



EPISODE 8

Building Principal Pipelines Improves Principal Retention

Lucas Held:

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Welcome to the second series in the Wallace Foundation's Principal Pipeline podcast. I'm Lucas Held, director of communications at the Wallace Foundation. We've added this second series of podcasts in order to discuss major new findings from the study of the Foundation's six year Principal Pipeline Initiative. The multi-year implementation and effect study on the pipeline was conducted jointly by Policy Studies Associates and the RAND Corporation. Importantly, the evidence from this study of pipelines is strong enough to make pipelines eligible for federal funding under the Every Student Succeeds Act.

Now, when we talk about a principal pipeline, we mean a comprehensive, district-led effort to put into place four interlocking components: rigorous leader standards, high quality pre-service principal preparation, ADA informed hiring and placement, and well aligned on-the-job support and evaluation, especially for new principals. Those four components can also be accompanied by system supports to help make pipelines work, and those include leader tracking systems and new roles for principal supervisors.

Now, in prior episodes, we discussed the impact pipelines have on student achievement and principal retention, as well as how impact was measured and how pipelines are carried out. Our topic today is retaining principals. Let me give a warm welcome to my three guests. Doug Anthony is associate superintendent of talent development for the Prince George's County public school system in Maryland, one of six districts that participated in the Wallace Foundation's Principal Pipeline Initiative. I'm also joined by Susan Holiday, instructional director, also known in some quarters as a principal supervisor, and Jaime Coffen, principal of Tulip Grove Elementary School. Both Susan and Jaime are also from Prince George's County.

Thank you all very much for making the time to talk with us today. Let me start by briefly recapping the findings on principal retention from the RAND study. Now, we know that student achievement was a main finding, but there were also findings on improved principal retention. Specifically, for every 100 new principals, pipeline districts saw nearly eight fewer losses after

three years, compared to new principals in comparison schools in other districts in the same state.

This matters because turnover is not only disruptive for teachers and students, but expensive for districts, and there may be an important educational benefit. Research suggests that the actions taken by principals to affect student achievement actually take time to implement and payoff for students. Let's begin with you, Doug. How important is principal retention to Prince George's County, and is it always a good thing?

Doug Anthony: [03:13](#) That's a great question, Lucas. Thanks for having me. Retention is extremely important, but I would qualify it by saying retaining effective principals is the key. In Prince George's County, it's important because it creates continuity for school communities as a whole. You want effective principals who understand how to build a community. They also stabilize a community in many instances by making sure that they have a quality teacher. An effective principal is a key lever in retaining a high quality staff. They create retention in a lot of spaces. If we can retain an effective principal, it leads to having effective teachers, and ultimately, helps stabilize a community.

Lucas Held: [04:00](#) Well that's really helpful, and that word stabilize, I think, is a very interesting choice. You mention that it's not just teachers, it's all the staff. What are some of the ways that Prince George's County is working to retain principals?

Doug Anthony: [04:19](#) I think for Prince George's County, one of the ways is we want to provide as much support as we can. Not only through systemic professional development, but through on the job, day to day support. A key lever for our change in the district around support is the role of a principal supervisor, and in our case, an instructional director. Instructional directors are one of the key levers for both retaining effective principals. Even in my own research, Lucas, I found in our district when I looked at principal attrition, one of the things that our principals said was most helpful was an effective supervisor. It wasn't money, it wasn't other things. It was actually the role of an effective supervisor was a key conduit on whether or not they stayed.

Lucas Held: [05:10](#) What were the principals telling you, Doug, that made a difference with supervision? Because, to some, supervision is a scary concept. I want to be left alone. I want to be left alone, as Greta Garbo would say. What were they doing that was of such value to principals?

