School Leadership Policy Toolkit – Frequently Asked Questions

The Center on Reinventing Public Education and the Thomas B. Fordham Institute developed this toolkit for state-level advocacy groups interested in improving school leadership policies. School leadership is key to making schools stronger and giving all students educational opportunities that prepare them to succeed in life. Attention has typically focused on teacher effectiveness; there is little discussion about the role principals play in ensuring educators work with the culture, tools, and support they need to provide high-quality instruction.

Here we address some of the most common questions about the ideas proposed in the policy toolkit and explain how they are good for principals, teachers, and students.

On improving the principal training pipeline…
Are preparation programs really the problem?

Researchers have been recommending that states raise standards and strengthen oversight of principal preparation programs for over a decade. Yet studies show that state principal policy is surprisingly uninformed by data: how many principals graduate from preparation programs each year, where they are placed, and whether they positively impact student achievement. Moreover, states are still woefully behind on making decisions about whether to reauthorize leadership programs based on key performance indicators, like the effectiveness of program graduates.

How can we fix preparation programs by adopting new state policies?

Far too many training programs are not providing rigorous courses, and as of 2013, only 11 states required preparation programs to provide relevant clinical experience, meaning most principals are still learning fundamental skills on the job after they've already been certified to run a school. This leads to a disconnect between how school leaders are prepared and what they actually encounter once they are hired at a school; districts and CMOs across the country report significant challenges in recruiting effective principals. States can raise the bar for what preparation programs must provide to principals in training, and ensure that programs demonstrate their graduates are consistently well prepared for the challenges of leading a school.

On evaluations…
How can we evaluate a principal's impact on school success when so many other factors outside of their control influence what's happening?

When it comes to in-school factors that influence student success, school leadership is second only to classroom instruction. In fact, highly effective principals raise student achievement by an equivalent of between two and seven months of additional learning each school year compared to the average principal, while ineffective principals lower achievement by the same amount. Plus, a great leader's impact is more significant in more challenging schools. It's clear that we need to be able to identify who the strongest principals are and make sure they're leading schools where students need them the most.

More importantly, research shows that successful principals are making better decisions and using their time more wisely. For instance, effective principals set high standards and create a culture that facilitates high-quality teaching and learning, leading to better classroom instruction and greater schoolwide gains. Good principals are likely to make more personnel changes in grade levels where students are underperforming. In short, many things that impact whether students and educators are more successful are within a principal's control, and we should evaluate principals on their effectiveness in these areas.

How should principals be evaluated?

As with any performance evaluation tool, it's always best to assess effectiveness using multiple measures. No single measure can answer definitively whether a principal is successful. Researchers who have studied different evaluation tools caution that when selecting or developing an evaluation, administrators should pay particular attention to the alignment between the role of the principal being evaluated and the model of leadership assumed by the evaluation instrument. For example, districts may want to evaluate principals who lead schools through a distributed leadership model differently than principals in a more traditional, single-leader school.

In terms of which measures to include, districts might consider observational measures that capture certain leadership behaviors known to impact student achievement. Since we know that principals can impact teacher retention as well, measures related to how well principals develop and retain effective teachers would also be useful. Finally, while states should choose specific growth measures carefully, value-added measures can be useful in driving improvement when the focus on student growth is used as a metric informing professional development.

On distributed leadership...
How do we know distributed leadership works?

When the objective of a good distributed leadership model is improving instruction, researchers have found that the professional community among teachers is strengthened and they are more likely to demonstrate instructional practices that are strongly associated with student achievement. Some schools and districts have a serious problem retaining their best teachers. One reason is that teachers often feel like they don't have advancement opportunities, particularly those that enable them to stay in their schools and classrooms. Distributed leadership eases the burden for principals and provides important opportunities for great teachers to develop and practice leadership skills while remaining a teacher.

The United Kingdom is far ahead of the United States in this area, having redesigned school leadership roles to create specific, substantive responsibilities for teachers at different levels within schools. And while it's true that distributing leadership might not work in every school, it has shown promise in practice where teachers are responsible for carrying out certain leadership practices and where the principal's role is aligned to fit this new model.

On empowering principals with autonomy…
Don't principals already have authority?
We know principals have a big job to do, and they know it, too. Less than half of principals surveyed feel like they have control over the things that are most important for them to be successful. This is not just a matter of perception: principals often do not have control over how to build and manage staff, even though it is one of the most important elements of principal effectiveness. As for school resources, principals often find their hands tied when it comes to how they can use their funding and encounter inflexible and outdated district procurement rules that make it difficult to spend quickly, efficiently, and creatively.

All of these issues matter: research shows that leaders in schools that have autonomy to determine their needs, goals, and programs do the best job of identifying approaches to change. Simply put, when effective principals have autonomy over decision making, schools improve.

On retaining our best principals…
Doesn't principal turnover have more to do with districts being underfunded and schools being too full of difficult students?
Principal turnover is a big problem. According to one study, over half of middle school principals and nearly three quarters of high school principals leave their initial school within five years. That's bad for teacher turnover and school stability, and the cost of churn is expensive for districts.

There are other factors at work beyond a tough job and limited resources. Compensation matters, especially when the difference in pay between veteran teachers and school principals can be small and not proportional to the increased responsibility and accountability. But often, principals are not prepared well and are not placed in schools that are a good match for their skills; a good 'fit' is a major factor in determining success, and districts need to account for this in recruitment. Once principals are on the job, they find themselves feeling isolated and hamstrung by a lack of autonomy over personnel and funding decisions because of local and state policies. So when faced with challenging environments, it's no wonder that many principals leave in search of a school that makes it a little easier.

Is retention just an issue of compensation? What can states do besides improve principal pay?
States can do a lot to improve retention of great principals: investing in leadership development, establishing peer networks, requiring districts to provide ongoing coaching, and removing barriers to autonomy—particularly for highly effective principals who agree to lead schools most in need of improvement. And when it comes to compensation, it's not simply a matter of increasing pay, though that's certainly helpful. States can ensure districts have greater flexibility on compensation, encourage districts to link increased pay to increased responsibility (promoting career advancement as well), and support districts that want to experiment with innovative models to keep the best principals at the schools that need them most. Finally, states should remember: small acts showing that principals are valued go a long way toward better retention; public recognition, like an award for the most effective principals, can have an impact.