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Revolutionizing *the* Principalship

Bold Bets *to* Elevate School Leadership

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In recent years, the United States education system has faced unprecedented challenges, placing school principals at the epicenter of a perfect storm. These leaders now confront a multifaceted crisis: students grappling with [substantial learning loss](#), [national academic indicators in decline](#), and a [mental health epidemic among youth](#). Simultaneously, public schools are battling increased chronic absenteeism, declining school enrollment, and the polarizing effects of education becoming entangled in broader cultural debates. This convergence of issues demands innovative solutions and resilient leadership from those at the helm of our educational institutions.

While there have been [historic funding investments in education](#), we are at risk of accelerating back to a system that never served students well, one that [saw stagnant achievement in reading and math](#), [declining student engagement](#), and [students who were tired, bored, and stressed, even before the pandemic](#). To face the challenges of the last few years, we need new solutions.

While the [last thirty years of education policy](#) have focused on standards, assessments, and accountability, the pandemic laid bare the need for a new North Star for public education—one that can unite policymakers, school leaders, communities, families, and students and align schooling with the outcomes necessary for students to define and achieve their own success. In [We Are What We Teach](#), the Aspen Institute Education & Society Program calls for a new vision for public education that is aligned across three foundational pillars: developing a healthy sense of self, preparing students for the future of work, and preparing students for participation in democracy and community.

In [Rethinking the Role of the Principal](#), we uplifted the research that school leaders are uniquely positioned to have a profound impact; in [Redefining the Role of the Principal](#), we highlighted some districts and states that are acting on that knowledge. Principals are the linchpin of educational transformation: realizing our visions for schools and aspirations for students hinges on their capacity to implement solutions effectively. School leaders wield immense potential to shape and revolutionize education. And as pivotal figures in the educational landscape leading policy implementation at the ground level, they are the vital link between schools and communities.

Yet, our current principal policy framework falls short. It neither fully recognizes the singular influence of principals nor adequately prepares or supports them to actualize a comprehensive vision for student and school success. While pockets of innovative principal policy exist nationwide, truly transformative change demands bold, disruptive thinking that challenges entrenched assumptions and traditional models.

Incremental improvements have merit, and critically underpin long-term change, and the moment calls for more. We must dare to conceive, implement, and evaluate audacious solutions that can fundamentally reimagine and elevate the role of the principal, catalyzing a paradigm shift in educational leadership and, by extension, in the very fabric of our educational system.

In light of these challenges, we propose a shift in how we conceive the principalship. We invite policymakers and educational leaders to envision a reimagined system to support and prepare principals—one that fully leverages their potential, recognizes their expertise, and creates an ecosystem that nurtures and empowers truly transformational leaders.



Big Bold Policy Bets

At the heart of this transformation lies a fundamental shift in mindset—a shift that cannot be easily mandated through the blunt instrument of policy alone. However, we believe that there are groundbreaking policy solutions that states can use to reshape the structures that support holistic principal development. These “big bets” may not have extensive precedent or established best practices, yet, but they represent the kind of innovative thinking necessary to create a sustainable, impactful school leadership role focused on what matters most for student and school success.

We ask you to explore these bold proposals, knowing full well that they may engender skepticism or resistance. But we also know that meaningful change rarely comes without challenge. By putting forth these ideas, we hope to inspire states, districts, and schools to embrace the bold changes needed to redefine the principalship for the 21st century. We invite you to join us in imagining a future where principals are not reduced to just managers, nor overwhelmed with exhaustive responsibilities, but are fully realized as transformational leaders equipped to guide our schools and students to new heights of achievement and success.

Five Big Bets to Empower Transformational School Leaders

1. Reimagining Principal Preparation through a “West Point Model”
2. Launching Principal State Policy Implementation Boards
3. Mandatory Director of Operations Role
4. Fostering Data-Driven Leadership—Data Camp for Principals
5. Transforming Principal Licensure



Big Bet #1: Reimagining Principal Preparation through a “West Point Model”

The Challenge: The role of the principal demands an extraordinary combination of talents and skills, including deep content knowledge, strong interpersonal skills, and exceptional leadership abilities. However, the current systems for training, compensating, and supporting principals often fall short of the high level of skill required for this critical role, and the prep is often too narrowly focused—not drawing enough on organizational leadership, human development, policy implementation, and other necessary skills. Preparation programs vary widely in quality, and attendance is often incentivized by pay scales rather than ambitions for school leadership. To attract and retain the best and brightest talent to the principalship, we must fundamentally realign our approach to recruitment, preparation, and retention.

