



Gateways to the Principalsip

State Power to Improve the Quality of School Leaders

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Introduction and summary

The academic success of this nation's students should not be left to chance. Yet when principals are selected to lead schools based on criteria that fail to measure performance or competency that is exactly what is being allowed to happen. Successful schools that provide positive, productive, and vibrant teaching and learning environments do not occur by accident. Instead, the most effective schools are led by principals who are equipped with the skills and possess the attitudes required to be exceptional school leaders.

Research shows that principals account for a quarter of a school's total impact on student learning. But this finding understates the full impact principals have because they play an essential role in hiring and developing teachers who account for the largest share of a school's impact on student learning.¹ While a single effective teacher can have a major impact on a student's achievement, this impact can “fade out” if that child is not taught by similarly effective teachers in subsequent years.² The person best positioned to ensure consecutive years of effective teaching for a child—thus influencing a child's overall academic achievement—is the principal.

For children to succeed, we need all schools to be led by skilled principals who support effective teaching across the entire school.³

The old job of principal as administrative building manager is no longer sufficient to dramatically improve student achievement. The job has evolved into a highly complex and demanding position that requires strong instructional and leadership skills.

The good news is there is a growing research base that clearly defines the dispositions, skills, and knowledge needed for effective school leadership today. The disheartening news is that few educators are being measured against these criteria prior to becoming principals.

States play a critical role in determining who leads our country's schools. Individual states control the two most important levers to ensure the quality

of principals—principal preparation program approval and principal licensure oversight. Yet few states are exerting their authority and efficiently using these two levers to improve educational outcomes for children. Each year thousands of principals across the country are licensed to serve as leaders of schools under antiquated laws that are misaligned to the skills and dispositions that research shows principals need to be effective.

Recognizing that states act as key gatekeepers to improve educational outcomes for children, it is imperative that states take immediate action to guarantee that each and every school is led by a high-quality principal.

In this report we analyze state policies and requirements for principal preparation approval and certification in a sample of 16 states—eight of which are “lagging,” and eight that are “leading” in their efforts to act as gatekeepers to ensure that schools are led by effective leaders. An effort was made to select a large pool of states to reflect a range of practices and policies, as well as to provide variation in the context, for example, geographic representation, student demographics, and population size. (See Box)

Our criteria for state selection

A literature review and interviews with field experts helped identify states that were lagging and leading in policies designed to increase principal effectiveness. We do not suggest, however, that the “lagging” states are the only states with poor policies. Rather, they serve as concrete examples of the pervasive misalignment between state policies and best practices on principal effectiveness. The “lagging” states we include as examples in this report are Indiana, Kansas, Minnesota, New Mexico, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Texas, and Washington.

We also identified “leading” states that are making progress and are heading in the right direction—states such as Illinois where principal preparation programs have been redesigned to adhere to performance-based standards so that by the year 2013 all principals will be approved under new rigorous assessment guidelines. Louisiana, too, is improving and making use of data to connect teachers and principals to student data.

While our “leading” sample states have not comprehensively reformed their entire approach to principal preparation approval and licensure, they nonetheless provide examples of specific component reform from which we can create the more holistic reform needed.

In the “leading” category, we include some of the states that won the first two rounds of Race to the Top federal competitive grant program. RTTT grants were awarded to states that are creating the conditions for education innovation and reform, including preparing, supporting, retaining, and measuring high-quality teachers and leaders. But we also highlight other nonwinner states that have made significant progress in this area. The “leading” states we identified are Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Louisiana, New York, Rhode Island, and Tennessee.

We conclude by providing specific recommendations for states to ensure that they are carrying out their gatekeeper roles to improve principal quality nationwide.

First, it is imperative that states develop a framework on principal effectiveness based on current best practice research that governs both principal preparation approval and licensure. States should only approve principal preparation programs that adhere to this framework and, ultimately, hold them accountable for consistently producing proficient principals who positively impact student achievement.

Second, states should be agnostic about what entities deliver the training and development for aspiring principals. States should be clear about the program elements needed to produce effective principals and open the playing field to a wide range of providers that meet these program requirements and yield effective principals.

When it comes to granting initial principal licensure, states should move away from input-based measures, such as years of teaching and master's degrees, toward performance-based measures that authentically test an individual's skills and competencies that signal readiness to be effective on the job. Ultimately, states should revoke or not renew the licenses of principals who are deemed ineffective.

It is clear that only the combination of highly effective teaching with highly capable school leadership will change outcomes for children in our schools—not one or the other but both.⁴ Given the critical role of principals in advancing student achievement, states must use their authority to improve the quality of principals across our country.

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