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School Leadership

A PRIMER FOR POLICYMAKERS



**EDUCATION
COMMISSION
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DEVEN SCOTT

Why Does School Leadership Matter?

Strong leadership is invaluable to any organization. Effective leaders recruit and develop talent, promote organizational growth, influence change and create positive culture. Extensive research shows this holds true in our nation's schools. Teachers identify principal leadership as one of the most important determinants — more than compensation — in their decisions to stay in a school or the profession.¹ Even more telling, school leadership is found to have one of the greatest influences on student outcomes — second only to classroom instruction — among school-level factors.² Effective principals and other school leaders are critical for fostering strong working and learning environments for teachers and their students.

“Principals, through their actions, can be powerful multipliers of effective teaching and leadership practices in schools. And those practices can contribute much to the success of the nation’s students.”³

What Role Does an Effective School Leader Play?

While teachers directly influence students in their classrooms, principals impact all of the students in their school buildings. Today's building-level leaders are much more than administrative officers or disciplinarians. Among other influences, an effective principal:

- Shapes a vision of academic success for all students.
- Improves instruction.
- Creates a climate hospitable to education.
- Manages people, data and processes to foster school improvement.⁴
- Cultivates leadership in others.

Because principals are key to teacher and student success, it is important for states to develop policies that support them throughout their careers — from preparation to evaluation and ongoing support. By first adopting strong school leadership standards and further aligning policies with these standards, states can help ensure effective principals lead more schools — and the teachers and students within those schools.

How Can States Help Ensure Schools Have Effective Leaders?

School Leadership Standards

Research shows that setting standards that articulate clear expectations of school leaders is essential to building a strong principal pipeline.⁵ All 50 states, plus the District of Columbia, developed school leadership standards, though the standards and level of policy integration vary from one state to the next. To help guide states, the Council of Chief State School Officers and the National Policy Board for Education Administration developed model standards and offer recommendations for implementing them across policies and practices. Known as the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders, they emphasize the capabilities of a principal as an instructional leader and link competencies to student learning.⁶ In considering ways to strengthen their school leadership standards, state leaders can look at adopting or adapting these nationally recognized standards.

ADDITIONAL STATE POLICY CONSIDERATIONS:

- Review current school leadership standards and engage principals, teachers and district administrators to ensure they align with local needs.
- Ensure school leadership standards are incorporated across state policies affecting principals throughout their careers.

New York is among the handful of states that have fully adopted the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders to guide its policies. This was the first step of a larger effort, the Principal Preparation Project, a state-led project to strengthen the quality of school leadership throughout the state.⁷

Recruitment Policies

Districts throughout the country continue to experience high principal turnover.⁸ Research shows that frequent changes in school leadership result in lower teacher retention and lower student achievement gains.⁹ States can play a role in creating strong recruitment and retention policies that are foundational to building an effective principal pipeline. States can consider comprehensive and/or targeted — such as rural or high-need schools — areas of support to mitigate principal shortages.

ADDITIONAL STATE POLICY CONSIDERATIONS:

- Provide resources to the state education agency — or directly to districts — to offer professional learning services for promising leaders, including assistant principals and teacher leaders.
- Develop and support statewide longitudinal data systems to track vacancies, retention rates and other key metrics.
- Develop programs to offer incentives to effective principals to lead high-need schools.
- Facilitate partnerships between preparation program providers and school districts to recruit aspiring principals.

Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools in **North Carolina** developed a data-driven Leader Identifier Tool to help identify potential candidates for leadership positions based on qualifications, experiences and background.¹⁰

Maryland's Promising Principals Academy is an intensive professional learning experience for assistant principals, central office staff and teacher leaders who are identified by their superintendent as showing strong leadership potential.¹¹

Preparation Design and Program Approval Policies

High-quality training and preparation are key to ensuring principals are prepared for success on day one and throughout their professional careers.¹² In considering ways to strengthen leadership training, state entities charged with preparation program approval can establish requirements for high-quality preparation and standards alignment.

ADDITIONAL STATE POLICY CONSIDERATIONS:

- Consider adopting or adapting the National Educational Leadership Preparation standards.¹³
- Encourage program providers to partner with local school districts to better equip aspiring principals to meet local needs.
- Ensure program providers deliver candidates a high-quality field experience that offers exposure to multiple sites and sufficient time in the field.
- Ensure program providers have data-driven accountability measures in place to allow for feedback for program improvement.
- Allow flexibility for program providers to adapt to changing local needs.