- Doug Anthony: [05:29](#) I think really strong, phenomenal principal supervisors like my colleague Susan here, are really good coaches. That, they actually know how they get the best out of their principals. They know how to both lean into their strengths, while giving them quality feedback on areas that they can grow. I think the other thing is, is how reliable and accessible a principal supervisor is. The role of a principal is so complex these days that you really need both a sounding board and someone who can push your thinking at the same time, who understands the role and the work that you do in a way that many others can't. All of our principal supervisors are former principals, so they understand the role and the context for the work of our principals.
- Lucas Held: [06:15](#) Now let's turn to Susan, who is an instructional director or principal supervisor. Doug uses this really interesting metaphor of a coach, and like all good coaches, he said we lean into their strengths but also challenge them in areas where they can get better. How do you carry out such a role? Of course, your ears were burning from the compliment. How do you do it?
- Susan Holiday: [06:45](#) Definitely, definitely. I think it is a balancing act, because we literally are their evaluator, but at the same time, we want to spend our time coaching and developing them. Some of that work comes with a lot of intentionality around school visits or conversations about what is an evaluative conversation. "I'm coming tomorrow to do your formal observation. This is what it's going to look like. What would you like me to give you feedback on?" Versus, "You've been really working on giving teachers feedback, so what time next week do you want me to come and see that work?"
- A lot of it is just making sure that I'm very intentional with my school visits, but at the same time, that we build this relationship of one of trust. My job is to support them, but my job is to also grow and develop them. As I learned very early on, I can't be a super principal. My interactions with the principals are around growing and developing them, in lieu of doing it for them.
- Lucas Held: [07:45](#) When you say I can't be a super principal, does that mean sort of, I can't be a shadow principal, kind of second guessing everything they're doing?
- Susan Holiday: [07:57](#) I think it's more around making sure that they know that I'm there to support them, but I don't want to continue to feed them all the information. They can come, they can problem solve. They might text me and say, "Susan, I need a thought partner. Here's what happened today." Or, "I'm really working

on this, what are your thoughts?" With case management and being able to look at sometimes, actually, the number of schools is, I can't be in every school every single day. When we talk about being the super principal, my job is to build their capacity, problem solve with them, grow and develop them, versus doing it for them.

- Lucas Held: [08:35](#) Their growth is really your success.
- Susan Holiday: [08:39](#) I absolutely feel responsible for their growth and development.
- Lucas Held: [08:43](#) Let's now turn to Jaime. You're a pipeline principal. You went through the pre-service. Tell us about the support you're receiving and how that's affecting your feeling of being at Tulip Grove and staying there.
- Jaime Coffen: [09:03](#) I think one of the things is that, when I started as a new principal, it's just important to have someone that you can kind of lean on and just kind of when you have questions or you need a thought partner or it's really just been a bad day and I need someone to talk to, to just kind of have that person available to be there to assist. It's good to just have someone to lean on. I think that that's one of the reasons why I have stayed in Prince George's County, is just because I know that there's a network or people who are there supporting me along this walk, along this journey of being a principal.
- Lucas Held: [09:36](#) Jaime, vast majority of us will never be a principal. What was that like, walking into the school the first day as a principal?
- Jaime Coffen: [09:53](#) It was kind of like jumping into a pool of water and not knowing how to swim. But, I think that you quickly learn how to swim. I think that you quickly learn how to make decisions that are going to be in the best interest of your students and the teachers and the community that you serve. You don't always have the right answer, but I think that that's where that network is so helpful, because there's always a lot of people that you can lean on, whether it be your instructional director or just other mentors who serve in the capacity of coach.
- There's always someone that you can kind of lean on to say, "This is what I'm thinking. Is this right or is it wrong?" A lot of times they won't say whether or not it's right or wrong. They'll say, "Well, you need to think about this," or, "You need to consider this." Then allow you to kind of come to your own conclusion. That has been helpful. There's not always someone giving you the answer, but someone who's pushing you to just

think a little bit deeper to kind of get to that place to where you need to be.

Lucas Held: [10:54](#) That connects amazingly to Susan, how you described your role.

Susan Holiday: [10:59](#) Definitely. Realizing that that type of conversation only takes place when they know that their best interests—I mean, I want them to call when there's a problem, but I also want to call when it's been success. A lot of times we're easy to be able to identify what went wrong, but I also want to push them to say well, you did really well, and how did you get there, to be able to replicate those efforts.

Someone mentioned earlier today around this deficit model, a lot of our schools are doing things that are going very, very well, and they don't necessarily reflect on what went well, they reflect on what didn't go well. That's another opportunity for principals to actually talk amongst each other and to network amongst each other. Like, "You're doing this really well. How did you do that?"