The Audacious Solution: Drawing inspiration from other countries, like Singapore, which have completely revolutionized their model for selecting, training, and supporting school leaders, we propose creating a “West Point Model” for principal preparation. This model would identify and cultivate top-performing candidates who demonstrated excellence in the classroom, a propensity for leadership, and a commitment to continuous learning.

Under this model, each state would designate at least one flagship university, or other entity, to offer a rigorous, multidisciplinary principal preparation program. These universities would be selected based on their commitment to working closely with school districts to build programs aligned with local needs and to ensure that graduates have opportunities to assume leadership roles upon completion. To earn designation, they would need to comply with research-based components of effective principal preparation established by the state, and these programs would need to demonstrate evidence of quality training.

Crucially, these preparation programs would not be confined to schools of education alone. Instead, they would provide aspiring principals with a comprehensive education that spans instructional leadership, the science of learning and development, data analysis, organizational development, public policy, and other relevant disciplines. Equipped with this broad knowledge base, these future school leaders will be prepared to lead effectively across the breadth of their pivotal roles.

To elevate the prestige of the principalship and attract high-caliber candidates, admission to these programs would be highly selective and equally attractive. To ensure equitable access, offer a worthy value proposition, and support workforce diversity, tuition would be free for candidates who commit to serving as school leaders in the state for at least five years. The program would also need to take into account how to support candidates who need to maintain employment while also managing course loads. Additionally, diversity could be increased in the pipeline if states were required to select a Historically Black College or University (HBCU), Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI), Minority Serving Institution (MSI) or Tribal College or University (TCU) to be the flagship institution or partner with the flagship universities. As is the case with various preparation programs at local and national levels, this preeminent program can stand alone, or it can complement local district talent pipelines.

By reimagining principal preparation through this “West Point Model,” we can create a pipeline of exceptional school leaders equipped with the skills, knowledge, and prestige necessary to drive transformative change in our education system. While this approach represents a departure from the status quo, it is precisely the kind of bold thinking that can ensure that every school has the visionary leadership it deserves.



Big Bet #2: Launching Principal State Policy Implementation Boards

The Challenge: Too often, well-intentioned education policies fall short due to poor or incomplete implementation. Many teachers and principals feel the acute impact of the policy pendulum in which new mandates feel disconnected from the realities they face in schools. This disconnect not only undermines the effectiveness of even the most promising policies, but also erodes morale among educators who feel their voices are not being heard. Moreover, this gap between policy and practice perpetuates a cycle of frustration and disillusionment in which education leaders witness the unintended consequences of policies that fail to account for the complex realities of leading a school and disrupt continuity in instructional leadership. For systemic changes to take hold and drive meaningful improvement, we must bridge the divide between policymakers and practitioners, creating a system that equally values the expertise and insights of those on the front lines of education and the policymakers in the state house.

The Audacious Solution: As the linchpins of policy implementation at the school level, principals set the priorities, expectations, and culture of their buildings. Yet, they are routinely excluded from the policymaking process. While some states, like North Carolina, have made efforts to bring together highly rated principals to help revamp professional development, we believe states can go further in leveraging the expertise of school leaders to craft policies that can be effectively implemented on the ground.

Drawing inspiration from the Congressional Budget Office, a nonpartisan federal institution that evaluates the potential costs and economic impact of proposed legislation, we propose a School Leader State Policy Implementation Board in each state. While the exact structure will vary based on each state's governance structures, this board would be composed of a rotating group of current or former school leaders from diverse schools and districts who would evaluate proposed education policies, score them based on feasibility of implementation, and provide feedback on critical implementation support. While states would create their own board selection criteria, we strongly suggest that states not just look at outcome or attainment data for schools, but also consider other indicators of quality in different contexts, such as growth data.

Board members would receive training, support, and compensation to ensure they are well-equipped to provide meaningful insights and recommendations. The board would also include staff researchers and policy analysts to help principals dissect and understand legislation. The benefits of this approach are multifaceted. Policymakers would have direct contact with those responsible for implementing policies, ensuring that the realities of school-level implementation are taken into account. Principals would gain a powerful advocate for their work and a platform to shape the policies that impact their schools. Moreover, the board would foster built-in buy-in from a group of school leaders, increasing the likelihood of successful implementation.

