

Education Division
Contact: Christopher Mazzeo, 202/624-5408 or
cmazzeo@nga.org
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Improving Teaching and Learning by Improving School Leadership

Summary

During the past decade, numerous states, localities, and foundations have launched initiatives to recruit and train better principals. What these efforts share is a recognition that school leaders exert a powerful, if indirect, influence on teaching quality and student learning.¹ Although many have sought to take on the leadership issue, few have detailed the steps that states can take to reform their systems of leadership development.²

To improve the system of preparing and developing principals, governors and other state policymakers should focus on three key areas—licensure, preparation, and professional development.

- **Licensure**—States should remove barriers for talented individuals to enter the profession and move toward a more performance-based system of certifying and rewarding school leaders.
- **Preparation**—States should allow and expand alternative preparation programs and develop a rigorous and defensible system of accreditation for programs and institutions that prepare school leaders.
- **Professional Development**—States should use the provisions of the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation to assess professional development practices in low-performing districts and move toward a state system of research-based professional development.

Why Focus on School Leadership?

Efforts to improve school leadership are not unwarranted: research confirms both a limited supply of talented candidates to lead schools and the important role these individuals can play in improving teaching and learning. Also driving the search for better principals are the performance expectations built into the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). Although claims of a national shortage of principals appear overstated,³ the number of openings is expected to grow by 20 percent during the next five years and the number of retirements is likely to increase markedly.⁴ These trends will pose the greatest challenges for urban and rural districts with large concentrations of high-poverty and low-performing schools. The turnover rate for principals is as high as 20 percent per year in these districts. Urban and rural communities often pay lower salaries and receive significantly fewer applicants for open positions.⁵ As a result, low-performing urban and rural schools are much more likely to end up with inexperienced principals and assistant principals.⁶

Yet the problem extends beyond the supply and distribution of leaders. Research also suggests that many current and potential principals lack the skills necessary to lead in today's schools. A 2001 Public Agenda report found that 29 percent of superintendents believe the quality of principals has declined measurably in recent years.⁷ One likely source of this dissatisfaction is the changing nature of the principalship. Historically, school leaders were expected to perform primarily managerial and political roles.⁸ "Schools of the twenty-first century will require a new kind of principal," according to the Institute for Educational Leadership, one whose main responsibility will be defined in terms of "instructional leadership that focuses on strengthening teaching and learning."⁹ The challenge for states is to redesign their systems of licensure, preparation, and professional development to produce and reward principals that have these kinds of skills.

What Do Effective School Leaders Do?

According to researchers Philip Hallinger and Ronald Heck, school principals “exercise a measurable, though indirect, effect on school effectiveness and student achievement.”¹⁰ Leadership appears to particularly impact the quality of teaching in schools.¹¹ School leaders provide focus and direction to curriculum and teaching and manage the organization efficiently to support student and adult learning. Principals also evaluate teachers and make decisions about their classroom assignments. When classroom instruction is weak in underperforming schools, or when large numbers of teachers are teaching out-of-field in these schools, significant responsibility rests with the principal.¹²

Quality school leaders, the evidence suggests, understand teaching and are respected by their staff. Moreover, these individuals are willing to hold themselves and others responsible for student learning and enhancing the capacity of teachers to meet this goal. As Richard Elmore puts it:¹³

The job of administrative leaders is primarily about enhancing the skills and knowledge of the people in the organization, creating a common culture of expectations around the use of those skills and knowledge, holding the various pieces of the organization together in a productive relationship with each other, and holding individuals accountable for their contributions to the collective results.

How each principal performs these tasks will inevitably vary. Nonetheless, the research suggests three primary modes of leading that promote student learning.

- **Principal as Entrepreneur**—Effective school leaders develop and sustain a focus on instructional improvement and student learning while protecting teachers from the intrusions of the outside environment.¹⁴
- **Principal as Organizer**—Effective principals bring to their schools innovative individuals and innovative ideas, programs, and instructional strategies that can improve teaching while maintaining a coherent reform agenda.¹⁵ They also engage teachers, parents, and community members as collaborators and leaders in school improvement efforts.¹⁶
- **Principal as Instructional Leader**—Effective school leaders build data-driven professional communities that hold all individuals accountable for student learning and instructional improvement. They do this by managing time and financial resources to build teacher professional skills and knowledge.¹⁷

How Can States Improve School Leadership?