Lucas Held: [11:42](#) I think it's also perhaps the case that, at least in public discourse, there's a lot of beating up that happens of schools and perhaps not enough time celebrating success. The principal has, at times, been described as an impossible job, Jaime, and it sounds like this kind of coaching support makes a big difference.

Jaime Coffen: [12:10](#) Well I think because we focus so much on like, the standards that we have, that we talk about what are the systems and structures that are in place to help you achieve the standard. In that, yes, you may talk about these are things that are not going right, but you're also going to talk about what processes did you take to get things to turn out the right way. Well, how did you specifically create, what did you do actually to create the structure for the data to increase in this way? What steps did you take? You're able to have those conversations and not just be reflective on things that might not be going well, but also reflecting on all the things that you're doing really well, too.

Lucas Held: [12:47](#) Really interesting, and this actually goes right back, Doug, to your observation that a good coach leans in on the strengths, and also coaches folks to find ways to address areas that could be improved. How have you created that culture across all of your cadre of principal supervisors and schools?

Doug Anthony: [13:15](#) We have a great, talented staff in central office in our district. Really proud of all the people. You have fabulous associate

superintendents and instructional directors. You have mentor teachers and leadership coaches, I'm sorry, mentor principals and leadership coaches. Then you have curriculum instruction, human resources. It's really a collective effort where we've understood that, you know, at the heart of our work, and the Wallace research says this, right, that second to teaching, the principal is the most critical factor in impacting student achievement.

As a system, we've really bought into that notion. We believe that that's true, and I think our efforts of support show that. Hopefully, if you were to talk to other principals outside of Jaime, you would hear the same kind of response, and I believe that you would, but that's what we've done. We've just taken time to do this and the Wallace work has been great for us to be able to do it.

Lucas Held: [14:09](#)

Well, that's great to hear. Maybe just to close off this episode, Jaime, would you advise others to consider principalship?

Jaime Coffen: [14:21](#)

I definitely would advise others to consider the principalship. It's great work. I mean, I think that, yes, I was not able to swim for a period of time. It was very difficult. I would never tell anyone that it wasn't, but I think that it took me maybe a couple of years to really get my footing, but now that I have it, I mean, I love what I do. I get out of my car every morning, I'm excited to walk into my school building. I walk in and I know that there are really, really great things happening for children and also for teachers.

Just going back to your previous question, I think you're able to get a lot of the work done because you just are able to build positive relationships. I think that that's not one of the things that we really talked about in this principal supervisor piece, is that relationship, that trust makes a world of difference. I think for me, walking into a building where my school culture was a little bit tough, having that relationship modeled for me helped me model that relationship within my building, and really shifted the culture in my building to now, where my teachers now have a voice, where they're heard too. I think it has resonated just across the board. I think the pipeline, yes, has been a great thing for principals, but I think principals who have gone through it and have experienced it have, for me, I've been able to turn key a lot of that in my building just developing my teachers.

Lucas Held: [15:37](#)

That's a very powerful observation, and it is said that culture of an organization, and as the saying goes, culture eats strategy for

lunch. That, this culture is created by all of our actions every day. Susan, it sounds like your focus on transparency and being upfront about what kind of conversation you're having contributed to that building of trust. Would you advise people to consider being principal supervisors?

Susan Holiday:

[16:09](#)

Yes. It's interesting, it's been a culminating piece and being able to take a look at some of the previous experiences and realizing that some of the central office experiences that I had after leaving the principalship clearly were some really nice building blocks, because as much as we're navigating principals, we're also navigating central office at the same time to support principals. That has also been truly helpful, too.

Lucas Held:

[16:38](#)

Speaking of helpful, I think this conversation will be very helpful to our listeners. I think that you have given us a window into the world of interlocking relationships that form a district's culture, and in turn, a school culture. We've heard themes of supporting strengths and enabling growth that I think, also, could probably apply to teachers and to students as well.

With that, let me give a hearty thank you to our three terrific guests. We've had Doug Anthony, associate superintendent of talent development. We have had Susan Holiday, instructional director, and Jaime Coffen, principal of Tulip Grove Elementary. All three from Prince George's County, which as I think you can hear, has a very cohesive vision for leadership that the district is executing faithfully. Thank you again, and we'll join you next time.