



Needed: A Long-Term Approach to Principal Recruitment, Development, and Retention

Dr. Trent Kaufman
Dr. Hollie Pettersson

There is strong evidence and little debate about the impact of school leadership in creating effective schools with excellent student outcomes. It has been known for decades that school leadership is second only to teaching as the most influential variable affecting student outcomes. However, while much attention has historically been focused on defining quality instruction—learning what effective teachers do and replicating those actions—much less attention has been given to understanding what effective principals do. For too long, leadership in schools has been viewed much like charisma—some have it, and some do not.

Over the last decade, however, the indispensable actions of principals that have the greatest impact on student learning have been demystified. We now know that leadership skills can be developed and good principals can become great—and, just as important, we know which skills principals should prioritize in order to best improve student outcomes:

“A new wave of research on educational leadership has shown that the quality of leadership can make a substantial difference to the achievement of students, and not just on low-level standardized tests. ... In schools where students achieve well above expected levels, the leadership looks quite different from the leadership in otherwise similar lower-performing schools. In the higher-performing schools it is much more focused on the business of improving learning and teaching.”ⁱ

This new perspective on principal leadership stands in sharp contrast to the traditional principal role, which was primarily focused on the day-to-day operational management of the school. As the Wallace Foundation has observed:

“This shift brings with it dramatic changes in what public education needs from principals. They can no longer function simply as building managers, tasked with adhering to district rules, carrying out regulations and avoiding mistakes. They have to be (or become) leaders of learning who can develop a team delivering effective instruction.”ⁱⁱ

Of course, this is not to suggest that principals should neglect the operational needs of their schools. But it does suggest principals should be focused first and foremost on the quality of classroom instruction and student learning in their schools.

What is Best Practice?

In recent years, the Wallace Foundation has brought the best research on principals together to identify the five most powerful leadership practices that directly impact student learning.ⁱⁱⁱ These practices are intuitive, but illustrate a clear departure from the traditional manager-centered principal role to one much more focused on instructional leadership. In this white paper, we have bucketed these five practices into three overarching categories, as follows:

- **Focused, Coherent Leadership**
 - Shaping a vision of academic success for all students, one based on high standards
 - Cultivating leadership in others so that teachers and other adults assume their parts in realizing the school vision
- **Effective, Student-Centered Instruction**
 - Improving instruction to enable teachers to teach at their best and students to learn to their utmost
- **Inclusive Culture of Collaboration**
 - Creating a climate hospitable to education in order that safety, a cooperative spirit and other foundations of fruitful interaction prevail
 - Managing people, data and processes to foster school improvement

BEST PRACTICE IN ACTION

Within each of these categories, researchers have documented in detail what effective practice looks like. Examples include the principal’s role in ensuring “high standards and rigorous learning goals,”^{iv} a task relegated to individual teachers in decades past; ensuring that schools “allow both adults and children to put learning at the center of their daily activities”^v; and pushing school leaders to shepherd their school’s culture rather than simply be a part of it.

Effective principals develop people by embracing the opportunity to work side-by-side with teachers on a variety of activities, including “developing and aligning curriculum, instructional practices, and assessments; problem solving; and participating in peer observations.”^{vi} Researchers agree principals have the strongest influence on student achievement when they “encourage continual professional learning; ... emphasize research-based strategies to improve teaching and learning and initiate discussions about instructional approaches, both in teams and with individual

teachers; ... [and] pursue these strategies despite the preference of many teachers to be left alone.”^{vii}

How to Scale Success

Now that we know what works for principal leadership, perhaps the most pressing question is how to take advantage of this knowledge to promote effective leadership development at scale. In an important first step, many states have begun work on developing new leadership standards to inform the training and evaluation of new principals. Other large-scale efforts to codify research-based leadership standards, competencies, and best practices—like the PSEL standards, the VAL-ED evaluation system, and the George W. Bush Institute’s *Framework for Principal Talent Management*—have also made valuable contributions to the field.^{viii}

However, scaling up effective principal leadership will require much more than establishing common standards. There are several important topics for state offices of education and associated legislative bodies to carefully consider as they contribute to this effort:

Right Now:

- How can we best equip currently employed principals with the skills and knowledge to make the biggest impact on student learning?
- What kind of training will be most effective, and who is best equipped at funding and providing it?
- What types of accountability systems will make new skills and knowledge stickiest, helping leaders make the knowledge and skills part of their daily practice for years to come?

