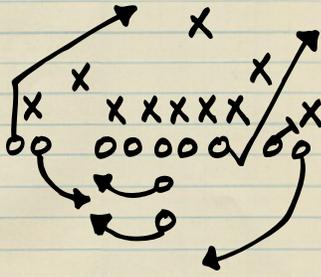


PLAYMAKERS: HOW GREAT PRINCIPALS BUILD AND LEAD GREAT TEAMS OF TEACHERS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

NOVEMBER 2012

New Leaders 



Great principals dramatically improve student achievement by developing teachers, managing talent, and creating a great place to work.

While ineffective principals drag down the performance of their schools, effective principals enable effective teaching, at scale, across the whole school.

LEADERSHIP ON THE FIELD: THE DIFFERENCE A PRINCIPAL CAN MAKE

On leadership—

“It’s getting the best out of people.”

Tom Landry, legendary coach of the Dallas Cowboys

Iconic coaches are remembered for their ability to take talented individuals and bring them together into a well-oiled team with relentless drive to succeed. Don Shula demanded perfection, Vince Lombardi exemplified determination and Tom Landry stayed flexible. Great coaches invest time and resources in training the talent on the team, make smart choices about where and when to play their skill-players and instill a drive to win. You can’t have a championship team without a gifted coach because teams need leaders.

So do schools.

It is not surprising that a decade of research supports principals’ critical role in shaping the quality of teaching and learning at the school level. On average, a principal accounts for 25 percent of a school’s total impact on student achievement—significant for a single individual.¹ A 2012 study found that principals have a stronger effect on all students in a school than teachers do because teachers affect only their students.² While ineffective principals drag down the performance of their schools, effective principals enable effective teaching, at scale, across the whole school.

Indeed, the difference between an average and an above-average principal can impact student achievement by as much as 20 percentage points.³ This is because effective school leaders play a significant role in improving student achievement by strategically and effectively managing teaching and learning at the school level each and every day, and along the continuum of learning from year to year—impacting student learning beyond the scope of even the most effective teachers.

Recruiting, developing and retaining great principals is one of the highest-impact plays we can make to ensure all kids get a high-quality education in every classroom every year.

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- 1 Leithwood, K., Louis, K. S., Anderson, S., & Wahlstrom, K. (2004). *How Leadership Influences Student Learning*. New York, NY: Wallace Foundation; Marzano, R.J., Waters, T., & McNulty, B. (2005). *School leadership that works: From research to results*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
 - 2 Branch, G., Hanushek, E. A., & Rivkin, S. G. (2012). *Estimating the effect of leaders on public sector productivity: The case of school principals* (pp. 45). Washington, D.C.: National Center for Analysis of Longitudinal Data in Education.
 - 3 Based on a 2005 study by McREL that analyzed 70 different studies from over three decades of research.

THE PLAYBOOK: HOW GREAT PRINCIPALS MAXIMIZE TEAM PERFORMANCE

This research study identifies the actions that great principals take to ensure and amplify great teaching. The findings are based on an in-depth analysis of the leadership practices in more than 200 district (134) and charter (77) schools that saw substantial gains in student achievement in seven urban areas.

Just like head coaches who lead a set of talented assistant coaches and team leaders, great principals cultivate and distribute leadership to other school leaders. Great principals collaborate with other school leaders to execute a playbook that includes the following three intersecting categories of actions for improving teacher effectiveness:

Developing teachers.

Highly-effective principals in our study set high expectations for student learning then equipped their teachers with the beliefs, knowledge and skills to meet them. Great principals ensured that teachers received the ongoing feedback, the professional development and the collaborative environment necessary to continuously improve their practice.

Managing talent.

Highly-effective principals assembled a top-notch staff. They avidly recruited and selected effective teachers, and they defined roles that maximized each teacher's strengths. They set clear goals for dramatically increasing student learning, focusing the majority of their time on supporting teachers in reaching those goals, while holding teachers accountable. They created opportunities for teachers to practice leadership and career pathways for great teachers to extend their reach to more students.

Creating a great place to work.

