The principal difference in effective schools

Will Miller
President, The Wallace Foundation

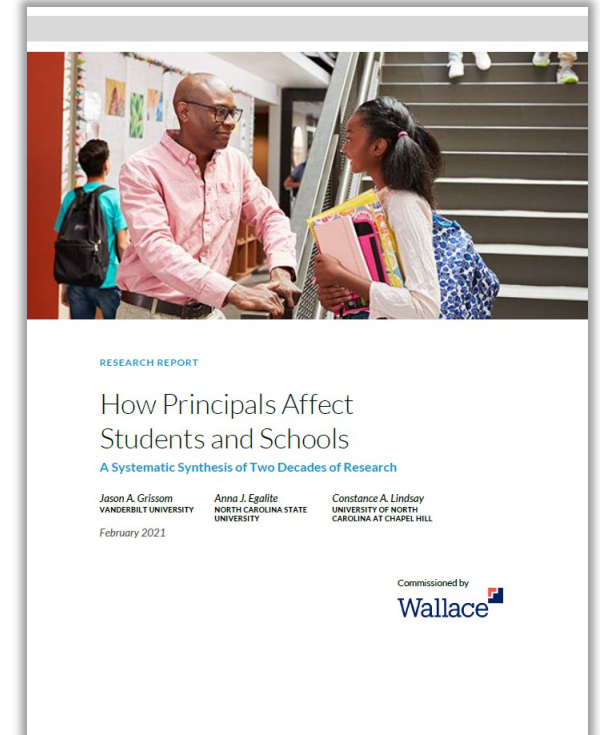Cahn Fellowship Annual Leadership Conference
October 6, 2023

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My topics this morning

- The evidence base on why (and how) principals matter

- Some of the challenges of the principalship

- Ways to better support principals

- Implications

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Why (and how) principals matter
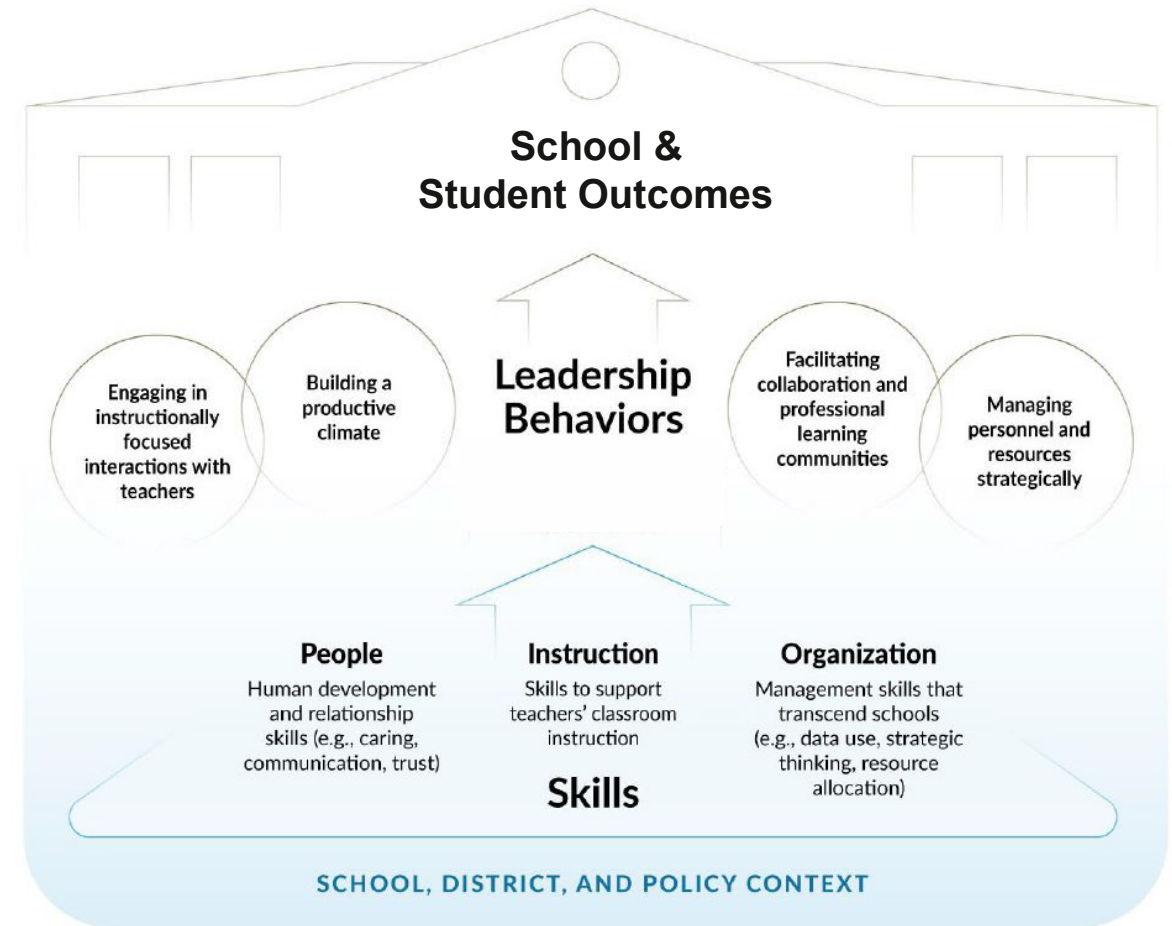
The evidence base on why principals matter

