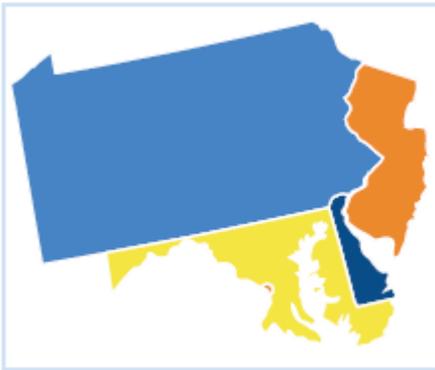


What are effective school leaders, and how can states and districts develop them?



In recent years, the job of the school principal has evolved from administrative oversight to include more complicated responsibilities. Principals today are expected to create collaborative environments for staff, provide effective instructional leadership, make strategic decisions, and ensure academic progress.

Recent research has demonstrated that principals are essential to student achievement—principals’ effects in this area are almost as large as teachers’.ⁱ Given the central importance of school leadership, it’s important to ask what makes for an effective principal.

CHARACTERISTICS OF EFFECTIVE SCHOOL LEADERS

Existing research has consistently identified five behaviors or skills effective principals exhibit:¹

1. Shaping a vision of academic success for all students, based on high standards

Effective school leaders establish and communicate a clear visionⁱ that focuses on high expectations and success for all students—not only those recognized as college bound.ⁱⁱ

2. Creating a climate of cooperation and collaboration, shared responsibility, and safety

Effective principals focus on establishing a high-performing culture and climate by “ensur(ing) that their schools allow both adults and children to put

learning at the center of their daily activities.”ⁱⁱ This culture must include safety, orderliness, responsiveness to students, and a sense of community and pride among staff collaborating to accomplish a greater good.ⁱⁱ

3. Cultivating leadership in others so that school staff embrace their roles in realizing the leader’s vision

Principals need the support of teachers and other team members to ensure their schools and students reach high standards. According to a Wallace Foundation report, “the more willing principals are to spread leadership around,” the more students will learn.

Effective principals recognize and use other resources, delegate responsibility to staff, enhance community and parental involvement, and develop leadership skills in others so they are ultimately surrounded by a community of leaders.ⁱⁱ

¹ Although this summary is based on a number of writings, the characteristics profiled are all pulled from The Wallace Foundation (2013) report.

4. Improving instruction to enable teachers to teach at their best and students to learn to their fullest

Effective principals emphasize continuous learning and growth for both students and teachers. They are up to date on the “*technical core* of schooling—what is required to improve the quality of teaching and learning.”ⁱⁱ They have professional development plans for their teachers. They spend time in classrooms and have frequent constructive interactions—both formal and informal—with teachers.ⁱⁱ

5. Managing people, data, and processes to foster school improvement

Effective principals use a thorough understanding of their schools’ systems and accountability requirements to develop schoolwide plans. Effective principals collect and assess data to monitor progress and inform next steps. Throughout this process, effective principals build a shared understanding and sense of involvement in school improvement. Lastly, effective principals recognize the importance of school staffing, and approach hiring and removal with care and deliberation.ⁱⁱ

MOVING FORWARD

According to the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL), “targeted investments in good principals can be a particularly cost-effective way to improve teaching and learning because principals ensure that excellent teaching and learning spread beyond single classrooms.”ⁱⁱⁱ But as the principal role evolves and school improvement efforts face continued scrutiny, there is a shortage of candidates pursuing principal roles, and those individuals who are pursuing these positions often have inadequate training or professional development.^{iv}

NCSL has identified several opportunities to address the challenges that face current and prospective principals. These recommendations are largely directed at states, though the last two may also apply to districts and charter management organizations (CMOs). The following list outlines these interventions and provides examples.

