



The Principal Effect

How Investing in School Leaders Is Key
to Solving Education's Challenges

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Executive Summary

Public schools are facing a major set of challenges, including concerns about students' mental health, chronic absenteeism, learning loss, high teacher attrition rates, and teacher shortages. Often policymakers, funders, leaders of education improvement efforts, and other stakeholders treat these challenges separately, developing different strategies to address each one. This fragmented approach, however, overlooks the one factor that influences all school conditions: the school principal.

By virtue of their role, principals influence the experiences of every person in the school and thus play a key role in improving student and teacher outcomes. Strengthening and investing in school leadership is also an equity strategy, given that effective principals have even larger effects in schools serving students from historically underserved communities. This report, which summarizes existing research about principals' effects, explains the importance of investing in and leveraging school leadership for mitigating the challenges currently facing schools.

How Principals Improve Education Outcomes

Principals affect student and teacher outcomes in three major ways:

1. Supporting effective instruction
2. Retaining teachers, thereby strengthening school stability and expertise
3. Creating a positive climate that welcomes and connects staff, students, and families

Researchers agree that principals' effects on student academic outcomes come about, for the most part, through their support for teachers and their practices. This occurs as principals orchestrate teacher professional development, productive teacher assignments, opportunities for teacher collaboration, professional culture, improvement-focused feedback, and the working conditions that teachers experience within a school. Actions that help teachers improve instruction within and across classrooms increase their experience of collegiality, their ability to engage in collective problem-solving, and their sense of efficacy, all of which matter for student achievement and teacher retention.

Effective principals support strong instruction, which improves student learning. A large body of research has identified strong links between principals' instructional leadership practices and improved student outcomes. Principals play a major role in supporting strong instruction, and consequently student learning, by:

- engaging with teachers around instruction: enabling successful practices, observing, coaching, providing feedback, and reviewing data together;
- working with staff to develop a cohesive educational program with strong curriculum and shared practices;
- investing in high-quality staff development;
- enabling teacher collaboration for planning and professional learning; and
- developing shared instructional leadership and shared decision-making.

Effective principals retain teachers, which improves school stability and student outcomes. Principal support of collaboration and orchestration of a shared vision are also significantly positively related to teacher retention, which further supports school stability and student achievement. Teachers who rate their principals as effective and supportive are less likely to leave their schools, and this impact is largest in high-need schools. Therefore, building leadership capacity can be a high-leverage strategy for achieving greater equity across schools. Specific principal actions that are positively related to teacher retention include:

- developing a safe, nurturing environment that supports well-being and fosters belonging of students and staff;
- supporting teachers at all experience levels with resources and caring;
- buffering teachers from external demands while protecting their time and agency; and
- fostering teacher collaboration and involvement in decision-making.

Effective principals create a positive climate, which improves student belonging, attendance, and achievement, as well as teacher retention. As leaders of schools, principals play a key role in shaping the school climate, which shapes the ways in which adults and students interact with and relate to one another. A substantial body of research shows that a positive school climate in which students feel a strong sense of belonging and support improves student attendance, behaviors, graduation rates, and learning loss. Studies show that positive school climates reduce the negative effects of poverty on achievement—effectively boosting grades, test scores, and student engagement. Creating such an environment involves structuring supports for both teachers and students, as well as reaching out to families, as students’ willingness to attend school is related not only to their relationships with teachers, but also to the involvement of their parents. Principals enable a positive school climate by:

- adopting policies and practices that undergird positive teacher–student relationships characterized by warmth, acceptance, and support;
- building a welcoming, inclusive, communicative school culture that builds trust between students, teachers, and families;
- creating structures and expectations for engaging families regularly;
- establishing high expectations for student learning for both teachers and students; and
- employing democratic school principles such as shared decision-making.

Thus, investments in principals’ knowledge, skills, and capacity must be part of any improvement strategy, particularly in schools facing the largest challenges.

The Importance of Supporting and Retaining Principals

Principal retention is consistently found to be associated with greater teacher stability and student achievement. In general, principal turnover is associated with declines in student test scores, which are larger in high-poverty schools and when the incoming principal is inexperienced. Principal turnover is also associated with decreased teacher ratings of school climate and higher teacher turnover, which are correlated with declines in student achievement. Principal turnover is typically higher in schools that serve concentrations of students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Principal turnover is also

higher in schools with fewer resources, less qualified teachers, and less central office support, and where there are fewer principal learning opportunities, including lower-quality principal preparation and fewer opportunities for coaching and networking.

Fortunately, we know a great deal about what enables principals to become more effective and stay in the profession. Research has found that quality learning opportunities in both preservice preparation and ongoing professional development enable principals to learn and implement the practices that make a difference both for student learning and for teacher learning and retention.

Policy Implications

Tackling the issues facing public schools today—from chronic absenteeism and lagging achievement to staff shortages—requires more than a piecemeal approach to solving individual problems. Because principals influence all of these problems for better or for worse, preparing and supporting principals so they are best equipped to handle them is one of the best investments policymakers can make. Further, because principal turnover undermines both teacher retention and student achievement, addressing it through coherent, evidence-based leadership policies represents one of the most powerful strategies for improving school quality and achieving greater equity.

In addition to providing adequate and equitable resources for schools, research suggests that districts, states, and the federal government can do the following:

- **Ensure high-quality principal preparation.** States' strategic use of licensure and program approval standards can help ensure that principal training includes the features of high-quality programs and content focused on critical areas of principal practice (e.g., leading instruction, shaping a positive school culture, developing people, and meeting the needs of diverse learners). States can also use standards to emphasize the types of learning opportunities that matter for effectiveness, such as quality internships, applied learning, and coaching and mentoring under the auspices of an experienced principal.
- **Create strategies to underwrite the cost of strong preparation.** States and districts can provide funding to cover the cost of high-quality preparation programs, especially by supporting yearlong internships linked to supportive coursework under the wing of a veteran principal. Well-designed internships are strongly related to principals' later effectiveness. Such investments are typically paid back in service and may be offered in exchange for a commitment to serve in a priority school. Investments in paid internships or apprenticeships for leadership preparation can encourage high-quality candidates to enter school leadership roles with a better-developed skill set and without going into debt.
- **Invest strategically in principals' professional learning.** Districts, states, and the federal government can invest strategically in high-quality professional learning—ensuring that principals have plentiful and equitable opportunities to learn how to support instruction and create collegial workplaces that improve teaching effectiveness and teacher retention. The form of professional learning also matters: Principals identify coaching and mentoring, networks that work on shared problems, and opportunities for self-directed learning that is tightly connected to their work as extremely important.

