

National Association of State Boards of Education

⊕ Strengthening the Principal Pipeline through State Leadership Academies

By Joseph Hedger

Strong, well-prepared school leaders are a well-known lever for improving student achievement and retaining teachers, but principal retention has received less attention. On the one hand, after principals have led their first school for five or more years, they hire more teachers who remain longer.¹ On the other hand, principals are leaving at worrying rates. Eleven percent of public school principals left the profession before the 2021–22 school year, including nearly 8 percent of principals with less than three years on the job (see figure).²

Principals cite inadequate preparation and professional development among the top five reasons they leave.³ A 2020 Brown University study found that educational attainment and years of experience in other jobs were not good predictors of principal effectiveness.⁴ However, performance ratings received as an assistant principal

or teacher had more predictive power, and assistant principals who had worked in schools with highly rated principals were more likely to be effective upon transitioning into the principalship.

Additionally, effective principals are not equitably distributed. Principals in the highest poverty public schools have the least experience, on average, compared with principals in the lowest poverty schools.⁵ Principal turnover in the 2021–22 school year was highest in high-poverty and rural areas.⁶

State leaders can help develop strong principals in their states by investing in evidence-based professional learning opportunities for current and future leaders, as Missouri, Delaware, and North Carolina have done. Their experiences highlight how statewide learning academies, mentorships, and peer-to-peer supports strengthen the principal pipeline and, in turn, build an effective educator workforce.

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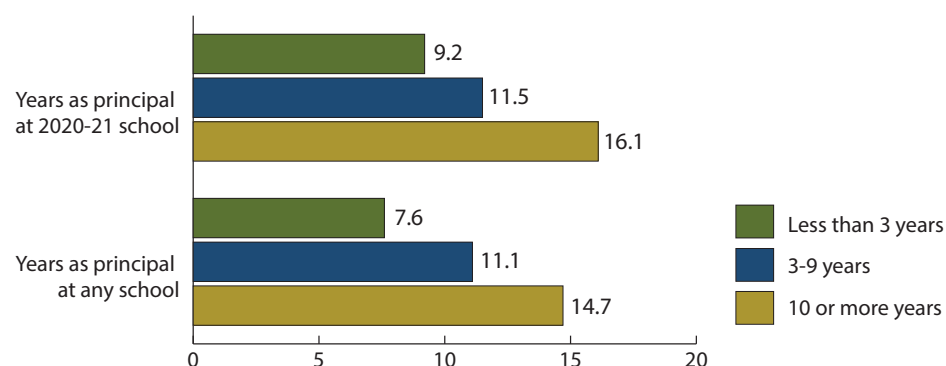
In 2016, Missouri established the Missouri Leadership Development System (MLDS) around five domains that a group of stakeholders developed in 2014 to summarize key roles of an effective, transformational principal: visionary, instructional, managerial, relational, and innovative.⁷ Competencies within these domains outline the skills strong school leaders need and the intentions for MLDS programming.

MLDS comprises nine regional centers that employ a total of 30 specialists who connect principals with mentors and host professional development and networking opportunities across Missouri. It provides four levels of support for principals: aspiring (i.e., preservice); emerging (those one to two years into the profession); developing (those with three-plus years on the job); and transformational (continued learning for veteran leaders).

“That’s the way the content is designed—it’s scaffolding,” said Dr. Paul Katnik, assistant commissioner of Missouri’s Office of Educator Quality and overseer of the program. “The first layer of content prepares you for the next, which prepares you for the next. We’re seeing a difference when the [new principals] come in and they’ve already had that initial preparation.” Since the program began, the retention rate of principals involved in MLDS has consistently exceeded the state’s average in 2017–22—about 84.6 percent—by 9 to 14 percentage points.⁸

MLDS had its origins in a one-year statewide leadership academy the state education agency had offered to anywhere from 120 to 150 principals annually, according to Katnik.

Principals Leaving the Profession before 2021-22 by Years of Experience (percent)



Source: Adapted from “Table A-2” in NCES, National Teacher and Principal Survey, July 31, 2023.

But when they finished, participants would always ask what was next. “What we were doing was fine and people enjoyed it, but we weren’t really moving any needles because it wasn’t a big enough, robust enough, aggressive enough system,” Katnik said. So in standing up MLDS, the agency expanded the work.

