

Autonomy and Empowerment of School Leaders

Why should states strengthen autonomy and empower school leaders?

The role and responsibilities of the school principal have grown more complex over the years. Principals are expected to shape the overall academic vision for their school, cultivate a culture of collaboration and excellence, and manage people, data, and processes to enable the school and its students to achieve at high levels.

Yet while it's clear that principals feel accountable for results, they feel they are lacking the tools and authority to succeed. According to the *29th Annual MetLife Survey of the American Teacher*, principals report that their authority does not match their responsibility:



As the principal role has evolved and become more demanding, states are recognizing that leaders need a wider array of tools and authority to be successful.

How are states hindering principals' ability to lead?

Lack of personnel authority	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> State laws mandating that seniority and tenure status drive promotions, placement, and layoffs hinder principals' efforts to build and maintain effective instructional teams. Overly burdensome dismissal processes make it difficult for principals to establish and maintain a schoolwide culture of excellence. Lock-step pay scales prohibit the use of performance and incentive pay that could attract and reward talented educators.
Inflexible funding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Restrictions on the use of grant funding often require schools to hire staff with certain qualifications or to purchase specific materials. Dedicated school funding is not protected. Districts are permitted to spend an unlimited proportion of K-12 funding as they see fit.
Class-size requirements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Class-size requirements hamper principals' ability to allocate resources to fit the specific needs of students and school programs.
Inefficient procurement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Overly burdensome procurement regulations can contribute to a risk-averse central office culture and cause both school leaders and service providers to lose time, money, and opportunities.

What can states do to empower school leaders?

Provide budget flexibility

- Remove detailed school-level staffing requirements and restrictions on how certain funds are used.
- Fund students on a per-pupil basis instead of funding programs, staff positions, seat time, or school days.
- Hold schools accountable for performance outcomes and measure progress in part based on the proportion of per-pupil funding over which principals have discretion at the school level.

Streamline the bureaucracy

- Reform procurement policies so that competitive bidding requirements do not pose disincentives to innovative partnerships.
- Model from the top—ensure state policies and practices support entrepreneurship and innovation and shift the culture from compliance to problem solving.

Strengthen personnel authority

- Eliminate barriers to principal autonomy—such as state mandates regarding seniority-driven decision making and inflexible salary schedules—that hinder their efforts to recruit and select talent, distribute leadership among top teachers, and remove ineffective staff.

Educate principals on their actual authority

- Make it easier for principals to distinguish between what is statutorily required versus what is common practice.
- Create mechanisms for principals to share innovative practices and collaborate on problem solving.

Learn more

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Model spotlight

In a study of northeast states, the Center on Reinventing Public Education found that **New Hampshire** provided the best policy climate for autonomy and innovation. Compared to their peers in other states, principals in New Hampshire face the fewest barriers to school autonomy, like learning time requirements and other restrictions on funding.

California recently revised its school funding scheme by eliminating many categorical restrictions and establishing an accountability system for how funds are spent. Schools now have more funding available for special populations and greater discretion over how to utilize state base funding.

Principals in **Colorado** and **Tennessee** are empowered to hire teachers based on their fit with the school team and to make other personnel decisions based on the teacher's performance in the classroom.