Six school districts are taking up the challenge of ensuring their schools have a supply of effective principals, and their experiences can point other district and state leaders to how to do it.

by Brenda J. Turnbull

Renewing the Principal Pipeline

The work principals do has always mattered, but as the demands of the job increase, it matters even more. Perhaps once they could maintain safety and order and call it a day, but no longer. Successful principals today must also lead instruction and nurture a productive learning community for students, teachers, and staff. They set the tone for the school’s academic focus and ever-improving professional practice.1

State requirements shape the role of principals. States set the standards for principal licensure and approve preparation programs. They also set standards by which school districts evaluate their principals.

Yet some principals still fall short, even when individuals, institutions, and school districts abide by these requirements. Perhaps it’s because school districts have to make hasty choices from the pool of available applicants, or they may simply hand a new principal the keys to the building and hope for the best. Or the best potential leaders may not be in the pool at all, having failed to pursue leader credentials. Or the preparation program that provided applicants with their credentials may itself be barely adequate.

Six school districts are taking on the critical challenge of ensuring their schools have a supply of effective principals, and their experiences can point other district and state leaders to how to do it. These districts are managing their principal pipelines intentionally: sending a consistent message about what they expect from principals, putting opportunities for advancement and learning in the hands of promising aspirants, and supporting novice principals on the job. If their work is to take hold and succeed more broadly, states will have to learn from it and support similar initiatives in their own backyards.

Urgency and Hope

With support from The Wallace Foundation, the six districts have participated since 2011 in the Principal Pipeline Initiative. They agreed to adopt and implement a shared set of approaches to standards-based preparation, selection, evaluation, and support for school leaders. Each district agreed to move fast so that many new principals could benefit within just a few years of start-up. These are the districts:

- Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, North Carolina
- Denver Public Schools, Colorado
- Gwinnett County Public Schools, Georgia
- Hillsborough County Public Schools, Florida
- New York City Department of Education, New York
- Prince George’s County Public Schools, Maryland

The foundation made a multiyear commitment to the six, which it selected in part because they had already launched some policies and practices consistent with the initiative design. The districts were awarded grants of $7.5 million to $12.5 million over six years, along with technical assistance supported by the foundation, to expand and improve on their existing practices and to build strong, sustainable policies and investments in school leadership.

By giving financial and technical help to districts that were already working on school leadership, Wallace hoped to support, study, and disseminate best practices in developing, selecting, and supporting school leaders.

The initiative reflects a comprehensive strategy for advancing districts’ priorities by strengthening school leadership in four mutually reinforcing domains of policy and practice:

- leader standards to which sites align job descriptions, preparation, selection, evaluation, and support;
Nevertheless, there are ways for any district to apply the lessons from these districts. In this article, I highlight adaptations that would be workable for small districts and at modest cost. I also emphasize state policies and supports that can help districts of all sizes and types in building stronger principal leadership.

Standards for School Leadership

Each district crafted statements about the competencies school principals should have. Because the districts actually used these leadership standards, they proved to be a powerful policy instrument, shaping job descriptions, curricula of preparation programs, and the assessments and support systems for aspiring and novice principals.

State standards for principals influenced the districts and were incorporated. But in addition, the districts took steps to build awareness, understanding, and credibility of the standards through broad-based discussion of the competencies that could best define the job of principal. “We want all of us to speak the same language” about school leadership, a Gwinnett County administrator said.

Hillsborough County, for example, engaged a 20-member committee of principals and assistant principals to develop and refine school leader standards and competencies and then asked all principals and assistant principals to vet the competencies. In 2014, a Hillsborough County administrator described the competencies this way:

The competencies drive everything we do. Every training we have, you’re going to see the competencies slide at the beginning, what competencies are we focusing on…. Every principal and assistant principal has a learning plan, where they sat down with their supervisor and created goals based on our competencies. It’s the language that is now being used across the district.

As evaluators of the Principal Pipeline Initiative, a team from Policy Studies Associates has studied the districts’ work since 2011. The evaluation is not finished: along with our evaluation partners at RAND, we will continue to study it for the next several years; a final report in 2018 will examine the initiative’s impact on schools and student achievement. At this point, we know that districts are excited about several changes they are making, although the ultimate results are not yet known.