By empowering principals through this State Policy Implementation Board, education policies would be not only well-designed but also feasible and effective in practice. This bold approach represents a significant shift in how we approach policymaking, but such innovative thinking is needed to drive transformative change in our schools. By bringing the voices of school leaders to the forefront of the policy process, we can create a system that is more responsive, effective, and ultimately better equipped to serve our students.



Big Bet #3 Mandatory Director of Operations Role

The Challenge: Principals are overburdened with administrative and operational tasks, diverting their attention from crucial responsibilities like instructional leadership, fostering a positive school culture, and community engagement. [Research suggests](#) that principals spend 50% of their time on operational, administrative, and managerial duties; only 15% on internal relations with students and staff; and less than 5% on external relations with the community. While a focus on operational duties is not detrimental to student achievement, [a principal's ability to build trust and show they care within and outside the school is correlated with increased teacher satisfaction, increased parental involvement, higher student achievement, and increased likelihood of successful reforms spearheaded by school leadership](#). Reducing the operational burden on principals can allow them to allocate time to internal and external relations.

The Audacious Solution: Mandate and provide funding for schools to establish dedicated director of operations roles. These positions would be responsible for a substantial portion of the operational and administrative workload, enabling principals to concentrate on their core responsibilities as instructional leaders and community advocates.

States should [adopt a model similar to the District of Columbia Public Schools \(DCPS\)](#), which introduced the option for schools to appoint a director of strategy and logistics. This role's responsibilities include enrollment management, facilities oversight, security coordination, food and nutrition services, and inventory management.

However, in the DCPS model, schools have to reallocate funds from other administrative positions, such as instructional coaches or deans, to create the director role. Other states and districts have tried to implement similar models. However, to meaningfully shift principals' time allocation, we propose that states mandate and fully fund these dedicated operations leadership positions, transitioning from an optional "nice to have" model to a mandatory "need to have" framework.

Importantly, this shift in time allocation for principals should also be mirrored in principal preparation. If principals will be more focused on internal, external, and instructional practices, they will need research-informed practices in these areas to benefit from this shift.

By establishing and funding these roles, states will be empowering principals to devote more of their attention to fostering educational equity and excellence, cultivating a positive school climate, and strengthening community partnerships—ultimately enhancing student outcomes and the overall quality of education.



Big Bet #4: Fostering Data-Driven Leadership—Data Camp for Principals

The Challenge: In today's data-rich educational landscape, school leaders have access to multiple sources of information, including state and federal assessment data, administrative records, school climate surveys, and opportunity-to-learn metrics. While data can play a significant role in assessing student progress, evaluating program efficacy, allocating resources, and sustaining educational priorities, most principal preparation (pre-service, in-service, etc.) does not provide training on effectively using data for school improvement. According to the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP), principals have been required to use data as a tool in school improvement for over fifteen years, yet many current principals lack the necessary training to harness data's full potential.

The Audacious Solution: To address the pressing need for data-driven leadership, we propose "Data Camps" tailored specifically for principals. These immersive training programs would equip principals with the knowledge and skills to analyze and apply insights from data effectively, ultimately driving better school and student outcomes. This learning is particularly important given the rapidly multiplying datasets that define student progress, as well as rapidly advancing technology for collection and analysis. Effective leaders will need to be conversant in both.

The Data Camps would provide comprehensive training on data analysis techniques, best practices for data-informed decision-making, and creative strategies for leveraging data to support instructional practices and school improvement efforts. Principals would have the opportunity to collaborate with fellow school leaders, share innovative solutions, and learn from one another's experiences in utilizing data to drive positive change.

These Data Camps could be conducted in person or offered through online platforms, similar to Indiana's [Management Performance Hub](#), which provides free data proficiency courses for state employees. By creating centralized online resources, principals would have the flexibility to revisit and asynchronously update their knowledge, particularly when new data sources or analytical tools become available. Data Camp recordings or virtual sessions can also be offered to assistant principals and teachers, creating better data literacy across the school.

Furthermore, Data Camps would foster a culture of continuous learning and data-driven decision-making within the education system. Principals would be better equipped to navigate the ever-evolving data landscape, enabling them to make informed decisions, efficiently allocate resources, and implement targeted interventions to support student success.