- **Build robust pipelines for recruiting and preparing equity-focused school principals, along with coherent systems of development and succession.** Districts can launch (and states can support) pipeline programs that recruit teachers who have demonstrated strong teaching and leadership capacity and carry them through preparation and induction; then organize ongoing learning for leaders, using standards that bring a coherent vision to the entire career. Pipelines not only improve the practice of individuals and create a supply of qualified leaders for school and district positions, but they also contribute to districtwide practices that support systemic change and increase student learning and equity.
- **Attend to principals' working and learning conditions.** Central office policies should attend to principals' needs and concerns, which may require increased information gathered from principals and principal input on district decisions that impact schools. This responsiveness should include strategies to keep effective principals, providing needed school resources and flexibility. States can conduct working conditions surveys for principals, as many do for teachers, and use data to inform policy decisions that address both statewide needs and those of the neediest districts and regions where principal turnover is usually highest.
- **Support adequate and equitable principal compensation.** District and state leaders can review the competitiveness of salaries and consider other forms of compensation (such as student loan repayment or housing supports) that may be important to attract and retain principals. States also have the responsibility of ensuring that school funding is adequate and equitable across communities, targeting additional funds to the neediest districts and schools. This can help districts provide more adequate compensation and better working conditions in the communities where these are most needed.
- **Establish principal stability as a goal, and create productive mechanisms for principal feedback, evaluation, and mentoring.** Districts that support, develop, and mentor principals can reduce the likelihood of principal attrition. District leaders can examine the usefulness of their principal support and evaluation systems, gathering input from principals as well as others in the district and community, with an eye toward sustaining practices that are helpful in guiding principals' development and supporting their effectiveness.

Policies that support evidence-based approaches to principal preparation and professional learning throughout their careers can make a measurable difference in addressing today's most critical issues, such as chronic absenteeism, learning recovery, and teacher retention, in a coherent way.

Introduction

Public schools are facing a major set of challenges. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, urgent concerns about students' mental health, chronic absenteeism, and learning loss have emerged. In 2023, almost 40% of high school students reported persistent sadness or hopelessness, 18% had experienced major depression, and 10% had attempted suicide.¹ Closely related to this mental health crisis, chronic absenteeism—the proportion of students missing more than 10% of days in a school year—more than doubled from 13% in 2017 to 29% in 2022.² In 2024, chronic absenteeism still hovered at about 24% across the nation—signaling that nearly one fourth of students are attending school irregularly and are at greater risk of disengaging and dropping out. Furthermore, pandemic drops in student achievement have not yet rebounded in most states across the country.³ Meanwhile, many schools have been struggling with high teacher attrition rates and teacher shortages,⁴ which further undermine school stability and student learning.⁵

Often policymakers treat these challenges separately, developing different strategies to address each one. Students struggle with mental health issues? Hire more school counselors. Student achievement is down? Adopt a tutoring program. Schools are unable to hire certified teachers? Raise salaries or hire substitutes.

This fragmented approach, however, overlooks the one factor that influences all school conditions: the school principal. In their pioneering research review of school leadership, Kenneth Leithwood and his coauthors noted that “leadership is second only to classroom instruction among all school-related factors that contribute to what students learn at school.”⁶ A more recent research review by Jason Grissom and colleagues noted that school leadership is, in many ways, the central school-level factor.⁷ While teachers matter more when it comes to the learning of individual students, they noted that principals create conditions for teacher effectiveness as well as for schoolwide improvements, stating:

It is difficult to envision an investment with a higher ceiling on its potential return than a successful effort to improve principal leadership.⁸

By virtue of their role, principals influence the experiences of every person in the school, affecting school climate, teaching practices, and teacher selection and retention. Thus, both directly and indirectly, principals play a key role in improving student and teacher outcomes. Strengthening leadership is also an equity strategy, given that effective principals have even larger effects in schools serving students from historically underserved communities.

This report explains the importance of investing in school leadership for mitigating the many challenges currently facing schools. It summarizes existing research on how principals strengthen teaching quality and improve school climate to boost student engagement and achievement.⁹ It then describes what we know about how strengthening principal effectiveness and principal retention, not just managing individual crises, can lead to positive outcomes. It concludes with implications for policy and practice for improving school outcomes. By providing high-leverage supports for principals—and through them, providing support to teachers, other staff, students, and families—education leaders, policymakers, funders, and other interest holders can simultaneously and coherently work to improve teaching and learning.

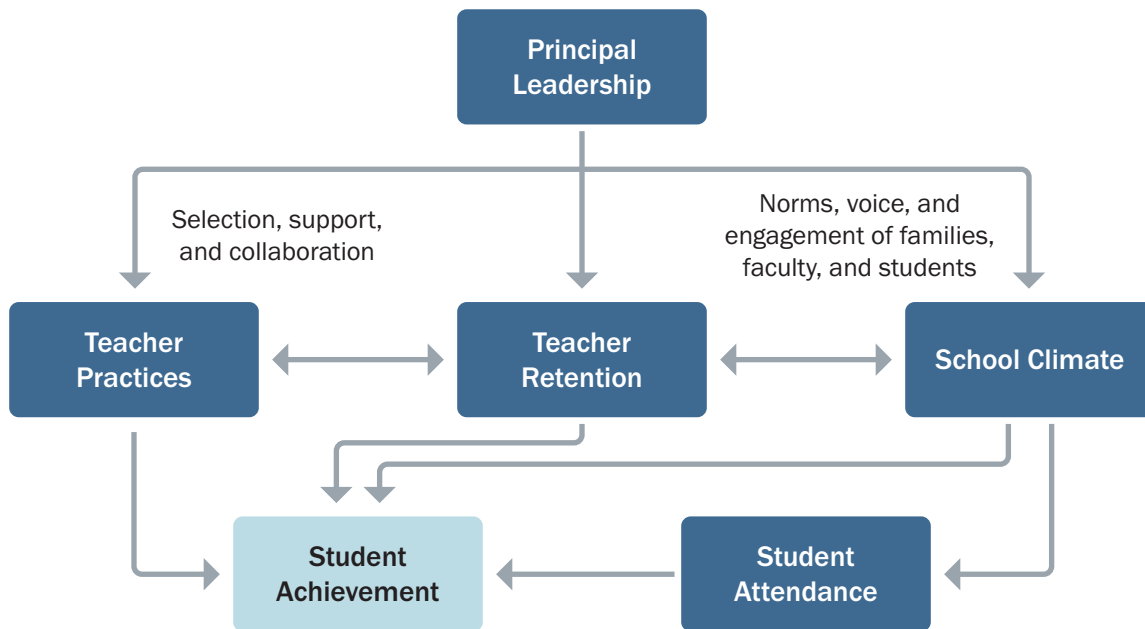
How Principals Improve Education Outcomes

A growing number of methodologically rigorous studies¹⁰ provide convincing evidence that some principals are more effective than others at promoting student attendance and achievement in English language arts and mathematics,¹¹ and that these principals are more highly rated by both supervisors and teachers.¹²

Researchers agree that principals' effects on student academic outcomes come about, for the most part, through their support for teachers and their practices.¹³ This occurs as principals orchestrate teacher professional development, productive teacher assignments, opportunities for teacher collaboration, professional culture, improvement-focused feedback, and the working conditions that teachers experience within a school. Actions that help teachers improve instruction within and across classrooms increase their experience of collegiality, their ability to engage in collective problem-solving, and their sense of efficacy, all of which matter for both student achievement and teacher retention.

