



# Leadership Matters

**What the Research Says  
About the Importance of  
Principal Leadership**



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NASSP (National Association of Secondary School Principals) is the leading organization of and national voice for middle level and high school principals, assistant principals, and all school leaders from across the United States and 36 countries around the world. The association provides research-based professional development and resources, networking, and advocacy to build the capacity of middle level and high school leaders to continually improve student performance. Reflecting its long-standing commitment to student leadership development as well, NASSP administers the National Honor Society, National Junior Honor Society, National Elementary Honor Society, and National Association of Student Councils. For more information about NASSP, visit [www.nassp.org](http://www.nassp.org).



### **National Association of Elementary School Principals**

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Established in 1921, the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) is the leading national association representing the nation's elementary and middle school principals in the United States, Canada, and overseas. NAESP believes principals are primary catalysts for creating lasting foundations for learning in their commitment to all children. NAESP hosts the Federal Relations Network and develops policy to advance the principals' profession at the national level. In addition to advocating for sound policies in pre-K-3 alignment, principal preparation and evaluation, and building the capacity of new principals, the association provides a variety of high-quality and targeted professional development programs, including mentoring for early-career principals.



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**G**reat schools do not exist apart from great leaders. NASSP and NAESP have always asserted this reality with confidence, but the past few years have provided volumes of high-quality research that confirm it. More importantly, recent research by the Wallace Foundation and other groups has brought into focus the behaviors and priorities of effective principals and the measured impact of principal leadership on student learning. This document compiles the research and makes a compelling case that, as the title suggests, leadership matters.

Unfortunately, our priorities have not yet caught up to the research. Principal development remains a low priority in most education policy agendas. The recent round of NCLB waivers prompted a rush to create new principal evaluation tools, most of which emphasize test scores over capacity building. And we continue to receive reports of principal preparation programs that fail to graduate principals with the skills necessary to lead schools in the 21st century. With all we now know about effective leadership, we can no longer make excuses for inadequate preparation and development.

For our two organizations, representing the nation's 100,000-plus principals and assistant principals, this document is a platform to reinforce to stakeholders the importance of the principal's role. And we invite all who read it to help us share that message.

Sincerely,



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# Leadership Matters

In today's climate of heightened expectations, principals are in the hot seat to improve teaching and learning. They need to be educational visionaries; instructional and curriculum leaders; assessment experts; disciplinarians; community builders; public relations experts; budget analysts; facility managers; special program administrators; and expert overseers of legal, contractual, and policy mandates and initiatives. They are expected to broker the often-conflicting interests of parents, teachers, students, district officials, unions, and state and federal agencies, and they need to be sensitive to the widening range of student needs. Although that job description sounds overwhelming, at least it signals that the field has begun to give overdue recognition to the indispensable role of and mounting demands on principals (DeVita, as cited in Davis, Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, & Meyerson, 2005, p. i).

This assessment of the importance of principals is echoed repeatedly by educators, researchers focused on leadership, and organizations concerned with ensuring that all students have access to high-quality schools. For example, a report issued by the Southern Regional Education Board suggests that "a principal can impact the lives of anywhere from a few hundred to a few thousand students during a year" (Schmidt-Davis & Bottoms, 2011, p. 2).

But—and this is key to understanding how a good principal supports high levels of teaching and learning—"it is neither teachers alone nor principals alone who improve schools, but teachers and principals working together" (Schmidt-Davis & Bottoms, 2011, p. 2). Principals are increasingly expected to lead their schools within a framework of collaboration and shared decision making with teachers and other staff members.

