

The Principal Effect: How School Leaders Address Education's Biggest Challenges

FACT SHEET

Why do school principals matter for student and teacher success?

Public schools are navigating multiple challenges, including concerns about student mental health, chronic absenteeism, academic achievement, and persistent teacher shortages. These challenges are often addressed in isolation, with separate strategies for each, and overlook a central, high-leverage factor: the school principal. Principals shape the experiences of students, teachers, and families, and a large and growing body of [research](#) shows that investing in strong school leadership is one of the most effective ways to improve student outcomes, strengthen the educator workforce, and advance equity.

How do principals influence education outcomes?

Principals support effective instruction, play a key role in retaining teachers (which strengthens school stability), and create positive environments that welcome and connect staff, students, and families.

How do principals support strong instruction?

A large body of research links principals' instructional leadership to improved student outcomes. Principals strengthen instruction, and consequently student learning, by:

- Engaging directly with teachers through observation, coaching, feedback, and data review
- Working with staff to develop a strong curriculum and shared practices
- Investing in high-quality professional development
- Enabling teacher collaboration for planning and professional learning
- Developing shared instructional leadership and decision-making

How do principals affect teacher retention and school stability?

Teacher turnover, which destabilizes schools and reduces student achievement, is greatly influenced by principals. Teachers who view their principals as supportive and effective are significantly more likely to remain in their schools, and this effect is especially pronounced in high-need schools. Principals improve teacher retention by:

- Developing safe, nurturing environments that support well-being and foster belonging of students and staff
- Supporting teachers at all experience levels with resources and caring
- Protecting teachers' time and agency and reducing external demands
- Fostering teacher collaboration and involvement in decision-making

How do principals shape school climate?

School climate, how students and adults experience their school environment, is a key driver of student success and teacher retention. A positive school climate in which students feel a strong sense of belonging and support improves student attendance, engagement, behavior, graduation rates, and academic achievement. Positive school climates also reduce the negative effects of poverty on achievement. Creating such an environment involves structuring supports for both teachers and students. Principals foster positive school climates by:

- Adopting policies and practices that build strong, supportive teacher–student relationships
- Building a welcoming, inclusive, communicative school culture that builds trust

- Creating structures and expectations for engaging families regularly
- Establishing high expectations for student learning for both teachers and students
- Employing democratic school principles such as shared decision-making

Why does principal retention matter, and what helps principals succeed?

Principal retention is consistently associated with greater teacher stability and student achievement, whereas principal turnover is associated with increased teacher turnover and declines in student achievement. Principal turnover is typically higher in schools that serve concentrations of students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds and schools with fewer resources, less-experienced teachers, limited central office support, and fewer opportunities for principal professional learning, including coaching and networking.

Research has found that quality learning opportunities in both preservice preparation and ongoing professional development enable principals to become more effective and stay in the profession. When principals have access to these supports, they are better equipped to lead instruction, retain teachers, and create strong school communities.

What policy strategies can strengthen school leadership?

Because principals influence all the issues facing public schools today, preparing and supporting principals to be best equipped to handle them is one of the best investments policymakers can make. And, 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, policymakers can:

Ensure high-quality preparation. Strategic use of licensure and program approval standards can help ensure that principal training includes high-quality features and content focused on the critical areas of principal practice.

Fund high-quality preparation pathways. Supporting yearlong internships or apprenticeships, linked to supportive coursework under a veteran principal, can enhance effectiveness and encourage high-quality candidates to enter school leadership.

Invest in ongoing professional learning. Ensuring that principals have plentiful and equitable opportunities to learn how to support instruction and create collegial workplaces can help improve teaching effectiveness and retention.

Build leadership pipelines. Recruiting dynamic teachers with strong teaching and leadership capacity and supporting their preparation, induction, and ongoing learning can enable districts to build coherent systems for leadership development and succession.

Improve working and learning conditions. Using principal input to inform decisions that affect schools and giving them autonomy and voice about resources and learning opportunities can aid retention.

Strengthen compensation. Ensuring competitive and equitable compensation, considering salaries and other forms of compensation such as loan repayment and housing supports, can enhance recruitment and reduce churn in the highest-need districts and schools.

Promote stability and create support systems. Establishing principal retention as a goal and creating supportive systems of principal evaluation, feedback, and mentoring can reduce turnover.

Learn more

For more information, access [The Principal Effect: How Investing in School Leaders Is Key to Solving Education's Challenges](#) report.

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