- Effective principals are key to the success of school improvement efforts

- Effective principals linked to improved student achievement, better student attendance, less exclusionary discipline, lower teacher turnover and higher teacher satisfaction
  - Principals' impacts are mainly but not exclusively indirect

- Principals affect an entire school whereas teachers affect a classroom

RESEARCH REPORT

How Principals Affect Students and Schools
A Systematic Synthesis of Two Decades of Research

Jason A. Grissom
VANDERBILT UNIVERSITY

Anna J. Egalite
NORTH CAROLINA STATE UNIVERSITY

Constance A. Lindsay
UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT CHAPEL HILL

February 2021

Commissioned by
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Source: How Principals Affect Students and Schools: A Systematic Synthesis of Two Decades of Research, Grissom, et al., Wallace, 2021*; School Leadership Interventions Under the Every Student Succeeds Act: Evidence Review,* Updated and Expanded, Herman, et al., RAND, 2017. *Principal Pipelines: A Feasible, Affordable, and Effective Way for Districts to Improve Schools,* Gates, et al., RAND, 2019; How Leadership Influences Student Learning– Wallace Foundation, Leithwood, et al., 2004.

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Growing evidence on *how* principals can make a difference
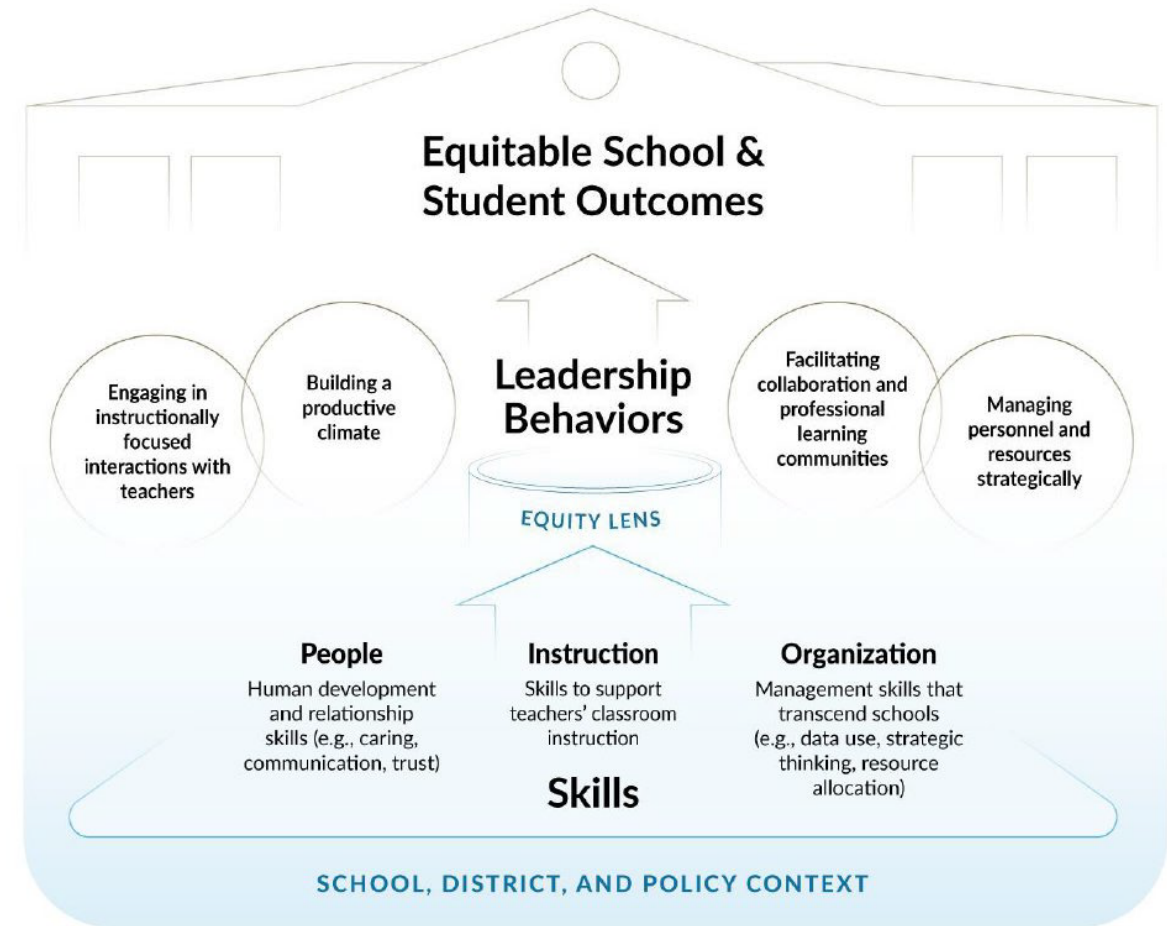
- A research team synthesized 200+ studies over last 20 years
  - Skills in three areas are crucial: People, instruction, organization
  - Skills support four areas of high-leverage behaviors linked to student learning, other outcomes