To improve school leadership, policymakers must first recognize that most leadership policies and regulations in their state were developed years ago and cannot produce the kind of leaders needed by schools today. Further, because so much of the recruitment, training, and professional development of principals happens in local districts and communities, policymakers must be strategic about how they intervene in the system of leadership development. Where states have the most leverage—and where they can exert the strongest influence—is in how principals are certified or licensed, prepared for practice, and provided additional training to improve their skills.

Licensure Systems

Forty-eight states require individuals to obtain a license or be certified before they can serve as a principal. In most cases, licensure is limited to candidates with three or more years of teaching experience who have earned a certificate or master’s degree from an accredited leadership preparation program.¹⁸ As currently deployed, licensure systems do little to ensure that states are producing a steady stream of principal candidates with the skills to lead schools effectively. Moreover, some systems deter potentially promising candidates from entering the field. One problem is that many states are licensing as principals significant numbers of individuals who have no plans to practice. **Georgia**, a state with fewer than 2,000 schools, has 3,200 individuals who are licensed as principals but not practicing.¹⁹ In **New York**, nearly two-thirds of principal credential holders are working as teachers or in other education positions.²⁰ This overcredentialing occurs, in part, because a master’s

degree in school administration—usually paired with licensure—can confer significant pay raises for teachers, including those who have no intention of becoming principals.²¹ Teachers who want to obtain a principal license self-select into preparation programs leading to a master’s degree, and universities, not districts, generally determine which candidates will be admitted. This additional training may benefit some teachers, but it does little to solve the problem of districts that cannot find qualified candidates to fill open principal positions.²²

For those who want to become principals, state licensure does little to assess their potential for success. State systems are keyed to “input” measures of competence (e.g., courses taken, prior teaching experience, and licensure assessment scores) rather than “outcome” measures (e.g., on-the-job performance or impact on student learning). Such input measures are imperfect indicators of leadership potential. Yet one common input measure—a minimum number of years of teaching experience—may deter potential promising principal candidates. Individuals without classroom teaching experience—especially those from other youth-serving fields, such as social work or youth development—may be particularly suited for school leadership, especially in community schools, charter schools, or other nontraditional settings. Although candidates without teaching experience will likely require additional support and coursework on curriculum and instruction, rules that automatically bar them from the profession are outmoded and inhospitable to leadership development.²³

States are using several strategies to improve their licensure systems. **Michigan** and **South Dakota** no longer formally require principals to obtain licenses as a condition of hiring, allowing districts to set their own hiring criteria.²⁴ **Delaware** and **Virginia** are conducting reviews of their licensure guidelines and are expecting to make significant changes to them. Other states, including **Arkansas**, **Kentucky**, **Louisiana**, **Maryland**, and **Ohio**, have tiered systems that provide an initial preliminary license to candidates and then some form of advanced certification after a one- to two-year induction period.²⁵ (see Louisiana’s Two-Tier Licensure System).

Louisiana’s Two-Tier Licensure System

Louisiana recently approved a new certification structure for educational leadership. Under the plan, which began July 1, 2003, the state will move to a two-tier licensure system. Principals with a Level I certificate will be required to enroll in a two-year Educational Leader Induction Program guided by a university facilitator and principal mentor. The program uses online and classroom learning activities to build principals’ knowledge of teaching and learning and their capacity as instructional leaders. To obtain the Level II certificate, candidates must complete the induction program and develop a portfolio that documents their efforts to meet the state’s standards for school principals. As part of this process, candidates must provide evidence of their capacity for leading school improvement and advancing student achievement. The new certification structure will also pilot a new Teacher Leader Endorsement to provide a formal credential for teachers seeking to assume collaborative leadership roles in schools.

