



POLICY AND PRACTICE

Frederick Brown

THE RESULTS ARE IN: PRINCIPAL PIPELINES MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Intentional principal pipelines are feasible, affordable, and benefit districts, schools, and students in tangible ways. That's the key takeaway from the results of The Wallace Foundation's six-year Principal Pipeline Initiative, an effort to help districts strengthen and make more systemic principal preparation, hiring, development, evaluation, and ongoing professional learning.

Although it may be hard to imagine now, this was not a forgone conclusion. Those of us who have been engaged with The Wallace Foundation or school leadership for the last decade recognize that this was the result of many years of work by educators and researchers alike.

In the mid- to late 2000s, I was a senior program officer at Wallace during a period the foundation often refers to as its first-generation leadership work. At this time, school leadership was a relatively new area of study.

Wallace funded several dozen of what it called "leadership experiments" across the country with grants funding work at both state and district levels. Framing the work was a hypothesis that a systemic approach to leadership, with alignment of practices at the state and district levels, would result in stronger leadership in schools.

Grantees whose work I guided, for example, included efforts focused on master principals in Wisconsin, area education agencies in Iowa, and district leadership systems in Oregon and Ohio. From 2000 to 2010, The Wallace Foundation initiated 140 programs in 24 states and produced more than 70 research reports about the important findings and insights from the work.

Together, these studies demonstrated that principal leadership is a vital component of successful schools. In fact, according to one influential study, leadership is second only to classroom instruction among all school-related factors that contribute to what students learn at school (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Wahlstrom, Louis, Leithwood, & Anderson, 2010). Furthermore, this study found that leadership effects are usually largest where and when they are needed most — that is, in some of our most challenging school environments.

Studies also began to examine the characteristics of effective leaders and what it takes to develop them. Features that emerged include alignment to leadership standards; vigorous, targeted recruitment and selection processes to seek out those with leadership potential; training that prepares principals to lead improved instruction and school change, not just manage buildings; and high-quality mentoring and professional development tailored to individual and



LEARN MORE

The final report of the Principal Pipeline Initiative, along with previous reports, podcasts, and additional resources, can be found at: www.wallacefoundation.org/principalpipeline.

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district needs (Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, & Orr, 2007).

The questions that remained were: What would happen if a district implemented all of the components that had been identified as essential for strengthening leadership practice? What if these components were systemic and interrelated? In other words, what would happen if the full pipeline was in place?

Starting in 2011, Wallace's Principal Pipeline Initiative built on the previous studies to address these questions. The initiative funded six urban districts to focus on four key areas:

- Leader standards, or job descriptions, that spell out what principals need to know and be able to do;
- Preservice training that equips enrollees with the knowledge and skills districts need and is given by providers with selective admissions policies;
- Hiring procedures that are data-informed and consider only well-qualified professionals for jobs and make strong matches between candidate and school; and
- On-the-job evaluation and support that are high quality and linked to one another and that serve to help principals, especially novices, improve — particularly in bolstering instructional leadership.

KEY FINDINGS

Both The RAND Corporation and Policy Studies Associates evaluated the six-year initiative, and the results were published in *Principal Pipelines: A Feasible, Affordable, and Effective Way for Districts to Improve Schools* (Gates, Baird, Master, & Chavez-Herrerias, 2019).

Here are the report's three major findings.

1. The principal pipeline work is feasible and affordable.

- Each of the participating

DISTRICTS THAT PARTICIPATED IN THE PRINCIPAL PIPELINE INITIATIVE

Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, North Carolina
 Denver Public Schools, Colorado
 Gwinnett County Public Schools, Georgia
 Hillsborough County Public Schools, Florida
 New York City Department of Education, New York
 Prince George's County Public Schools, Maryland

districts was able to implement all of the components of the principal pipeline at scale.

- Participating districts spent about \$42 per student per year on pipeline activities during the initiative — a small amount compared to many other improvement strategies. The lowest-cost components were the development of leader standards and selective hiring and placement.

These findings are notable because the nature of large urban districts is that they are complicated systems where change often comes at a snail's pace. Seeing change at scale in a relatively short period of time is an accomplishment that is not only valuable but relatively uncommon.

2. Principal pipelines are effective for principal retention.

- Newly placed principals in participating districts were 5.8 percentage points more likely to remain in their school for at least two years and 7.8 percentage points more likely

to remain in their schools for at least three years than newly placed principals in comparison schools.

Research shows that when principals leave, teacher attrition and students are affected negatively (Béteille, Kalogrides, & Loeb, 2011), and it doesn't take an accountant to imagine the staggering cost of training, hiring, and supporting new principals and teachers in schools impacted by principal turnover. According to School Leaders Network (2014), it costs roughly \$75,000 to replace just the principal. Unfortunately, such outcomes are common: 22% of principals leave their job each year (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.).

When an effort like the Principal Pipeline Initiative finds a statistically significant decrease in principal turnover, it is newsworthy for any district seeking to strengthen teaching and learning at scale while also paying attention to personnel costs.

3. Cultivating strong principal pipelines is beneficial for students.

Although there were differences across the six districts, overall effects on achievement were positive in math and reading.