Source: *How Principals Affect Students and Schools: A Systematic Synthesis of Two Decades of Research*, Grissom, et al., Wallace, 2021

School & Student Outcomes

Engaging in instructionally focused interactions with teachers

Building a productive climate

Leadership Behaviors

Facilitating collaboration and professional learning communities

Managing personnel and resources strategically

People
Human development and relationship skills (e.g., caring, communication, trust)

Instruction
Skills to support teachers' classroom instruction

Organization
Management skills that transcend schools (e.g., data use, strategic thinking, resource allocation)

Skills

SCHOOL, DISTRICT, AND POLICY CONTEXT

An emerging picture on how principals can apply an equity lens

- Growing, largely qualitative literature on leadership for equity.
  - Principals can have important impacts on key populations, including low-income students and students and teachers of color.
  - Through direct channels (e.g., disciplinary actions) or indirect channels (e.g., by working with teachers and in hiring decisions).
  - Principals of color appear especially likely to have positive impacts on both students of color and teachers of color.

Source: *How Principals Affect Students and Schools: A Systematic Synthesis of Two Decades of Research*, Grissom, et al., Wallace, 2021

Equitable School & Student Outcomes

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SCHOOL, DISTRICT, AND POLICY CONTEXT

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Principals getting greater attention in policy

1987

"The educational administration field lacks… a definition of good educational leadership." *

2015

45 states have school leadership standards.

