



GREAT PRINCIPALS AT SCALE STATE & FEDERAL POLICY BRIEF

SEPTEMBER 2014

New Leaders 

GREAT PRINCIPALS AT SCALE

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THE CHALLENGE

Truly exceptional school leaders can and do succeed in even the most challenging circumstances—but staffing every school with such superheroes is not viable solution. All too often, we find that local policies and practices create barriers that prevent great leaders from thriving. From burdensome mandates unrelated to their most important responsibilities to significant barriers to teacher hiring and development, many principals are hindered by inefficient district practices and requirements. School leader success should be supported by, not in spite of, the local conditions in which school leaders work.

District central offices must foster the supportive working conditions that enable all school leaders—not just the superheroes—to succeed.¹

States and the federal government can help change the way districts support and hold school leaders accountable. Yet too often, state and federal policies do not take school district central offices into account—sometimes bypassing the district entirely.² And while targeted school interventions have proved successful in transforming individual schools over short periods of time, these improvements are not being scaled or sustained in part because of unsupportive local conditions.

To scale and sustain school improvement, states and the federal government must promote and model effective leadership policies and practices at the district level.

DISTRICT CONDITIONS FOR EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP

In June 2014, New Leaders and the George W. Bush Institute's Alliance to Reform Education Leadership (AREL) released a report entitled [Great Principals at Scale: Creating District Conditions that Enable All Principals to Be Effective](#). This brief summarizes the framework presented in the report, and recommends actions that states and the federal government can take to promote district conditions that support effective leadership.

The framework arranges school system conditions into four key strands:

- **Alignment among goals, strategies, structures, and resources** so that the work of every staff member in the district is supporting system-wide goals focused on increasing student achievement.
- **Culture of collective responsibility, balanced autonomy, and continuous learning and improvement** that allows central office and school leaders to work collaboratively towards goals.
- **Effective management and support for principals** with ongoing opportunities for development and feedback—and, most notably, roles and responsibilities that are doable.
- **Systems and policies to effectively manage talent at the school-level**—giving principals the authority and support to appropriately staff teaching and leadership roles in ways that meet school needs.

Regrettably, the experts who helped develop the framework agree that these conditions typically do not exist in most school systems. In particular, a collaborative district culture and authority for principals to staff their schools tend to be missing in many school districts. Creating these conditions will not simply be a matter of enacting new policies and programs—it will require large shifts in organizational culture and operations. Those shifts can be supported by states and the federal government.

PRINCIPALS MATTER

Research shows that principals matter. On average, a principal accounts for 25 percent of a school's total impact on student achievement.³ Highly effective principals put a student's achievement gains two to seven months ahead in a single school year—while weak leaders slow a student's progress by the same amount.⁴ Leadership is particularly critical in low-performing schools, where improvement does not occur without strong leadership.⁵

ABOUT NEW LEADERS

Our experience at New Leaders confirms that strong school leaders can dramatically improve the quality of teaching and raise student achievement not just in a single classroom, but across an entire school. Founded in 2000 by a team of social entrepreneurs, New Leaders is a national nonprofit that develops transformational school leaders and designs effective leadership policies and practices for school systems across the country. We operate our leadership programs in more than 15 districts and over 100 charter schools nationwide. As of 2014, we have developed more than 1,600 leaders, impacting the lives of more than 350,000 students. And, through our state and district engagements and our policy work, we have impacted 13,000 leaders and 7 million students nationwide.

CROSS-CUTTING ACTIONS

States and the federal government must start by recognizing the critical role districts play in supporting leadership, and they must work to engender supportive local conditions by shifting their own culture. The following four overarching actions are important cross-cutting steps to support principal effectiveness:

- **Engage school leaders and central office staff directly in policy development and implementation.** Invite principals and central office staff to share best practices and highlight their needs by including them in discussions during the development, implementation, and revision of policy. While important for all four strands, engaging educators is primarily important when building a culture of collective responsibility, balanced autonomy, and continuous learning and improvement, as outlined in strand two.
- **Establish structures for a principal pipeline with a clear pathway for aspiring leaders.** Be strategic in the recruitment and development of potential principals, including the identification of future leaders and practice-based training.
- **Use the bully pulpit to speak about the importance of great leadership.** Champion the power of the principals and speak loudly, clearly, and regularly about the changes needed to achieve supportive local conditions through high-profile communications and convenings.
- **Find ways to highlight and share models of excellence.** Focusing on successful models will help encourage the adoption of these conditions in more districts.