- After three or more years, schools with newly placed principals in participating districts outperformed comparison schools with newly placed principals by 6.22

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percentile points in reading and 2.87 percentile points in math.

- Principal pipeline effects were positive and large for schools in the lowest quartile of the achievement distribution — that is, schools where improvement was particularly needed.
- There were statistically positive effects of the principal pipeline on achievement in elementary and middle schools, and some evidence of positive effects for high schools.

Instinct backed by previous research had suggested to many of us that a coherent district system promoting strong principals would make a difference for students, but these results provide powerful evidence that such investments are indeed worthwhile.

WHAT DID THE DISTRICTS DO?

One of the strengths of the Principal Pipeline Initiative was detailed documentation about what each of the districts did to build the pipeline components.

The final report is complemented by, and best understood in the context of, a series of implementation reports produced by Policy Studies Associates. These reports, published from 2013 to 2016, detail both the struggles and accomplishments of these districts. The following findings help illuminate how the districts achieved the results they did and point to some promising starting places for other districts looking to improve their own leadership pipelines (Turnbull, Anderson, Riley, MacFarlane, & Aladjem, 2016).

Every district implemented leadership standards that served as the foundation for all the remaining components of the pipeline. Districts also strengthened their data systems to identify potential principals as well as make decisions about placement in schools. Over time, the districts developed longitudinal data systems often referred to as leader tracking systems. The districts used these

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systems to help keep track of a principal candidate's experience, performance, and assessed competencies.

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Districts also identified early on a need to change and support the role of assistant principals. As a result of their improved principal preparation programs and structures, many districts had more candidates than they would need to fill principal vacancies. Therefore, they developed strategies to redefine the assistant principal's role and support those leaders.

Each district strengthened evaluation and support for principals. One common strategy was aligning evaluation rubrics to the leadership standards the districts developed at the outset. Strengthening the role of the principal supervisor was another common strategy, leading Wallace to create a separate initiative focused on that role.

LEARNING IN STAGES

For Learning Forward, one of the particularly interesting aspects of this initiative is the way that participating leaders have strengthened their practice at various stages in their careers, not just at a single preparation point. The importance of these multiple stages is emphasized in and consistent

with Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2011).

Many of these districts worked hard to strengthen preservice experiences for principals to make sure aspiring principals' initial learning was aligned to district needs. And university partners paid close attention to using appropriate learning designs, as we outline in the Standards for Professional Learning, creating learning experiences that included active engagement, modeling, reflection, metacognition, application, feedback, and ongoing support after participants exited the programs.

Districts recognized that preservice experiences were necessary but not sufficient. However, many found ongoing professional learning for principals and aspiring principals to be a challenge. Districts struggled as they toggled between group professional learning and individual on-the-job support.

According to the implementation reports, many principals in participating districts reported that professional learning didn't always meet their needs and were often exercises in compliance. When it came to coaching and direct support, however, principals reported appreciation for their principal supervisors, particularly when those supervisors had manageable numbers of principals to support.

As districts consider addressing these professional learning challenges for principals, we encourage them to use the Standards for Professional Learning as a reference. The standards provide guidance for creating a professional learning system for principals based on individual and collective learning needs, resourced effectively, developed using best practices in adult learning, aligned to district leadership standards, focused on implementation of new practices, and evaluated regularly to determine if intended outcomes are being met.

We hope you'll explore the principal pipeline reports and share your insights and questions with

us and our partners at The Wallace Foundation. And we hope you'll join us in our appreciation for the districts, foundation staff, and others who have committed to long-term learning about strengthening school leadership and student learning.

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CALL TO ACTION / Denise Glyn Borders

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A beloved mentor, Floretta Dukes McKenzie, then the superintendent of DC Public Schools, urged me to get back into a school system. I spent several years in the central office of Baltimore City Public Schools in Maryland as an assistant, then associate, then chief superintendent, where I covered research, evaluation, assessment, accountability, and planning.

I saw then how few resources teachers had available to support their professional learning. But not until I moved to overseeing those same areas for the Department of Defense Education Activity schools around the world in 35 countries did I realize how it is possible to invest meaningfully in educators.

This system invested so much more in professional learning than I had seen before — 10% of the budget compared to 1% to 3% in domestic systems. The Department of Defense knows not only how to create a continuous improvement environment for young people and officers alike, but also how

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I believe in building bridges, pushing boundaries, making strategic connections.

Part of what has driven me to work in different kinds of education organizations is my early recognition of the importance of understanding multiple disciplines if our hope is to transform education.

In college, my degree was interdisciplinary, covering cognitive psychology and education. As a graduate student, I explored the role of sociology, anthropology, socio- and psycho-linguistics, business, and more. The learning sciences is different disciplines coming together to deeply understand how people learn and what teaching must look like to lead to

learning, and that's just what we need — we all get too siloed, boxed in our own worlds.

In my more recent jobs applying research and working in multiple centers, I saw the bigger picture more clearly. All learning flows from previous learning, and this has implications for how schools and districts align their professional learning with district priorities and how they make connections from grade to grade, building to building.

I'm thrilled to be in a position to make more connections — between research and practice, with funders and partners, from district to district. And I know my next learning experience will be with you. I look forward to hearing about your journey and what Learning Forward can do to support you along the way. ■