The Every Student Succeeds Act had just introduced a 3 percent set-aside for school leadership development when MLDS began. With the approval of the Missouri State Board of Education, Missouri dedicated those funds for building MLDS. They also aimed to ensure the program relies on blended funding from Title IIA and Title I state allocations, an early childhood grant, and federal COVID relief funds. Most recently, they received a three-year, \$10 million grant from the U.S. Department of Education’s Supporting Effective Educator Development program. “We got this blended package of funding, so if we lose any [individual sources], it’s not going to shut down the system,” Katnik said.

Currently, MLDS’s preparation and development programs reach 2,000 principals out of about 3,600 in the state. During the pandemic, SEA staff added recorded modules, podcasts, and other virtual opportunities for learning and connection, which broadened the geographic reach of these resources. Katnik suggests they already do pretty well engaging rural regions. “Some of the digital [material] works well for them, but a lot of the time, they want to get together,” he said. “Rural locations are a little isolated feeling, and [principals there] like the collaboration opportunities.”

Urban areas need more attention, according to Katnik. The higher concentration of principals and assistant principals in those regions pose added difficulty. MLDS aims to help bigger systems and cities improve the designs of their own leadership programs.

Missouri also hired external evaluators at the start of MLDS to report annually on the program. Based on surveys, interviews, and focus groups, these publicly available evaluations focus not only on MLDS participants but also on teachers’ feedback.

“We have very high ratings that come from those evaluation studies on the value and relevance of MLDS,” Katnik said. “But there are always things we can do to make it better, and we always pick those up and

start working.” For instance, building on recommendations from the evaluations, they developed modules for mentors of early career principals to clarify mentors’ responsibilities.

The state board has been strongly engaged in MLDS. In fall 2021, it convened a blue ribbon commission on teacher recruitment and retention that recommended ways to address shortages. However, its members also suggested expanding MLDS, since the program teaches principals how to build positive, supportive cultures, which is a key retention strategy in the state. “Part of the expansion of MLDS is at the direction of the state board [members] who adopted those recommendations,” Katnik said. “They were there on day one when it was just an idea, and they are still here today pushing it to grow and be bigger and more impactful.”

DELAWARE

Delaware launched the Governor’s Institute for School Leadership in 2021. Building on five modules of instruction aligned to the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders, the institute offers leadership coaching through the University of Delaware, a monthly Superintendent Study Council for collaborative learning and networking, and a three-year induction and mentorship program for assistant principals.⁹

In 2018, when Dr. Michael Saylor joined the state education agency as director of education excellence, Delaware had already convened professional learning cohorts for first-year administrators, with current superintendents and deputy superintendents facilitating. The program complied with a state board regulation requiring a one-year induction program for first-year administrators or those new to the state.

As in Missouri, participants at the program’s conclusion kept asking, “What’s next?” Through a partnership with the University of Delaware, the state education agency provided another year of optional no-cost coaching for assistant principals who had completed the program. The coaching aspect was then added to state regulation to help guard it from administrative change, according to Saylor. About 50 to 70 percent of participants were opting in.

Then, after year two, participants asked for still more, so the agency added a year of professional learning, forming what is now called the Assistant Principal Academy. “At

that point, we became one of only seven states in the nation to have a three-year induction program for administrators,” Saylor said. At the same time, Delaware received federal funding under the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund that seeded the institute’s development, and both the Assistant Principal Academy and the Superintendent Study Council were brought under that umbrella.

The Superintendent Study Council has also seen enthusiastic support, according to Saylor. “The superintendents want to talk about governance, how to work with their school board, and policy,” he said. “So we will bring legislators in to meet with them, especially as legislative sessions open. It’s helped create more open communication, and they’re getting more input before those bills are introduced.”

Recently, Delaware added a third program within the Governor’s Institute for School Leadership focusing on district-level leaders and how they can better support principals. Saylor worked with leaders from high-need, comprehensive support and improvement schools and researchers to review the model standards for principal supervisors and identify opportunities for programming. “We found that they were receiving a lot of support around operations and management,” he said. “But what was lacking was support in things like instructional leadership related to visiting classrooms, reviewing feedback for teachers, sitting in on professional learning, and giving feedback to the principals.”

So Saylor’s team created the Executive Leadership Academy, led by University of Delaware experts and housed in the College of Education and Human Development’s School Success Center. It offers professional learning as well as no-cost coaching for district supervisors. It has helped spur change, Saylor said. Recent surveys show that principals feel more supported by supervisors who have been through the program. There are still challenges for high-need schools, which tend to experience the most leadership turnover. “But by focusing on principal supervisors, our theory of action tells us that that’s going to improve retention,” Saylor said.