2019

- 36 in-depth interviews including district leaders, school board members, and state education officials **

- Across all three audiences:
  - Leadership was seen as a lever for improving student achievement at the school level
  - Principals seen as key to recruiting and retaining effective teachers

"If you don't have good leadership, you're not going to have the outcomes that you want for kids. So, you've got to invest in that."

– State education official, Midwest

* Source: *Leaders for America's Schools. The Report of the national Commission on Excellence in Educational Administration*, University Council for Educational Administration

**Source: *Effectively Communicating about Principal Pipelines: Key findings from qualitative research with superintendents, school board members, and state education officials*, Hart Research Associates and Brossard Research. The research included a range of district sizes: medium (10), large (8), very large (6) and a mix of states including Arizona, California, Colorado, Georgia, Kansas, Maryland, Missouri, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Utah and Virginia.

Some of the challenges of the principalship

A challenge: Polarization of K-12 education

- Declining overall trust in schools, like other institutions
  - Decline is greater among Republicans than Democrats
- Though trust in 'my child's school' remains higher
  - 57% extremely or very satisfied with overall quality of education their children are receiving at school

Americans' Confidence in U.S. Public Schools, by Party ID

% Great deal/Quite a lot of confidence in public schools

— Republicans ···· Independents — Democrats

1-point Dem-GOP gap

29-point Dem-GOP gap

43

29

14

Shown is full trend from 1973 to 2022

Get the data
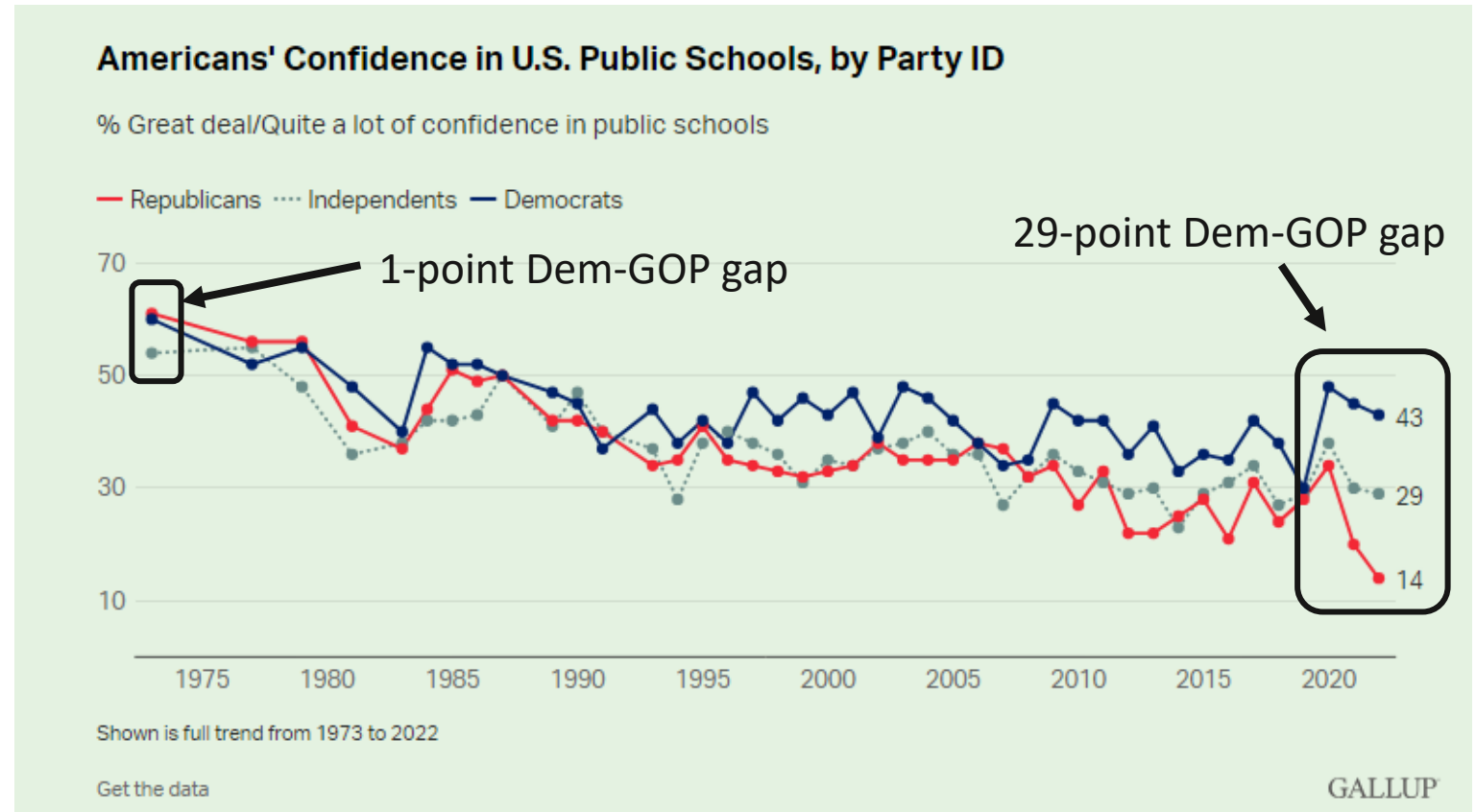
GALLUP

Source: Americans' confidence in public schools: Confidence in Public Schools Turns More Partisan (gallup.com); Historically Low Faith in U.S. Institutions Continues (gallup.com); Confidence in 16 institutions compared: Historically Low Faith in U.S. Institutions Continues (gallup.com); Parents' satisfaction with the quality of education their children are receiving: A majority of parents of K-12 students are extremely or very satisfied with the quality of the education their children are receiving | Pew Research Center)

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Leading to greater conflict

- Partisan divides over teaching on race, gender

- Those outside of public education playing a growing role
  - 45% of districts are seeing heightened FOIA requests
  - 31% of districts report receiving verbal or written threats from the public against their educators, mainly from parents and family members
  - Nearly half of principals of color reported experiencing racial discrimination, mainly from parents and families

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Principals are feeling the stress

- COVID put twice the stress on principals and teachers vs. other working adults
  - 85% compared to 35% on average

- Learning recovery an ongoing challenge

- The percentage of principals who say the 'stress and disappointments of the job... are worth it' fell from 85% to 60% from 2016-22
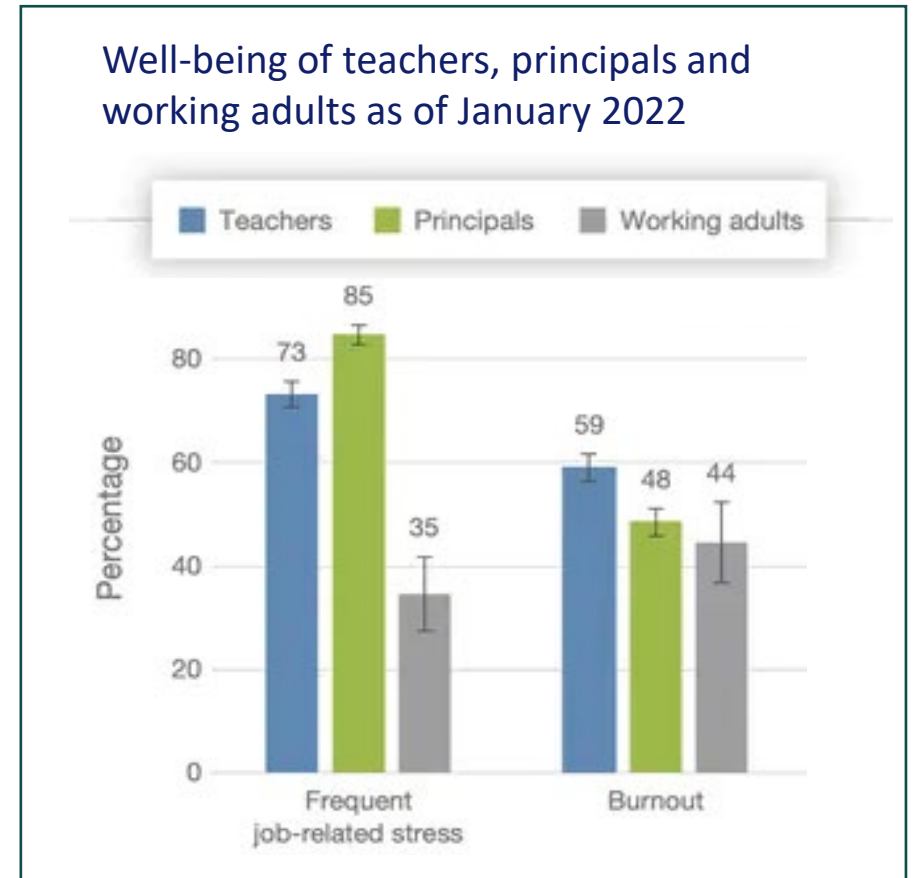
Well-being of teachers, principals and working adults as of January 2022

