

Highly-Effective Principals



The Big Idea:



Principals have a large impact on the success of students and teachers in their schools. It is important that they are well-prepared and highly-effective.

Why are Principals So Important?

For years, researchers and school improvement advocates have focused on improving teacher quality as the main lever for increasing school quality. However, recent research from the Wallace Foundation has found that the impact of principals on improving schools has been understated. Principals are responsible for recruiting, developing, and supporting all teachers in a school building, as well as building a supportive school climate. Researchers found that changing a principal's expertise from being ineffective (25th percentile of effectiveness) to being highly effective (75th percentile of effectiveness) increased learning in reading and math by about 3 months for all students in a school. Since principals impact all students in a school, principal development is a great investment because policymakers can pour resources into a smaller number of educators while affecting a larger number of students.

How do Principals Make an Impact?

Most of the impact a principal has on their students' achievement is through their teachers. Principals make an impact on students through teachers in a number of ways, including:

- Hiring and retaining effective teachers
- Providing high-quality professional development to help teachers be more effective
- Building relationships with and supporting new and experienced teachers in the building
- Creating and maintaining an effective school climate conducive to teaching and learning
- Effective management and operation of school buildings

Principals also have an impact on students outside of just their academic achievement. Effective school leadership can influence disciplinary rates, which have ties to later life outcomes for students of color, and can lower absenteeism, a problem needing special attention as chronic absenteeism rates increase as students return to school from the pandemic.

Because principals are a key part of students' learning, improving principal effectiveness raises student achievement. The following are some considerations when considering the support that principals need to be effective and continuous improvement:

- 1 **Principal Turnover:** Almost half of new principals leave after 3 years, and 20% of all principals leave every year. At the highest-poverty public schools, principals only had an average of 3.4 years of experience at their current school, compared to 4.3 years at the lowest-poverty schools. Principal turnover is higher in schools with more students of color. Research shows that student scores decline in the years after a principal leaves the school, while principals that stay are shown to improve student outcomes the longer they are at the school. Keeping principals on the job and supporting them in place is

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Principal Diversity: Retaining and supporting diverse principals on the job is important for diverse student and teacher populations. The change from a White principal in a school to a Black principal increases the school's share of Black teachers by 3%. As for student outcomes, Latinx students have higher test scores in schools with Latinx administrators, and Black students with Black principals have been shown to have higher math scores. However, Black and Hispanic principals are more likely to be demoted after 5 years of placement as a principal.

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Principal Pipelines: While teachers spend their time facilitating student learning, principals have a different job: facilitating adult learning, helping their staff become better teachers. Research from the Wallace Foundation emphasized the importance of pre-service preparation and selective hiring and placement as two key domains of comprehensive, aligned principal pipelines. [North Carolina's Principal Fellows Program](#) rewards the state's best principal preparation programs and subsidizes candidates' tuition and residency. This allows programs to be highly selective in their admissions processes and candidates to choose the highest-quality program in the state without having to make sacrifices of their time or ability to pay.

Alabama's School Principal Leadership and Mentoring Act

In 2023, the Alabama State Legislature passed the School Principal Leadership and Mentoring Act, with the goal of improving the quality of principals in schools around the state. The Act provides annual stipends for principals (\$10,000, with up to an additional \$5,000 for those working in low-performing or high-poverty schools) and assistant principals (\$5,000, with up to an additional \$2,500 for those working in low-performing or high-poverty schools) that complete the following:

- Beginning 2023-2024, develop a comprehensive professional learning plan to be implemented in 2024-2025 school year, and each year after
- Complete five additional days of high-quality professional learning each year
- New Principals: Complete a two year principal mentoring program beginning in 2024-2025
- Participate in the new evaluation system for principals beginning in 2027-2028
- Complete the year-long principal leadership academy by 2029-2030

In addition, the Act requires new, updated school leadership standards and a principal leadership framework to be designed. The creation of the standards, framework, evaluation system, and other parts of the Alabama Principal Leadership Development System will be done by the design team, a group appointed by various state leaders and convened by the State Superintendent of Education.

While the Act provides great supports for in-service principals, new principals need even more support, as [research](#) shows that principals in their first years on the job are less effective than experienced principals. The next step in improving principal quality in Alabama is to work with principal preparation programs at higher education institutions to ensure that standards for new leaders are high, curricula are aligned to the best research on what schools and students need, and deep, school-based leadership experiences are included.