EFFECTIVE DISTRICTS

To understand how to foster these conditions through state and federal policy, imagine for a moment what a district that implemented these conditions would look like.

The district would have a well-known strategic plan that describes a coherent vision and includes organizational structures and resource allocations—including personnel resources—aligned to the plan. The district would provide key resources to support schools, including curriculum and data aligned to the strategic plan, differentiated implementation support, and systems for monitoring progress towards goals over time.

Central office staff and school leaders would work together in a collaborative culture. The two would consult each other on best practices, school-level decisions, and policy development—taking joint responsibility for student outcomes and school performance. Their coordinated efforts to streamline their interactions would promote the development of innovative improvement strategies.

The district would use research-based principal standards and include student outcomes in a principal's job expectations. Moreover, the district would encourage continuous professional growth for principals through an evaluation and support process that is fair, transparent, rigorous, and aligned to the standards and student outcomes. Principals would receive frequent feedback for growth. Evaluation data, along with other information, would be used to determine which leaders are retained, considered for salary increases, and, where desired, given additional responsibility.

Principals in the district would have the authority to hire, dismiss, or reassign school-based staff and assess teacher performance through a fair, transparent, and rigorous teacher evaluation and support process that is grounded in research-based standards and student outcomes. Finally, the district's human resource systems would enable schools to attract, hire, and retain top-quality candidates at all levels—from teacher to school leader.

These conditions do not exist in many places.

This example is provided to help districts visualize the policies to which they should aspire based on what state and district leaders and researchers agree is critical for system success.

For more examples of effective district conditions, see the "[Conditions for Effective Leadership Framework Rubric](#)."

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

Below is a summary of the actions state or federal leaders can take to operationalize the recommendations described in more detail in this brief. Please note that the actions do not represent an exhaustive list; rather, they reflect the most important ways to bring the recommendations to life. To illustrate these recommendations further, we also provide examples from the field throughout the brief.

STRAND	STATE-LEVEL SUPPORT	FEDERAL-LEVEL SUPPORT
1) Alignment	Increase the timeliness and predictability of state budget processes while providing districts with support in aligning resources to strategic priorities.	Invest in building district capacity to improve key systems by strategically using formula funding and, where available, competitive district funding.
2) Culture	Create a system for supporting and holding districts accountable that is centered on creating conditions for effective leadership.	Shift interactions with states and grantees by moving away from a compliance orientation and toward collaboration.
3) Effective Principal Management and Support	Promote and fund effective principal evaluation, support, and development by sharing models with districts and using principal managers as a key lever.	Refocus federal formula funds on more effective activities for teachers and leaders, including investing in new principal manager models.
4) Systems and Policies to Effectively Manage School Talent	Ensure state personnel laws and policies enable districts and principals to manage human capital effectively, including cultivating a robust pipeline to the principalship.	Incent states and districts to give principals the authority to manage staff effectively, including promoting distributed leadership models.

THE PRINCIPAL AMBASSADOR FELLOWSHIP

Launched by the U.S. Department of Education (the Department) in school year 2013-2014, the Principal Ambassador Fellowship (PAF) program is modeled after the Department's Teacher Ambassador Fellowship (TAF) program. It provides opportunities for excellent principals to engage in policymaking by advising Department staff on a part-time basis from the field. Both sides benefit: the Department gains the critical perspective of school leaders when devising new policies and implementing programs and participants gain a deeper understanding of federal education policy that enables them to contribute solutions at all levels of the education system.