In addition, principals play a large role in supporting a positive school climate, which strongly influences students' attendance, sense of self-efficacy, and achievement.¹⁴ These factors and other actions of the principal also play a large role in determining whether teachers stay in the school, which in turn matters for student achievement. As shown in [Figure 1](#), through all of these practices, principals influence teacher and student outcomes.

Figure 1. How Principals Influence School Outcomes



Source: Learning Policy Institute. (2026).

These factors are interrelated: A positive school climate boosts student attendance, which supports achievement, while also encouraging teachers to stay in the school, which supports staff stability and student achievement. Studies have uncovered several key mechanisms by which principals affect student outcomes¹⁵:

- supporting effective instruction by creating enabling conditions and learning opportunities for teachers;
- retaining teachers, so the school and students benefit from stability of relationships, practices, and expertise that has been developed and is shared; and
- creating a positive climate that supports strong, trusting relationships between and among staff, students, and families.

In addition, principal retention is itself associated with greater stability of staffing and achievement in most instances. Thus, the conditions under which principals are supported and enabled to stay in their roles also influence teacher and student outcomes.

Effective Principals Support Strong Instruction, Which Improves Student Learning

Principals play a major role in supporting and helping to improve teachers' instruction by engaging in instructional leadership practices. While different definitions of "instructional leadership" exist, the term typically refers to a set of leadership behaviors that include setting expectations for, monitoring, and assessing instruction, influencing instructional practices, and supporting teachers' professional learning.

Focusing on Instruction

Several meta-analyses covering research over the last 5 decades have identified strong links between principals' instructional leadership practices and improved student outcomes.¹⁶ In particular, student achievement has been found to improve as principals spend time in instructionally focused interactions with teachers: observing, coaching, providing feedback, reviewing data, and developing a cohesive educational program.¹⁷ Large-scale reviews have also found that effective principals lead instruction by redesigning the organization to support improved teaching and learning and investing heavily in staff development.¹⁸

Many studies link high-quality teacher evaluation systems with gains in student performance,¹⁹ particularly when they feature a shared framework for discussing teachers' instructional practices and provide growth-oriented feedback,²⁰ and when they are linked to professional learning.²¹ For example, an intervention designed to support principals' structured feedback to teachers across eight districts had a positive impact on the frequency and quality of that feedback, on the quality of the teachers' classroom practices and, subsequently, on their students' mathematics achievement.²²

Not all evaluation practices have those characteristics, however. Another study found that while principal time spent on teacher coaching, feedback, and developing the school's educational program predicted positive achievement gains, time spent on informal classroom walk-throughs was negatively associated with performance outcomes, particularly when walk-throughs were not viewed by teachers as a strategy to help inform professional development or school improvement.²³

Facilitating Collaboration

Research also points to principal leadership behaviors that go beyond teacher supervision, including building teacher community in support of professional learning²⁴ and enabling shared instructional leadership and shared decision-making.²⁵ As the concept of instructional leadership has developed from a focus on individual leaders to a shared endeavor among leaders and teachers,²⁶ there is growing evidence that principals' effects on teachers' instructional practices come about in large part by virtue of the teacher collaboration that principals help to facilitate.²⁷ When teachers have opportunities to collaborate during the school day, research shows that both teachers and students benefit: Teachers experience lower rates of turnover, and students show improved achievement gains.²⁸

Principals play an important role in creating common planning time for teachers to collaborate and in establishing professional learning communities for instructional teams, both of which are associated with higher achievement growth for students.²⁹ Principals can also structure collaboration in ways that increase its effectiveness, for example by creating protocols for collaboration or supporting effective data use with the goal of improving instruction.³⁰

As part of this shared instructional leadership effort, principals can also ensure that there are productive professional learning opportunities available to teachers that improve instruction.³¹ Professional learning opportunities for teachers that are well aligned to school goals are positively related to greater student achievement growth.³²

A study of Chicago principals in improving schools contrasted with those in schools that were stagnant in achievement found that principals in improving schools built a “culture of shared organizational learning.”³³ The goals that guided organizational learning were linked to the school vision, which helped teachers “understand how their collective efforts [within the school] contribute to the larger purpose.” Leaders of improving schools also set aside time for staff to regularly work together in a focused, productive manner and more frequently shared leadership across their staff than did their colleagues in schools with stagnant scores.

In sum, effective principals help improve instruction by:

- engaging with teachers around instruction: enabling successful practices, observing, coaching, providing feedback, and reviewing data together;
- working with staff to develop a cohesive educational program with shared practices;
- investing in high-quality staff development;
- enabling teacher collaboration for planning and professional learning; and
- developing shared instructional leadership and shared decision-making.

Effective Principals Retain Teachers, Which Improves School Stability and Student Outcomes

Just as support of collaboration and orchestration of a shared vision increase school effectiveness,³⁴ these aspects of leadership are related to teacher retention,³⁵ which in turn further supports school stability and student achievement.³⁶ The ability of effective principals to retain teachers is a function of both their ability to create a strong sense of shared mission and to support the work of teachers individually and collectively.

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Creating Shared Purpose

Many studies find that teachers' job satisfaction and career decisions are shaped by their connectedness to a team working toward a common shared purpose.³⁷ The extent to which educators feel their fellow educators are committed to shared school objectives is positively related to instructional leadership and is negatively related to teachers' intent to leave.³⁸

For example, the most important factors identified in a survey of more than 2,000 current and former California teachers about why they chose to stay were the opportunity to participate in school decision-making and the quality of relationships among the staff.³⁹ Similarly, a study surveying urban teachers in a Midwest city found that relationships with coworkers and collaboration with fellow teachers positively affected their decisions to remain teaching at their school.⁴⁰ As a teacher in the study explained:

[We are] a shared learning community. We are very involved with each other in planning, learning ... lots of team preparation. We all hold the same vision. We believe in our mission and work together to achieve that.

This kind of collaborative environment is supported by distributed leadership throughout the school. One study in a large urban district found that most of the leaders in the schools with low teacher attrition rates did not "view themselves as traditional, omnipotent, 'top-down' administrators."⁴¹ Instead, these principals described their responsibilities as facilitators, collaborators, team leaders, or leaders of leaders. These principals often used leadership teams or site-based management teams to make school-based decisions.

