

Strengthening Principal Evaluation

Why should states strengthen principal evaluations?

Principals are the second-most important in-school factor related to student achievement. In fact, one study estimates that 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 ([Branch, Hanushek, and Rivkin, 2013](#)).

Principals are also fundamental to building and retaining great instructional teams. Highly effective teachers are drawn to and thrive under great school leaders ([Branch, Hanushek, and Rivkin, 2013](#)).

Just ask any teacher—a great principal can make a world of difference. Given their importance, it's critical that states support districts in identifying and developing effective school leaders. Rigorous, meaningful evaluations enable district administrators to do just that.

What do rigorous, meaningful principal evaluations look like?

Historically, principal evaluations have resembled fulfillment of checklists of various tasks and responsibilities. They are notable for their lack of alignment with identifiable standards and their lack of outcomes-based measures.

A better model for evaluating principals would be to use multiple measures of principal performance that assess the principal's impact on school climate and performance, and her ability to develop and lead a team of high-performing educators.

Method:

1. Standards-aligned, observation-based assessments by peers and supervisors
Carefully constructed subjective assessments like observation rubrics and school climate surveys of staff can be reliable indicators of principal performance.
2. School climate and satisfaction surveys of teachers, students, and parents
Including an objective measure of school-wide growth in student achievement yields valuable comparison data that, when balanced with other measures contributes to a holistic understanding of a principal's impact on his or her school.
3. Objective measures of student/school growth aligned to principal responsibilities
Historically, leadership evaluations have rarely aligned to standards or included outcomes-based measures. When selecting a tool, 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.
4. Constructive feedback and development
No evaluation system is complete without deliberate mechanisms for constructive feedback and development. Even the best school leaders desire frequent opportunities to reflect, learn, and enhance their practice. For struggling principals, these opportunities can provide the critical support they need to improve.

At minimum, such feedback opportunities should occur after each informal and formal observation. Development systems should be tiered to provide more intensive coaching for those principals who need it, and leverage the knowledge of successful principals as models for their peers.

Who is doing this well?

Several states have adopted policies requiring districts to develop and implement stronger principal evaluations. For a good model law on principal evaluation, policymakers might look to [Louisiana](#), [Massachusetts](#), and [Tennessee](#). Each of these states requires regular evaluations that rate principals across multiple tiers of effectiveness, utilize multiple measures of performance, and link to feedback and development.

While state law should require regular, comprehensive principal evaluations, most states will choose to leave the details of such evaluation systems—like which specific measures to use and their weightings—to districts and schools. Many districts, however, do not have the capacity to develop robust systems, however, and likely will look to the state for guidance. For this reason, states would be wise to develop a model framework that districts can adapt for their own use.

Learn more

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- Christine Campbell, Senior Research Analyst and Policy Director, Center on Reinventing Public Education
- Jody Spiro, Director, Education Leadership, The Wallace Foundation
- Susanna Loeb, Professor and Faculty Director, Center for Education Policy Analysis, Stanford University
- Karen Kearney, Director, Leadership Initiative, WestEd <http://www.schoolturnaroundsupport.org/collections/principal-evaluation>
- Heather Peske, Associate Commissioner for Educator Quality, Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education
- VAL-ED evaluation instrument: <http://www.valed.com/index.html>
- Tennessee Administrator Evaluation: <http://team-tn.org/evaluation/administrator-evaluation/>

Model spotlight

Many districts are now using the Vanderbilt Assessment for Leadership in Education (VAL-ED) instrument, created by Vanderbilt University. The VAL-ED evaluation uses a research-based, “learning-centered” design, based on the idea that a principal’s work should be centered on improving learning and ensuring that all of the processes, organization, and in-school structures are in service of supporting teaching and learning. It is aligned to the Interstate School Leader Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) standards.

VAL-ED works through the use of 360-degree feedback from teachers, principals, and supervisors, focusing specifically on leadership *behaviors* that relate to increasing student achievement. The behaviors cover six key areas:

- High standards for student learning
- Quality instruction
- Community connections
- Performance accountability
- Culture of learning
- Rigorous curriculum

Importantly, VAL-ED requires respondents to identify evidence on which they base their assessment. The model also allows for accounting of conditions that may impact how performance is measured (e.g., years in current school, grade levels in school, student body composition, and composition of staff at beginning of appointment). Multiple studies have confirmed that the VAL-ED instrument is rigorous, valid, and reliable. (VAL-ED Technical Manual)