

# Developing Excellent School Principals to Advance Teaching and Learning:

Considerations for State Policy

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

All organizations need effective leaders to succeed, and schools are no exception. A growing research literature has shown the multidimensional roles principals play in keeping schools operational and safe, and in fostering productive work cultures where teachers and staff can serve students as they pursue their academic goals.

Principals who are strong, effective, responsive leaders help to inspire and enhance the abilities of their teachers and other school staff to do excellent work. Such principals also tend to retain great teachers and create opportunities for them to take on new leadership roles. In short, principals, through their actions, can be powerful multipliers of effective teaching and leadership practices in schools. And those practices can contribute much to the success of the nation's students. This leads to the following key question:

*What can state policymakers do to help ensure that schools have excellent principals who advance teaching and learning for all students?*

The answer: Quite a bit, actually. Each year, state officials make and enforce policies and regulations that can limit or enhance the ability of principals to lead their schools. Further, especially during the last five to ten years, states have pushed forward ambitious education initiatives that will be unlikely to succeed without principals actively leading the work on the ground. In light of the research evidence, the central

roles principals play merit much attention as state officials craft their policy agendas.

The diversity of conditions across the U.S. makes it impossible to identify a single formula that will enhance the work of principals in the country's nearly 100,000 schools. The 50 states operate with varying needs, capacities, governance systems, and political cultures. Yet even with that variation, the research informing this report nevertheless identifies three crucial areas leaders across all states can usefully consider as they seek answers to the key question just posed:

1. State **POLICY AGENDAS** that address school principals along with other priorities.
2. State **POLICY LEVERS** available to state leaders as they attempt to identify and train aspiring principals and support those already on the job.
3. The **CONTEXTUAL FACTORS** within states and local communities that affect how state policies or initiatives for principals are likely to unfold in practice.

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## A. Principals and the state policy agenda

Although nobody would deny that school principals are important, the principal's role has received consistently less attention relative to other topics on state

education policy agendas. State policymakers give much more attention to teachers and teacher-related issues than principals. Further, the impulse to broaden the scope of “school leadership,” although done for understandable reasons, has had the unintended consequence of obscuring the unique and specific roles that principals play.

In considering the role of principals on state policy agendas, several findings emerge:

- **LOW AGENDA STATUS OVERALL:** Across various data sources examined for this report, none indicated principals were a consistently high agenda item for states. Crowded state policy agendas in education often prioritize other issues above principals.
- **LOW AGENDA STATUS RELATIVE TO TEACHERS:** Teachers receive more agenda attention than principals in popular discussions and research. Further, investments in professional development also tend to prioritize teachers rather than principals. Some of these differences are understandable because there are so many more teachers than principals in the nation’s schools, yet the evidence suggests important reasons for striking a better balance to improve the chances that teachers and principals alike can do excellent work.
- **OBSCURING PRINCIPALS’ ROLES AND UNIQUE CONTRIBUTIONS:** The trend toward harnessing the leadership capabilities of entire school staffs can blur the important substantive distinctions that exist between the leadership responsibilities of principals compared with those of other school leaders.

Augmenting principals’ place on state policy agendas is important for:

- *Building productive school cultures:* A growing research base documents the key role principals play in helping their schools succeed. Excellent principals make important contributions to school culture and climate, and have detectable and substantial impacts on student achievement.

- *Supporting teachers and teaching:* Teaching is the core technology of schools, and, in the words of one respondent interviewed for this report, “principals are multipliers of effective teaching.” Excellent principals can have a powerful impact on the teachers in their buildings by setting smart professional development agendas, selecting and supporting accomplished teachers to take on leadership roles, and working one-on-one as mentors for teachers who need guidance and support.
- *Ensuring that state initiatives succeed:* Numerous state education policy initiatives developed during the last two decades depend heavily on excellent principals for their success. Teaching to new academic standards, evaluating teachers through in-person observations, and using data to direct various aspects of a school’s daily activities—state leaders have crafted policies and regulations across these areas and will be relying on school principals to help make them work.