Next 1 to 5 Years:

- As colleges of education and other mechanisms for principal training align their work to the new standards, how do we ensure they are sharing with one another their successes and missteps?
- What types of induction processes will be most effective in helping new principals have the right type of mentorship and feedback experiences?

- Who are the right providers of this training, given the increased emphasis on vision, talent development, and change management? And are colleges of education the right match?

Ongoing:

- How do we attract the right people to become principals in the first place?
- How do we identify emerging leaders and support their development as principals?
- How do we acknowledge, reward, and retain leaders that are making the biggest difference in student learning?
- How do we address key transformational opportunities highlighted by research—such as principal role descriptions, supervisory approaches, and school structure and governance?

“Effective school leadership depends on support from district and state officials. Except for the most entrepreneurial, principals are unlikely to proceed with a leadership style focused on learning if the district and state are unsupportive, disinterested or pursuing other agendas.”

-Wallace Foundation (2013)

PRIORITIZING LONG-TERM NEEDS

These questions ought to be at the forefront for policymakers who are serious about improving education in their state. Thanks to the Wallace Foundation and the National Conference of State Legislators^{ix}, the goal to improve school leadership will be a focus for many state legislative education committees. However, considering historical legislative trends related to school leadership, it will be vitally important that policymakers take proactive steps to ensure their efforts address long-term educational needs. In the past, well-meaning officials have unfortunately yielded to pressures to

focus only on the short-term, resulting in policies that were both non-transformational and insufficient to produce lasting positive outcomes for students. For example:

- A bill passed in Washington State in 2017 makes professional certification of principals optional, opening the door to principals with unconventional skillsets and backgrounds. However, the bill’s focus is on the immediate need to staff vacant positions (by removing barriers that will make doing so easier), rather than paving the way for a new influx of principals with innovative skillsets and perspectives.
- The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA; 2015) differentiates professional learning for principals from that of teachers, and permits states to use three

percent of Title II Part A funds to develop better systems of support and preparation for principals. However, there is no guarantee that states will evaluate their current practices and strive to adopt evidence-based models for professional learning and coaching. This risks a continuation of programs that are not aligned with the current, research-based understanding of effective principal leadership.

- A bill passed in Illinois in 2010 overhauled the preparation requirements for principals in an effort to address traditional preparation programs that are “woefully out of touch with the realities of what school leaders face on the job in today’s increasingly complex school environment.”^x This resulted in new licensure requirements and significant changes to the experiences of principal candidates. However, in 2014 the Illinois School Leadership Advisory Council (ISLAC) met to formulate a strategic plan to address identified implementation issues related to quality assurance, training for mentors and supervisors, and program cohesion^{xi}, affirming that effective reform of preparation programs also requires legislative oversight to realize the intended benefits.

The momentum of states focusing on school leadership is palpable and exciting. However, there is a clear need to ensure policies prioritize the long-term needs of schools and students in order to create sustained, scalable success. Establishing forward-thinking systems for recruiting, developing, and retaining high-quality principals will deliver the kind of impact legislators and state education offices—not to mention students and their families—are looking for.

Conclusion

Thanks to groundbreaking education research, we know more than we ever have about what makes principals effective. In order to take advantage of this new knowledge, it is critical that state offices of education and legislative bodies leverage this research as they create new policies for improving school leadership. Ultimately, states’ ability to foster impactful principal leadership and thereby drive student achievement will depend on the extent to which they use this research as the foundation for long-term, transformational policies.