Supporting and Recognizing Teachers

The positive impact on teacher retention of principals who are deemed effective by their teachers and supervisors is even larger in high-need schools.⁴² In one study, principals rated highly on "setting clear expectations, providing support and encouragement, and recognizing staff for a job well done" reduced teacher attrition "enough to offset the turnover differential between disadvantaged schools and other schools, as defined by student demographics."⁴³

Explicitly building leadership capacity among principals can be a high-leverage strategy for achieving greater equity across schools. For example, a study of middle schools in New York City found that improvements in measures of school leadership over time were associated with reductions in teacher turnover.⁴⁴ In that study, leadership encompassed principals' ability to communicate a vision, manage the school, and support teachers with materials, collaboration, feedback, and professional development.

Teachers' perceptions of support from their principals consistently predict their job decisions.⁴⁵ National survey data show that teachers who strongly disagreed that their administration was supportive were more than twice as likely to move schools or leave teaching than those who strongly agreed that their administration was supportive.⁴⁶ For rural teachers, dissatisfaction with the school administration is the most common factor in decisions to leave at far higher rates than suburban teachers.⁴⁷

Research has identified a number of leadership strategies that make a difference in teachers' decisions to stay in their school and the profession. These include:

- creating and maintaining safe, nurturing environments that foster a sense of belonging for both students and staff;⁴⁸
- engaging in caring leadership practices (i.e., practices that are informed by the needs of the individual and motivated by a desire to advance their success and well-being);⁴⁹
- proactively supporting new teachers and committing themselves to the success of teachers at all levels of experience;⁵⁰
- protecting teachers' time and agency in making teaching decisions and buffering teachers from bureaucratic mandates;⁵¹
- creating time for teachers to collaborate with one another to share, plan, and engage in joint work around curriculum and school improvement;⁵² and
- sharing decision-making with teachers.⁵³

Effective Principals Create a Positive Climate, Which Improves Student Belonging, Attendance, and Achievement

As leaders of schools, principals play a key role in shaping the school climate. In their 2021 review of how principals influence school outcomes, Jason Grissom and colleagues identified “building a productive school climate” as one of the most important categories of behavior in which effective principals engage. In a study examining the potential pathways between principal instructional leadership and student achievement growth, researchers found the strongest linkage to be through improvements in school climate, even for schools that started out with strong climates.⁵⁴

According to the National School Climate Center, “School climate is based on patterns of students', parents' and school personnel's experience of school life and reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures.”⁵⁵

Supporting Teacher and Student Well-Being

A positive school climate promotes student and teacher well-being, cultivates a sense of belonging, and supports strong relationships among adults and children. Because children learn best when they feel safe and supported, and their learning is impaired when they are fearful or traumatized, they benefit from supportive, trust-filled environments that enable them to manage stress, enabling regular attendance and stronger learning.⁵⁶

In schools led by highly rated principals, teachers report more positive school climates and stay at higher rates.⁵⁷ A substantial body of research links teachers' reports of positive school climate with lighter emotional exhaustion and improved feelings of personal accomplishment,⁵⁸ and with lower levels of teacher burnout, greater job satisfaction, and lower attrition.⁵⁹

Reviews of research incorporating more than 400 studies have found that a positive school climate improves student attendance, behavioral outcomes, graduation rates, and learning loss overall and reduces the negative effects of poverty on achievement, boosting grades, test scores, and student engagement.⁶⁰ Recent research reinforces the substantial impacts effective principals have on attendance and on reducing chronic absenteeism, with stronger impacts in urban schools that serve concentrations of low-income students.⁶¹

Engaging Families

Family engagement is a critical part of effective principals' efforts, as students' willingness to attend school is associated not only with their relationships with teachers but also with the involvement of their parents or guardians. For example, a survey of secondary students across 106 schools found that rates of student absenteeism were strongly related to student ratings of school climate. Students noted that they especially value school connectedness, parent involvement, relationships with teachers, and the learning environment as crucial markers of school climate.⁶² The principal has strong influence on all of these factors.

Other research has found that school-based practices fostering family engagement are associated with positive attendance outcomes.⁶³ These practices include frequent communication with families, family and community-based activities, parent workshops, and collaborative leadership that involves parents in decision-making. Beyond communicating with parents, schools benefit when principals engage with parents as partners in supporting their children's growth: building trust with families and community members through regular engagement, two-way communication, and shared decision-making; and leveraging community resources so that schools can act as community hubs, tapping into local energy to foster a more supportive learning environment.⁶⁴

Research finds that the establishment of trusting relationships and engagement with families and staff are mutually related to positive school climate, which in turn supports attendance and achievement. Interestingly, in one study, family engagement and collegial leadership practices identified by teachers were also highly correlated.⁶⁵ In particular, higher rates of family engagement were positively related to principals discussing classroom issues with teachers, maintaining definite standards of performance, and looking out for the welfare of faculty members. These supportive behaviors communicate caring and high expectations, thus further contributing to a positive school climate.

In sum, principals enable a positive school climate that supports teacher retention, student attendance, and student achievement by:

- adopting policies and practices that undergird positive teacher–student relationships characterized by warmth, acceptance, and support;
- building a welcoming, inclusive, communicative school culture that builds trust between students, teachers, and families;⁶⁶
- creating structures and expectations for engaging families regularly;⁶⁷
- establishing high expectations for student learning for both teachers and students;⁶⁸ and
- employing democratic school principles such as shared decision-making.⁶⁹

The Importance of Supporting and Retaining Principals

We now know that stable, consistent learning environments, which are greatly influenced by the stability of the principalship itself, matter for both student and teacher outcomes. In general, principal turnover is associated with decreased teacher ratings of school climate⁷⁰ and higher rates of teacher attrition.⁷¹ In one study, the effects of principal turnover on teacher turnover were greatest in high-poverty schools, urban schools, and schools that were already experiencing staffing instability among teachers and former principals.⁷²

In addition, several studies have found that, in the years following a principal's departure, student test scores typically go down,⁷³ both in terms of their overall levels and rates of growth.⁷⁴ The negative effects of principal turnover can last up to 5 years and tend to be larger in high-poverty schools and schools with a history of low student achievement.⁷⁵ The negative effect of principal turnover on student achievement suggests that high levels of churn are disruptive and that principals need time to make meaningful improvements in their school.⁷⁶

In the years following a principal's departure, student test scores typically go down, both in terms of their overall levels and rates of growth.

The Impacts of Principal Turnover

Longitudinal studies conducted in both Texas⁷⁷ and New York City⁷⁸ found that rates of teacher turnover depended both on *why* the outgoing principal left and *who* was hired to replace them. In both of these studies, researchers found that replacing a principal with either an internal hire, such as an assistant principal, or someone with prior administrative expertise seemed to buffer some of the negative impacts of turnover, including teacher turnover and negative impacts on school climates. In contrast, in Texas, principal transfers led to the highest teacher turnover rates, especially in the year prior to a new principal's entry, when the incoming principal had no administrative experience, possibly because teachers received advance notice of their qualifications. Similarly, in New York, principals hired from outside the school led to an increase in teacher turnover and a sharp drop in teachers' assessments of workplace conditions, specifically those related to trust, order, and vision. These effects were not observed when principals were internally promoted.