## Linking Principal Leadership and Student Learning

For more than a decade, the Wallace Foundation has sponsored rigorous research on school leadership. In a recent report, the foundation highlighted an important message from the research: "A particularly noteworthy finding is the empirical link between school leadership and improved student achievement" (Wallace Foundation, 2011, p. 3). The foundation said about this link:

Education research shows that most school variables, considered separately, have at most small effects on learning. The real payoff comes when individual variables combine to reach critical mass. Creating the conditions under which that can occur is the job of the principal. (Wallace Foundation, 2011, p. 2)

Researchers Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, and Anderson (2010) concurred with this assessment and drew from findings of a research project that spanned six years:

In developing a starting point for this six-year study, we claimed, based on a preliminary review of research, that leadership is second only to classroom instruction as an influence on student learning. After six additional years of research, we are even more confident about this claim. To date we have not found a single case of a school improving its student achievement record in the absence of talented leadership. Why is leadership crucial? One explanation is that leaders have the potential to unleash latent capacities in organizations. (p. 9)



Earlier findings from Louis et al. provide additional details about the link between principal leadership and student learning:

**Leadership is second only to classroom instruction among all school-related factors that contribute to what students learn at school.**

While evidence about leadership effects on student learning can be confusing to interpret, much of the existing research actually underestimates its effects. The total (direct and indirect) effects of leadership on student learning account for about a quarter of total school effects....

This evidence supports the present widespread interest in improving leadership as a key to the successful implementation of large-scale reform....

**Leadership effects are usually largest where and when they are needed most....**

While the evidence shows small but significant effects of leadership actions on student learning across the spectrum of schools, existing research also shows that demonstrated effects of successful leadership are considerably greater in schools that are in more difficult circumstances.

Indeed, there are virtually no documented instances of troubled schools being turned around without intervention by a powerful leader. Many other factors may contribute to such turnarounds, but leadership is the catalyst. (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004, p. 5)

**How Do Principals Affect Student Learning?**

Discussions about the scope of the principal’s job too often focus on a to-do list: helping teachers improve their teaching, using data to review and refine the instructional program, and ensuring that the school is kept clean and safe. The more abstract but very tangible elements of leadership, however, are often what spell the difference

between adequate and excellent principals. The research can address this aspect of the link between principal leadership and student learning.

Louis et al. (2010) offered a definition of “leadership” that is distilled from the essence of their findings: “Leadership is all about organizational improvement; more specifically, it is about establishing agreed-upon and worthwhile directions for the organization in question, and doing whatever it takes to prod and support people to move in those directions” (pp. 9–10).

In the executive summary of that report, the researchers said that “leadership effects on student learning occur largely because leadership strengthens professional community; teachers’ engagement in professional community, in turn, fosters the use of instructional practices that are associated with student achievement” (Wahlstrom, Louis, Leithwood, & Anderson, 2010, p. 10).

Other researchers conducted a meta-analysis that focused on the relationship between school leadership and student achievement. They also found that principal leadership is correlated with student achievement and that there were especially strong links between specific

principal behaviors and student learning. One such behavior was the extent to which the principal “is aware of the details and undercurrents in the running of the school and uses this information to address current and potential problems” (Waters, Marzano, &

McNulty, 2003, p. 4). In the view of those researchers, “effective leadership means more than knowing what to do—it’s knowing *when, how, and why to do it*” (Waters et al., 2003, p. 2, emphasis added).

In a recent report, the Wallace Foundation (2011) identified five key functions of principal leadership:

- *Shaping a vision of academic success for all students*, one based on high standards.
- *Creating a climate hospitable to education* in order that safety, a cooperative spirit and other foundations of fruitful interaction prevail.
- *Cultivating leadership in others* so that teachers and other adults assume their part in realizing the school vision.

*Achieving success as a leader, by virtually any definition, requires ‘doing right things right.’*  
(LEITHWOOD, 2005, P. 3)

- Improving instruction to enable teachers to teach at their best and students to learn at their utmost.
- Managing people, data and processes to foster school improvement. (p. 4, boldface removed)

The report identified an important qualification about those key leader functions:

Each of these five tasks needs to interact with the other four for any part to succeed. It's hard to carry out a vision of student success, for example, if the school climate is characterized by student disengagement, or teachers don't know what instructional methods work best for their students, or test data are clumsily analyzed. When all five tasks are well carried out, however, leadership is at work. (Wallace Foundation, 2011, p. 5)

A report from Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL) spoke to the importance of the vision set by the principal:

Effective school leaders know how to focus the work of the school on the essential. They have a clear mission or purpose for the school and identify goals that align with that mission. They communicate the purpose and goals in a meaningful way such that all stakeholders understand what they need to do. (McIver, Kearns, Lyons, & Sussman, 2009, p. 12)

Finally, a study of principals in high-need districts characterized most of those principals as falling into one of two categories—"transformers" or "copers."