Preparation Programs

Expectations for programs that prepare principals have increased exponentially in recent years.²⁶ Most preparation takes place in college- and university-based graduate programs. Many of these programs were initially developed when school leaders were expected to fill managerial and political roles, and they have struggled to train a new breed of instructionally oriented principals.²⁷

University-based preparation is still based on a managerially focused curriculum and a traditional academic model of organization. University programs confer credits and degrees and are not designed to measure competencies. Only a few programs have close ties to schools or districts—the employers

of the workforce these programs are developing. School and community connections are crucial in recruiting promising students, in developing more contextualized curricula, and in mentoring and supporting principal candidates in the early stages of their career. Although many colleges and universities provide exemplary principal training, many more do not. Yet, in most states, there are few, if any, alternatives to college- and university-based preparation programs.

Efforts to reform college- and university-based preparation during the past three decades have had only a limited effect.²⁸ One reason is the current system of preparation provides few real incentives to change. Preparation programs need new and experienced faculty with deep knowledge of teaching and learning and the school improvement process. They must develop stronger relationships with districts. They must raise their standards and expectations for students. Few colleges and universities have shown a willingness to reallocate resources and rethink faculty performance incentives to meet these goals. Preparation programs generally attract large numbers of students and thus provide a significant source of revenue to their universities. Not surprisingly, university deans and presidents are often reluctant to redesign programs or raise standards for fear of alienating paying students.²⁹ State accreditation processes focus on minimum standards and thus provide few incentives for program improvement.

States have sought to improve principal preparation in several ways, with mixed success. One common approach has been to adopt standards for school leaders and to require preparation programs to align with these standards. Forty states have adopted such standards and 27 states use standards developed by the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) or the Educational Leadership Constituent Council (ELCC).³⁰ ISLLC/ELCC standards try to balance the political, managerial, and instructional roles of principals and expect colleges and universities to show performance-based evidence that their curricula and internship experiences meet the standards.³¹

To date, there is little evidence that standards adoption has driven meaningful change in preparation programs. As with most professional standards, ISLLC/ELCC relies on self-reporting by programs, which can lead to little more than formal compliance with standards (e.g., changing course titles or adding components). Although the standards affirm that the “central responsibility of leadership is to improve teaching and learning,”³² they shortchange the instructional dimension of principal leadership and provide few incentives for colleges and universities to collaborate with school districts or change their practices significantly. For these reasons, ISLLC/ELCC standards may best serve as a useful starting point for developing more meaningful standards for principal preparation programs, as states such as **Georgia, Louisiana, Ohio, Massachusetts, and Oregon** have done.

More promising are efforts by states to conduct audits or reviews of preparation programs. Audits involve document review and onsite visits to preparation programs and are usually overseen by a formal committee or task force. The advantage of an audit strategy is that a state can take a broader look at the licensure, preparation, and professional development of school leaders in light of state needs and current practices and performance. Both **Mississippi** and **North Carolina** have successfully used program reviews to close down poorly performing university-based programs and press for policy changes to improve leadership development.³³ **Delaware, Georgia, Iowa, and Massachusetts** are all conducting or planning audits of their principal preparation programs.

Another approach is to turn to alternative providers such as school districts, professional associations, community groups, and nonprofit organizations. Examples include district-based efforts in Providence, Rhode Island, and Boston and Springfield, Massachusetts; and New Leaders for New Schools, a national nonprofit organization that trains principals in Chicago, New York City, and Washington, D.C. (see *A New Model for Principal Preparation in Massachusetts*). Although these programs are relatively new, they are noteworthy because of the ongoing support and professional development they provide candidates on the job and because of their strong connections to districts and more intensive mentorship experiences. Another benefit of using high-quality alternative providers is to inject competition into state systems of preparation. Fourteen states now allow principals to enter the profession through alternative routes and programs.³⁴

A New Model for Principal Preparation in Massachusetts

With support from the **Massachusetts** Department of Education, Springfield Public Schools (SPS) has developed a new “Leadership University” to house all training and professional development activities for principals and district staff. As part of this effort, SPS will now offer its own preparation program leading to administrative licensure in Massachusetts. The two-year licensure program consists of four required courses, a summer institute, an administrative pre-practicum, and a supervised internship. District staff teach the coursework in collaboration with seven local colleges and universities. Candidates will be selected for the program through a rigorous application process managed by SPS. The program expects to produce 150 new administrators for SPS and other local districts during the next five years. Massachusetts hopes to expand this model to other districts and adapt its lessons to the state’s other preparation programs and professional development providers.