Warning signs of attrition among principals

- Principal attrition is increasing faster than teacher attrition

- Poor well-being, adverse working conditions were associated with teachers' and principals' intentions to leave

  - Supportive school environments linked to better well-being, lower intentions to leave

Percentage of principals who retired or resigned
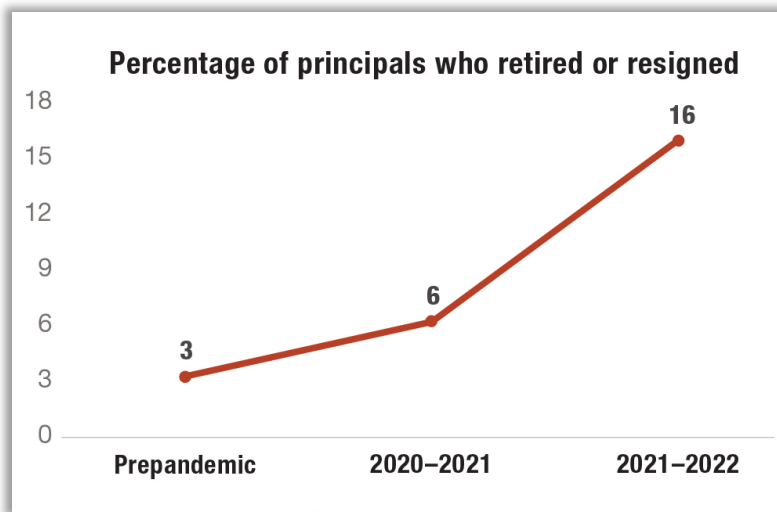
> **"The principals have been the glue that has kept education together…. Principals pour into the vessels of everyone else – students, teachers, central office staff. But who is meeting the needs of the principal?"**
>
> *-- Tabari Wallace,* special advisor on principal engagement, North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, quoted in *"Principals Are on the Brink of a Breakdown," EdSurge, July 6, 2022*

Source: Chart reflects estimates from 300 districts based on surveys administered in Fall 2022 compared to summer 2021. *Educator Turnover Has Markedly Increased, but Districts Have Taken Actions to Boost Teacher Ranks: Selected Findings from the Sixth American School District Panel Survey | RAND* ; Tabari Wallace quotation: *Principals Are on the Brink of a Breakdown | EdSurge News*

An implication: The need for better support

"Researchers, philanthropies, professional associations of school principals, and the federal department of education… **should seek to understand how the school leader job is changing. …[and] develop policies to attract and retain high-quality principals."**

-- RAND, findings from the Sixth American School District Panel, Survey, 2023

… so what can we do?

