

Principal Concerns: Leadership Data and Strategies for States

By Christine Campbell and Betheny Gross

To improve outcomes for students, we need to improve not just the quality of teachers, but the quality of the principals who lead them. Yet discussions about human capital and school improvement typically center on teachers alone. This is a mistake, as principals are a critical driver of school success.

When it comes to finding, deploying, and keeping talented school leaders, current state-level practices are haphazard at best. In the worst cases, they actually may be keeping talented people out of the job. States are only just beginning to address the weaknesses in their principal pipelines—and even then, they are not yet developing the strategic approaches necessary to truly improve the talent pool and improve student outcomes.

Some states have taken first steps toward improvement by tackling alternative paths and certification, but their plans are not comprehensive or driven by data, and there is still a long way to go. In addition, these piecemeal efforts may not result in a stronger principal labor market or get talented principals to the schools that need them the most. Instead, states need to first understand their circumstances. They need to analyze principal data to identify upcoming needs. Then they need to step back and look at a broader, comprehensive set of solutions that improve the job, attract the most promising candidates, and get them in the places that need them the most.

With the interest and assistance of more than a dozen key state education leaders and staff from across the country, the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) has been investigating what it would take for states to attract, deploy, and support a steady flow of talented school leaders. The time to act is now: We need strong principals to carry out federal and state education reforms such as school turnaround efforts and teacher evaluation. Every state has a shortage of great leaders, and in states with looming retirements that shortage will grow.

CRPE has created a set of materials that state policymakers can use as they get started in developing and supporting a principal corps for the coming decades. The *State Principal Data Guide* can help states be deliberate as they choose where to invest. States already collect some principal and school performance data; they should merge those to track high- and low-achieving principals and look for trends by location and school level. Most states don't know how many people graduate every year from principal preparation programs, much less where their best, or weakest, principals come from. States must begin to collect this information to determine where to expand and where to withdraw, and to make the quality options known to prospective candidates.

The needs, and the right solutions, will differ by state. States with impending retirements will need to recruit and prepare more leaders; those with a younger workforce will need to develop the leaders they have. Some states may have plenty of training programs graduating good candidates but no plan to get them into the neediest schools; others may not have enough candidates at all. Only by digging deeper can policymakers know where their needs lie and define their priorities. In order to create effective, state-specific strategies, policymakers should track these metrics:

Positions that might come open, tracked by school type and geography

- How many principals are between one and five years away from retirement?
- How many superintendents (who often get replaced by principals) are likely to retire?
- How many schools have shown perpetually low performance (and thus have principals likely to be removed)?

Leaders who might need support, tracked by school type and geography

- How many principals are in their first or second year?
- How many schools are in the bottom tenth and have shown little or no growth under a certain principal?
- How many principals are newly appointed to schools in the bottom tenth?

Outcomes of principal training programs

- What percentage of a program's graduates got jobs within five years of completion?
- What percentage of a program's graduates led schools with consecutive years of student growth?
- How many principals will successful programs graduate over the next five years?

Once states collect and analyze this data, they can turn to a set of guiding principles that should drive policy. The *Principal Pipeline Framework* can help states prioritize and adopt an array of policies that can attract and make the most of strong principal talent. The framework is structured around three conditions that must be met for high-quality supply to meet demand. The first focus is **the right work**: The principalship must be designed as an attractive job that challenges and rewards capable people. Second is **the right people**: States must draw the most talented prospects to the field. Finally, **the right places**: The best, most determined leaders should have incentives to take on the most challenged schools.

In combination with the data analysis, the *Principal Pipeline Framework* offers a set of comprehensive policies to meet these conditions. Some options are cost-free; some are high-impact and more expensive. Some policies will be easy to implement; others might be more challenging. The possibilities include:

The right work: Making the job appealing

- Provide autonomy over staff, program, budget, and pay.
- Support growth through professional development.
- Hold leaders accountable for performance.
- Ensure competitive compensation and career ladders.

The right people: Getting and keeping great leaders

- Limit credentialing barriers.
- Expand alternative preparation and certification.
- Find promising internal candidates.
- Attract promising external candidates.
- Ensure that human resources officials are open to different kinds of leaders.

The right places: Matching top principals with the schools that need them

- Set up a job clearinghouse.
- Provide pay incentives for working in challenging schools.
- Give an elite corps of experienced principals more autonomy.
- Expand the reach of high-performing principals.

Over the next few months, CRPE will release a series of *Principal Concerns* briefs that provide state-level analyses of the principal workforce in several states. These briefs—which begin with a look at Iowa—will demonstrate how an informed understanding of the demographics of a state’s leadership corps can help policymakers proceed with improving it.

With retirements on the horizon and strong leaders in short supply, states need to act now—and act thoughtfully—to ensure that schools, and students, have the excellent principals they need. States should pilot new approaches in the districts most interested in trying new things, and they should measure outcomes so that only efforts that work are continued. And any time states legislate changes in teacher policy, they should attend to principal policy as well. By doing so, and by making use of the data guide and pipeline policy framework, states can move closer to the ultimate goal: having every school run by an engaged leader who knows how to develop and retain talented teachers and, ultimately, improve student outcomes.

*This brief summarizes a more detailed report, **Principal Concerns: Leadership Data and Strategies for States**, by Christine Campbell and Betheny Gross (Seattle: Center on Reinventing Public Education, September 2012), which can be found at crpe.org.*

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