

How to Use the School Leadership Policy Toolkit

Why a School Leadership Policy Toolkit?

Much of the education policy advocacy in recent years has focused on improving teacher quality. But too often, the ‘human-capital’ reform strategy has missed a key element—strengthening school leadership. Whether we’re trying to raise the bar for instruction or expand school options for parents, there’s little that can be done to successfully improve schools without strong school leaders. Yet not only have advocates tended to focus too little on this area, but state leaders have neglected it as well. Most states lack a coherent strategy for school leadership, even though it’s clearly a fundamental piece of the puzzle.

Luckily, this mindset is slowly shifting as advocacy leaders and policymakers begin to focus on what makes a great principal and how to get more of them in the schools that need them most. This school leadership policy toolkit is designed to support those reform efforts.

A review of the research and literature around school leadership policies reveals five key policy areas, around which this toolkit is built:

Pathways and Pipelines – How do principals become principals? What do preparation programs look like? What does it take to become a principal? How do districts and schools grow and recruit school leaders?

Distributed Leadership – How can teachers lead from within their schools? How can principals delegate some of their authority to teachers?

Autonomy and Empowerment – What authority do principals have to make decisions regarding personnel and budget? Are principals empowered to move quickly and flexibly to meet the needs of their students, educators, and families?

Principal Evaluation – How are principals evaluated by district leaders? Is their performance measured by multiple indicators of school success, including progress of students and staff growth and satisfaction?

Retention and Compensation – How are states and districts incentivizing the best principals to continue to lead? Do districts have the flexibility and tools to make school leadership an attractive long-term career prospect?

The school leadership policy toolkit is intended to assist advocacy groups in sifting through leadership research to develop a strategy for making improvements in their own states. We identify clear components that states should have in place, and models and experts in the field from which advocates can learn.

That's not to say there is a defined approach that every state should take. Improving school leadership demands a multi-faceted, state-specific strategy that considers a combination of state policy, state leadership, and district practice. In some instances, a change in state policy can work well to move the needle, for example by removing statutory barriers that prevent non-traditional candidates from entering the principal pipeline. In other instances, policy reform isn't the solution; rather, the state can provide guidance to districts and schools to help them address their long-term staffing, capacity, and programmatic needs.

What's included in the School Leadership Policy Toolkit?

An overview of the importance of principals and how their roles and time should be structured.

The five policy sections, which include:

- A brief review of the available research and findings you'll need to understand the policy more fully, as well as potential barriers to reform.
- An advocacy piece designed to communicate to policymakers and stakeholders why they should take action.
- Model policy, if appropriate.
- A list of available resources and experts for more information.

An illustration of how each of the five policy areas work together and interact with other state-level policy reforms.

A matrix detailing proposed state actions and policy recommendations for each policy area.

Getting started

The lack of a coherent strategy for school leadership in most states presents an opportunity to develop a comprehensive plan that both reflects the best research and aligns to other reforms being implemented (like new teacher evaluations and turning around low-performing schools). Ideally, the state department of education leads the way on the strategy development. But in some states, the department may lack the capacity, bandwidth, or the will to take the lead. In this situation, advocacy groups and stakeholders can play a more prominent role.

Every state needs an overall strategy (or combination of strategies) for school leadership. Questions to consider include:

- Does the strategy articulate a clear vision for school leadership in the state?
- Does the strategy identify existing strengths of the state policy environment on which to build, and challenges to address?
- Is the strategy data-driven and informed by research?
- Are there clearly defined goals and metrics to measure success of the strategy?
- Are the roles of the state and districts clearly delineated?
- Are there timelines associated with achieving those goals?

Be coordinated and comprehensive

Improving school leadership should not be viewed as something that can be solved piecemeal. These materials provide an array of options that can be tailored to fit the best path forward for your particular state.

But keep in mind that policies and actions are interdependent. That is, the impact of strengthening the talent pipeline will be minimal if new principals aren't supported and the best principals aren't retained over the long run. In order for a state to develop and deploy a strong corps of effective principals, its reforms must be coordinated and comprehensive in scope.

Determining needs and strategies

Specific needs will vary by state, but generally fall into three areas: not enough principals to meet *demand*, principal *quality* needs improvement, or districts and schools struggle with *retaining their best principals*.

- ***Not enough principals to meet demand:*** Districts should be planning ahead, not only for recruitment needs, but also for succession. Strategic planning recognizes not just the number of projected vacancies, but also the different needs among them (e.g., chronically low-performing schools need stronger leadership).
- States need to know whether existing pipelines are providing the requisite number and quality of leaders needed, yet principal supply should not outpace demand. Program diversity should reflect the diversity of district needs across the state, and states should utilize alternative certification routes to expand and enhance the candidate pool.
- ***Principal quality needs improvement:*** Principal effectiveness is a good indicator of whether a school can be successful in meeting the needs of students and educators. All principals, regardless of their level of experience or performance, deserve regular reviews and feedback on performance. Development and coaching options should be tailored to meet the needs of each principal. States can expand the reach of resource investments by tracking how they're used, creating flexibility to blend different funding streams, and linking outcomes to expenditures.
- ***Districts and schools struggle with retaining their best principals:*** Successful retention efforts maintain stability in school leadership and keep the best people in place longer. States should identify and provide support to districts that struggle with retention, as well as think strategically about improving retention statewide. States should also be concerned with whether effective principals are in the places most needed and whether they are distributed equitably.

