

# Principal Development as a Strategy in School Improvement

Damion Pechota and Deven Scott

School leadership is a key component of successful school environments and academic performance strategies. Among school-related factors, school leadership is [second to teaching](#) in its impact on student learning. In addition, [research](#) shows that strong leaders contribute significantly to successful school turnaround.

To ensure that school leaders are equipped to lead their schools and effective in school improvement efforts, states can employ a variety of policy levers. This brief highlights three types of state policy initiatives — role recognition, statewide support systems and federal funding — that can effectively support principals as they engage in school improvement.



In schools where principals are seen as instructional leaders and are given greater autonomy, research shows a direct correlation with teacher retention and student success.



To support principal leadership, states are leveraging three types of policy initiatives: role recognition, statewide support systems and federal funding.



Under ESSA, states are using Title I and Title II funds for principal development and support programs.

## Role Recognition

The role and function of an effective principal is [an important factor](#) in the academic success and overall environment of a school. As the managerial and instructional leader, the principal has the ability to impact all teachers and students who enter the school building. In addition to influencing the overall school culture, principal leadership impacts the [consistency and quality](#) of teachers over the course of a student's career. Teacher survey results indicate that strong school leadership [ranks higher than compensation](#) as a key factor in recruitment and retention.

[Research demonstrates](#) that [specified roles](#) for principals that emphasize the abilities of the principal as an instructional leader have a direct correlation with teacher retention and student success. As a policy lever, states can support districts and schools in identifying core responsibilities by adopting statewide school leadership standards that emphasize instructional leadership. To assist in these efforts, states may wholly adopt or adapt national model standards — such as the National Policy Board for Educational Administration's [Professional Standards for Educational Leaders](#) — while allowing districts to tailor them to meet local needs.

### Evidence From the Field

The Wallace Foundation's [Principal Pipeline Initiative](#) (PPI) was a five-year investment in six school districts — large, urban areas located in **Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Maryland, New York** and **North Carolina** — that supported districtwide strategies to improve schools through effective leadership. As part of the initiative, districts enhanced their leadership standards to better define the expectations of principals. At the end of the initiative, student math and literacy scores improved, and principals were more likely to stay in those districts than their counterparts in other districts.

Another Wallace initiative examined how districts can use principal supervisors who oversee and provide services for principals on behalf of districts. The [Principal Supervisor Initiative](#) was a four-year investment in the role and effectiveness of principal supervisors, collecting data on how they serve school and district leaders. Six school districts in **California, Florida, Iowa, Maryland, Minnesota** and **Ohio** were chosen for the initiative. The study found that principal supervisors help improve school principal effectiveness, especially in terms of schoolwide academic success.

**In addition to role definition, research on turnaround program implementation identifies that providing principals with autonomy allows for greater chances of success.**



**Florida's [Principal Autonomy Program Initiative](#)** was a pilot that provided principals with greater fiscal and administrative autonomy to improve student achievement and school management in low-performing schools. Multiple schools [improved](#) their letter grade ratings by allowing leaders to implement innovative strategies for student success. In 2018, the Florida Legislature made the pilot program permanent.

## Statewide Support Systems

A second policy lever for principal effectiveness in school improvement is the development of state systems to support and train principals for success. Guided by their various [K-12 education governance](#) structures, state leaders are tasked with bringing together different stakeholders and systems to support principal preparation, professional development and management of school improvement programs. [Statewide support systems](#) can help coordinate these efforts and provide school leaders with tools to be effective.

**A statewide support system, which can include leadership training and development strategies, is required for turnaround programs for low-performing schools.**

 For example, in **Colorado**, the state board of education developed a school transformation [grant program](#) that includes leadership development. The [program](#) is administered by the state department of education to provide leadership training to improve student performance in the highest need schools.

**In order to ensure quality leadership beyond the requirements of turnaround programs, states are developing initiatives and training programs specifically for principals. Tying these leadership initiatives to larger statewide policy goals helps align school leader expectations with state or regionally identified improvement strategies.**

 **Arkansas** has a robust state support system that includes multiple, interconnected leadership programs to meet both state requirements and regional needs. Created by the Arkansas Legislature in 1991, the University of Arkansas–Fayetteville houses the [Arkansas Leadership Academy](#), a training and support program for school leaders and administrators.

### From Research to Action

The **Tennessee** Education Research Alliance conducted a series of studies over multiple school years on the relationship between **Tennessee** principals' evaluations and their effectiveness in school improvement. Using data from the 2011-12 through 2014-15 school years, TERA's [2018 report](#) found that schools with highly rated principals had both higher levels of student achievement and greater retention of high quality teachers.

State policymakers in Tennessee are taking action to offer leadership development in a number of ways, including specific supports for turnaround principals. In 2018, former Tennessee Gov. Bill Haslam announced a [comprehensive initiative](#) to focus on improving the preparation, retention and development of principals. The initiative includes training for new principals to fill the annual estimated 270 school leader vacancies and incentives for the state's top principals to lead low-performing schools.





**Ohio** Department of Education indicates that the [state](#) uses all allowable ESSA reservations — including the 3% Title II set-aside — to advance the quality of principals and other school leaders and to update the state’s school leadership standards.

States have also leveraged Title II dollars into larger federal investments in school leadership specific to low-performing schools.



**North Carolina** uses Title II dollars to support the [Northeast Leadership Academy](#) (currently part of NC State University’s Educational Leadership Academy), which prepares aspiring principals who are committed to serving in low performing, high need schools in rural North Carolina. Created in 2010 as a two-year program serving 13 school districts, the project was awarded a five-year U.S. Department of Education Title II grant in 2013 to expand its reach.

## Final Thoughts

States recognize that, as school leaders, principals are an important part of school improvement strategies. Research studies continue to expand the understanding of the principal’s role in ensuring opportunities for student success. While this area continues to develop, states are making policy changes to support principals by specifying their roles, creating statewide frameworks of support and using federal funds for principal development.

# About the Authors



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As a policy analyst, Damion provides research and analysis on a diverse set of state-level education issues. Prior to joining Education Commission of the States, Damion worked as a senior policy analyst with Legislative Council at the Colorado General Assembly. Damion is dedicated to the idea that a nonpartisan perspective can enhance the discussion and understanding of state education issues from early learning to workforce development. Contact Damion at [dpechota@ecs.org](mailto:dpechota@ecs.org) or **303.299.3632**.

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