Delaware’s school leadership institute has a direct impact on teachers as well. Effective principals play a large part in improving school climate and teacher well-being and retention.

“We know from [teacher exit surveys] that the number one reason for change is always tied to school leadership,” Saylor said. “Teachers will follow the school leaders they love, or if they’re having problems with their school leader, they’re leaving. That investment in school leadership is important to us as a retention strategy.”

In 2023, Delaware began working on an additional retention strategy for teachers and principals: more formal teacher-leader roles, especially in high-need schools where principals were getting overwhelmed with workloads and high turnover. The Delaware education agency began working with the Wilmington Learning Collaborative to support interested teachers in taking on leadership roles in high-need schools.

“It’s a twofer,” Saylor said. “Teacher leaders are seeing it as a retention strategy for themselves and for the teachers they’re supporting, and school leaders are seeing it as a model for distributed leadership.” It is also an opportunity to “build our bench,” he said: Since the jump from classroom to administration is so big, it provides something in between that has so far been well received.

NORTH CAROLINA

North Carolina also sought to develop effective principals in high-need schools. In 2023, the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction launched its Early Career Principals Academy, a professional learning program for principals in their first three years on the job. Established through a partnership with the department, North Carolina Principals and Assistant Principals’ Association (NCPAPA), the N.C. Alliance for School Leadership Development, and the Belk Foundation, the academy builds the leadership skills and competencies of early career principals to enable them to meet the conditions for student success.

The academy arose out of an Assistant Principal Accelerator program established in 2022. This program offers in-person and virtual sessions for assistant principals who have been nominated by their district superintendent to be fast-tracked into the principalship in high-need schools through targeted professional development and coaching.¹⁰

During a presentation on accelerator program implementation to the state board, then Vice Chair Alan Duncan asked whether a one-year program would be enough. Excited by the question, Shirley Prince, executive director of NCPAPA, began to brainstorm what would become the Early Career Principals Academy.¹¹

Still in development, the academy will provide in-person convenings with state and national experts as well as peer networking with fellow North Carolina school leaders. A series of virtual sessions will follow the in-person meetings. After the third year, participants will have also completed NCPAPA’s Distinguished Leadership in Practice program, a year-long leadership development program for principals.

LESSONS LEARNED

While district leadership drives most principals’ professional development, states have a clear role. Researcher Paul Manna outlines three actions states can consider:

- study current state priorities to create a better allocation of resources for teachers and principals to access high-quality professional development;
- gather resources and expertise that can serve school districts in setting their professional development priorities; and
- provide support for principal professional development designed to help principals implement ambitious state initiatives.¹²

State academies and learning centers for school leaders in Missouri, Delaware, and North Carolina show how states can lead and foster new principals’ cohesive understanding of the role. State academies require collaboration. Myriad groups in Missouri helped MLDS cover more ground, for example: elementary and secondary principal associations, superintendent groups, and higher education. “Every one of those partners co-owns a piece of it,” Katnik said. “It’s not just them joining in and collaborating with DESE because they’re nice. You have to have partners who are willing to do it with you.”

Forming relationships with legislators helps lay the table, Saylor said. “By collaborating on the legislation, we’re getting much higher

quality bills,” he said. “We’re not seeing some of the division that other states are.”

State leaders must also look for continued improvement. Ongoing evaluations and surveys not only show the value of the programs but also help build buy-in from other groups, especially when the program is in its infancy. Similarly, listening to those the programs affects most can reveal areas for further focus. “You have to study what you’ve done,” Katnik said. “Look at what’s working, then build on it. Find out what can be done better and work on that. Just commit yourself to it from the start.”

Joseph Hedger is NASBE’s program manager and editor.

NOTES

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7 Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, “Missouri Leadership Development System: Executive Summary,” [web page](#) (December 2020).

8 See figures in Anna Merod, “Missouri Shows Ongoing Investment in Principals Pays Off,” *K-12 Dive* (March 29, 2023), derived from Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education data.

9 Delaware Public Media, “Delaware Announces New Professional Development Program for Public School Leadership” January 25, 2021.

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11 Rupen Fofaria, “New Statewide Program Aims to Support Development of High-Quality Principals,” *EdNC*, October 2, 2023.

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