Collecting the right data

By collecting the right data and aligning it to the right objectives, states can take action to address these needs.

Unfortunately, collection and use of good data is more of an ideal than a practice in most states. Using [the basic data categories](#) below, you can take stock of which questions your state is equipped to answer. Solving data deficits where identified should be a high priority.

- ***Number of current and projected vacancies*** by district and school type. (Are states and districts planning ahead?)
- ***Principal administrative data*** that shows for each principal: years on the job, years in current school placement, name and type of school, diversity characteristics, name of preparation program and year of completion, evaluation data, and movement pattern among schools and districts. (Are districts able to hire the right principals for the right jobs?)
- ***School performance data*** that can be disaggregated by type, region, and student demographics, and linked to principal and teacher assignment and evaluation data. (Are principals making an impact?)
- ***Preparation program data*** including information on candidate recruitment, where graduates are hired, graduate performance in the first few years in a leadership position, and the percentage of programs that serve non-traditional candidates. (Are preparation programs meeting demand and preparing high-quality principals?)
- ***Leadership development and support expenditures*** at the state and district level, including the percentage of federal Title II dollars spent in these areas. (Are resources for development and retention being spent strategically to meet the needs of schools and districts?)

Taking informed action

The table below brings the elements of the statewide strategy together—targeting needs and then identifying strategies that states can take, the data and measures that need to be tracked, and expected outcomes.

School Leadership Statewide Strategy Elements

Issue	Micro Issue	Action/Activities	Measures/Data Needed	Outcomes
Not enough principals to meet demand	Too few principals entering and completing the pipeline	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Work with districts to collect robust data and project vacancies more accurately and strategically - Make the principalship more attractive by strengthening compensation, autonomy, and training 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Vacancies collected and projected by region and school type (urban, rural, suburban, high-performing, turnaround) - Number of leadership preparation program graduates by region and school type 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Stronger data system and planning processes that help district leaders to address not only their recruitment needs, but also prepare for succession - More principal candidates apply for positions from local preparation programs, are matched to specific schools based on need, and are retained at higher rates
	Pipeline too narrow / barriers to entry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Create additional flexibility in licensing requirements - Establish additional pathways through alternative routes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Percentage of leadership preparation programs that allow non-traditional candidates to apply - Percentage of candidates who have applied and been hired by the state/district, disaggregated by race and ethnicity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Alternative certification routes that expand and enhance the candidate pool - Program diversity reflects the diversity of district needs across the state
	Hiring and training are not strategic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Eliminate burdensome state hiring procedures - Create clearinghouse for best practices in talent hiring 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Percentage of vacancies not filled within 60 days of start of school year - Percentage of schools led by effective principals (as defined by evaluation system) by performance level and student demographics (high-performing, low-performing, race, SES, ELL, etc.) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Principals are in place at their schools in advance of school year - Effective principals are distributed equitably across districts and the state

Principal quality needs improvement	Principal prep programs are not high quality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Develop accountability system for prep programs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Percentage of leadership preparation program graduates employed in the position of school leader within 2 years of program completion - Percentage of principals in their 1st or 2nd year who have been evaluated as effective or better - Leadership preparation programs whose graduates are evaluated as effective or better in years 1, 2, & 3 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Fewer leadership graduates are unemployable - Principals are prepared to succeed upon appointment to their post
	State and districts lack effectiveness data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ensure state data systems are collecting the information needed to track effectiveness over time - Require performance evaluations at district level that have a growth measure - Establish state-level guidelines, training, and default evaluation system 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Percentage of schools led by a principal who was evaluated in the past year - Percentage of principals evaluated as below effective - Percentage of students and teachers satisfied with their school principal, by school and district 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - All principals, regardless of effectiveness or years on the job, receive feedback to help them improve - Improvement in principal effectiveness can be correlated with growth in school performance, as well as student and teacher satisfaction
	Principals lack support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Require districts to link professional development to areas identified as needing improvement in the performance evaluation - Establish state information warehouse for development and coaching best practices 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Principals in need of particular supports by region and school type, as identified by performance evaluations - Percentage of principals who improve on their evaluations over a 3-year period 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Principals receive professional development relative to the challenges identified in their evaluation, and demonstrate growth in those same areas within 2 years. - Struggling principals receive greater support, and demonstrate growth within 1 year. - Turnaround principals receive targeted supports and resources, and demonstrate significant school improvement within 2 years.

Districts and schools are losing their best principals	Principal retention is a problem	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Make the principalship more attractive by strengthening compensation, autonomy, and training - Assist districts in creating growth opportunities that span the course of career 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Retention rates by district, school type, region, and performance levels - Percentage of effective principals who have been in their current school assignment for more than 3 years - Percentage of effective principals who leave their district, by district 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Districts demonstrate relative stability in principal tenure, and effective principals remain in place longer - Districts retain at least 75% of their effective principals each year
	Principals lack authority and autonomy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Eliminate mandates related to personnel rules - Reform outdated and overly burdensome procurement systems - Remove barriers to spending flexibility at school level 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Retention rates for non-traditional principals - Percentage of effective principals who leave the profession, by district 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The vast majority of principals report that they have the authority and tools to be successful
	Schools lack distributed leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Create state-level standards and certifications for school leadership roles at multiple levels 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Percentage of schools and districts that offer effective teachers with over 5 years of experience at least 2 teacher leadership roles or opportunities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Principals report that they rely on teacher leadership to assist with key responsibilities - More teachers gain new leadership certifications