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Ways to better support principals

Research suggests three potential solutions

- **Peer learning**: e.g., The Cahn Fellowships
  - "Collegial learning networks support principals' learning by providing opportunities for principals to learn from their peers, build their communication and collaboration skills, and learn new ways of thinking."

- **Districts:** Comprehensive, aligned principal pipelines for development and ongoing support of principals

- **States:** Collaborative efforts between state agencies, districts, universities and community organizations
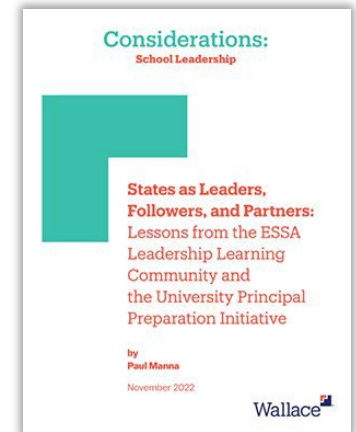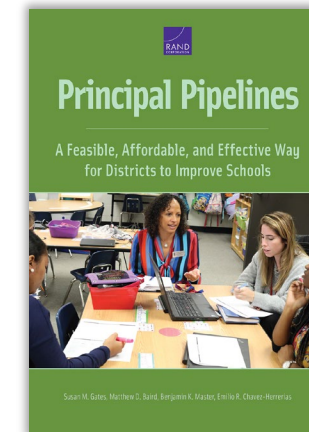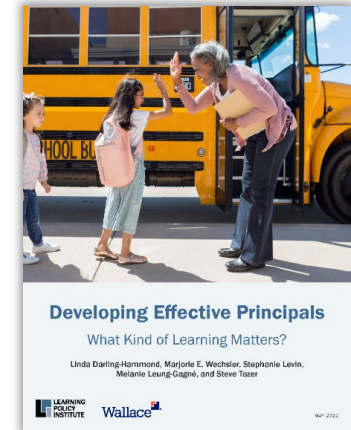
Source: Developing Effective Principals: What Kind of Learning Matters? | The Wallace Foundation, Learning Policy Institute, The Wallace Foundation; *Principal Pipelines: A Feasible, Affordable, and Effective Way for Districts to Improve Schools,* Gates, et al., RAND, 2019; *States as Leaders, Followers, and Partners: Lessons from the ESSA Leadership Learning Community and the University Principal Preparation Initiative,* Wallace, 2022.

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Comprehensive, aligned principal pipelines:

An evidence-based approach to developing and supporting principals and improving student achievement

Comprehensive, aligned principal pipelines:

An evidence-based approach to developing and supporting principals and improving student achievement

- **Achievement:** In six large districts, benefits for math and reading in elementary schools, math in high schools, including in lowest quartile of schools.
  - After three years, schools in pipeline districts outperformed their comparison schools by 5 percentile points in reading and 2.3 percentile points in math.
  - RAND: Pipelines "provided districts with larger gains for fewer resources spent per student than is typically found in research."

- **Retention:** New principals 8% more likely to remain for 3 years

> "We found no other comprehensive district-wide initiatives with demonstrated positive effects of this magnitude on achievement."
>
> --*Principal Pipelines: A Feasible, Affordable, and Effective Way for Districts to Improve Schools,* RAND, 2019

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Jaime Whitfield-Coffen, principal, gives last-minute instructions to students and parents before opening the newly renovated Tulip Grove Elementary School in Bowie, MD on the first day of school.

"**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 of people who are there supporting me along this walk, along this journey of being a principal.**"

-- Jaime Whitfield-Coffen, principal, Prince George's County, 2013-2023

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One reason: Reshaped supervision

- When principal supervision focused on development and support, principals saying central office is 'organized to support me' went from 41 to 57 percent.

- Supervision was a two-way street: Supporting principals, *and* communicating their importance to district colleagues

- A limitation: Teachers' perceptions of principals did not change

Principal Elizabeth Namba, right, visits a classroom at Hyde-Addison Elementary in Washington, D.C. as Principal Supervisor Janice Harris, at rear, observes.