1. Setting standards

Standards establish the foundation for effective principal preparation by identifying information principals need to

know and things they need to be able to do. Instituting high standards for principals is an important first step to overhauling principal preparation, licensure, mentoring, professional development, and evaluation and ongoing support.ⁱⁱⁱ States might start by examining the [Professional Standards for Educational Leaders](#) (PSEL) produced by the National Policy Board for Educational Administration.^v

Example: In 2011, Oregon passed a bill requiring the State Board of Education to develop and institute core professional standards to improve student academic growth and learning throughout the state. Ultimately, the standards could be used to guide human resources, professional development, and administrative decisions and practices.ⁱⁱⁱ

2. Preparation program design and approval

As traditional principal preparation programs face increasing pressure to develop skills needed for the evolving role, new research has emerged on evidence-based best practices for high-quality training of current and prospective principals.^{vi} States can use these findings to reassess how traditional and alternative preparation programs are evaluated and approved.ⁱⁱⁱ

Example: Illinois strengthened principal preparation by passing a bill in 2010 that required all principal preparation programs to “meet new standards for state approval, with the goal of improving the quality and relevance of the training that principals receive.”^{vii} As a result of the bill, principal preparation programs must display a focus on instruction and student learning.ⁱⁱⁱ With these standards in place, Illinois’ principal preparation programs now emphasize significant collaboration with school districts and ample practical application opportunities.^{vii}

3. Licensure

Requirements for principals’ initial licensure and renewal vary by state, though many states place significant value on years of teaching and degrees. An alternative approach for licensure renewal would be requiring principals to “demonstrat(e) effectiveness in supporting high-quality teachers and improving student outcomes.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Example: When Delaware revamped its principal preparation and development procedures, it used standards to guide all aspects of state education leadership

policy. What resulted was a “coherent approach to training and practice,” where administrator licensing was based on the same set of standards as preparation program approval, continued professional development, and administrator evaluation. The overhaul included a tiered licensing system that provides new principals with three years of mentoring, during which the principals focus on different parts of the standards each year.^{viii}

4. Professional development

Leadership training should continue throughout a principal’s career. The professional development that states, districts, and CMOs provide should be personalized, adaptable to changing needs, and carefully developed to assure alignment to standards, training, licensing requirements, and evaluation.ⁱⁱⁱ

Example: In Mississippi, many principals participate in the School Executive Management Institute (SEMI), a two-year in-service professional development program. A survey conducted by the Wallace Foundation found that Mississippi principals benefit greatly from SEMI training, which includes professional reading, workshops, school visits, and mentoring.^{viii}

5. Evaluation and ongoing support

Providing support and evaluation throughout principals’ careers is a great way to build their capacity and hold them accountable for having positive impacts on students and schools. NCSL suggests several design characteristics of effective principal evaluation programs. States, districts,

and CMOs can “make certain that principal evaluations are designed with direct involvement of principals and other stakeholders; are guided by quality leadership standards; are rigorous, fair and equitable; are educational and provide useful, valuable, and trustworthy data; provide actionable feedback to improve performance; and are connected to a broader human capital management system,” which may, for example, affect hiring, professional development, incentives, and other HR processes.ⁱⁱⁱ

Example: In recent years, New Jersey has focused on “improving implementation of principal evaluation so it becomes a better driver of professional growth for principals.” To do so, the state developed a Principal Practice Instrument that is aligned with the national PSEL.^v New Jersey’s instrument “encourages districts to incorporate self-reflection, authentic evidence of practice, and discussion about practices as part of principal evaluation.”^{ix} The PSEL provides a framework for improving principal performance through evaluation, coaching, and mentoring.^x

ⁱ School Improvement Resource Center. (n.d.). [Effective traits of successful principals](http://www.tcdss.net/uploads/resources/docs/Effective_Traits-Successful_Principals.pdf). Retrieved from http://www.tcdss.net/uploads/resources/docs/Effective_Traits-Successful_Principals.pdf

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

ⁱⁱⁱ Shelton, S., & Welu, M. (2014). [Building a school principal pipeline: Lessons from the field](#). Education Policy Brief. Washington, DC: National Conference of State Legislatures.

^{iv} National Institute for School Leadership. (n.d.). [What the research says: The importance of school leadership and leadership development](#). Washington, DC: Author.

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- ^v National Policy Board for Educational Administration. (2015). [Professional standards for educational leaders](#). Reston, VA: Author.
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- ^{vii} Manna, P. (2015). [Developing excellent school principals to advance teaching and learning: Considerations for state policy](#). Retrieved from <https://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/Documents/Developing-Excellent-School-Principals.pdf>
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- ^{ix} Riley, D.L., & Meredith, J. (2017). [State efforts to strengthen school leadership: Insights from CCSSO action groups](#). Washington, DC: Policy Study Associates.
- ^x Wilson, J. (2015). [National Policy Board for Educational Administration](#) [PowerPoint]. Reston, VA: National Policy Board for Educational Administration.