



**Strengthening school leaders to be supportive and highly effective is an important strategy for keeping strong teachers in our classrooms.**

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## CALL TO ACTION

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# INVESTMENTS IN PRINCIPALS ARE INVESTMENTS IN TEACHERS

**T**here's no doubt about it — this is a challenging time to be an educator. With the disruption of the pandemic, school safety concerns, political tensions about what teachers should teach, student trauma, and more, it's no wonder that teachers are reporting high levels of stress, burnout, and thoughts about leaving the profession.

Recent reports have presented contradictory conclusions about whether “teacher shortage” is the right phrase to describe what's happening in the teaching profession today. But what's clear is that our schools have an acute need to identify, hire, support, and retain more qualified teachers — especially teachers of color, whose numbers are far from representative of the students they serve.

More than half of schools in a recent nationally representative study reported that they are understaffed (Institute of Education Sciences, 2022). And while some studies suggest that large percentages of teachers did not follow through with their reported plans to leave the profession over the last year (Bleiberg & Kraft, 2022), we shouldn't assume those teachers are staying for long. Too many studies are finding that teachers are unhappy and overwhelmed (e.g. Hart Research, 2022; Steiner et al., 2022) — a fact that isn't good for anyone in schools, least of all for students.

The truth is that the teacher crisis is very real, but it's not new. We've known for many years that a crisis was looming, as fewer people have chosen the profession and enrolled in teacher education programs (McMurdock, 2022), likely for reasons such as low pay, stressful working conditions, and little public support, even before the pandemic. We can look back to previous research — as well as forward to emerging research — about the factors causing the crisis and how to address it.

In a prepandemic report, Learning Policy Institute researchers concluded that nearly two-thirds of the existing teacher shortage challenge could be attributed to attrition, driven by teachers' dissatisfaction with working conditions (Sutcher et al., 2019). Conversely, another study by that institute found that teachers are much more likely to stay in their schools when they feel supported (Podolsky et al., 2016).

In light of these findings, there are a number of factors we, as a field, need to address. But one stands out to me, because it is a necessary condition for all others: school leadership.

Logic suggests, and research confirms, that strengthening school leaders to be supportive and highly effective is an important strategy for keeping strong teachers in our classrooms. Leaders shape teachers' working conditions through the policies, structures, schedules, and other elements that they design and oversee. They set the tone and expectations for school climate and culture, which influence how adults and students interact and feel at school. They establish the conditions for high-quality professional learning and other forms of support that determine whether teachers' questions and needs are addressed and whether they have opportunities to keep learning and developing as professionals.

Likely for all these reasons, the Learning Policy Institute study mentioned earlier found that teachers value the support of a school leader even more than salary considerations. Teachers



also stated that the opportunity to collaborate with colleagues and have input on decisions in their environments — factors that are strongly influenced by school leaders — were also very important.

## HOW TO SUPPORT PRINCIPALS

Effective leaders who nurture and bring out the best in teachers are made, not born. The good news is we now know a great deal about how to develop and support effective school leaders.

Thanks to a major effort supported initially by The Wallace Foundation and researched extensively by RAND and Policy Studies Associates, we know that “principal pipelines” — systemic approaches to developing school leaders’ knowledge and skills — are a comprehensive, feasible, and affordable way to develop and support effective principals (Gates et al., 2019).

The research finds that effective principal pipelines include the following elements (Aladjem et al., 2021):

- Rigorous job standards that specify what a principal needs to know and do, which inform not only job descriptions and expectations but the design of preparation programs that train and place principals;
- High-quality preservice training;
- Selective procedures for hiring principals and matching them to schools;
- Aligned on-the-job support and evaluation, especially for those new to the job;
- Leader tracking systems that provide accessible data and information to be used for matching principals to vacancies, considering the representation of leaders from different backgrounds, identifying priorities for professional learning and support, and more;
- A principal supervisor role refocused from administration to honing principals’ instructional support skills; and
- Systems and capacity to support and sustain principal pipelines.

While we need a comprehensive approach to the entire pipeline, I want to call attention to a crucial part of the pipeline that is often overlooked: aligned on-the-job support and evaluation. These last few years have left building leaders feeling more isolated than ever, and principals need support in how to navigate all the challenges they’re facing. As the Implementation standard of Learning Forward’s Standards for Professional Learning reminds us, that support for principals should include mentoring and ongoing coaching (Learning Forward, 2022). It should also include opportunities to be part of a learning community of principals sharing best practices and strategies, as the Culture of Collaborative Inquiry standard reminds us.

When school systems invest in professional learning and support for principals, as well as the other elements of principal pipelines, they are also investing in teachers. That’s because well-prepared principals create solid foundations of support for the entire staff and school community. They also model the kind of resources and strategies that principals should implement for teachers.

Of course, principal pipelines should not and cannot be the only investments we make in addressing teachers’ working conditions and promoting teacher retention. But they are an important part of a systemic approach to the teacher crisis facing our schools.

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