LEAD CONNECTICUT FELLOWSHIP

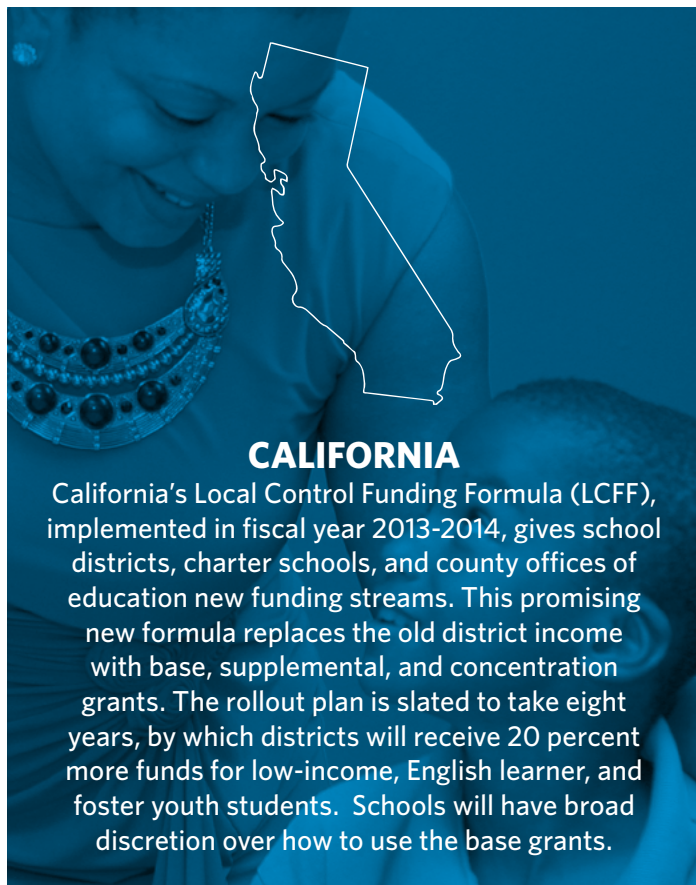
The Connecticut State Department of Education brought together a diverse cohort of some of its best principals and district leaders to participate in a policy and practice fellowship. The fellowship culminated with an opportunity for the fellows to share recommendations with the Commissioner of Education in the summer of 2014. The state plans to continue engaging these leaders over the next school year. As they continue to hone their policy knowledge, they contribute their expertise to state policies and initiatives.

STRAND 1: ALIGNMENT

The first strand that effective school systems have in place is **alignment among goals, strategies, structures, and resources**, so that the work of every staff member is supporting system-wide goals focused on increasing student achievement. When a school system has these components and a system for monitoring progress, principals can actualize the plan at the school level.

STATE-LEVEL SUPPORT

Increase the timeliness and predictability of state budget processes while providing districts with support in aligning resources to strategic priorities. Focus categorical funding streams on incentivizing districts to invest in high-leverage activities aligned with the districts' strategic goals. Instead of requiring strict adherence to funding formulas and mechanisms that dictate school-level staffing configurations, states can give districts and school leaders more flexibility. This flexibility would help districts encourage school leaders to use innovative staffing methods while also freeing up money previously tied to specific materials, positions, or activities that were misaligned with the school's strategic priorities. Additionally, transparency and timeliness in providing districts with budget information can enhance districts' and schools' abilities to plan, including attracting and hiring effective staff.⁶



CALIFORNIA

California's Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF), implemented in fiscal year 2013-2014, gives school districts, charter schools, and county offices of education new funding streams. This promising new formula replaces the old district income with base, supplemental, and concentration grants. The rollout plan is slated to take eight years, by which districts will receive 20 percent more funds for low-income, English learner, and foster youth students. Schools will have broad discretion over how to use the base grants.

FEDERAL-LEVEL SUPPORT

Invest in building district capacity to improve key systems by strategically using formula funding and, where available, competitive district funding. Encourage districts to think comprehensively about their use of federal, state, and local resources. Allow more districts to conceptually consolidate funding streams (i.e., conceptually—not literally—pool funding to use in an integrated manner) and report on how they are aligning and leveraging those resources to meet strategic goals and, ultimately, improve student outcomes.⁷ Additionally, the federal government can incent more districts to change their practices by rethinking how formula and competitive funds flow. Consider creating a new competitive grant for states or districts that want to establish conditions for effective leadership. Amend Title II-A of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) to shift a portion of formula funding to national activities funding for competitive grants to states, districts, and their partners. The competitive grants can be used to build district capacity to improve human resources and other district-level systems. Finally, use performance-based funding to drive additional resources to and expand the reach of grantees with strong results while not renewing funding to grantees with poor results.

STRAND 2: CULTURE

The second strand that effective school systems have in place is a **culture of collective responsibility, balanced autonomy, and continuous learning and improvement**. Principals are more successful when there is a district-wide culture of joint responsibility for achieving shared student outcome goals. The cross-cutting action noted above—engaging school leaders and central office staff directly in policy development and implementation—is critical for all four strands but particularly important for building a strong culture. Experts called out this condition—and the corresponding changes in how districts operate—as the most important one.

