

March 2013

Leading the Future: Rethinking Principal Preparation and Accountability Frameworks

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Abstract

Research shows that 60 percent of the impact a school has on its students' academic achievement directly results from the efforts of teachers and principals. Furthermore, 25 percent of the school's academic achievement depends solely on the principal's actions. This figure underscores the fact that a single person can determine one-fourth of a school's overall impact on students. With nearly half of our nation's schools (48%) failing according to the current standard, and a persistent achievement gap between low-income children of color and their better off counterparts, the time to act is now. In order to address the need for effective principals, President Obama and the U.S. Congress should prioritize school leadership in the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, and should establish a competitive grant program to incentivize states to develop a rigorous evidence based framework of accountability and support for aspiring and new principals.

Introduction

The United States' education system is broken; although some gains in the achievement of the lowest performing subgroups have been achieved in the last couple of decades, the gap between socioeconomic and racial groups is simply unacceptable¹. Research over the last few decades shows that highly effective

educators are generally not working with the populations that need their skills the most.² This inequity in distribution leads to findings like those from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), that show the gap in academic performance between Hispanic and white 8th graders has held steady over the last twenty years.³ This same report shows white 12th graders scored 23 points higher than Hispanic 12th graders in the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), a gap that also remains largely unchanged. Furthermore, research shows the lowest performing schools in this country are largely populated with low-income students of color.⁴ These statistics raise tremendous equity and civil rights concerns; with this knowledge in mind, it is hard to make the argument that poor children of color have the same opportunity to achieve as their higher income peers. With a strong body of research that shows effective teachers and principals are the single most impactful element of any school, it makes sense to focus on ensuring equitable distribution of effective educators across our nation's schools.⁵

With the ballooning national debt and Congresses' inability to agree on a balanced approach on a way forward on a budget, the federal and state governments must find effective, efficient, and fiscally responsible ways of addressing failing schools. Up to this point, federal educa-

tion policy has not prioritized developing an effective workforce of educators. Although school performance is a function of multiple components, recent research has shown certain variables have particularly high leverage. Educational researcher Robert Marzano has shown that 60 percent of the impact a school has on its students' academic achievement is the direct result of efforts by teachers and principals and of that, 25 percent of the school's academic achievement depends solely on the principal's actions.⁶ This means a single person can determine one-fourth of a school's overall impact on students.

Furthermore, research reveals two important points. First, because of the principal's role in hiring teachers and evaluating teachers, guiding professional development, and in developing leadership structures within the school, principal performance is inextricably linked to teacher effectiveness⁷. Second, after four years of effective teaching, the achievement gap among low-income children nearly disappears. This means that in order to address the achievement gap in an effective way, there must be a system level approach that will guarantee that students will have effective teachers year after year. In order to achieve excellent teaching, excellent leadership must be provided. With nearly 50 million public school students, over three million public school teachers, and less than 100,000 school leaders, it is clear

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that the federal and state education policy must focus on bolstering the capacity of the school principal workforce.⁸

Researchers from the Wallace Foundation, after studying 180 schools across nine states, reported “to date we have not found a single case of a school improving its student achievement record in the absence of talented leadership.”⁹ Without addressing principal effectiveness, it is unlikely that current and future policies will lead to long-term improvement of our nation’s schools. Much like the demands for our schools have changed, the demands for principals have changed as well. School leaders are no longer expected to simply be effective managers of people and resources. The increased pressure on systems for all children to meet proficiency standards and to show progress on high stakes testing has caused the role of the principal to expand into instruction.¹⁰ The school reform movement has recognized and embraced this shift as evidenced by Teach For America’s new school leadership initiative, the New Leaders for New Schools Fellowship, and Columbia University’s Summer Principals Academy. These programs are designed specifically to identify and prepare effective principals to enter into this nation’s lowest performing schools. These programs represent worthwhile initiatives, but with nearly half of our nation’s schools (48%) not making adequate yearly progress, the measure for a failing school set by the No Child Left Behind Act, it is simply not enough.¹¹

According to a recent study from the Institute of Education Sciences, only *one* state in the country — Massachusetts — scored at a level of proficiency in math based on 4th and 8th grade NAEP scores. This means 49 out of the 50 states in the country scored at basic or below basic.¹² As if this

was not enough to sound the alarm bells, with these dismal statistics in mind, it is not a large leap to say, we need better principals.