Big Bet #5 Transforming Principal Licensure

The Challenge: Current principal licensure exams often do not predict future success as school leaders. [Research](#) has highlighted a lack of correlation between performance on these widely used state licensure tests and effective school leadership outcomes. Moreover, candidates of color are less likely to pass these exams compared to their white counterparts. Thus, these exams sustain inequities in access and opportunity without providing tangible value in identifying promising future leaders.

The Audacious Solution: To address these critical issues, policymakers must mandate a complete overhaul of principal licensure requirements, using measures that validly and reliably connect with principal success in the field. The reformed licensure process should encompass the following key elements:

- 1. Alignment with Prioritized Leadership Standards:** The licensure process should align with high-priority standards that reflect the essential skills, knowledge, and competencies for effective school leadership. Importantly, these standards should prioritize competencies that are most critical for principals, [such as fostering a positive school climate, engaging with the community, providing instructional leadership, and utilizing data-informed decision-making](#). Selecting a clear, focused set of research-based standards is essential to achieving each of these critical competencies.
- 2. Performance-Based Assessments:** Incorporate authentic, performance-based assessments that require candidates to demonstrate their abilities in real-world scenarios. This could include simulations, case studies, or practical exercises that assess leadership skills in realistic situations and provide a more comprehensive evaluation of candidates' readiness for the principalship.
- 3. Continuous Stakeholder Evaluation and Improvement:** Establish a mechanism for continuous evaluation and improvement of the licensure process by actively involving relevant stakeholders, such as current principals, teachers, parents, and other education experts. This ongoing feedback loop will ensure that the licensure requirements remain relevant and aligned with the evolving needs of effective school leadership.
- 4. Transparent Criteria and Multiple Measures:** To reduce potential biases, the licensure process should include transparent criteria that are clearly communicated to candidates during their preparation. Additionally, the process should rely on multiple measures and assessments, avoiding an over-reliance on standardized tests or a single evaluation method, [which can inadvertently perpetuate biases](#).

With these transformative changes, the principal licensure process will become a more authentic and equitable pathway to identifying and preparing exceptional school leaders. It will prioritize the skills and competencies that truly matter for creating positive learning environments, fostering student success, and driving educational excellence in our schools.



Conclusion

The role of the principal stands at a pivotal crossroads. As our education system navigates unprecedented challenges and societal shifts, we can no longer rely on antiquated notions of school leadership. Principals today need a comprehensive skill set that supersedes operational management, encompassing instructional leadership, community engagement, data-driven decision-making, and a deep understanding of how to foster a positive school climate that nurtures the whole child.

Rethinking and revolutionizing the principalship is not merely an academic exercise; it is a moral imperative. Big bets take political will and courage, and some states are already rethinking the principal's role. For example, [North Dakota's first-in-the-nation principal apprenticeship program](#), which is registered with the US Department of Labor, leverages ideas from other professions to rethink how to address principal and teacher shortages and better support student achievement. Such changes might seem daunting, but they are not impossible. And when we empower principals to be transformative leaders, we equip them to dismantle systemic barriers, promote equity and inclusion, and cultivate learning environments where every student feels valued, supported, and prepared to thrive in the 21st century.

The recommendations outlined in this paper represent a roadmap for policymakers, educators, and communities to embark on this journey of reform. From reimagining principal preparation and licensure through a prestigious "West Point Model" to mandating dedicated operational support that frees principals to focus on their unique leadership role, these bold ideas challenge the status quo and demand a fundamental shift in practice and mindset. These shifts create a system that both supports the development of great school leaders and leverages principals' knowledge and unique position to inform better policy and practice.

We recognize the inherent tension in some of our recommendations, which may seem to add more responsibilities to an already full plate. By strategically reallocating resources and reimagining the principalship, these additional responsibilities can become integral parts of a more empowered and effective leadership role rather than burdensome add-ons. We believe that with the right shifts in resources and support structures, these changes can create the time and capacity principals need to engage in these crucial areas of development and influence.

Ultimately, the success of our education system hinges on the quality of our schools' leadership. By reconceiving the support, preparation, and available resources for the principalship, we can unlock a future where every school is led by a visionary leader who inspires excellence, champions equity, and empowers students to reach their full potential.

The path ahead will not be easy, but the stakes are too high to settle. **It is time for bold action, unwavering commitment, and a shared vision that recognizes the principal as the catalyst for transforming our schools into beacons of hope, opportunity, and limitless possibility.**