The evaluation team uses data from onsite interviews with administrators in district central offices and partner organizations; surveys and focus groups of novice principals and aspiring principals; and documents including the districts’ proposals, work plans, and progress reports. Three reports have presented the findings to date.

Despite its interim stage, the initiative has already produced ideas about reshaping school leadership. To be sure, these districts are not typical. They are large, and foundation support has bolstered their already high capacity.

They had seen novice principals flounder, despite having the right qualifications on paper.
Partnerships with preparation programs reportedly benefited from a structured approach for program assessment called the Quality Measures for Education Leadership Systems and Programs. Designed by Education Development Center with Wallace support, Quality Measures addresses program components associated with effective leader preparation: course content and pedagogy, clinical practice, recruitment and selection, and three components related to graduate performance outcomes (knowledge, skills, and competencies; responsiveness to market demand; and impact on school, teacher, and student performance).  

Leaders of programs in districts and partner organizations gathered evidence on the extent to which their programs met criteria in each of the Quality Measures components. At each site, program representatives then met with district staff and Quality Measures facilitators to review and rate evidence. This analysis revealed that districts and providers needed better tracking systems to determine graduates’ employment status. Another discovery was that many program leaders welcomed a collaborative look at their preparation programs.

**What a state can do:** States can officially recognize preparation programs whose curricula are well aligned with state leadership standards. States can examine the current state standards for principals, adopt or adapt the revised Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium Standards, scheduled for release in fall 2015, and ensure that the wording reflects state priorities and will give actionable guidance both to preparation programs and to districts. States can also align principal licensure requirements and evaluation criteria to the standards and encourage districts to elaborate on the core state standards so as to serve local needs and priorities effectively.

**Preservice Leader Preparation**

The Principal Pipeline Initiative design called for a strong district role in the preservice preparation of aspiring leaders. The districts enlarged their role by operating their own formal preparation programs and by seeking greater influence over preparation programs in nearby universities or nonprofit organizations. In all cases, they wanted to ensure that programs for aspiring leaders would reflect their district standards and offer robust opportunities to practice leadership skills on the job with guidance from mentors.

By 2013, five of the six districts operated their own programs for sitting assistant principals who were promising candidates for the principalship. Top district leaders spent time with the cohort of participants, and sitting principals served as mentors. Denver and Prince George’s County each added a new district-run program; Gwinnett County, Hillsborough County, and New York City sought to improve existing programs.

All the districts also deepened working relationships with nearby universities and alternative programs that prepared school leaders. Charlotte-Mecklenburg actively selected participants for programs at nearby universities and collaborated to shape the curriculum. Prince George’s County worked with each of several nearby universities to start a specialized preparation program.

What a district can do: Whether or not a district finds it feasible to operate a full-fledged preparation program on its own, it can ensure that professional learning for aspiring principals, teacher leaders, instructional coaches, or assistant principals reflects established standards and expectations. Further, it can ensure that nearby universities have up-to-date district job descriptions and hiring criteria for principals and information about their graduates’ track records. If there are preparation providers whose graduates usually fail to qualify for principal jobs, a district can alert the providers about this issue and then inform its teachers.

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Principal Hiring and Placement

The six districts were not content to wait for good applicants to show up when a vacancy arose but instead cultivated promising future leaders and set up multiple stages of leadership selection. Every district introduced standards-based assessments for those seeking to qualify as principals, and the assessments mattered, often opening or closing the door to advancement. Assessment procedures in all districts as of 2014 included practical demonstrations, typically with simulated scenarios, carried out over a day or more. Activities included the following:

- **Role play.** The candidate takes the role of principal in a difficult semiscripted scenario, such as addressing an angry parent or teacher.
- **In-basket exercise.** The candidate prioritizes and addresses multiple tasks and messages that might arrive.
- **School data review.** The candidate receives a package of school data to analyze, discuss, and address in recommendations for data-informed improvement.
- **Teacher observation and feedback.** The candidate observes a video of teacher instruction and then enacts or describes feedback for the teacher.

Every district assembled a pool of individuals who had performed well on the assessments and could be considered for principal jobs. The process of creating talent pools had two reported benefits, according to district leaders: It streamlined the process of filling vacancies by limiting the number of applications, and it produced stronger applicants.