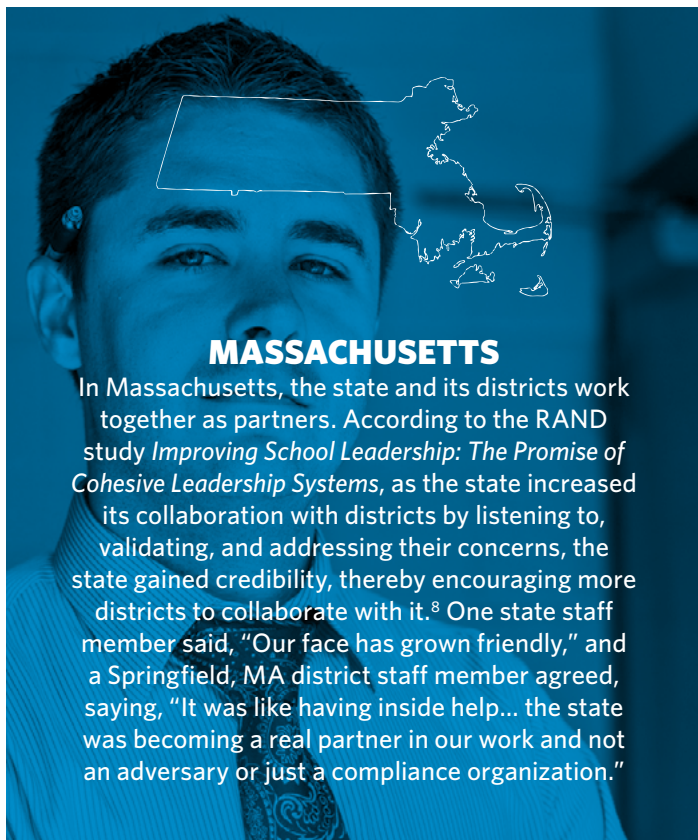
STATE-LEVEL SUPPORT

Create a system for supporting and holding districts accountable that is centered on creating conditions for effective leadership. States can model the relationship they hope to foster between districts and schools by providing that same collaborative support and accountability to their districts. Invest districts in this culture of collaboration by working with them to meet state requirements while remaining flexible and focused on outcomes. Use a differentiated approach: reward and empower districts that are setting the right conditions for school leaders by right-sizing state oversight and giving space for innovation. Provide more intensive support to districts with less capacity and low student growth and outcomes. Finally, be open to ongoing conversations to both uncover disconnects in how policies are being interpreted and implemented by districts as well as ideas for continuous improvement at the state level.

FEDERAL-LEVEL SUPPORT

Shift interactions with states and grantees by moving away from a compliance orientation and toward collaboration.

For instance, new monitoring protocols for ESEA flexibility focused on balanced autonomy and continuous improvement could remove the “toe the line” mindset and improve collaboration between the U.S. Department of Education (the Department) and individual states. During grant monitoring, boost grantees’ success by pairing accountability with tailored supports and technical assistance rather than simply running through compliance checks. To be sure, the Department must make certain that taxpayer dollars are spent well by using compliance checks to prevent fraud and abuse. At the same time, Department staff can achieve this end while shifting their interactions with states and grantees to be more collaborative and focused on overall goals. Finally, allow states and districts to draft consolidated and comprehensive plans for their use of federal funds—and, where applicable, state and district resources—to support them in tackling their challenges more strategically. Cross-cutting, high-quality plans for increasing teacher and leader effectiveness and student achievement could inform future ESEA reauthorizations, as well, thereby giving schools, districts, and states more flexibility in achieving a more rigorous set of outcomes.



MASSACHUSETTS

In Massachusetts, the state and its districts work together as partners. According to the RAND study *Improving School Leadership: The Promise of Cohesive Leadership Systems*, as the state increased its collaboration with districts by listening to, validating, and addressing their concerns, the state gained credibility, thereby encouraging more districts to collaborate with it.⁸ One state staff member said, “Our face has grown friendly,” and a Springfield, MA district staff member agreed, saying, “It was like having inside help... the state was becoming a real partner in our work and not an adversary or just a compliance organization.”