As with teacher attrition, the magnitude of the achievement dip associated with principal turnover depends in part on the reason for turnover and the characteristics of the incoming principal. When the incoming principal is more experienced or effective, the dip in student scores is less pronounced,⁷⁹ which may mean that it is "the associated loss of leadership skills, relationships, and the like that disrupt student learning," rather than the turnover event itself.⁸⁰

These findings suggest that reducing unnecessary principal turnover is as important as building principal effectiveness. The two are related. As is true for teachers, when principals are more effective, as assessed by their supervisors and teachers, they experience lower rates of turnover than their less effective colleagues.⁸¹ This is likely because they feel more efficacious and better able to handle the many challenges of the job with lower levels of disruption and stress.

Sources of Principal Turnover

Research has found a number of school characteristics associated with principal turnover. Frequent transitions are more common in larger schools⁸² and in schools that serve higher proportions of students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, students who struggle academically, or students who have high rates of disciplinary incidents.⁸³ A variety of working conditions are also correlated with higher rates of principal turnover. Schools in which teachers have lower qualifications;⁸⁴ feel higher levels of stress;⁸⁵ and report less autonomy, weaker relationships, and fewer resources also experience more principal turnover.⁸⁶ Finally, principals who make lower salaries relative to other principals with similar qualifications in the same geographic labor market are more likely to leave for other jobs.⁸⁷

Working conditions also matter, including principals' access to support from the central office; their decision-making authority across a range of issues such as budgeting, teacher hiring, and student discipline; and the nature of accountability policies. Punitive accountability policies that threaten compensation or employment based on measures like student test scores have created disincentives for principals to remain in high-need schools and have influenced principals' mobility decisions.⁸⁸

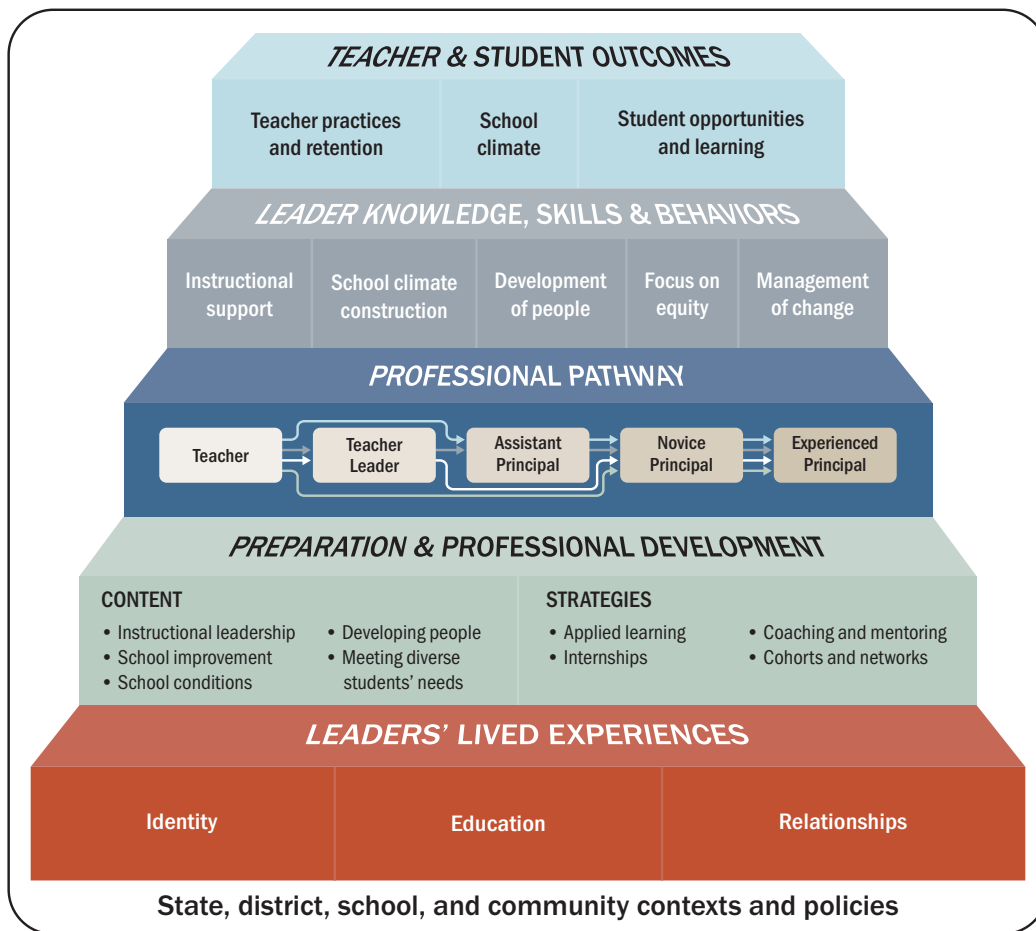
The benefits of stability in the principalship include the fact that, in most cases, principal stability is associated with teacher stability, which is in turn related to student achievement. One study suggested that as principals gain experience within a given school, they become better at hiring teachers who tend to stay in the school for longer durations.⁸⁹ The analysis suggests that principal hiring expertise is at least partially context-specific: When principals transferred to a new school, they continued to make more effective hiring decisions than they did in their first year in the principalship. However, gains in hiring effectiveness were small compared to the gains in retention that accrued to principals who remained within the same school. Unfortunately, the study also found that high rates of principal turnover prevented most principals from acquiring the level of site-specific experience that would allow them to identify teachers who would be a good fit within their school and support them to stay.

What Enables Principal Effectiveness and Retention

Fortunately, we know a great deal about what enables principals to become more effective. As detailed in a recent comprehensive review of the research,⁹⁰ quality learning opportunities in both preservice preparation and ongoing professional development enable principals to develop the practices that make a difference both for student learning and for teacher learning and retention. As shown in [Figure 2](#), principals’ knowledge, skills, and behaviors that influence these outcomes depend on both the content and processes of professional learning.

The content elements include learning how to: lead and support instruction, improve school climate and conditions, develop staff, and meet diverse students’ needs in ways that are culturally responsive and attend to the whole child. As adult learning theory predicts, effective methods of learning build on candidates’ experiences and their current needs and motivations,⁹¹ enabling candidates to apply knowledge in practice through case studies, real-world projects that address problems of practice, and internships. For sitting principals, ongoing professional learning opportunities connected to practice, mentoring and coaching from expert veterans, and opportunities to be part of a cohort or network are also important.

