

Effective principal support What will it take?

District and state education leaders need to band together to support professional learning for principals wherever they are in their careers, from aspiring to expert.

Leadership matters – at all levels. The contributions of leaders in education are crucial to initiatives aimed at improving student learning. From research we know that leadership is second only to classroom instruction as an influence on student learning (Leithwood, *et al*, 2004). In a follow-through study, researchers noted, “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” (Leithwood, *et al*, 2010).

While some schools and districts have been making progress, many others continue to struggle. If we are to make sure all students are prepared for success in higher education and other post-high school ventures, an investment in principal development and support is essential.

How might we ensure that we have the talented leaders that the children of California deserve?

Together, we must increase our focus on developing and supporting educators who step up into leadership positions in

schools and districts. Universities, districts and other agencies across California need to band together to guide and support leaders wherever they work and wherever they are in their careers. Doing this requires a long-term, cross-organization commitment to collaborate on creating and implementing a formative support system for everyone, from those who are aspiring to be leaders to those who have become experts at their work.

What could this system look like?

From research and practice literature we already have a good picture of what effective site leadership looks like. Principal quality is broadly described through the California Professional Standards for Education Leaders and illustrated in more detail in the Descriptions of Practice. Though used statewide to some degree (in professional development by the Association of California School Administrators, embedded in administrator preparation programs, and used in some districts’ evaluations), the

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challenge is to ensure the CPSEL are used consistently and that they guide the specific leadership practice needed in every school.

An organizing frame for principal development is described in *Effective Principals for California Schools – Building a Coherent Leadership System* (2010). This proposal suggests a continuum of career stages with related system support. It recognizes that principals develop their capacity to successfully lead schools over the course of their careers in stages that are distinct and interrelated. These stages are aspiring (identification and recruitment), candidate (preparation and licensing), novice (induction), developing (continuous improvement), and expert (recognized accomplished practice).

As a starting point for the collaborative effort to establish a coherent leadership development system, consider each stage of the leadership development continuum described below against your current practices. What can you do to strengthen the principal pipeline so as to better ensure effective principals in your schools?

1. Aspiring principal – Identification and recruitment

There will be a need for new principals in California. In 2007-08, California's 14,474 school-site administrators ranged from 24 to 83 years old. More than 5,000 principals and vice-principals, about 37 percent of the overall administrator workforce, were between the ages of 51 and 60.

A report from the Regional Educational Laboratory at WestEd (White, *et al*, 2010), using projected retirements and changes in school enrollment, identified that the highest need counties are generally in the Central Valley and Inland Empire regions. While the counties in these two regions are expected to need to hire 46 percent of their 2007-08 workforce (or more than 2,200 principals and vice-principals) over the next decade, other regions in California will need to hire an average of 27 percent of their workforce.

Some veteran principals may move into areas needing school leaders. However, identifying and recruiting aspiring leaders with the potential to be effective principals is critical, and an important first step in building a statewide leadership development system.

With current licensing requirements, high quality teachers are the foundation for developing accomplished principals.

Recruiting requires attracting candidates who see themselves as being successful in the role of principal, and then identifying those in the pool who are – or may become – a perfect fit for the work. The recruiting process



includes both inviting and persuading skilled and experienced teachers to commit to administrator preparation and certification and additional leadership responsibilities.

Essential questions – Aspiring principals

1. What practices and structures do we have in place that support principal identification and recruitment?
2. What partners can collaborate with us in this area?
3. What data are we collecting and analyzing around our principal recruitment and retention practices?

Identifying and recruiting aspiring leaders with the potential to be effective principals is an initial step in building a statewide leadership development system. However, it is not sufficient to ensure a highly qualified principal in every school. Done well, recruitment builds a strong base for the next stage of development, preparation and licensure.

2. Principal candidate – Preparation and licensing

In California, there are a variety of preparation approaches for principal candidates,

including full university-based programs; alternative programs such as organization and county offices of education partnerships; district-led programs; and those presented by nonprofit or private organizations, completion of AB 430 training, or an exam. Most of these are framed by or aligned to the CPSEL. Some programs include internships

that provide candidates with hands-on experience to prepare them before they are placed in a position. More and more programs have focused on developing candidates' instructional, accountability and transformational leadership skills. The current system for authorizing who can work as a school principal is based on program completion as the main way to verify that a candidate has at least the baseline level of professional accomplishment deemed necessary to serve as an entry-level principal.

What entry-level expectations should reasonably be, what constitutes adequate preparation and how best to provide it, and what type of license should be required are hotly debated questions. And research on what a coherent system of development is and its effect on getting new administrators ready to lead schools is virtually non-existent. However, significant work in this area is under way.

In August 2010, the Commission on Teacher Credentialing convened an advisory committee to study the Administrative Services Credential, the principals' license. The advisory panel is involved in a one-year

study of the preparation of leaders for California schools and is charged with determining what changes might be appropriate in the administrator credentialing system to meet the needs of today's schools.

Committee members are convened by CTC and the Department of Education and include cross-agency representation from universities, school districts and county offices, professional organizations (including ACSA) and research agencies. Suggestions that will be made by the advisory committee in July and subsequent action by the commission point to a significant collaborative effort to strengthen the preparation and licensing stage of principal development.

Essential questions – Preparation and licensing

1. What practices and structures do we have in place that support principal preparation?
2. What partners can collaborate with us in this area?
3. How are we creating real-world training for our principal candidates?

As challenges mount for principals to ensure that every student achieves, even the most effective preparation licensing process is not sufficient. Principals must further develop leadership skills and continuously improve their practice in order to lead teachers and students to improved teaching and learning.