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## B. State policy levers to cultivate and support excellent principals

State leaders possess formal and informal powers they can use to serve the goal of ensuring schools have excellent principals who can advance teaching and learning for all students. Although these policy levers are available in every state, different conditions within each will make some more attractive or feasible to pull than others.

### SETTING PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP STANDARDS

Standards for principals are important because they help define the scope of the principal’s job, including what principals should know and be able to do. They also provide an organizing frame to inform principal training, professional development, and licensing practices in states.

*States can consider the following actions* to leverage the potential of standards:

- Adopt principal leadership standards into state law and regulation.

- Differentiate among leaders. States can use standards to clarify those expectations that apply to all leaders and which are specific to principals.
- Embed standards in practice. Adopting principal leadership standards is merely a first step. If they only live on paper, they will remain irrelevant to practice.
- Reconcile with other standards. In defining standards for principals, states can also consider standards related to other dimensions of education to foster coherence across their policies and initiatives.

#### **RECRUITING ASPIRING PRINCIPALS INTO THE PROFESSION**

Even though recruitment and hiring are mainly local school district functions, states can alter the incentives to which aspiring principals and school districts respond, thus influencing recruitment practices and the pool of potential principal candidates.

*States can consider these actions* as they seek to improve principal recruitment:

- Facilitate coordination between local school districts and principal preparation programs in the recruitment of aspiring principals.
- Alter incentives to increase the chances that people who seek principal certification actually intend to become principals. This will avoid wasting valuable resources on people who obtain additional degrees but have little or no intention of becoming principals.
- Support special institutes, including leadership academies, to help identify potentially talented principals, usher them into the profession, and support them on the job.
- Forecast future trends in anticipated principal vacancies to direct recruitment toward meeting specific state needs for principals.

#### **APPROVING AND OVERSEEING PRINCIPAL PREPARATION PROGRAMS**

States possess unambiguous authority to oversee the organizations that prepare principals, and they also approve the specific degree programs that institutions of higher education offer. States can help promote the quality of principal preparation programs and help provide information to potential principal candidates so they can select strong programs that will prepare them to become excellent principals.

*States can consider these actions* as they oversee and approve principal preparation programs:

- Actively oversee principal preparation programs, rather than essentially delegating oversight and approval processes to national accrediting bodies.
- Sunset current programs and require them to meet a high set of standards before admitting future students.
- Use licensing authority to create incentives for programs to improve. States can alter their licensing requirements or prerequisites for aspiring principal candidates to enter a principal preparation program, which can put pressure on preparation programs to improve their offerings so that these candidates receive useful training.
- Serve as an information clearinghouse on program offerings and quality. States can gather and share with programs basic descriptive data about program operations to help candidates select strong programs, help the programs improve, and learn from the experiences of other states.
- Avoid overregulating so that strong programs maintain the flexibility to innovate and quickly adapt to changing circumstances or opportunities.

#### **LICENSING NEW AND VETERAN PRINCIPALS**

Licensing provides states with a gatekeeping function that allows some individuals into the profession and prevents others from becoming principals in public schools. How states wield their licensing powers can enable licensing to be a substantively important step in a principal's career or yet another area where

approaches based on compliance and box-checking dominate.

*States can consider these actions* as they use their licensing authority:

- Connect licensing requirements as much as possible to the real-world conditions and practices that principals experience on the job.
- Delegate the authority to license principals to entities beyond the state that have a strong track record of developing principals.

#### **SUPPORTING PRINCIPALS' GROWTH WITH PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

With each new policy initiative, technological advance, or demographic shift, school principals frequently find that they need added training to help them lead their schools well. Typically, states have played a relatively small role in principals' professional development, but they can help ensure such experiences benefit their principals. Without investment in professional development, major state initiatives—crafted in state legislatures, boards of education, and state education agencies—are likely to fail.