Figure 2. Professional Learning Theory of Action



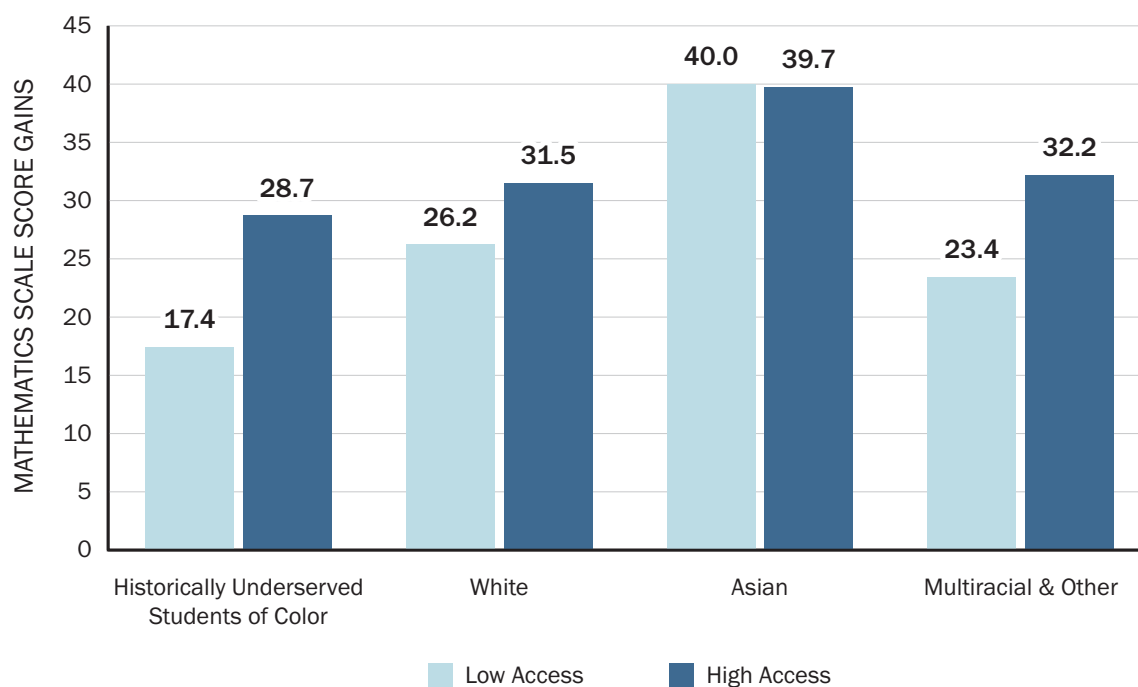
Source: Darling-Hammond, L., Wechsler, M. E., Levin, S., Leung-Gagné, M., & Tozer, S. (2022). *Developing effective principals: What kind of learning matters?* Learning Policy Institute.

Learning That Influences Principal Effectiveness

A large-scale California study illustrated how principals' past learning opportunities influenced teacher retention and student achievement within their schools.⁹² Principals who reported having received high-quality preparation had better teacher retention outcomes than their peers who reported low-quality preparation experiences, even when controlling for other teacher traits and school conditions.⁹³ High-quality preparation includes such things as a quality internship, opportunities for applied learning, and extensive opportunities to learn about leading instruction, shaping a positive school climate, developing people, and meeting the needs of diverse learners. The differences were substantial: The probability of a teacher remaining through the following year in a school served by a well-prepared principal was 89%, whereas the likelihood of remaining in a school served by a poorly prepared principal dropped to 78%.

Student achievement outcomes were predicted by both the quality of a principal's internship during their preparation and by having greater access to professional development across all content areas. The quality of a principal's internship predicted stronger gains in English language arts, whereas greater access to professional development predicted gains in both English language arts and mathematics. Students of color from historically underserved communities experienced the largest gains,⁹⁴ especially if their principal had had substantial access to professional development focused on instructional leadership. (See [Figure 3](#).) The differentials in mathematics learning for historically underserved students who had a principal with little versus extensive training in this area, for example, were equivalent to approximately 4 months of instruction.

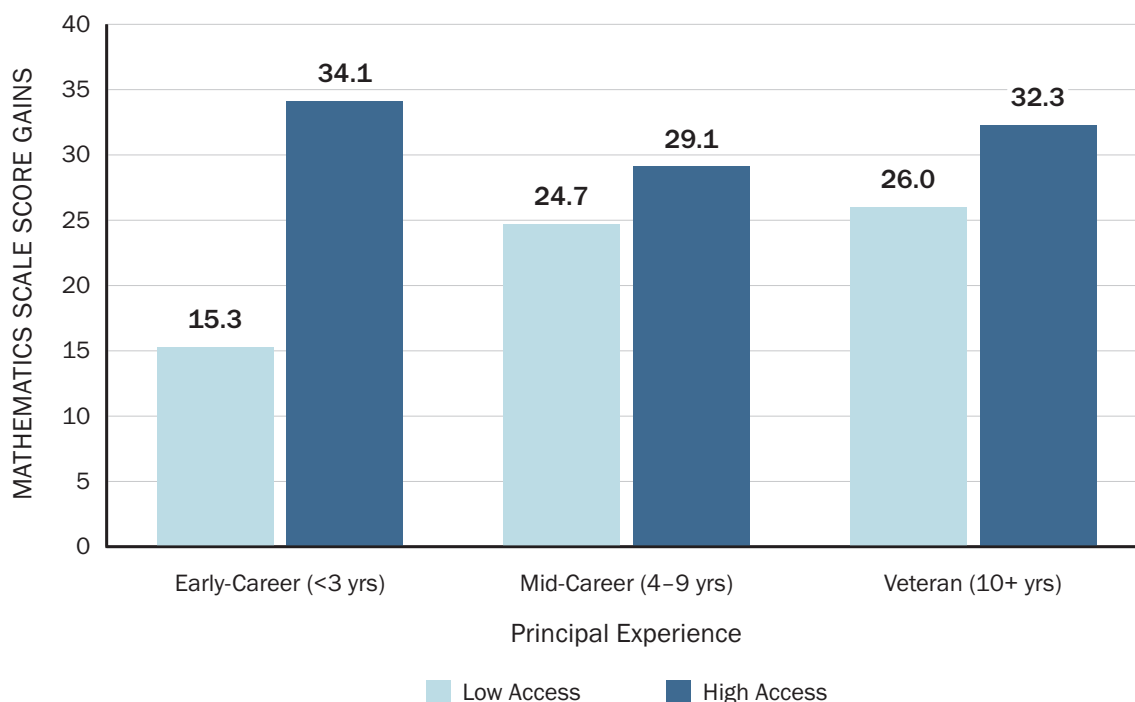
Figure 3. Student Gains in Mathematics, by Race/Ethnicity, for Principals With Differential Access to Professional Development in Instructional Leadership



Source: Campoli, A. K., & Darling-Hammond, L. With Podolsky, A., & Levin, S. (2022). *Principal learning opportunities and school outcomes: Evidence from California*. Learning Policy Institute.