Highly-effective principals fostered a workplace where teachers wanted to stay and grow. They showed their teachers that they were valued and fostered community among colleagues. They delegated leadership and responsibility, and in doing so, gave teachers ownership over school decisions and initiatives. And they instilled a uniform code of conduct across a school, so that teachers could focus on instruction, rather than behavioral problems.



FIGURE 1

Principals made three intersecting types of plays to amplify teacher effectiveness

CHAMPIONS DO IT BETTER

Legendary coaches expect the best from their teams. They won't be outplayed—their teams practice all aspects of the game with emphasis on particular plays. They won't be outsmarted—their teams stay flexible on the field, ready to adapt to new challenges. And they won't have less heart—their teams have a relentless drive to succeed.

So it is with principals and their teams.

Highly-effective principals:

See the full game.

Like winning coaches who attend to all aspects of the game—offense, defense and special teams—great principals have a playbook that covers developing teachers, managing talent and creating a great place to work.

Focus on the right plays at the right time.

Like great head coaches who develop a new game plan tailored towards the situation they will face that week, great principals focus on particular plays by diagnosing the strengths and weaknesses of their schools and adjusting their strategies over time.

Coach to win.

Like legendary coaches who demand perfection, great principals are relentless in their attention to detail, follow through and drive to succeed.

When great teams simultaneously execute well, it can result in “high-yardage plays” that dramatically move the ball down the field towards the goal. The most successful principals were vigilant in identifying “high-yardage plays” that simultaneously addressed teacher development, talent management and school culture and therefore made large strides in improving instruction. These “high-yardage plays” included:

- Cultivating leadership.
- Conducting observations with useful feedback.
- Fostering “Teacher Learning Communities.”
- Individualizing roles and responsibilities.

CHECKING THE SCORE: THE NEED TO FOCUS ON PRINCIPALS

While we know there is no silver bullet in transforming public education, we know from a decade of research that outstanding principals yield a significant return on investment.

Policymakers, philanthropists, education reformers and entrepreneurs have consistently and rightfully asserted that teacher effectiveness is the most powerful way to lift the quality of our nation's schools. Yet they have too often overlooked how to recruit, develop and retain successful principals, who can, in turn, recruit, develop and retain successful teachers. Ninety-seven percent of teachers say that supportive leadership is necessary to keep good teachers in their schools—more than any other factor.³ Strong teachers gravitate to schools with strong leaders and stay there.

Through a variety of federal reforms and competitive funding programs (such as Race to the Top; the Teacher Incentive Fund; and the opportunity available to states for flexibility under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act⁴) the U.S. Department of Education has incentivized states and districts to develop and implement, among other reforms, new approaches to educator effectiveness. These federal programs alone account for almost \$6 billion in spending, not including the over \$2 billion allocated annually for teacher and principal development in Title II and the millions of dollars spent separately by states and districts to recruit, develop and evaluate high-quality teachers.

Though federal programs generally include options for investments in principal quality, states have focused most dollars and time on teacher quality initiatives that are separate from the principal. If included, school leaders are often an afterthought or add-on to teacher initiatives as opposed to an integral element of any effort to transform instruction and schools. At the district level, even something as fundamental as principal job descriptions often fail to state that one of the principal's responsibilities is to build strong and consistent instruction across a school.

But this is akin to drafting every player in the “top 10” without installing an effective head coach to lead the team.

If policymakers do not invest sufficient resources and attention in principal quality as a key element of teacher quality efforts, these reforms will have trouble demonstrating marked improvement in student achievement and risk public disapproval and ultimate abandonment over time. Such a fate would be tragic given the incredible potential of these reforms, if done well, to transform the quality of teaching and learning in our nation's public schools.

3 Scholastic Inc. (2012). Primary sources: America's teachers on the teaching profession. New York, NY: Scholastic and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

4 Also known as No Child Left Behind.

RULES OF THE GAME: POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS THAT INVEST RESOURCES, TIME AND ATTENTION IN PRINCIPALS

“Leaders are made, they are not born. They are made by hard effort, which is the price which all of us must pay to achieve any goal that is worthwhile.”