Professional Development

Even the best preparation programs provide only a fraction of the training principals need to continually succeed in their school. Yet professional development for principals is often an afterthought in states and districts. When available, these efforts are usually poorly linked to state reform efforts, vary widely across districts and regions, and are rarely tied to standards. District professional development efforts also differ considerably in their overall quality and reform focus.³⁵

This is all the more troubling given the strong professional consensus on professional development. According to the research, high-quality professional development programs:³⁶

- focus on student learning and the specific problems practitioners face;
- reinforce and sustain group work and collaboration among teachers, principals, and district personnel;
- link directly with day-to-day work in real schools and classrooms;
- sustain a consistency of focus over time; and
- use feedback from teaching and learning to inform program development and evaluation.

States can begin by holding providers of professional development accountable to these standards. Many states already have statewide leadership academies and should align the work of these academies with the research-based professional development standards. The greater challenge, however, is to piece together the decentralized delivery of principal professional development into a coherent whole. This will require states to develop common delivery and performance expectations and work closely with districts, state academies, regional service centers, and private vendors to implement these expectations. States will need to provide incentives for practicing principals to participate in the improved programs. States must also link preparation and professional development more effectively and encourage dialogue and collaboration among providers to develop a more seamless leadership development experience.³⁷

Several states, districts, and organizations have developed promising models of principal professional development. The **Alabama** State Academy brings together school and district personnel in 50 low-performing schools from across the state to develop skills in instructional leadership and turning around schools. The **Georgia** Leadership Institute for School Improvement convenes district teams for a three-year program focused on leading school improvement.³⁸ **Ohio** has recently called for a major overhaul in its professional development system for teachers and school leaders.³⁹ The National Institute for School Leadership, a project of the National Center for Education and the Economy,

offers a three-year executive development program for state, district, and university teams to train practicing principals in their own state and system.⁴⁰ All of these approaches seek to provide professional development for principals of a higher quality and at a greater scale than ever before. All are also new and have not yet been rigorously evaluated (see Ohio's State Standards for Professional Development).

Ohio's State Standards for Professional Development

Ohio Governor Bob Taft convened the Governor's Commission on Teaching Success in November 2001. Governor Taft charged the commission with improving the recruitment, preparation, and professional development of teachers and building the capacity of principals to provide instructional leadership and support quality teaching. In February 2003, the commission released its final report, *Achieving More: Quality Teaching, School Leadership, Student Success*. Among the report's major recommendations are to increase the accountability of teacher and principal preparation programs based on the performance of their graduates and to expand opportunities for qualified individuals to become teachers and principals through alternative routes. On professional development, the report recommends that Ohio adopt statewide standards for professional development and better align the state's regional service agencies' professional development activities with the new state standards. The governor's office is reviewing the commission's recommendations in anticipation of future policy action.

Recommendations for Governors

Principals are crucial to states as they address the many and varied provisions of NCLB. The central goal for states should be on producing high-quality school leaders and getting these leaders into the neediest schools. This will require governors and other state policymakers to do more than create new and innovative programs. They will also need to take immediate and long-term actions to improve the entire system of leadership development in their state.

Reform Licensure Systems

Immediate Action: Remove barriers for talented individuals to enter the profession.

Rigid rules requiring three or more years of teaching experience should be replaced with more flexible provisions that allow candidates to share evidence of teaching, leadership, or youth development experience that makes them promising principal candidates. This evidence could be provided via a portfolio or through assessments that simulate the kinds of leadership tasks that principals must master. Preparation programs should be given the discretion to admit promising potential leaders with varying professional backgrounds. States should require preparation for licensure candidates but afford flexibility in the scope, design, and delivery of these programs.

Long-Term Action: Develop a tiered, performance-based licensure system.

States should develop systems that require candidates to show evidence of their skills and on-the-job performance to renew their license. Such efforts should build on tiered licensure systems that exist in **Kentucky, Louisiana, Ohio**, and other states. Under one model, principals would earn an "initial" license after completing an approved preparation program with the expectation that they would apply for an "advanced" license after a set period on the job (e.g., three to four years). Performance assessments would need to be developed at both the initial and advanced levels. These assessments could also be used to enable candidates to demonstrate their skills at any time during their

professional careers, potentially accelerating the licensure process for some and opening the profession to others who possess the demonstrated competencies.