Illinois revamped its principal preparation policies to strengthen coursework, field experience, mentorship and district partnership requirements with the goal of ensuring every principal is prepared to succeed as an instructional leader.¹⁴

Georgia developed a two-tiered system of educational leadership preparation programs. Tier 1 programs prepare candidates to serve in leadership positions below principal (such as assistant principal); and must align with adopted Georgia Leadership Standards, establish a partnership with a school district, offer a clinical experience and provide a candidate support team. Tier II advanced programs must also include an extended residency component and have more rigorous performance expectations.¹⁵

Certification and Licensure Policies

All 50 states, plus the District of Columbia, established requirements for principal certification and licensure, which often include minimum education level, preparation, teaching experience and assessments. While states differ in the types of training and skills necessary for certification, many require principals to have a master’s degree and at least three years of school-related experience. In considering ways to strengthen certification and licensure policies, states can look to develop tiered, performance-based systems that align with adopted standards.

Curious what policies your state has regarding school leader certification and preparation programs?

This **50-State Comparison** reviews these requirements across eight key data points.

ADDITIONAL STATE POLICY CONSIDERATIONS:

- Review policies to ensure candidates possess appropriate education and experience requirements.
- Develop performance-based assessments that evaluate a candidate’s ability to address adopted standards and real-world conditions.
- Partner with districts to support mentorship or induction programs as part of certification or licensure requirements.
- Provide a route to certification for candidates with nontraditional backgrounds.

Massachusetts developed its own evaluation tool, the Performance Assessment for Leaders, that closely aligns with state-adopted Professional Standards for Administrative Leadership and comprises performance-based tasks rather than traditional, pencil-and-paper exams.¹⁶

California developed a two-tiered credentialing system for school principals. In order to advance to the Administrative Services Clear Credential, principals must work in a full-time administrative position for at least two years, earn a Preliminary Administrative Services Credential and complete an approved induction program.¹⁷

Mentoring, Induction and Professional Development Policies

High-quality professional learning opportunities provide current and aspiring principals with the training, knowledge and skills required for career success and advancement. States can support a variety of professional development, mentoring and induction offerings for novice and experienced school leaders — including coaching, professional learning communities, workshops, conferences, courses and web-based coursework and training.

ADDITIONAL STATE POLICY CONSIDERATIONS:

- Ensure new principals receive high-quality induction and mentoring support.
- Offer direct professional learning opportunities through the state education agency.
- Provide resources to support districts in local professional development programs.
- Embed professional learning opportunities in licensure renewal requirements.
- Target certain school leaders, such as turnaround principals, and provide specialized professional development programs.

The **Tennessee** Department of Education offers high-quality, professional learning opportunities to principals through its Academy for School Leaders and requires administrators to obtain TASL credits each year.¹⁸ The state also plans to increase development opportunities for rural school leaders by creating a professional network for principals in selected rural schools to attend training programs.¹⁹

To increase the number of effective leaders in high-need schools, the **Utah** legislature created the School Leadership Development Program.²⁰ This training is aligned with the Utah Educational Leadership Standards and includes skills-building in data-driven decision-making, evidence-based practices and other school improvement strategies.

Evaluation and Ongoing Support Policies

Principals and other school leaders have opportunities to reflect, develop and grow through evaluation systems and targeted supports. By creating an evaluation system that emphasizes instructional leadership and is aligned to school leadership standards, states can provide a robust framework for districts to use in implementation and in ongoing targeted supports to principals.

ADDITIONAL STATE POLICY CONSIDERATIONS:

- Provide resources and guidance to districts on evaluation and support systems.
- Support the training of principal supervisors to ensure evaluation and support systems are effectively implemented.
- Continue to consult with district leaders and collaborate on ways to better the system.

The **Kentucky** Department of Education is developing a state framework for The Kentucky Professional Growth and Effectiveness System for Principals that districts may choose to implement.²¹ The framework is grounded in the adopted Principal Performance Standards and will include opportunities for supervisors to work with each principal on an annual professional growth plan through both site visits and formal reviews.

The **Delaware** Department of Education provides guiding documents and training for evaluating principals under its statewide Delaware Performance Appraisal System II.²² Prior to performing an evaluation, principal supervisors must complete foundational training in DPAS-II and pass a credentialing assessment.

Questions to Consider

States play a pivotal role in partnering with districts to support school leaders throughout their careers. To create a comprehensive, standards-based approach that prepares, supports and develops school leaders, state leaders can consider the following:

- Do current state policies align with adopted school leadership standards?
- Do current state policies support principals and other school leaders throughout the career continuum?
- In what ways does the state education agency support district implementation of school leadership policies?
- How can data systems better inform school leadership policies and practices?

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AUTHOR

Deven Scott is a policy researcher and state relations associate at Education Commission of the States. She earned a bachelor's degree in political science and history and a master's degree in public administration, both from the University of South Dakota. In her spare time, she can be found hiking, watching true crime documentaries or cheering on the Minnesota Vikings. Contact Deven at dscott@ecs.org or **303.299.3622**.

ENDNOTES

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Education Commission of the States | 700 Broadway Suite 810 Denver, CO 80203