STRAND 3: EFFECTIVE PRINCIPAL MANAGEMENT AND SUPPORT

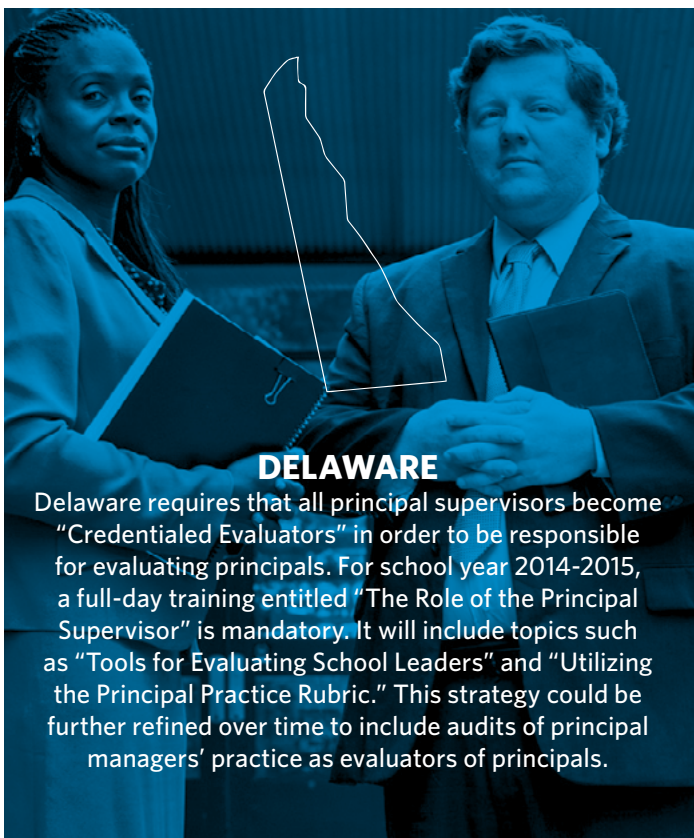
The third strand that supports school leadership is **effective management and support for principals**, including roles and responsibilities that are feasible and continuous opportunities for principals to grow and receive feedback. Districts can develop, support, motivate, and retain high-quality leadership talent by establishing a system in which principals' ongoing learning and improvement is supported by principal managers.

STATE-LEVEL SUPPORT

Promote and fund effective principal evaluation, support, and development by sharing models with districts and using principal managers as a key lever. Principal evaluation and support systems should be based on clear, evidence-based standards with multiple sources of evidence related to principal actions, teacher effectiveness, and student learning. In designing these systems, states should consult both principals and experts in the field, and should adapt the systems over time as they learn from experience. In implementing them, states must monitor and support districts, providing training for evaluators, guidance about appropriate manager-to-staff ratios, and necessary resources. States must fund principal development needs identified through evaluation as a key part of any major reform, leveraging ESEA Title II-A funding to help cover costs. Finally, states can redefine the principal manager role into one focused explicitly on improving principals' instructional leadership, culture building, and talent management by providing collaborative support directly to principals. States should ensure that these managers are provided with training on principal evaluation and support systems and that districts are able to appropriately fund these important positions.⁹

FEDERAL-LEVEL SUPPORT

Refocus federal formula funds on more effective activities for teachers and leaders, including investing in new principal manager models. In order to improve principal effectiveness, funding and data must be strategically employed. To start with, set aside a portion of the state-level reservation in ESEA Title II-A specifically for principal effectiveness activities. Increase the state-level reservation of Title II-A funds and set aside at least half for activities focused specifically on school leadership, including pipeline development, pre-service preparation, evaluation and management, in-service support, and retention and rewards. Additionally, as part of ESEA Title II-A reporting, collect important school leadership data, including retention of principals rated as effective, ratios of principal managers to principals, and principals' authority to hire and manage staff. Furthermore, invest in new principal manager models, providing training and support supplemented with a feasible workload. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation recommends a [formula](#) for the appropriate caseload for principal managers, which warns against encumbering them with too many principals to oversee.



DELAWARE

Delaware requires that all principal supervisors become "Credentialed Evaluators" in order to be responsible for evaluating principals. For school year 2014-2015, a full-day training entitled "The Role of the Principal Supervisor" is mandatory. It will include topics such as "Tools for Evaluating School Leaders" and "Utilizing the Principal Practice Rubric." This strategy could be further refined over time to include audits of principal managers' practice as evaluators of principals.

STRAND 4: SYSTEMS AND POLICIES TO MANAGE SCHOOL TALENT

The fourth and final strand that supports school leadership is **systems and policies to effectively manage talent at the school level**. With these in place, principals have the authority and support to appropriately staff teaching and leadership roles in ways that meet school needs. Our experts noted that a principal's authority to staff a school was the condition most often missing at the local level.