Succession planning for schools engaged top-level district leaders. In Denver, for example, top leaders began identifying and discussing anticipated vacancies in the fall, and they actively encouraged districtwide identification of potential school leaders who should be encouraged to seek promotions or further preparation.

For leaders in these large districts, knowing potential principals well presented a challenge. Therefore the districts organized their human capital data into individual longitudinal records to provide accessible candidate profiles. These leader tracking systems capture data on potential leaders’ experience, performance, and assessed competencies.

Districts aspired to develop systems that let them use many kinds of data in hiring and placement, including applicants’ evaluation scores when they were teachers and assistant principals, experience with particular types of schools and students, language skills, performance on selection and exit assessments in preparation programs, and measured competencies related to instruction and leadership. Thus, for example, district leaders might look

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**Box 1. Principal Support in Charlotte-Mecklenburg**

Charlotte-Mecklenburg’s sequence illustrates the interplay of internal and external sources of support for novice principals:

- First- and second-year principals were matched with a district staff member called a consultant coach, who met with and advised principals in small groups.
- Second-year principals participated in the National SAM Innovation Project, a program in which coaches work with principals on time management and instructional leadership.
- Third-year principals participated in the Executive Leadership Institute at Queens University of Charlotte, NC. A collaboration between the university’s education and business schools, the program trained principals on leadership styles and organizational change.
- Fourth-year principals participated in the Innovation Institute of the nonprofit McColl Center for Art and Innovation, which focused on innovation for leaders from a variety of backgrounds.
- A fifth-year capstone experience through a local consulting firm, the Center for Intentional Leadership, rounded out the support sequence.
for a candidate who had experience in particular grade levels or with English learners whose competencies matched the needs of the school.

**What a district can do:** Districts can make performance tasks part of the hiring process and test capacity for future leadership by giving potential leaders the chance to demonstrate skills within their current schools. Districts also can organize human capital data into individual, longitudinal records, whether these records are securely stored in sophisticated databases or simple spreadsheets. They can determine specific experiences and leadership strengths of teachers or others who aspire to leadership.

**What a state can do:** States can support districts with technical assistance in finding or developing performance tasks for the hiring process. If feasible, they also can organize state-level educator data to permit tracking of credentials and career experiences over time and within and across districts, and they can make data available as appropriate for identification and selection of principals.

**Principal Evaluation and Support**

The six districts built capacity for leader evaluation and support as they piloted, revised, scaled, and refined new procedures. In 2014, principal evaluation in each of the six included measures of student performance and supervisor ratings related to standards-based criteria. Refining a set of evaluation criteria aligned with standards was not simple; it required multiple rounds of clarification and supervisor preparation. Each district contracted with or employed coaches or mentors for novice principals. More than four of every five principals reported that mentor support addressed their needs and helped them develop action plans to meet goals, according to a 2014 survey of all principals in their first three years in the six districts.\(^5\)

Charlotte-Mecklenburg organized its principal support into a multiple-year sequence (see box).

In support, as in hiring, district leaders saw the potential of the data in the leader tracking system. They said that individual leaders’ assessed competencies should, and eventually could, drive the differentiation of support.

**What a district can do:** Districts that want to change their principal evaluation can start with a pilot phase that allows everyone to learn and fine-tune the system. Districts can find a knowledgeable mentor or coach for each new principal. If a district is large enough to have many new principals, it can plan a structured program of induction support, but with or without such a program, it can help new principals find the right professional learning opportunities.

**What a state can do:** States can align principal evaluation requirements with state standards and then give districts time and support to learn the system and make it work for them.

States can support statewide learning opportunities for new principals and facilitate cross-district principal mentoring for small districts.

**Conclusion**

As the Principal Pipeline Initiative and its evaluation continue, the research will reveal more about how districts can build thoughtful, effective systems to strengthen school leadership. For now, the participating districts’ experiences suggest approaches worth exploring. According to district leaders, the changes described here have helped them make better-informed hiring decisions and have helped aspiring and novice principals learn and practice skills of instructional leadership. To scale up to districts of all sizes, state leadership will be a crucial source of support.


3Interview with evaluation team, April 2104.


5Turnbull et al., Districts Taking Charge of the Principal Pipeline.