The "transformers" [the more effective principals] had an explicit vision of what their school might be like and brought a "can-do" attitude to their job.... [They] focused intently on creating a culture in which each child can learn. Giving up is not an option. (Johnson, Rochkind, & Doble, 2008, p. 3)

In contrast, the copers were "typically struggling to avoid being overwhelmed" (Johnson et al., 2008, p. 3).

What might those principal behaviors look like in everyday terms? Let's look at two examples: the impact of the principal on attracting and retaining a high-quality teaching staff and the principal's need to focus on the "right stuff."

*School leaders improve teaching and learning indirectly and most powerfully through their influence on staff motivation, commitment, and working conditions.*

(LEITHWOOD, DAY, SAMMONS, HARRIS, & HOPKINS, 2006, P. 5)

#### **GOOD PRINCIPALS ATTRACT, SUPPORT, AND RETAIN A HIGH-QUALITY TEACHING STAFF**

Pick the right school leader and great teachers will come and stay. Pick the wrong one and, over time, good teachers leave, mediocre ones stay, and the school gradually (or not so gradually) declines. Reversing the impact of a poor principal can take years. (Cerf, as cited in Mitgang, 2008, p. 3)

Johnson (2006) agreed and viewed the principal as the "broker of workplace conditions"—someone whose "influence on the school as a workplace for teachers extends well beyond being in charge of the school" (p. 15). For example, a survey of 40,000 teachers conducted by Scholastic and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (2010) asked teachers about the factors that affect retention. This study found that "supportive leadership is the standout, top-ranked item" (p. 39). Other studies have made similar findings about the importance of leadership on teachers' attitudes about their working conditions:

- Using data from a study of North Carolina teachers, Ladd (2009) found that "school leadership emerges as the most consistently relevant measure of working conditions" (p. 29).



- In another study, Hirsch, Frietas, Church, and Villar (2008) found that “two to three times as many teachers who say they want to remain in their current schools agreed with positive statements about school leadership...than did teachers who want to remain in the profession but move to a different school” (p. vii).
- In response to a study conducted in South Carolina, more than one-quarter of the teachers identified leadership as the “most crucial working condition in making their decisions about whether to stay in a school,” and this factor was “significantly predictive of teacher retention” (Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement, 2007, p. 2).
- Maryland teachers emphasized the importance of school leadership on teaching retention:

School leadership was the most important condition affecting teachers’ willingness to remain teaching at their school. Teachers who indicated that they plan to remain teaching in their school were twice as likely to agree they work in trusting and supportive environments. (Hirsch, Sioberg, & Germuth, 2010, p. vii)

Finally, the importance of the school principal in making—or breaking—a teacher’s first years in the profession is highlighted in a report by the Public Education Network (2003):

New teachers working in schools run by principals they describe as effective and competent had a much easier transition into teaching.... Teachers gave high marks to principals who made it easy for them to ask questions and discuss problems, and those that provided them with assistance, guidance, and solutions. (p. 22)

#### **GOOD PRINCIPALS MANAGE THEIR PERSONAL TIME AND PRIORITIES TO FOCUS ON THE RIGHT STUFF**

“The principal’s job is complex and multidimensional, and the effectiveness of principals depends, in part, on...how they allocate their time across daily responsibilities” (Rice 2010, p. 2). Researchers Leithwood et al.

(2004) agreed: “Leaders’ contributions to student learning, then, depend a great deal on their judicious choice of what parts of their organization to spend time and attention on. Some choices...will pay off much more than others.” (p. 11)

Recent research is helping to better define what the right stuff might be. Many of the discussions about principal leadership have focused on instructional leadership—stressing that this should be the core of a principal’s job. But the definition of instructional leadership is evolving.