Vince Lombardi, legendary coach of the Green Bay Packers

We need principals who develop teachers, manage talent and create a great place to work. While these are by no means the only responsibilities principals have, they are essential to building a winning team. Our

recommendations below speak to the very specific role that policy has to play in fostering great principal actions that amplify great teaching. For broader recommendations see www.newleaders.org.

AT THE LOCAL LEVEL

Local school districts define the majority of conditions that support or inhibit principals. Districts have multiple important opportunities to change the status quo. We recommend that school districts tackle:

Principal hiring.

Seek out the best. When hiring principals, districts often stress graduate degrees or number of years in the system, rather than the competencies and skills necessary to excel on the job. Instead, districts should implement more rigorous hiring processes that screen and assess for necessary mindsets and skills, such as an unwavering belief in all students’ ability to succeed, adult management experience and instructional expertise.

Principal evaluation and development.

Districts should provide clear and consistent expectations of success for principals. They should focus evaluation, professional development and accountability for the student outcomes that principals need to achieve, and on the important roles principals play, including the development and retention of high-quality teachers. In particular, districts should provide sufficient training for principals on the new expectations for teacher evaluation and development and hold principals accountable for successfully demonstrating these skills.

Principal management and support.

School districts should dedicate sufficient time and training for district leaders to conduct principal evaluation and performance management activities, including clear goal setting, school visits, formative feedback and support for individual principal development. They should hold principal managers accountable for results of the schools and principals they manage.

Decision making.

District leadership should empower principals with flexibility to make managerial decisions that impact teaching, such as discretion to:

- Make **strategic staffing decisions**, including hiring, promotion and when necessary, the efficient and fair removal of ineffective teachers.
- Manage **budgets** and staffing allocations to meet specific school needs.
- Restructure school **schedules** to enable common planning time for teachers to foster communities of practice led by the principal and teacher leaders.

About New Leaders

New Leaders has seen first-hand the impact of strong principals in multiple, diverse communities. Over 12 years, New Leaders has prepared more than 900 school leaders in 12 urban areas across the country. Students in New Leader schools tend to achieve at higher levels than their peers and tend to have higher high school graduation rates; a number of our principals have transformed high-poverty, under-performing schools into environments where teachers and kids can be their best. New Leaders are making measurable progress in closing the achievement gap.

We use the data and insights gained from our experience training principals and conducting research in high-gaining schools—combined with independent evaluations of our program—to improve our leadership development model and to inform the policy recommendations we make to the field.

Contact Us

30 West 26th Street, Second Floor
New York, NY 10010

www.newleaders.org
info@newleaders.org
646-792-1070

**To access the full report, please visit
www.newleaders.org/playmakers.**

AT THE FEDERAL LEVEL

Federal policymakers help set the tone and importance of education policy for the country. From new initiatives that foster innovation to continued funding for bedrock programs, these policymakers can integrate principals into education reforms in several ways:

Leverage existing formula funds.

Federal policymakers should set aside Title II formula dollars specifically for principal effectiveness and promote the use of Title II funds for school leadership strategies that support teacher effectiveness. Additionally, they should continue to require rigorous teacher and principal evaluations as part of the requirements for flexibility under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.

Champion the cause.

Policymakers should bring the importance of school leadership to national prominence. For example, they could expand the Champions of Change program to leverage highly-effective principals nationwide, or use the strong blueprint provided by the Administration's proposal for a Master Teacher Corps. They should talk publicly, consistently and at the highest levels about the importance of principals in amplifying great teaching.

Break down barriers to entry.

Federal policymakers should encourage states to cultivate talent from all sectors. While all great teachers require a strong background in teaching and instruction, professionals returning to the field may have gained valuable adult leadership skills from other experiences such as time in the public or private sector or service in the military. By removing arbitrary barriers to entry for returning talent, states and districts can fortify the pipeline of emerging principals and leaders.

Invest in tools and consortia focused on leadership.

Policymakers should help states find wheels, not recreate them. Federal policymakers are in the unique position to invest in tools and convene states together to bring ideas, discuss challenges and share best practices in all areas of education, especially in school leadership.

Competitive grants.

Federal policymakers should continue to expand efforts to promote principal effectiveness in competitive grant programs and underscore the need for teacher effectiveness efforts to include principals.