



## CALL TO ACTION

Frederick Brown

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## HOW CAN WE SUPPORT LEADERS OF COLOR?

**A**s we at Learning Forward continue to deepen our equity work, I have been reflecting on a troubling pattern I've seen throughout my career: Leaders of color, especially male leaders of color, are vastly underrepresented in schools and districts, even in systems with high percentages of students of color.

When I was a school principal in the 1990s, I was the only male principal of color in the district. Later, when I was a senior program officer for The Wallace Foundation, one of the superintendents I supported, an African American man, told me he was struggling and hoping to find peers to connect with, but neither he nor I were very successful in making connections. With little support to be found, he left the district — a sad ending not only for him but the educators and students he served. These are just two of my own stories, and I know that other educators of color have many of their own.

My colleagues and I at Learning Forward recognize that we have an opportunity to help change these patterns so that the proportion of leaders of color matches the populations of students they serve. We believe a systemic approach not only addresses quantity but also professional learning and policies at all levels to ensure quality and support.

It is vital to identify and tap educators of color who demonstrate early indicators of leadership potential. But it's not just a matter of getting people of color in the principal's seat — it's about supporting principals to be highly effective. Support means helping leaders build their skills, learn from peers, and navigate the challenges.

It also means being their champions and advocates, because implicit bias and racism are alive and well. I'm often reminded of a principal who told me that leaders of color, like him, have to be twice as effective as their white colleagues to “stand up to the pushback we get for trying to do the same job as anyone else.” They should not have to face those challenges alone.

To guide this work, we can look to The Wallace Foundation's deep investment in understanding and developing principal pipelines. After working intensively with six districts and eventually scaling its efforts to more than 90 districts, the Foundation identified seven domains of principal pipelines that can guide efforts to diversify and improve the workforce. (See box above.)

We recognize that these structures and systems must be fortified by policy. Education policies can set goals and aspirations for hiring and retention and establish incentives. They can also reinforce leadership standards and professional learning standards to drive effective practice.

For any of these efforts to be successful, they must be embedded in systems that drive continuous learning and improvement. If those systems are not in place, well-intentioned efforts become haphazard and default back to the status quo. Establishing a culture of professional learning is always the first step to growing leaders and teachers.

Investing in leaders of color is investing in equity for all students. Our communities deserve nothing less. ■

### SEVEN DOMAINS OF PRINCIPAL PIPELINES

1. Leader standards.
2. High-quality preservice principal preparation.
3. Selective hiring and placement of principals.
4. On-the-job evaluation and support.
5. Principal supervisors.
6. Leader tracking systems.
7. Systems and accountability.

To learn more, see [www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/pages/principal-pipeline-self-study-guide-for-districts.aspx](http://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/pages/principal-pipeline-self-study-guide-for-districts.aspx).