPARATION

- 14** states are investing in **promising new principal residencies and academies**, including innovative models operated by the state, districts, or nonprofits
- 21** states are **expanding high-quality existing preparation programs**, including those run by universities
- 13** states are upgrading **principal certification or licensure**



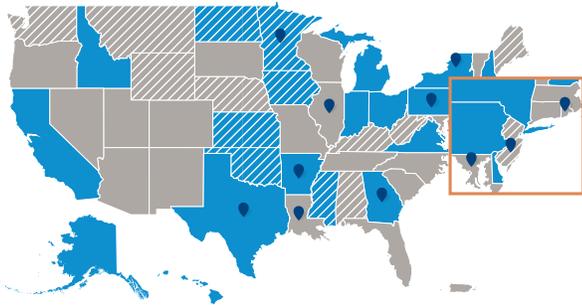
4. These research-based elements include: a clear program purpose; rigorous, systematic recruitment and selection; a coherent, relevant curriculum with coursework aligned to leadership standards; a requirement that participants work, learn, practice, and receive feedback on their performance in a real school setting; demanding program completion requirements; and systems to collect and review program data, including regarding graduate outcomes, and engage in continuous improvement.
5. Title II, Part B programs that can support state and local school leadership initiatives include the School Leader Recruitment and Support Program (SLRSP), the Teacher and School Leader (TSL) Incentive Grant Program, and the Supporting Effective Educator Development (SEED) Program, which would require states or districts to partner with an eligible nonprofit to apply.

5 Focusing and Reimagining On-the-Job Principal Support

Just as principal preparation is changing, so, too, is the ongoing training and support school leaders receive on the job. Nearly every state is focused on making sure principals continue to grow and improve throughout their careers by focusing on high-quality, evidence-based professional development and support. Some states will provide new principals with specialized guidance during their critical early years, which can set the stage for the longer-term success of their schools. Many states are also working to ensure principal evaluations are embedded in robust, learning- and improvement-oriented performance management systems. Several states are focused on aligning the definition of school and principal success as well as ensuring the information gleaned from observations

of principal practice and school data are used to help leaders get better at what they do. Finally, to bring all of these strategies to life, several states are investing in the individuals responsible for supporting principals to be their best: their supervisors.

Wyoming plans to align its school accountability system and school leader evaluation and support system. The state will require an audit of principal evaluations for schools identified for improvement, and it will provide support to districts to ensure tight alignment between data from school report cards, the results of principal evaluations, and principal professional development. **Minnesota** will provide targeted professional development on the Instructional Feedback Observation (IFO) process to principals of CSI and TSI schools *and their supervisors*.



SCHOOL LEADER SUPPORT

- 21** states are investing in **induction support** for new school leaders
- 16** states will **strengthen performance management systems** for principals, including by tying evaluation results to tailored, high-quality PD and support
- 11** states are rethinking and investing in **principal supervisor** roles and management systems



ACTION PLANNING: RECOMMENDATIONS & RESOURCES

States have proposed a range of school leadership strategies in their ESSA plans, including many smart, necessary investments. At the same time, there is substantial variation in the level of detail included in each plan. Further, few states intend to make comprehensive investments along a principal's career trajectory. And there could be stronger alignment across strategies targeting leaders at the classroom, school, and system levels.

As state officials implement and continuously improve their ESSA plans, there are specific steps they can take to advance their school leadership work in the five critical areas highlighted in this brief. For each action, we provide select resources—including research, examples, and tools—states can use to assess, strengthen, and expand their leadership agendas.



Overarching Considerations

Data collection. What data, including regarding school leadership needs and outcomes, are you collecting now—from districts, charter management organizations, schools (as appropriate), preparation programs, and professional development providers—to inform future decision-making and continuous improvement? How will you balance data collection needs with efforts to minimize reporting burdens?

- [*Readiness Assessment Rubric and Process Recommendations*](#) (UCEA; New Leaders; CCSSO)
- [*Principal Policy and Practice Alignment Tool*](#) (U.S. Department of Education)

Local Education Agency (LEA) plans and oversight. What information on school leadership are you asking districts to submit as part of their ESSA plans? Have you asked districts to explain how their plans to improve high-need schools and advance equity reflect evidence-based best practices, including school leadership? Have you explicitly asked districts to explain their strategies for ensuring every school is led by a well-prepared, well-supported principal? And how they will ensure local conditions support effective school leadership?

- [*Great Principals At Scale*](#) (George W. Bush Institute; New Leaders)

Communication and engagement.

Have you communicated to key stakeholders, including school leaders, what to expect next? How do you intend to share updates on ESSA implementation moving forward? How will you engage key stakeholders, including school leaders, to understand what's working and what can be improved as you implement your state's ESSA plan in the months and years ahead?