The impact of reshaped principal supervision
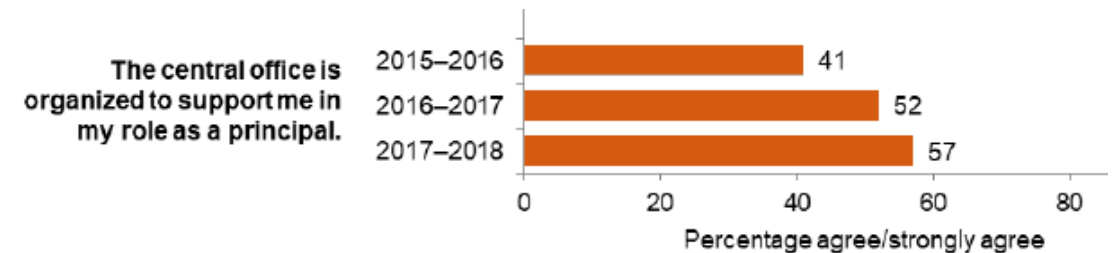
The central office is organized to support me in my role as a principal.

	Percentage agree/strongly agree
2015–2016	41
2016–2017	52
2017–2018	57

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Statewide approaches for supporting principals are emerging

- States can foster **networks** that connect districts, universities, and others to support principals

  - **Wisconsin**: Launched the Wisconsin Urban Leadership Institute for "Big 5" principals; cohorts of 25 gain 10 months of professional learning, coaching and networking.

  - **Missouri:** Missouri Leader Development System (MLDS) boosted 3-year retention from 82-87%; 98% for MLDS graduates.
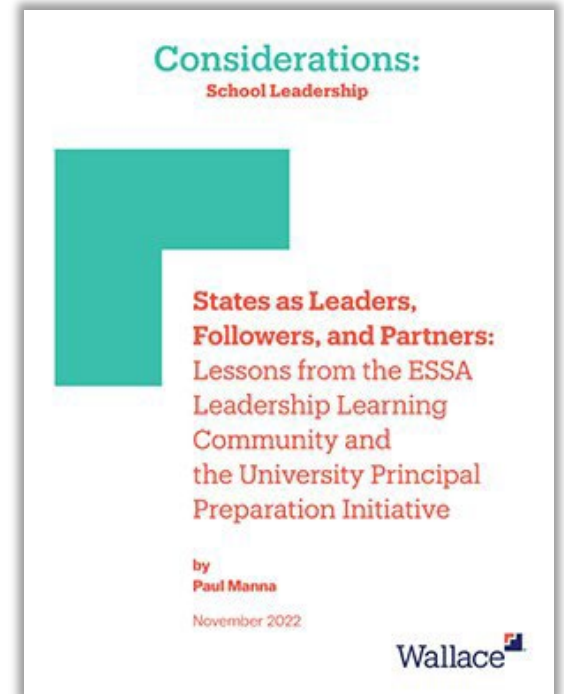
Considerations:
School Leadership

States as Leaders, Followers, and Partners: Lessons from the ESSA Leadership Learning Community and the University Principal Preparation Initiative

by Paul Manna

November 2022

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Implications

Summing up

- Growing evidence of the impact of effective principals for teacher, student and school success

- Growing recognition of their importance in federal and state policy

- K-12 education has become – as in many areas of society – politically polarized

- Both principals and teachers are feeling the strain

- The implication: We need continued – and greater -- attention to developing and supporting principals, and to their importance in our public education system

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What you can do

- Sustain (or incorporate) **the behaviors and underlying skills** that make for an effective principal in your own work

- Advocate for your district to adopt and adapt a **comprehensive, aligned principal pipeline**

- As you advance in your career, if you become a principal supervisor, consider its dual function – **supporting principals and advocating for them**

- If you become a superintendent or associate superintendent, make **the principalship** and what it takes to support it **a top strategic priority**

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Thank you

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