About the Authors

Dr. Trent Kaufman is the founder and CEO of Ed Direction. He is the author of numerous articles published in various periodicals, including *Phi Delta Kappan*, *Educational Leadership*, and *Education Week*. He is also the author of two best-selling books on school transformation: *Collaborative School Improvement* (Harvard Ed Press) and *The Transparent Teacher* (Jossey-Bass). A former classroom teacher and school administrator, Dr. Kaufman has worked with hundreds of schools across the country to improve outcomes for tens of thousands of students. He holds a master's degree in organizational leadership from the University of California, Berkeley, and master's and doctoral degrees in policy and performance management from Harvard University.

tkaufman@eddirection.com | 801.456.6767

Dr. Hollie Petterson is a partner at Ed Direction, where she also serves as Education Practice Lead. She has over 23 years of experience as a teacher, school psychologist, administrator, and consultant at the school, district, and state levels. She is also the author of numerous peer-reviewed

articles and instructional media. Dr. Petterson has a PhD in psychology and master's degrees in education leadership and policy and special education from the University of Utah, where she also serves as an adjunct instructor.

hpettersson@eddirection.com | 801.456.6722

Ed Direction is one of the country's most effective school transformation partners. We help schools, districts, and states maximize student achievement by providing personalized support for implementing evidence-based practices.

Our Improvement Coaches offer free strategy sessions to state, district, and school leaders. To request a session, email us or visit our website.

Email us: info@eddirection.com

Visit us online: eddirection.com

Follow us on Twitter: [@ed_dir](https://twitter.com/@ed_dir)

ⁱ Robinson, V. (2011). Student-centered leadership. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, p. 3.

ⁱⁱ Wallace Foundation. (2013). The school principal as leader: Guiding schools to better teaching and learning. Retrieved from <http://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/pages/the-school-principal-as-leader-guiding-schools-to-better-teaching-and-learning.aspx>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Goldring, Ellen; Porter, Andrew C.; Murphy, Joseph; Elliott, Stephen N.; and Xiu Cravens. (2007). Assessing Learning-Centered Leadership: Connections to Research, Professional Standards and Current Practices. Vanderbilt University. p.7-8.

^v Ibid.

^{vi} Portin, Bradley S.; Knapp, Michael S.; Dareff, Scott; Feldman, Sue; Russell, Felice A.; Samuelson, Catherine; and Theresa Ling Yeh. (2009). Leadership for Learning Improvement in Urban Schools. University of Washington. p.55.

^{vii} Louis, Karen Seashore; Leithwood, Kenneth; Wahlstrom, Kyla L.; and Stephen E. Anderson. (2010). Investigating the Links to Improved Student Learning: Final Report of Research Findings. The Wallace Foundation, University of Minnesota and University of Toronto. p.91.

^{viii} Wallace Foundation. (2013). The school principal as leader: Guiding schools to better teaching and learning. Retrieved from <http://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/pages/the-school-principal-as-leader-guiding-schools-to-better-teaching-and-learning.aspx>.

Council of Chief State School Officers. (2017). Professional Standards for Educational Leaders. Retrieved from <https://www.ccsso.org/resource-library/professional-standards-educational-leaders>. George W. Bush Institute. (2016). A Framework for Principal Talent Management. Retrieved from <http://www.bushcenter.org/publications/resources-reports/reports/framework-principal-talent-management.html>.

^{ix} The National Conference of State Legislators. (2014). Effective School Principals: A Lever for School Improvement.

^x National Conference of State Legislatures. (2012). Improving School Leadership Through Legislation. Retrieved from <http://www.ncsl.org/research/education/leadership-chicago.aspx>.

^{xi} Baron, Debra and Alicia Haller. Center for the Study of Education Policy. (2014). Redesigning Principal Preparation and Development for the Next Generation: Lessons from Illinois. Retrieved from: <https://education.illinoisstate.edu/downloads/isl/islac/the-illinois-story.pdf>.