- [*Building Principal Capacity and Engagement for Reforms: Principal Engagement*](#) (U.S. Department of Education)

1 Prioritizing Excellent Instructional Leadership

Enact a comprehensive approach to leadership. Refresh school leadership standards to reflect a current vision of an effective principal that focuses on ambitious instructional leadership. Consider using the Professional Standards for Education Leaders or a similar research-based framework, and start by identifying a smaller number of those standards you believe are most critical to target your state's needs. Use those upgraded standards to strengthen principal preparation and to align expectations, policies, and systems along the career trajectory of principals and across the leadership ecosystem (i.e., for teacher leaders, principal supervisors, and other school leaders).

- [*Model DC School Leadership Standards*](#) (DC Office of the State Superintendent of Education)
- [*Missouri Leadership Development System*](#) (Missouri Department of Education)
- [*Transformational Leadership Framework*](#) (New Leaders)
- [*Building Principal Capacity and Engagement for Reforms: Principal Role*](#) (U.S. Department of Education)

Focus on evidence. Directly invest in evidence-based principal preparation programs and professional development options that have a proven track record of improving student achievement and other measures of student success. Ask districts—via their ESSA-required local plan—to explain how their leadership strategies to achieve school improvement and student learning goals meet the law's evidence requirements. Consider pre-vetting or pre-approving providers to encourage districts and schools to partner with or adopt evidence-based programs.

- [*School Leadership Interventions Under the Every Student Succeeds Act: Evidence Review*](#) (RAND Corporation)
- [*The Evidence Provisions of the Every Student Succeeds Act*](#) (Results for America)
- [*Using Evidence to Strengthen Education Investments*](#) (U.S. Department of Education)

2 Advancing Diverse, Equitable Leadership

Prioritize diversity and racial equity. Invest in programs or partnerships designed specifically to attract, develop, and retain outstanding leaders of color or other leaders who reflect the background of underrepresented students. Encourage districts and schools to engage in research-based professional learning regarding race and equity.

- [*We Need Educators Who Reflect the Communities They Serve*](#) (New Leaders; Education Post)
- [*Learning to Lead for Racial Equity*](#) (Phi Delta Kappa International; NYC Leadership Academy)

Advance equitable access to great teachers and leaders.

Use incentives to encourage the best leaders to serve the schools most in need, including financial rewards and other non-financial benefits (e.g., providing—or encouraging districts to provide—operational flexibility to turnaround leaders in exchange for greater accountability). If not already included in your educator equity plan, review data to understand how leadership could be a strategy for supporting goals to increase equitable access to effective teachers.

- [*The School Principal's Role in Reducing Teacher Turnover*](#) (New America)



3 Distributing Leadership and Building a Leadership Pipeline

Foster true teacher leadership. Provide districts and schools with model teacher leader job descriptions in which the roles are clearly-defined and based on school needs. Remove regulatory hurdles or provide guidance on how districts can break down policy barriers that inhibit true teacher leadership (e.g., state licensure requirements that prevent non-administrators from conducting observations or contracts that limit opportunities to create flexible teacher leader roles). Encourage high-quality training for teacher leaders appropriate to their position by highlighting programs with a strong evidence base or disseminating guidance on research-backed components for school-based teacher leader PD.

- [*Untapped: Transforming Teacher Leadership to Help Students Succeed*](#) (New Leaders)
- [*The Whole Package: 12 Factors of High-Impact Teacher-Leader Roles*](#) (Public Impact)
- [*Sharing the Load: Denver Public Schools Differentiated Roles Pilot*](#) (The Aspen Institute; Leading Educators)

Reimagine the assistant principal role. Adapt principal standards and related resources (e.g., hiring tools, observation rubrics, and evaluation protocols) for assistant principals to reflect their unique position on the path to principal readiness.

- [*Developing Assistant Principals*](#) (WNET)

Support strong instructional leadership teams. Encourage districts to provide principals with the requisite autonomy they need—e.g., regarding staffing, schedules, and budgets^{ix}—to build a strong leadership team. Consider investing in or highlighting programs designed to build the leadership capacity of the entire team in support of school improvement goals.

- [*School Leadership Counts: Instructional Leadership for Student Success*](#) (New Teacher Center)
- [*Playmakers: How Great Principals Build and Lead Great Teams of Teachers*](#) (New Leaders)

4 Strengthening and Innovating Pre-Service Principal Preparation

Review key data to deeply understand your state's needs and readiness for principal preparation program reform.

Review your state's school leader workforce data and information on principal preparation programs to understand strengths and gaps in your current and future cadre of school leaders. Based on that analysis, determine whether you can build on strengths and address gaps via targeted measures (e.g., launching a statewide leadership academy for leaders of rural schools) or if more comprehensive steps are necessary (e.g., updating program approval processes and requiring all principal preparation programs to re-apply).