States should also work with districts to tie salary schedules and compensation to advanced licensure. These changes should seek to factor in pay differentials for highly skilled principals who agree to work in the neediest schools. They should also limit raises for teachers who earn advanced degrees to teachers who obtain a master's degree in a content area or an area directly relevant to their classroom and school responsibilities.

Improve Preparation Programs

Immediate Action: *Allow and develop alternative principal preparation programs.*

States should encourage school districts, nonprofit organizations, and others to develop new high-quality preparation programs. States can develop new programs in partnership with school districts or work with national organizations with experience in this area, such as New Leaders for New Schools (www.nlms.org) and the National Institute for School Leadership (www.nislonline.org). States should also reach out to deans and presidents to encourage the redesign of university-based programs, where necessary. In all cases, programs should offer rigorous and relevant training in an accelerated fashion and with strong links to schools and practitioners. New program efforts can potentially be funded through Title II of NCLB, the Teacher and Principal Quality Training and Recruiting Fund, which provides grants to states for activities that “establish, expand, or improve alternative routes” for the training of principals.

Long-Term Action: *Hold all preparation programs accountable for performance.*

States should revise their accreditation systems to incorporate program quality and performance indicators in their reviews, including evidence of the preparation program's impact on student learning. They can call on preparation program faculty and others to help develop program quality and performance standards that build on ELCC and other available leadership standards.⁴¹ Once standards are in place, states can conduct benchmarking audits of all programs to assess strengths and weaknesses and identify improvements needed to meet the standards. States can follow these program reviews with targeted technical assistance to help programs improve. After this assistance period, states could reaccredit programs based on the new standards and potentially close poor performers. States should hold all providers—universities, school districts, nonprofit organizations, and others—to these performance standards.

Enhance Principal Professional Development

Immediate Action: *Use the provisions of NCLB to assess the professional development practices of low-performing districts.*

Federal law requires low-performing districts to develop plans to address the professional development needs of their teachers and principals and allocate not less than 10 percent of Title I funds to improve professional development practices.⁴² States should use these plans to ensure districts develop systemic strategies for instructional improvement that include high-quality professional development for practicing principals. Such a process can encourage districts to use professional development models that build principal capacity and potentially reduce teacher and leader turnover.

Long-Term Action: *Develop a system of professional development for principals that is linked to national standards.*

Policymakers should adopt or adapt National Staff Development Council (www.nsdc.org) standards to bring coherence to the diverse provision of principal professional development in their state. The

standards provide a research-based guide to assess the organization, design, and delivery of professional development by existing providers. States should hold all providers—vendors, regional service centers, and school districts—to these standards of practice. Once in place, states can further strengthen the standards by requiring providers to show evidence of links between their training and school change and improvements in student learning.

Conclusion

States can take steps to improve principal leadership development, especially in the areas of licensure, preparation, and professional development. Governors and other policymakers must act decisively and soon for states to grow a new generation of high-quality school leaders. By taking the steps described in this brief and by attending to the environment in which these school leaders will work, including pay and working conditions,⁴³ policymakers can achieve this goal and make important progress to improve teaching and ultimately student learning in every classroom in their state.

Christopher Mazzeo of the Educational Policy Studies Division, National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, wrote this *Issue Brief*. A grant from the Wallace Foundation supports the center’s work on school leadership.

¹ Philip Hallinger and Ronald Heck, "Exploring the Principal's Contribution to School Effectiveness: 1980–1995," *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, vol. 9, no. 2 (1998): 157–91; and Institute for Educational Leadership, School Leadership for the 21st Century Initiative, Task Force on the Principalship, *Leadership for Student Learning: Reinventing the Principalship* (Washington, D.C.: Institute for Educational Leadership, October 2000).

² This brief focuses on state strategies for developing better principals. Although some of its recommendations may be applicable to the development of superintendents and district personnel, the brief does not address these considerations.

³ Marguerite Roza et al., *A Matter of Definition: Is There Truly a Shortage of School Principals?* (Seattle, Wash.: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2003); and Susan Gates et al., *Who is Leading Our Schools: An Overview of School Administrators and Their Careers* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, 2003), 1.