In addition, students in schools led by early-career principals who experienced extensive professional development—including on instructional leadership, teaching diverse learners, and managing change—demonstrated achievement gains in mathematics greater than those in schools led by more senior principals with similar access to professional development.⁹⁵ (See Figure 4.) While this study and other research find that principal experience generally correlates with higher student achievement growth,⁹⁶ these results also show that access to intensive professional development can help close the gap in learning for both new principals and their students.

Figure 4. Student Gains in Mathematics, by Principal Experience, for Principals With Differential Access to Professional Development



Source: Campoli, A. K., & Darling-Hammond, L. With Podolsky, A., & Levin, S. (2022). *Principal learning opportunities and school outcomes: Evidence from California*. Learning Policy Institute.

A number of systemic professional development programs that operate over multiple years with cohorts of principals supported by instruction, networking, and mentoring or coaching have been found to be associated with growth in principal effectiveness as measured by gains in student achievement.⁹⁷

The mentoring or coaching component of these programs appears to be particularly important. In two studies, researchers found that principals who participated in mentoring or coaching programs had higher teacher ratings, greater student achievement outcomes, and stronger practices (e.g., providing feedback to teachers, discussing actions and goals aligned with feedback) than those who did not participate.⁹⁸ In five additional studies, principals reported that mentoring and/or coaching helped them to improve their practice in multiple ways: leading instruction, developing staff, building positive school cultures and

community relationships, managing operations and budgets, and making data-driven decisions.⁹⁹ In two of these studies, principals reported that their mentoring and/or coaching experiences resulted in improved student outcomes.¹⁰⁰

Productive coaching can also be provided by principals' supervisors when they take a "teaching-and-learning approach" rather than a traditional supervisory approach, both one-on-one and in learning communities of other principals. This approach has been found to expand principals' capacity for instructional leadership.¹⁰¹

The importance of high-quality mentoring is also underscored by a study of the University of Washington's Center for Educational Leadership (CEL) program—a 2-year program focused on improving instruction by preparing principals to conduct frequent classroom observations, document what teachers and students did and said, and provide useful feedback to teachers. A multistate, random assignment study of the program found that teachers in schools led by CEL participants had increased access to professional development and increased retention rates. However, researchers found positive effects on principal practice and student achievement only for the subset of CEL participants who were more experienced and who received higher-quality coaching.¹⁰²

The right kinds of experiences before becoming a principal also matter. Highly effective teachers who transition into the principalship tend to promote greater student achievement growth,¹⁰³ as do principals who were previously highly rated as assistant principals or who worked in a high-performing school or under a high-performing principal.¹⁰⁴ All of these career paths allow for the development of skills essential to effectiveness in the principalship.

Learning That Influences Principal Retention

Research has found that principal learning opportunities also affect retention.¹⁰⁵ In particular, principals are more likely to stay in their jobs if they have attended high-quality preparation programs that carefully select and deeply prepare principals for challenging schools, have experienced a strong internship under the wing of an expert principal, and have had access to in-service training, mentoring, and coaching that continue to develop their skills.¹⁰⁶ Studies of several preparation programs with these features—as well as district pipeline programs that have partnered with preparers and continued supports into the early career—have documented their higher retention rates in comparison to those of other new principals.¹⁰⁷

Taken together, all of these studies underscore that principal effectiveness and stability are products not just of individual skill, but of systemic supports and policy designs.

Policy Implications

Tackling the issues facing public schools today—ranging from chronic absenteeism and lagging achievement to staff shortages—requires more than piecemeal approaches to individual problems. Because principals have outsized influence on all of these issues, training and supporting principals so they are best equipped to handle these matters is one of the best investments policymakers can make. Furthermore, because principal turnover undermines both teacher retention and student achievement, addressing it through coherent, evidence-based leadership policies represents one of the most powerful strategies for improving school quality.

Despite this evidence, investments in principal preparation and support remain limited and uneven across states. In addition to providing adequate and equitable resources for schools, research on successful policies¹⁰⁸ suggests that districts, states, and the federal government can accomplish this with the following strategies:

- **Ensure high-quality principal preparation.** To ensure that principals get the kind of preparation that matters for their effectiveness, states can strengthen licensure and program approval standards. These standards, if well designed and enforced, can ensure that principal training includes content focused on critical areas of principal practice (e.g., leading instruction, shaping a positive school culture, developing people, meeting the needs of diverse learners, and managing change). The standards can also reinforce the importance of preparing principals to create culturally responsive, equitable, and collaborative learning environments that support belonging as well as meaningful learning for both students and teachers. States can also use program approval to leverage the types of learning opportunities that matter for effectiveness, such as quality internships, applied learning, and coaching and mentoring—including early-career induction—under the auspices of expert, experienced principals.

All states and Washington, DC, have adopted standards to guide principal licensure, and many have developed new requirements for principals, such as having a valid educator license, having experience in an educational setting, completing a preparation program, and passing an assessment. Among principal licensure assessments, research suggests that performance-based approaches may have stronger validity and less disparate outcomes than paper-and-pencil tests.¹⁰⁹ Only a few states, however, have fully used their standards to guide performance-based approaches to licensing, intensive approaches to preparation program accreditation, or approval that could result in stronger program models. Likewise, only a few states have adopted high-leverage program approval policies, such as requiring clinically rich internships and university–district partnerships.

Cities like Chicago and states like Illinois that have taken on such comprehensive reforms have seen benefits for principal competence, retention, and effectiveness, with student achievement gains documented in schools with better prepared and supported principals.¹¹⁰ However, because few states have undertaken such policy shifts, considerable variability still exists in terms of principals' opportunities for high-quality early-career learning across the country.

- **Create strategies to underwrite the cost of high-quality principal preparation.** One of the reasons many principals do not get high-quality preparation is because of the costs of both tuition and time away from full-time work to engage in a meaningful internship. States can provide funding to cover the cost of high-quality preparation programs, as North Carolina has done with its Principal Fellows program that for many years supported the costs of a master’s degree and yearlong internship under the wing of a veteran principal. Mississippi’s sabbatical leave program offers another model, underwriting teachers’ salaries for a year while they complete an administrative credential, repaid with 5 years of service. Programs like the one at Delta State University work with partner districts who recruit candidates, provide mentors, open their schools to candidates for a full-year internship, and enthusiastically hire program graduates. Other models create paid internships in the context of an assistant principalship or other clinical opportunity, often offered in exchange for a commitment to serve in a high-poverty urban or rural school.¹¹¹

Investments in paid internships or apprenticeships for leadership preparation are critically important: They can enable high-quality candidates to enter school leadership roles with a better-developed skill set but without going into debt. Paid internships also make it feasible for candidates to take the necessary time for intensive clinical placements. Support for clinical partnerships between programs and districts can ensure that internships, along with mentoring opportunities for novice principals and coaching for veterans, become universal and sustainable.