For example, in a study of Florida principals, Horng, Klasik, and Loeb (2010) found that, on average, they spent less than 10% of their time on functions traditionally defined as instruction (such as classroom observations and professional development for teachers). Almost 30% of their time was spent on administrative activities, including student supervision, scheduling, and compliance issues; about 20% of their time was spent on “organizational management.” In addition, the researchers found that devoting more time to organizational management was correlated with higher student achievement as reflected by test scores. In contrast, time spent on instructional activities was either not or only marginally related to student performance.

On the surface, these findings seem to undermine the argument that the principal is the instructional leader of a school. But it is important to first look at the types of activities—such as ensuring that the school is safe, managing the budget and other resources, and dealing with concerns from teachers—included in organizational management. Effectively addressing such concerns provides staff members and students with a well-organized, learning-focused environment in which to work. Thus, these recent findings “do not necessarily contradict the body of research arguing for principals as instructional leaders, but this new evidence does help nuance [*sic*] that argument by broadening the definition of instructional leadership to include organizational management skills” (Rice, 2010, p. 3). Grissom and Loeb (2009) conducted a similar study and agreed with Rice’s assessment:

Principals devoting significant time and energy to becoming instructional leaders in their schools

are unlikely to see improvement unless they increase their capacity for organizational management as well. Effective instructional leadership combines an understanding of the instructional needs of the school with an ability to target resources where they are needed, hire the best available teachers, provide teachers with the opportunities they need to improve, and keep the school running smoothly. (p. 32)

Effective principals agree with this assessment. Blase, Blase, and Phillips (2010) interviewed 20 principals who had been recognized by their state departments of education as a “high-performing principal of a high-performing or significantly improving school” (p. xxvii). These principals indicated that

effective administrative leadership provides a stable, predictable, and supportive foundation for a high-performing school...[and] that effective administrative and instructional leadership are inextricably intertwined and interdependent processes. (p. xxviii)

## What Stands in the Way of Effective School Leadership?

It is important to celebrate the principalship and talk about the positive impact that effective principals have on their schools. But the broader view of celebrating the principalship should include recognizing that every school—and every student—deserves such a principal. And the bottom line is that there are barriers to ensuring this happens.

Many principals feel that they have multiple, often-conflicting priorities and that not everything can always be done well. They have multiple constituencies—students, teachers, parents, school board members, and superintendents—and feel that they are always on call and must respond to the needs of those groups. Time is fragmented; principals speak of the intense effort needed to find time to focus on important issues when there are myriad administrative tasks that must be done. Often, they feel that the leadership aspect of the job is shortchanged.

Johnson (2005) interviewed principals who had

voluntarily left their principalships after serving from 2 to more than 10 years. Reasons provided by these principals for their decisions included:

- A discrepancy between the level of accountability expected of principals and the lack of influence they really have over many factors affecting school success
- A sense of being isolated when dealing with challenges
- A workload that sometimes seems simply not doable
- Preservice training that left them feeling unprepared for the challenges of the job.

*School-level leadership is most productive when couched within a supportive and consistent district-level leadership that sets the vision and expectations but is willing to step back and take the risk of allowing the principal of the school to lead with some autonomy.*

(AMERICAN INSTITUTES FOR RESEARCH, 2010, P. 5)

## THE DISTRICT-SCHOOL CONNECTION

The accountability-influence gap often mentioned by principals deserves special attention. A Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) project included interviews with principals about the district-school connection. Some of the principals viewed themselves as spending “time and effort finding ways to work *around* the district office to improve student achievement” (Bottoms & Fry, 2009, p. v, emphasis added). Another SREB report also addressed the district-school connection:

Plainly put, the problem is this: Districts...are failing to create the conditions that make it possible for principals to lead school improvement effectively. What happens instead? In some districts, administrators attempt to exert complete control over every phase of instruction and school operations. They try to own all the problems and enforce all solutions from the top down. In other



districts, administrators turn all the problems over to the principal, offering little or no sense of direction or support—just a demand for results. (Bottoms & Schmidt-Davis 2010, p. ii)

Principals who had been selected as turnaround leaders were asked by Mass Insight Education (2012) what they needed from their districts. One principal expressed a frustration that was echoed by others: “The system itself can be a huge obstacle. I find myself fighting with the people who were supposed to be helping me. That dynamic can be draining” (p. 2).