- [!\[\]\(a88007b249b36c75dcbde101f514cec3_img.jpg\) *State Evaluation of Principal Preparation Programs* \(UCEA; New Leaders\)](#)
- [*Restructuring Principal Preparation in Illinois* \(Illinois Education Research Council; UChicago Consortium\)](#)

Invest in evidence-based, outcomes-focused principal development. Invest in existing principal preparation programs with a demonstrated track record of success. Based on state needs, consider launching or investing in promising new programs designed using the latest research on what works in school leader development. Revamp program approval and/or renewal processes to require that all programs, now and in the future, meet higher levels of evidence. Consider adopting a requirement that aspiring principals complete a rigorous full-time residency as part of their training. Work with districts to identify already-existing roles that could be filled by residents (e.g., AP roles), and with your state legislature to secure funding to create such positions where needed. Work with state legislators to enact new laws (requiring updated regulations) to make a principal license contingent on demonstrated effectiveness in increasing student achievement, strengthening teacher practice, and improving school culture—both for initial licensure and renewal.

- [!\[\]\(e662c6fdc679f154c0e75d901761d894_img.jpg\) *Change Agents: How States Can Develop Effective School Leaders* \(New Leaders\)](#)
- [*Redesigning Principal Preparation: A Work in Progress at the University of Missouri St. Louis* \(New Leaders\)](#)
- [*Ready to Lead: Designing Residencies for Better Principal Preparation* \(NYC Leadership Academy\)](#)

5 Focusing and Reimagining On-the-Job Principal Support

Prioritize high-quality training on ambitious instruction specific to school leaders.

Provide districts with clear guidance regarding funds that can be used to support principal professional development along with resources on high-quality instructional leadership programming. Consider pre-vetting providers to encourage districts and schools to partner with evidence-based leadership-focused professional development programs. In their ESSA plans, ask districts to articulate how they will provide school leaders with training regarding enacting ambitious college- and career-ready standards across schools that is distinct from professional development for teachers.

- [!\[\]\(2cbb40928a34ecf5ce700a63c52aa374_img.jpg\) *Ambitious Leadership: How Principals Lead Schools to College and Career Readiness* \(New Leaders\)](#)
- [*Building Principal Capacity and Engagement for Reforms: Professional Learning* \(U.S. Department of Education\)](#)

Deepen connections between school and school leader needs and professional development.

Align your state's school accountability system with principal evaluation and support, linking measures to help ensure that the incentive structure supports principals to focus on their most important responsibilities. Support high-quality implementation of school leader evaluation and support by building district capacity—for example, by convening principal evaluators for training with a focus on school visits, goal setting, providing effective feedback, and using data from evaluations to help principals become stronger instructional leaders.

- [!\[\]\(1f101ad452ef9a3f01bb1e89af34fc34_img.jpg\) *Principal Evaluation Toolkit* \(New Leaders\)](#)
- [*Principal Evaluation Practical Guide* \(GTL Center\)](#)

Focus on effective principal management. Refocus principal supervisors' responsibilities on managing and supporting principals by adopting standards, aligned to school leadership standards, that reflect these priorities. Provide model job descriptions that bring new expectations for principal supervisors to life. Launch communities of practice for principal supervisors across your state—directly or in partnership with an evidence-based provider—to align practices regarding their work to hire, support, evaluate, and retain outstanding school leaders.

- [!\[\]\(91353dea0600335a09362f69ea4eac2b_img.jpg\) *The Changing Role of Principal Supervisors* \(Wallace Foundation; Council of the Great City Schools\)](#)
- [*Principal Supervisor Network Redesign: A Toolkit for Building Stronger Systems* \(New Leaders\)](#)
- [*Power in Numbers: Coaching Principals to Build Teams that Transform Schools* \(NYC Leadership Academy\)](#)

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ABOUT NEW LEADERS

New Leaders is a nonprofit organization that develops dedicated, skilled leaders at every level of our education system—from teacher leaders to principals and superintendents—equipping them to elevate instruction and achievement across classrooms, schools, and districts. Since 2000, we have trained 3,200 great school leaders who reach 500,000 students annually. We have active partnerships in 30 cities and with over 150 charter schools. Our leaders, 64 percent of whom are people of color, overwhelmingly work with America's highest-need students: 78 percent of students served come from low-income families and 87 percent are children of color. And an independent study by the RAND Corporation found that students who attend New Leader schools outperform their peers by statistically significant margins specifically because of the strong leadership of their New Leader principal. In fact, New Leaders was recently named the principal preparation program with the strongest evidence of positive impact on student achievement.

LEADERSHIP CHANGES EVERYTHING

Everything that happens in schools—setting high expectations for students, helping teachers grow and improve their practice, engaging families and communities, everything—**depends upon the caliber of our nation's 90,000 principals.**

LEADERSHIP CHANGES TEACHING **97%**

Teachers list school leadership as essential or very important for their career choices—**more than any other factor.**^x

LEADERSHIP CHANGES LEARNING **20%**

The difference in student achievement at a school led by a high-performing principal compared to an average-performing principal.^{xi}

LEADERSHIP CHANGES SCHOOLS **25%**

Fully one-quarter of a school's influence on student learning is **directly attributable to its leaders.**^{xii}