*States can consider these actions* as they seek to help principals receive effective professional development:

- Study current state priorities to create a better allocation of resources that help teachers and principals gain access to high-quality professional development.
- Support local school districts as they set their professional development priorities.
- Provide support for professional development for principals that will help them implement ambitious state initiatives.
- Create links between professional development and licensing renewal processes to steer principals toward professional development tied to important skill sets or knowledge.

#### **EVALUATING PRINCIPALS**

Policymakers and researchers have spent more time and effort exploring the implications of different approaches to teacher evaluation and less on evaluations for principals. According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, since 2010, 36 states have passed laws requiring principal evaluations and 22 states were rolling out new principal evaluation systems in 2014 and 2015. However, given the field's limited experiences with principal evaluation, no set of best practices yet exists.

*States can consider these actions* as they engage the area of principal evaluation:

- Remain flexible during implementation as new knowledge surfaces about how principal evaluation systems operate in practice. Although much support exists for aligning principal evaluations to standards and incorporating measures of leadership quality into them, no consensus appears to exist across the states about the design of principal evaluation systems and the actions that should follow once principals are evaluated.
- Learn from other states' experiences about potentially promising strategies that can be incorporated into their own principal evaluation systems.

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### **C. Getting from here to there: Assessing state and local contexts**

The policy levers described in the previous section are available to state leaders across the nation. But states' specific histories, political environments, approaches to education governance, and past policy experiences can influence how those levers will influence educational practices in schools. Four contextual factors are particularly relevant for state leaders to consider before and as they set their policy priorities.

#### **STATE EDUCATION GOVERNANCE: WEB OF CONSTRAINTS AND SOURCE FOR OPPORTUNITIES**

When studied from afar, the 50 states possess a remarkably similar set of governing bodies that oversee education. Up close, however, how these organiza-

tions and other state institutions manage their internal affairs, wield authority, and interact with each other (as well as local schools and interest groups) can vary tremendously.

*Attending to the state education governance context is important because it:*

- involves numerous state government organizations and actors, all of whom attempt to balance diverse and sometimes-conflicting constraints and incentives; and
- creates potential veto points that can stymie action but also provides multiple venues through which smart ideas can enter the policy process.

#### **DIVERSE LOCALES: PRINCIPALS IN URBAN, SUBURBAN, AND RURAL COMMUNITIES**

As one respondent noted in a personal interview, “Every state has a lot of little states in it.” Recognizing important differences among localities—as well as variation within local communities across income and race, for example—can help inform state policy decisions designed to improve local practice.

*Attending to the diversity across urban, suburban and rural settings is important because it:*

- incorporates a broader range of voices into state policy debates, helping to reveal differences but also common concerns across school districts;
- reveals opportunities or constraints, depending on the locality, for principal recruitment and professional development efforts; and
- underscores the need for the state to play a strategic coordinating role to ensure that district needs are met across a state.

#### **CAPACITY TO IMPLEMENT: MOVING POLICY INTO PRACTICE**

Rolling out state initiatives and then sustaining them to improve practice and, ultimately, student learning requires state and local capacities. These capacities include talented personnel, technical expertise, and funding.

*Attending to the capacity demands that state policies create is important because it:*

- identifies gaps between state policy ambitions and the ability of state and local agencies to fill them. Without local funding, staffing, and technical expertise, state requirements designed to enhance the work of principals likely will fail to have their intended effects;
- can bring to light potentially valuable network partners outside of government that state officials can use as they seek to ameliorate capacity deficits; and
- helps state officials differentiate between low capacity districts and higher capacity ones, which themselves can be sources for future state innovation.

#### **VIEW FROM THE MAIN OFFICE: STATE POLICY AND THE PRINCIPAL'S PERSPECTIVE**

Principals are bearing more and more weight as old responsibilities persist and as new ones become layered on top of them. While principals report that they are exercising more and more power over matters such as evaluating teachers and setting school performance standards, they remain equally responsible for traditional activities, such as setting school discipline policies and managing budgets and school spending.