⁴ Gates et al., 16.

⁵ Roza et al., 24–25.

⁶ Frank Papa, Hamilton Lankford, and James Wyckoff, *The Attributes and Career Paths of Principals: Implications for Improving Policy* (Albany, N.Y.: University of Albany, SUNY, 2002), 8.

⁷ Steve Farkas et al., *Trying to Stay Ahead of the Game: Superintendents and Principals Talk About School Leadership* (New York, N.Y.: Public Agenda, 2001), 23.

⁸ Larry Cuban, *The Managerial Imperative and the Practice of Leadership in Schools* (Buffalo, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1988).

⁹ Institute for Educational Leadership, 3.

¹⁰ Hallinger and Heck, 2.

¹¹ Tamara Schiff, "Principals' Readiness for Reform: A Comprehensive Approach," in *Principal Leadership* (Arlington, Va.: National Association of Secondary School Principals, January 2002).

¹² Richard Ingersoll, "Why So Many Under-Qualified High School Teachers?," *Education Week*, Vol. 18, number 10, 1998, 64; and Craig Jerald, *All Talk, No Action: Putting an End to Out-of-Field Teaching* (Washington, D.C.: Education Trust, 2002).

¹³ Richard Elmore, *Building a New Structure for School Leadership* (Washington, D.C.: Albert Shanker Institute, 2000), 16.

¹⁴ Penny Sebring and Anthony Bryk, "School Leadership and the Bottom Line in Chicago," *Phi Delta Kappan* 81, no. 6 (February 2000): 440–43; and Michael Knapp, Michael Copeland, and Joan Talbert, *Leading for Learning: Reflective Tools for School and District Leaders* (Seattle, Wash.: Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy, February 2003), 14–16; William Ouchi, *Making Schools Work: A Revolutionary Plan to Get Your Children the Education They Need* (New York, N.Y.: Simon & Schuster, 2003), 51–80.

¹⁵ Fred Newmann et al., "Instructional Program Coherence: What It Is and Why It Should Guide School Improvement Policy," *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 23, no. 4 (2001): 297–321; and Knapp, Copeland, and Talbert, 18–22 and 26–28.

¹⁶ Anthony Bryk et al., *Charting Chicago School Reform: Democratic Localism As a Lever for Change* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1999); Samuel Casey Carter, *No Excuses: Lessons from 21 High-Performing, High-Poverty Schools* (Washington, D.C.: Heritage Foundation, 2001); Knapp, Copeland, and Talbert, 22–25; and Schiff, 5.

¹⁷ Karen Seashore Louis and Sharon Kruse, *Professionalism and Community: Perspectives on Reforming Urban Schools* (Los Angeles, Calif.: Corwin Press, 1995); Elaine Fink and Lauren Resnick, "Developing Principals as Instructional Leaders," *Phi Delta Kappan*, vol. 82, no. 8 (April 2001): 598–606; Richard Elmore, *Bridging the Gap Between Standards and Achievement: The Imperative for Professional Development in Education* (Washington, D.C.: Albert Shanker Institute, 2002); and Knapp, Copeland, and Talbert, 16–18.

¹⁸ Frederick Hess, *A License to Lead? A New Leadership Agenda for America's Schools* (Washington, D.C.: Progressive Policy Institute, 21st Century School Project, 2003); and Thomas B. Fordham Institute and the Broad Foundation, *Better Leaders for America's Schools: A Manifesto* (Washington, D.C.: Thomas B. Fordham Institute, 2003).

¹⁹ Southern Regional Education Board, *Good Principals Are the Key to Successful Schools: Six Strategies to Prepare More Good Principals* (Atlanta, Ga.: Southern Regional Education Board, March 2003), 1–2.

²⁰ Papa et al., 13.

²¹ Standard salary schedules for teachers in school districts are based on a combination of years of experience and degrees earned. According to the American Federation of Teachers, in the 100 largest cities in 2001–02, the average minimum salary for teachers with a bachelors' degree was \$31,567. The average maximum salary with a master's degree was \$53,248. See American Federation of Teachers, *Survey and Analysis of Teacher Salary Trends, 2002* (Washington, D.C.: American Federation of Teachers, 2003), 50–51.