

## Principal Retention – Advocacy

### Why should states focus on improving school leader retention?

#### Principal turnover is a significant problem

Great principals can have a tremendous impact on student and teacher success. But the job of leading a school has become increasingly complex, and surveys of principals indicate that they're feeling the pressure. Not surprisingly, principal turnover is a significant problem across the country.

About **50%**  
of newly hired **middle  
school principals**  
remained at the same  
school for **three** years.

Only **30%**  
of newly hired **high  
school principals**  
remained at the same  
school for **three** years.

In practical terms, this means *the average newly hired high school principal will not see their freshman class graduate high school* ([Fuller, "Examining Principal Turnover," 2012](#)).

#### Principal turnover has negative consequences, especially for high-need schools

- High principal turnover can lead to higher teacher turnover and negatively impact student achievement, an acute problem at lower-achieving and high-poverty schools.
- Frequent principal churn—whether from one school to another or out of the profession altogether—undermines efforts to produce sustained school improvements and to implement meaningful reform.
- It takes about three years to see the positive effects of a new principal; progress stalls during transitions between strong leaders.
- Replacing principals, including recruiting and onboarding, is expensive—conservative estimates put the cost at \$75,000 each—and it's not uncommon for large urban districts to replace over 15 principals each year.

Of course, not all principal turnover is bad; districts should use thoughtful recruitment strategies to replace low-performing principals with high performers. But it's unlikely that states can improve education for students without ensuring that the best school leaders are retained in the schools that need them the most.

#### Why do school leaders leave?

Although new principals at high-poverty and low-achieving schools often leave for opportunities to lead schools with better conditions, principal turnover occurs for reasons other than the difficulty of the job, such as:

- The role of school leader often comes with substantial on-the-job isolation.
- Local and state policies often limit the principal's decision-making authority related to personnel and funding.
- Principal compensation is usually tied to experience and education, as well as the size and type of school—but is not based on performance.
- The difference in pay between veteran teachers and school principals does not reflect the increased responsibility and accountability.
- Principals often lack meaningful development, coaching, and advancement opportunities.

## What can states do to improve school leader retention?

The most powerful policy shifts states can make to improve principal retention involve strengthening school leadership policies overall:

- Providing ongoing *evaluation, development, and coaching support*.
- *Improving principal preparation* substantially so that leaders are ready for the rigors of the job.
- Enabling schools to *distribute leadership* so that principals do not have to carry an ever-increasing load by themselves.
- *Empowering principals with the autonomy* needed to do the job.
- Collecting and sharing *data* so that districts and schools can mitigate turnover by planning for succession.

Compensation also plays an important role, and studies suggest that schools can raise student achievement by attracting higher-performing principals through better pay.

States should:

- Encourage districts to *link additional principal compensation to increased leadership responsibilities*, such as managing other principals, mentoring aspiring principals, and facilitating professional learning communities for rising leaders.
- *Establish a statewide model* of compensation and salary structure and/or an incentive fund for districts that pilot new salary and award structures based on effectiveness.
- *Publicly recognize great principals* with measures other than just compensation, such as a principal of the year award. Thus communicating that principals are valued improves retention.
- In addition to increased compensation, *incentivize highly effective principals to move to high-need schools* by providing increased autonomy around decision making, allowing strong leaders to bring their own team, and allocating resources for targeted professional development.

## Learn more

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## Model spotlight

**Rhode Island** awarded competitive grants to two districts in 2012 to develop and pilot performance-based compensation models. The Rhode Island Department of Education encourages other districts to learn from and potentially adapt these models through an information warehouse maintained by the department on its website. The website includes emerging local compensation models, useful research, and links to programs and other resources on principal compensation.

**KIPP** invests heavily in leadership development at all levels, including continuous learning opportunities, leader retreats, and one-to-one coaching. While these investments have a substantial cost (approximately \$150,000 per principal), KIPP schools see great rewards as well, including significantly better retention rates than the average charter school and nationally recognized impacts on student achievement. This model reflects three key components of improving school leader retention that states could incorporate into their efforts: supporting ongoing development, communities of practice, and one-to-one coaching.