Louis et al. (2010) identified another key way in which the district relationship with principals is essential:

Not only do teachers need support to feel successful and efficacious in their work, the same is true for principals. We found that school districts are able to influence teaching and learning, in part, through the contributions they make to positive feelings of efficacy on the part of school principals.... Principals possessed of strong efficacy beliefs will be more likely than others to undertake and persist in school-improvement projects. (p. 15)

The researchers also found that “in higher-performing districts, central office leaders believed in their capacity to develop more effective principals” (p. 21). This translated into

a focus on specific areas of leadership practice (e.g., methods of clinical supervision, school-improvement planning, classroom walk-throughs, and use of student performance data). Leaders in higher-performing districts communicated explicit expectations for principal leadership and provided learning experiences in line with these expectations; they also monitored principal follow-through and intervened with further support where needed. This kind of supervision was not limited to formal principal appraisal procedures. Instead, gaps in principals’ leadership expertise were identified through ongoing monitoring and discussion with principals about school perfor-

mance and improvement plans, and through informal advising and coaching interventions. (p. 21)

In the view of Bottoms and Fry (2009), “the district leadership challenge is to move from oversight, from holding principals accountable at arms length [*sic*], to providing the capacity-building support that true district-school partnerships require” (p. vii).

*Finding practical ways to thoughtfully and appropriately assess and develop leaders can have an important impact on the quality of leadership, and through that, on the quality of education in our schools.*

(GOLDRING, PORTER, MURPHY, ELLIOTT, & CRAVENS, 2007, P. 1)

#### **OTHER AREAS OF CONCERN**

Other areas of concern relate to preparation for the position, principal evaluation, and the need for ongoing support. Work has focused on all these areas, although much more is needed. For example, Sun (2011) suggested that although most states have adopted the ISLLC (Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium) standards for principals, “support and evaluation systems for principals do not typically map back to these standards” (p. 6).

#### ***Preparation for the Principalship***

“Getting the right people to become school leaders is very important, but so is providing these people with the right set of skills to be effective leaders” (Christie, Thompson, & Whitely, 2009, p. 4). But DeVita (as cited in Davis et al., 2005) talked about “a litany of concerns about the quality and effectiveness of the leadership preparation” (p. i). She suggested that “what’s desperately needed, however, is not just another indictment, but a deeper analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of these programs and what can be done to improve them” (p. i).

Conversely, Mitgang and Gill (2012) see some positive movement toward improving preparation programs:

Over the last decade, there has been notable

progress in revamping principal preparation. Since 2000, virtually all states have adopted new learning-centered leadership standards. Some states are using them to tighten principal certification rules and compel leadership training programs either to improve or shut down. Roughly half the states have, for the first time, mandated mentoring for newly hired principals. (pp. 4–5)

Mitgang and Gill (2012) also pointed to progress being made at the local level: “It’s too soon to say for sure, but early evidence suggests payoffs for schools might include lower principal turnover and higher student performance” (p. 2). For example,

some districts, such as Chicago and Denver, have collaborated with willing universities to design better training for aspiring principals. Others, such as New York City, Boston and Gwinnett County, Ga., have formed their own training academies or are working with non-profit training providers to

create programs suited to their needs. (p. 2)

Finally, they suggest that both experience and new research on preservice training for principals provide direction for additional efforts to improve training opportunities. For instance,

- Aspiring principals need pre-service training that prepares them to lead improved instruction and school change, not just manage buildings.
- Districts should do more to exercise their power to raise the quality of principal training, so that graduates better meet their needs.
- States could make better use of their power to influence the quality of leadership training through standard-setting, program accreditation, principal certification and financial support for highly qualified candidates. (Mitgang & Gill, 2012, p. 12)

## A New Look at Principal Evaluation Matthew Clifford and Steven Ross

It is time to rethink principal and assistant principal evaluation as a process to build individual leadership capacity and school effectiveness. In 2011, the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) and the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) created a joint committee to develop a framework for principal evaluation that can guide the improvement of professional practice that leads to increased student learning. The framework includes six key domains of leadership responsibility that fall within a principal’s sphere of influence:

- Professional growth and learning
- Student growth and achievement
- School planning and progress
- School culture
- Professional qualities and instructional leadership
- Stakeholder support and engagement.