3. Novice principal – Induction

The induction career stage begins when an administrator is selected to work as a principal in a district. First-time principals are most in need of support as, during the first two or three years on the job, they undertake the often challenging transition from preparing to become a principal to being the principal in charge of an entire school community.

In theory, a hiring district assumes responsibility for orienting its new principals to the ways of the district by building up novices' knowledge, skills and awareness of what's needed to work successfully in their new job. But many beginning principals may never have the opportunity to go through a focused and ongoing induction process be-

yond what is expected in the Tier II credentialing process.

Novice principals themselves suggest that districts provide support for cohort networks, match them with accountable mentors, and make sure not to place them in the most difficult environments in their early years. Mentoring or coaching beginning principals is prevalent as an induction approach, including programs led by ACSA, the New Teachers Center, and the California Association of Latino Superintendents and Administrators (CALSA) and it is embedded in some AB 430 seminars.

When novice principals are able to improve and broaden their portfolio of skills, they are on a path to make a difference, stay in the job, and become highly accomplished leaders.

Where reputedly effective programs are in place, effective coaching stems from a clear focus on elements outlined in leadership standards and well prepared coaches who provide ongoing support to address significant instructional priorities. Because information about research-based and best practice induction programs is not easily accessible, the cross-agency Integrated Leadership Development Initiative has targeted principal induction as a focus for an upcoming summary of practice and examples.

Essential questions – Novice principal

1. What practices and structures do we have in place that support our new school leaders?
2. What partners can collaborate with us in this area?
3. What data are we collecting about the effectiveness of our principal induction program?

To establish a full continuum of high-quality leader development, leaders in California must attend to the induction stage for new principals. When novice principals are able to improve and broaden their portfolio

of skills, they are on a path to make a difference, stay in the job, and become highly accomplished leaders.

4. Developing principal – Continuous improvement

Principals with from three years to 30 or more years on the job benefit from high quality professional learning tied to their individual leadership growth and enhanced professional performance. It contributes to their enhanced morale, professional commitment, and sense of professional value and personal worth. This in turn leads to greater retention of skilled and experienced leaders who have maximum capacity to successfully guide school improvement.

Effective professional development, as described in research and professional literature, focuses on improved teaching and learning, is standards- and research-based, examines personal practice, provides differentiated learning opportunities, and employs coaching support. So that every principal across the state has access to the learning and support they need, developing principals must be a shared statewide responsibility.

Currently, however, AB 430 is the only state-sponsored learning program for fully credentialed principals. County offices, professional and private organizations have carried the burden of providing professional learning with districts that are key developers of their leaders.

Districts must understand that how they design principal expectations, professional learning and evaluation directly affects whether or not leaders develop and, in turn, whether or not district and school goals are met.

Knowing what principal professional development currently exists and making it accessible to principals across California is a big challenge. Cross-organization work is now under way to map what standards-based professional development is available. The Integrated Leadership Development Initiative created a prototype for a Web-based library of current resources, for example, the leadership committee for county offices of education are collecting information from all of the county offices and ACSA has again updated its professional offerings.

Essential questions – Developing principal

1. What practices and structures do we have in place that continuously push our administrators to grow in their leadership learning?

2. What partners can work collaboratively with us to support us in this area?

3. How do we provide differentiated professional learning for mid-career principals?

New study results show that schools perform better when guided by experienced principals. This suggests that a commitment to providing long-term high quality professional development and support to mid-career principals is well worth the investment.

5. Expert principal – Highly accomplished practice

While acknowledging successful principals is not a new practice, extending the standards-based career continuum to include ongoing development of experts is new. The designation of “highly accomplished” denotes a level of expertise judged according to performance level rather than course hours, veteran status, or years of service or seat-time experience. Further developing these principals to become more than “effective” means pushing our conception of continuous learning into innovative training and support appropriate for their individual goals and helping them work with others who are coming up the ranks or struggling.

Recognizing highly accomplished principals at the far end of the leadership development continuum sets a challenging goal for those seeking to be the best at what they do. It provides a marker for rewarding those who have gone beyond what is expected for effective practice. And, for those considering joining the principal ranks, it establishes that the job not only is doable, at a high level, but also is highly valued.

Essential questions – Highly accomplished practice

1. What practices and structures do we have in place that recognize and reward those leaders who demonstrate highly accomplished leadership practice?

2. What partners collaborate with us in this area?

3. How are we working to retain our most successful leaders?

In California, the vision of advanced learning or incentives for accomplished principals is not yet clear. But standards-based awards, advanced learning opportunities, expert networks, salary adjustments, National Board Advanced Certification for Principals or other incentives offer options for consideration. These underscore the value of continuous learning and effort in not only meeting, but also exceeding expectations for expert leadership.



Coordinating learning opportunities

Developing highly effective principals for California schools is a key component in meeting our goals to educate every student. However, no single agency or organization has the capacity to provide the full range and quality of professional learning needed by California principals. Therefore, to consistently provide high quality professional development throughout every principal’s career, the state’s education leaders need to coordinate learning opportunities that are designed and delivered for maximum impact across the continuum of principal development and available in every corner of the state.

It is time for state, regional, university, district and school leaders to collaborate on actions necessary to establish an effective and coherent leadership development system. The report, *Effective Principals in California Schools – Building a Coherent Leadership Development System*, outlines what we can do together. And, it is time to move ourselves to make it happen. ■

References

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“*Effective principals in California schools*” is available online at wested.org/online_pubs/EffectivePrincipals.pdf.

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