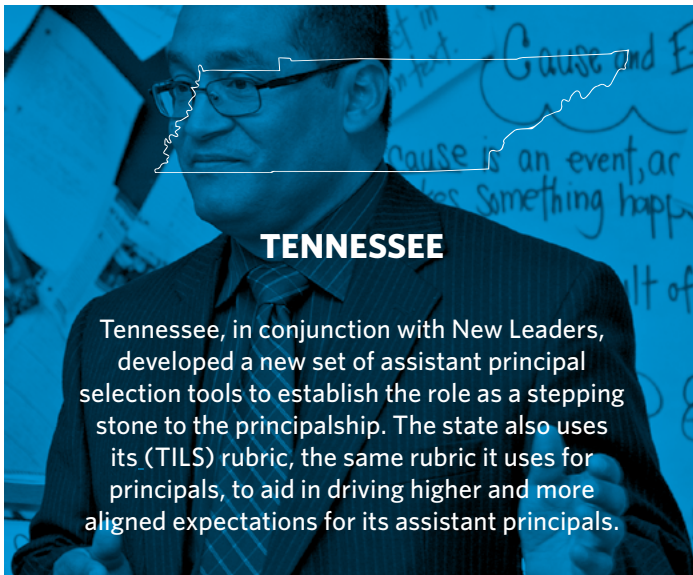
STATE-LEVEL SUPPORT

Ensure state personnel laws and policies enable districts and principals to manage human capital effectively, including cultivating a robust pipeline to the principalship.

States can eliminate policy barriers to distributing leadership roles across a team that includes assistant principals and teacher leaders. For example, states can develop model collective bargaining language for local leaders to consider that removes barriers to teachers observing and providing feedback to their peers.¹⁰ For better implementation of teacher evaluations and support systems, states can create and share resources and tools, such as protocols and video libraries of great teacher practices. Additionally, states can support districts in being explicit and strategic in the recruitment and development of assistant principals, teacher leaders, and leaders from other fields with past teaching experience. While states should refrain from creating additional levels of required licensure (e.g., for teachers leaders), states can develop selection, evaluation, and support tools and professional development programs specifically for teacher leaders and assistant principals. This distributed leadership model promotes sharing leadership responsibilities while also providing career ladders for effective educators that include hands-on leadership practice.

FEDERAL-LEVEL SUPPORT

Incent states and districts to give principals the authority to manage staff effectively, including promoting distributed leadership models. Invest in innovative states and districts that plan to align human capital policies to effective principal practice, funding grantees that remove barriers to principals' staffing authority, develop model job descriptions for positions on a school's leadership team (such as teacher leaders and assistant principals), or create competency-based selection tools. One example of such a program is the Teacher Incentive Fund (TIF), which funds the development and implementation of performance-based human capital management systems in high-need schools. Additionally, the Department can provide technical assistance and access to tools and resources that make it easier for principals to evaluate and support teachers and for principal managers to evaluate and support principals. Host sessions with states and districts on structuring the teacher leader and assistant principal roles to support the principal in conducting teacher evaluations and other instructional leadership activities.



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- 6 For more information on using funds flexibly across federal programs, see: [ESEA flexibility parameters](#). For information on flexible school-level staffing configurations, see the [National School Administration Manager Innovation Project \(SAM\)](#).
- 7 For more information on consolidating funds, see [Title 1 2008 Guidance](#) (p. 51).
- 8 Augustine, C. H., Gonzalez, G., Ikemoto, G. S., Russell, J., Zellman, G. L., Constant, L., & Dembosky, J. W. (2009). *Improving school leadership: The promise of cohesive leadership systems*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation. Retrieved from <http://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/school-leadership/key-research/Pages/The-Promise-of-Cohesive-Leadership-Systems.aspx>
- 9 For more information on principal evaluation and support, see New Leaders *Principal evaluation handbook*, which includes a [rubric](#) and the University of Washington's Center on Education Leadership's *Principal support framework*. For more information on principal managers, see McKinsey & Company's *Capturing the leadership premium* and the *Wallace Foundation's Rethinking leadership: The changing role of principal supervisors*.
- 10 For an example of model collective bargaining language, see [Massachusetts' model educator evaluation system](#). For an example of a contract database, see [ConnCan's administrator contract database](#).