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B R I E F

When Learning Counts: Rethinking Licenses for School Leaders

Summary

As achievement gaps persist, academic results lag behind accountability expectations, and sanctions loom ever larger, the public looks to principals to lead school improvement. States use licenses to control who becomes a principal, but do these licenses encompass the knowledge and skills those principals need to promote student learning? If not, what kind of policy framework would help decision makers, educators, and others rethink principal licenses and the school leadership they support?

To answer these questions, *When Learning Counts* examines the licensure content for principals in all 50 states plus the District of Columbia and finds that licensing requirements are misaligned with today's ambitions for school leaders and vary widely state to state. These findings highlight a missed opportunity. Licensing can play a valuable role in developing school leaders and securing the principals that schools need, but today's licenses fall short.

Only six states primarily focus their licenses on learning. Two-thirds of the states include some learning content in their licensing requirements, but inclusion of that content seldom amounts to a coherent policy focus or plan. Even when states include learning-focused content, it is narrow in scope.

To guide policymakers as they restructure principal licenses, this report presents a policy framework, entitled "*Licensing-Plus*," to promote student learning. Departing from traditional licenses that ignore the distinction between entry-level and expert practice, *Licensing-Plus* restructures the license to better link licensure to learning, provide for specialized professional learning that develops technical expertise, and promotes leadership development. This new structure ensures that policymakers can better align licenses with the duties and demands of today's principalship.

When Learning Counts:

Today's school principal operates in an era that prizes student learning above all else, at levels never before demanded or attained. These demands have changed the very nature of school leadership, altering the knowledge and skills required of principals. Now principals must define learning goals, motivate students and teachers, build staff capacity, marshal resources, and, often, win the support of community members. Unfortunately, these demands are not supported by state licensing requirements.

Findings:

An analysis of the licensing requirements in the 50 states and D.C. revealed that licenses run between two extremes: a reliance on individual characteristics, such as background checks or academic degrees, that signal nothing about the purpose or practice of the principalship; and lists of knowledge and skill requirements whose scope and depth do not clearly add up to a meaningful definition of the job. Only six states primarily focus their licenses on learning. Two-thirds of the states include some learning content in their licensing requirements, but inclusion of that content seldom amounts to a coherent policy focus or plan.

Even when states include learning-focused content, it is narrow in scope.

Generally, licensing requirements are misaligned with today's ambitions for school leaders, are unbalanced across states, and ignore the larger context of school leadership development. Three issues are especially important to understanding how principal licenses limit leadership development:

- The myth of the “super principal”: Piling school leadership expectations onto lone individuals has not resulted in school systems that serve all children well. Licensing requirements in many states perpetuate this system.
- The distinction between entry-level skills and expertise: Licensing, by design, represents only entry-level knowledge and skills, a level sufficient to keep the public from harm. It does not indicate that a principal is able to tackle the occupation's thorniest problems. The hardest and most consequential tasks a principal faces require expertise beyond the license and necessitate additional training to develop these higher-level skills.
- The difference between “practice” and “leadership”: Licenses govern practice and represent the knowledge and skills needed to carry out technical tasks. No one, however, licenses leadership. Leaders emerge after organizations make substantial investments in their training, scrutinize their promise, and build on the right mix of personal attributes. If learning expectations demand true leadership at the school level, then states must set out consciously to develop it or to recognize it from whatever quarter it appears.

Licensing can play a valuable role in developing school leaders and securing the principals that schools need, but today's licenses fall short.

Recommendations:

State licensure can be restructured to properly situate licenses as the foundation of school leadership development. The authors call this framework Licensing-Plus, and it affects practitioners in four stages:

1. It *(re)structures the license* itself to include a background check, academic degree, specification of required knowledge and skills, and a test of knowledge and skills open to all candidates regardless of background.
2. It *provides for the development of expertise* through focused continuing education tied to required knowledge and skills; voluntary, post-licensure certifications in specialized areas of school leadership; and share authority broadly.
3. It *promotes leadership development* through specialized leadership training that includes policy and professional opportunities.
4. It *promotes effective licensing policies* by using research to merge licensing provisions, principal knowledge and skills, and school performance.

Licensing-Plus raises the prospect that school principals will be upstanding, educated, qualified, administratively competent, on target, possessed of the right know-how, and able to handle their job in any school or district that beckons; that is, it raises the prospect that principals will possess the characteristics that reasonable citizens might demand in school leaders. In short, when student learning matters, states must view principal licenses as tools to promote learning. Tackling new demands for school leadership requires that states rethink principal licenses in ways that move the profession toward learning-focused school leadership. Licensure plays an important role in

leadership development, but licensure alone cannot guarantee that leaders will arise.

For more information:

Commissioned by The Wallace Foundation, “*When Learning Counts: Rethinking Licenses for School Leaders*” was authored by Jacob E. Adams, Jr. and Michael A. Copland. The findings and recommendations are solely those of its authors. To download the report, please visit www.crpe.org or The Wallace Foundation's Knowledge Center at www.wallacefoundation.org.
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