The following essential features of sound evaluation practices were identified by principals and are supported by research:

**Created by and for principals.** Evaluation should not be something done to principals. Effective evaluation system designs will be most accurate and useful when principals are active contributors to the process.

**Systemic support.** Performance evaluation should be part of a comprehensive system of support, including quality professional development, induction support for new principals, and recognition of advanced performance.

**Utility.** Evaluation results should inform principals’ learning and progress, regardless of summative ratings of practice. Each part of the process should help principals and evaluators create a holistic description of practice.

**Flexibility.** Principals’ relationships with their supervisors, schools, and communities affect their leadership. Processes to assess principal practice should accommodate local contexts, reflect a principal’s years of experience, be job-specific, and give supervisors sufficient flexibility so that a standard process used district- or statewide can accommodate differentiation that is based on principals’ work and grade-level responsibilities.



## Evaluation of Principals

Despite being a critical basis for determining who is an effective principal and for acting on those determinations, principal evaluation systems have simply not been a high priority for most states and local school systems. As a result, these systems do little to advance a powerful vision of principal effectiveness. (New Leaders for New Schools, 2009, p. 5)

The Wallace Foundation (2009) suggested that evaluation processes focus on research-identified “driver behaviors”—the “most potent behaviors that can promote better learning outcomes” (p. 5). In addition, the foundation pointed to another often-found problem: “inconsistent connections between evaluation processes and the professional development and mentoring necessary to help leaders improve once weaknesses are identified” (p. 2).

But there has recently been positive movement in regard to principal evaluation systems. In 2011, the

National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) and the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) created a joint principal evaluation committee to develop a framework for principal evaluation to be used as a guide for improving professional practice that leads to increased student learning. The framework includes six key domains of leadership responsibility that fall within a principal’s sphere of influence. (See sidebar below.)

In addition, a Vanderbilt University team, supported by the Wallace Foundation, has developed VAL-ED (Vanderbilt Assessment of Leadership in Education), a process that focuses on “six ‘Core Components of School Performance’—the ‘what’ of effective leadership—and six ‘Key Processes of Leadership’—the ‘how’” (Wallace Foundation, 2009, p. 8).

In a recent review of the principal evaluation literature as well as current practice, WestEd researchers also suggested that on a local level there should be a periodic assessment of “the alignment between the district’s principal evaluation system and the critical goals

### The Full Report

Excerpted from *Rethinking Principal Evaluation: A New Paradigm Informed by Research and Practice*, which was researched and written by Matthew Clifford, from the American Institutes for Research, and Steven Ross, from the Center for Research and Reform in Education at Johns Hopkins University. The full report is available at [www.nassp.org/Content/158/evaluation\\_report\\_final.pdf](http://www.nassp.org/Content/158/evaluation_report_final.pdf).

#### Accuracy, validity, and reliability.

Supervisors use evaluation results to make decisions about a principal’s access to professional development and continued employment. Consequently, evaluation processes must provide accurate, valid, and reliable information and gather performance data through multiple measures.

**Relevance.** Evaluation systems should incorporate widely accepted standards of practice so that results are relevant to the improvement of

principals’ current work. To remain relevant, principal evaluation systems should be routinely monitored and adapted to reflect the dynamic nature of the profession.

**Fairness.** Evaluations should be transparent, be systematically applied to all principals in a state or district, and place a high priority on outcomes that principals control rather

than those they have limited or no ability to change. Decisions about continued employment should rely on multiple years of evaluation data. In addition, effective principal evaluation systems should treat performance assessment as a positive process that strengthens principals’ capacity, not as a pretext for discipline.