Service scholarship programs have been shown to be effective at recruiting doctors, nurses, and teachers, especially when they underwrite a significant portion of educational costs and are bureaucratically manageable for candidates, districts, and higher education institutions. To support and scale up state efforts, federal funding under Title II of the Higher Education Act (HEA), the Teacher Quality Partnership Grant Program, which supports teacher preparation programs, could be expanded to include school principals. To further support principals’ access to high-quality preparation, the TEACH Grant Program, under Title IV of the HEA, could be expanded to include principals in addition to teachers, covering their costs of preparation in exchange for service.

- **Invest strategically in principals’ professional learning.** Local, state, and national investment in professional learning that focuses on critical content and successful strategies can support principals’ effectiveness and make such learning available in a more equitable way. Districts should establish ongoing professional development that supports principal learning and make it readily accessible by providing staff support to free up principals’ time, offering opportunities at convenient times and locations, and integrating professional learning into the district’s feedback, evaluation, and mentoring systems.

The form and content of professional learning matters: Principals identify their participation in principal networks that work on shared problems, their access to coaching and mentoring, and their opportunities for self-directed learning directly connected to their work as extremely important. Districts and states can be strategic about the content as well as the strategies for professional learning—ensuring that principals have opportunities to learn how to create collegial workplaces that improve teaching effectiveness and teacher retention, as well as how to develop shared leadership approaches that can increase effectiveness by freeing up time for professional learning while retaining teachers and improving their effectiveness.

In addition to using their own funds, states can leverage federal funds provided by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) to support the development of school leaders. States can leverage funds under Titles I and II of ESSA to invest in leadership training for schools that are identified as needing support and intervention, as well as to strengthen both teacher and school leader skills for implementing a wide range of improvements in schools. ESSA permits states to set aside 3% of their Title II formula funds to strengthen the quality of school leaders, including by investing in principal recruitment, preparation, induction, and development. Some states have used these funds to launch and sustain school leadership academies and have invested in other vehicles for ongoing professional learning. Using ESSA funds and state investments, states and districts can ensure principals have coordinated, high-quality, and sustained professional learning.

- **Build robust pipelines of well-prepared, equity-focused school principals and coherent systems of development and succession.** Prior experience as an effective teacher, along with high-quality preparation, induction, coaching, and professional development, all contribute to effectiveness in the principalship. In addition, assistant principals who have had the opportunity to work with an effective principal have a strong on-ramp into the principalship, which then reduces the negative effects of turnover when a principal leaves. When districts structure and manage succession and hiring in an organized way based on professional standards, outcomes are stronger for principal and teacher retention and for student achievement.

Assistant principals who have had the opportunity to work with an effective principal have a strong on-ramp into the principalship, which then reduces the negative effects of turnover when a principal leaves.

Such pipeline programs have proven to be effective for finding teachers with leadership potential and carrying them along a supportive pathway to becoming a principal. Pipelines for qualified leadership candidates start before preparation with targeted recruitment of dynamic, expert teachers who have shown leadership potential, often as mentors or coaches to others. Systematic identification and recruitment processes can attract teachers who have already demonstrated key abilities and who have the potential to contribute to positive school outcomes. Such recruitment also gives schools and districts the opportunity to pick candidates who will meet their local needs and represent historically underserved populations.

Following recruitment, pipelines work with local preparation programs to support initial and ongoing learning for leaders organized around standards that bring a coherent vision to preparation and induction, as well as high-quality shared learning opportunities for veteran leaders. Pipelines help keep strong principals engaged and build local capacity. They not only improve the practice of individuals and create a supply of qualified leaders for school and district positions but also contribute to districtwide practices that support systemic change and increase student learning and equity.¹¹² This includes smooth, planned succession from teaching to assistant principalships to principalships that offer continuity of leadership in schools.

- **Attend to principals' working and learning conditions.** Research shows that principal turnover is exacerbated by principals feeling they have workloads that are too heavy, inadequate decision-making authority, and insufficient support for learning and problem-solving. In order for district leaders to be alert and responsive to principals' needs and concerns, both supportive supervision and strong communication are needed. Some research has found that well-trained principal supervisors can contribute to this role, strengthening principals' capacity to become instructional leaders while engaging in joint problem-solving around site-specific issues with regular week-to-week conferencing.¹¹³

Principal participation in decision-making is also important.¹¹⁴ This means both offering principals enough agency and flexibility on hiring, staff development, and budgeting to lead their schools successfully and engaging principals appropriately in districtwide decisions. Principal input on districtwide issues can be surfaced by surveys, as well as regular principal input solicited on district decisions that impact schools. This responsiveness should include strategies to keep effective principals, such as providing recognition and needed school resources. Many states gather data about working conditions for teachers through working conditions surveys, district and school report cards, and school improvement plans. Gathering this information from principals as well and aggregating it to the district and state levels could help local leaders inform policy decisions. States could also use the data to determine how to target special efforts at the neediest districts and regions.

- **Support adequate and equitable principal compensation.** Compensation levels and stability have both been tied to principal turnover rates. To strengthen continuity in the principalship, state and district leaders should review the competitiveness of salaries and consider other forms of compensation that may be important to attract and retain principals. State leaders can establish or incentivize more competitive principal salaries across and within districts, or strengthen compensation through other vehicles, such as loan forgiveness, housing supports, or salary incentives for working in particular schools or regions. States can also evaluate their funding formulas to ensure that overall school funding is adequate and equitable, targeting additional funds to the neediest districts and schools, which will help districts provide more adequate compensation, especially in the communities where it is most needed.
- **Establish principal stability as a goal, and create productive mechanisms for principal feedback, evaluation, and mentoring.** Given the generally negative effects of principal turnover, and the fact that it is more prevalent—and more damaging—in high-need schools, states and districts could take on reducing principal turnover as a specific policy target. Many principals choose to move schools or exit the profession because job demands outstrip supports. But it is also true that some districts still think that moving principals regularly can be helpful for bringing new ideas to a school, giving a principal a fresh challenge, or fixing low performance—an idea that was encouraged by the No Child Left Behind approach to sanctions.

Evidence suggests that, in most cases, encouraging or allowing principals to leave low-performing schools without giving them sufficient support and allowing sufficient time for productive strategies to take hold is not generally successful. Districts that support, develop, and mentor principals can reduce the likelihood of principal attrition while improving school outcomes. District leaders can examine the usefulness of their principal support and evaluation systems, gathering input from principals as well as others in the district and community, with an eye toward sustaining practices that are helpful in guiding principals' development and supporting their effectiveness.

Conclusion

Developing and supporting strong principals is a critical approach to strengthening schools and tackling many of the problems currently addressed in a piecemeal fashion. Shared accountability for this important shift is needed: Leadership development must become a joint enterprise among states, higher education institutions, districts, and communities. We know a great deal about evidence-based policies and practices that can prepare and retain school leaders who create supportive school environments that engage students, keep teachers, and strengthen teaching and student learning. Making these opportunities readily available to all school leaders can make a measurable difference in student, teacher, and school outcomes—addressing many of today’s most critical issues in a coherent way.

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