*Attending to the overall range of state policies that affect principals is important because it:*

- enables state leaders to better understand how their policy initiatives alter the tasks that principals must complete each day;
- highlights situations where state policies create layered and potentially conflicting demands on principals; and
- suggests a strategy of addition by subtraction, meaning that as state policies advance new priorities for principals, states can simultaneously dismantle less important responsibilities that occupy principals' time.

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## D. Looking ahead

Being a school principal is more challenging than ever, in part because of an expanding set of responsibilities, technological change, and growing student needs that are characteristic of a diversifying nation struggling to provide equal opportunities to all its students. How to begin this work of cultivating and supporting excellent principals, or how to continue moving it along for states that have begun to make their principals a higher policy priority? There is not a cookbook recipe for policy development or implementation that will work equally well in all states. State and local adaptations will be necessary. Still, there are some useful places for all states to start, regardless of their current conditions.

*Consider the following topics and guiding questions as a suggested path forward.*

- Move principals higher on state education policy agendas. Are there state leaders and constituencies in the state that can help move principals higher up on the agenda? And if there are not, why is that the case? Before states can hope to make strides in cultivating and supporting their principals, state leaders and their constituents need to be paying attention to them.
- Catalogue principals' tasks, in theory and in practice. What is it that state policymakers aspire to have their principals do? Then ask: What is it that principals actually do? Where are those practices consistent or inconsistent with the aspirations of state policymakers?
- Identify explanations for the consistencies and inconsistencies. What causes principals to work in ways that support or push against state aspirations? Is it a matter of professional disagreement about which tasks are most important? Are there features of the state context—governance, local contexts, capacity, or webs of prevailing policy—that are supporting or obstructing principals as they do their work?
- Create a policy and political strategy for moving forward. How can using the policy levers

discussed in this report or other policy changes, which could include dismantling policies and regulations in some areas as well as creating new ones, improve the chances that states will have excellent principals leading their schools? How can the state move a policy agenda forward while simultaneously maintaining flexibility to respond to inevitable challenges (and potential opportunities, too) that may arise in the future? Further, how to ensure that promising efforts can be sustained and be given the time to produce results instead of being swiftly abandoned as the political winds shift?

In calling for the principalship to be a policy priority across the states, this report encourages state leaders to envision their principals as invaluable multipliers of effective teaching and learning in the nation's schools. Operating with that vision, and understanding the potential role of state policy to help achieve it can help state officials ensure state policies work in mutually supportive ways and are coherent enough to channel state and local energies in positive directions while remaining flexible enough to adapt to local circumstances. These are difficult balancing acts to execute, but with care and learning from work underway in state capitals across the nation, some of which is highlighted in this report, state leaders can improve the chances that all schools will be led by excellent principals who are advancing teaching and learning.

# How States Can Ensure Schools Have Principals Who Advance Teaching and Learning

In seeking to improve education for all students, state policymakers often overlook the key role of the school principal as a driver of effective teaching and learning. There's no single formula for better state policy regarding principals because each state is unique, but three sets of considerations can help direct policymaking.



## Assessing State and Local Contexts

- Varied state governance structures and politics
- Diverse locales
- Different capacities to implement policy
- Web of current state mandates affecting principals

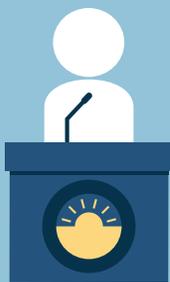
**Sound policymaking rests on understanding basics about a state and its localities: how different state agencies wield authority and interact with one another; the variety of urban, suburban and rural communities; state and local capabilities to carry out change; and state mandates already shaping the principal's job.**



## Considering Policy Levers

- Setting principal standards
- Recruiting aspiring principals
- Overseeing principal preparation
- Licensing principals
- Supporting professional development
- Evaluating principals

**States have formal and informal powers to develop more effective principals, from setting standards for the profession to strengthening training, licensure and evaluation.**



## Setting Agendas

- Principals' contributions little understood
- Principals a low priority on crowded state agendas
- Yet principals can be multipliers of effective teaching

**Principals merit a more prominent place on state education policy agendas because of their powerful and singular role in improving education school-wide.**