Investing in principals is a cost-effective solution to achieving schoolwide improvements in learning. A solid foundation for evaluation includes the collaborative efforts of administrators and principals who

work together to design goals and target measures within each of the six evaluation domains. The evaluation process and feedback can be used as a formative tool for building a principal’s leadership capacity.

and needs of principals, the schools, and the district” (Davis, Kearney, Sanders, Thomas, & Leon, 2011, p. 33).

### ***Ongoing Support for Principal Development***

Although new principals in some districts or states have a well-developed support system, others still have to fly by the seat of their pants and feel that the culture is unsupportive. As Mitgang and Gill (2012) pointed out, “Getting pre-service principal training right is essential. But equally important is the training and support school leaders receive after they’re hired” (p. 24).

The NewSchools Venture Fund, a group that works with charter schools, has some common sense suggestions for ways to support new principals. The organization believes that a three-pronged approach that includes individualized coaching, a cohort emphasis on group problem solving, and targeted training for the needs of individual principals is essential to principal development. In addition, school districts should “be sure to protect time in the calendar...[because] if left to chance, the everyday urgencies of leading a school will crowd out development needs” (NewSchools Venture Fund, 2008, p. 21).

Hitt, Tucker, and Young (2012) address the issue of continuing development for more experienced principals. In their view, the foundation for this development should be ensuring that time is available for “reflection, growth, and renewal” (p. 11).

The content and focus should be individualized, with a tight link between principal evaluation and development opportunities. Finally, efforts should be made to provide development that is job-embedded.

### **Moving Forward**

“Given the impact school leadership can have on student outcomes, providing every school with an effective principal should clearly be among the top priorities” (Sun, 2011, p. 4). This challenging job requires ability, energy, and commitment, and school districts are often looking for people who can walk on water. But this attitude is part of the problem. More than 10 years ago, the National Institute on Educational Governance, Finance,

Policy-making, and Management (1999) suggested that “the real issue is how to structure leadership jobs and prepare people for them so that people who are proficient and committed, but not necessarily extraordinary, can succeed” (p. 8).

Mendels agrees and is also encouraged. In his view, “once an issue at the margins of school reform, boosting school leadership has climbed high on the policy to-do list” (Mendels, 2012, p. 58). The Center for American Progress (2011) sees both the federal government and the states as having roles in this process:

In the past, federal policymakers haven’t given school leadership much attention. This reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act should ensure that all 50 states develop definitions of principal effectiveness and next-generation principal evaluation systems that identify effective leaders based on student achievement and other rigorous measures of outcomes and practice. It should also ensure that states hold principal preparation programs accountable for preparing leaders that are effective in schools. While defining and evaluating principal effectiveness is not sufficient to ensuring strong leadership, it is a critical step to creating a coherent, statewide vision of effective school leadership that can inform other

policies. States will also need to use these systems to drive all aspects of their human capital systems—from certification to compensation to professional development. (p. 1)

“Some ‘leading’ states are recognizing the crucial role of principals and are beginning to understand their power to influence who leads their schools” (Cheney & Davis, 2011, p. 21). School districts also have a key role to play. Research “suggests that district policies and practices focused on instruction are sufficiently powerful that they can be felt by teachers as an animating force behind strong, focused leadership by principals” (Louis et al., 2010, p. 203).

Although there has always been the sense that

*The bottom line is that investments in good principals are a particularly cost-effective way to improve teaching and learning.*

(DEVITA, 2010, P. 3–4)



leadership matters, the actual behaviors and priorities of effective leaders are in clearer focus now than they have ever been. More important, the new understanding of the principal's impact on learning should motivate all policymakers and others with a stake in student learning to advocate for effective, ongoing principal development. Everyone shares a common aspiration for all students to attend high-quality schools. Yet, as the research definitively illustrates, that goal will remain out of reach without a similar commitment to high-quality principal leadership.

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