In order to address the need for effective principals, Congress and the Administration should prioritize school leadership in the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act by incentivizing states to revamp their principal licensure procedures and bolster principal preparation programs. Furthermore, the Department of Education should incentivize states to develop a rigorous evidence based framework of accountability and supports for aspiring and new principals. Although improving existing principals is a necessary part of the effort, this paper will look only at how to improve the current pipeline to the principalship.

What makes a good principal?

“It is the work they do that enables teachers to be effective — as it is not just the traits that teachers bring, but their ability to use what they know in a high-functioning organization, that produces student success. And it is the leader who both recruits and retains high quality staff — indeed, the number one reason for teachers’ decisions about whether to stay in a school is the quality of administrative support — and it is the leader who must develop this organization.”
— Linda Darling Hammond¹³

Research shows that effective principals are reinventing the role by looking at school wide systems that prioritize student achievement and teacher effectiveness.¹⁴

The role of the school leader has changed drastically as education has evolved. Before

the giant bureaucracy of public education that exists today, when schools were first growing out of the one room schoolhouse, the school leader was simply the “principal teacher.” In this capacity, the principal simply took on extra duties and made sure that the school opened every day. As schools began to grow in size and complexity, focus on the role of the principal teacher began to shift away from the “teacher” part of the job and more into the management and operations side of the job. Over time, this shift led to the effective elimination of the instructional component of the principal’s job. With the increased attention to high stakes testing and rigorous accountability measures in recent years, principals have seen their role begin to shift back to the role of the instructional leader of the school. Unfortunately, as a result of this profession’s history, current school leaders simply do not have the skillset to handle this shift and preparation programs are not preparing candidates to handle these new responsibilities.

The rush of attention to results, especially in economically disadvantaged areas, has also led to a flurry of research on what effective principals do. As the overarching leader of a school, the principal serves two core functions: provide direction and exercise influence.¹⁵ With the use of these two functions, a principal must do five things¹⁶: provide the school community with a vision of academic success for students; create a climate that is safe, welcoming, and cooperative, and places student success as its top priority; develop those around them by distributing their leadership and thus creating buy in; provide instructional leadership in the form of direct coaching of teachers by instituting systems that support improving teachers’ instructional practice; and set up systems and process to collect and analyze data in order to stimulate school improvement.

The current principal preparation programs are simply not meeting today's needs for principals. Research shows us that the vast majority of principal preparation programs make virtually no mention of the use of data or statistics in managing, much less improving a school.¹⁸

Directing resources at improving the principal workforce is also effective since principals can directly impact the effectiveness of the teachers in the classroom. This can happen in two ways. First, like every job, people are attracted to good bosses. Having good school leaders has shown to be a very effective way of attracting and retaining high performing talent.¹⁷ Second, the principal is uniquely positioned to both directly and indirectly help teachers improve their practice. Through instructional coaching, principals with strong pedagogical skills can support teachers as they improve. Principals can also establish different protocols or learning communities within the school to foster collaboration within the teaching staff. Both of these practices have shown to be necessary to promote effective teachers.

What makes an effective principal preparation program?

The current principal preparation programs are simply not meeting today's needs for principals. Research shows us that the vast majority of principal preparation programs make virtually no mention of the use of data or statistics in managing, much less improving a school.¹⁸ This same research shows that only 11 percent out 56 programs surveyed cover material having to do with issues like curriculum development, instructional practice, classroom management, and learning theory, all important aspects of any classroom. Clearly, schools do not have this need.

Research based on years of work from the Wallace Foundation, New Leaders for New Schools, the Alliance for Excellent Education, and several schools of education across the country has shown what needs to be done to improve principal preparation programs. This research shows that improvements need to be

a combination of better people, better andragogy methods, better support of new principals, better content, and better oversight of the programs.¹⁹ Their recommendations are as follows:

1. "A more selective, probing process for choosing candidates for training is the essential first step in creating a more capable and diverse corps of future principals.
2. Aspiring principals need pre-service training that prepares them to lead improved instruction and school change, not just manage buildings.
3. Districts should do more to exercise their power to raise the quality of principal training, so that graduates better meet their needs.
4. States could make better use of their power to influence the quality of leadership training through standard setting, program accreditation, principal certification and financial support for highly qualified candidates.
5. Especially in their first years on the job, principals need high-quality mentoring and professional development tailored to individual and district needs."

Policy Recommendations

This is complex issue that must be addressed with matching urgency. The issue requires the federal government and the state governments to work together to support change.

As Congress and the Administration look to once again make the United States' education system the best in the world, they should consider the following:

- Create a competitive grant program that supports states, or consortia of states, in developing rigorous, evidence based leadership standards. In order to be eligible for funding, the state or consortium must agree to:

- Use the leadership standards to develop the licensing procedure and evaluation system for principals. This will set a minimum bar across every state that all school leaders must meet.
- Include student performance data in the state's principal evaluation system. The ultimate goal of any school should be to prepare its students to be model citizens and to be ready for the next step — whatever that may be. School leaders must be held directly accountable for the performance of the students they serve.
- Require that every public school principal — traditional or charter — is licensed by the state. Currently, several states like Texas and Colorado do not require charter school principals to be licensed by the state. If states adopt quality licensing procedures, every public school leader in the state should be expected to meet the same bar since, after all, all students are expected to meet the same standard.

- Combine Title II of the Higher Education Act (HEA) into Title II of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) during the next ESEA reauthorization attempt in order to address the entire educator human capital pipeline from one source. In order to create the most effective system, pre-service training and in-school supports must build towards the same goal — guaranteeing student performance. Combining Title II of HEA and Title II of ESEA will make it easier to address this as a continuum. This new title should:

By crafting standards that set a minimum bar that is meaningful and rigorous, improving the quality of the principal preparation pipeline, increasing accountability of principal preparation programs for their results, and providing incentives for talented individuals to enter the school leadership pipeline, the quality of principals in high need schools should improve.

- Ensure that institutions of higher education that receive funding through this Title use an evidence based curriculum;
- Provide loan forgiveness for individuals who enroll in principal preparation programs which states have determined to be high-achieving, in return for a five-year commitment to work at a high-need school;
- Allow states the flexibility to use funds for financial incentives to increase the number of effective principals who serve in high-need schools; and
- Provide states with the option of establishing mentorship programs for new principals who serve in high-need schools.

In this case, the federal government will only be able to create the basic conditions necessary for change. A tremendous amount of power to effect change sits in the hands of state legislators and state education agencies (SEAs). In order to improve principal performance in the neediest schools, state legislatures and SEAs should work at the following:

- Establish, at minimum, a three-year probationary period for newly licensed principals after which they must reapply for their license. In order for the applicant to receive a license during reapplication, they must have demonstrated a record of success over the three years, based on the state designed principal evaluation system.
- Create a formula grant program for local education agencies to provide high quality mentoring for new principals serving in high-need schools, during their first three years of service.
- Tie the accreditation of principal preparation programs to the performance on principal evaluations of

the graduates from the program in the three most recent years.

- Ensure that state accredited principal preparation programs are using an evidence based curriculum that includes a significant amount of time dedicated to clinical practice and mentoring.

Conclusion

By crafting standards that set a minimum bar that is meaningful and rigorous, improving the quality of the principal preparation pipeline, increasing accountability of principal preparation programs for their results, and providing incentives for talented individuals to enter the school leadership pipeline, the quality of principals in high need schools should improve. Based on the research covered in this paper, the proposed steps should create the necessary initial condition to improve those schools that are currently not serving their students.

It is important to recognize that this would only be a first step in creating a framework of high expectations and strong supports to push the principal profession, and improve underperforming schools forward. Part of the long-term goal must be to create a system that allows for comparability across state lines. Like we learned from No Child Left Behind, having different standards in different states makes it challenging to determine the effectiveness of a given state's approach, and can lead to some states developing low standards to appear high-achieving.

Ultimately, it is the role of the Federal and State governments to ensure the well-being of its youngest and most vulnerable population. The American education system must not only work to create an exceptional workforce, but it must also be a tool for social equity and an avenue out of

poverty. In this current time of economic austerity, when the number of children of color living in poverty is at an all time high, it is a moral imperative to make the most meaningful and deliberate investments to improve the country's education system.²⁰ As supported by the research in this paper, principals are an essential element to achieve this goal.

Endnotes

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