



March 23, 2016

The Honorable John King
Secretary
U.S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Avenue, SW
Washington DC, 20202

Re: Guidance Addressing Education Leadership Under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)

Dear Secretary King:

The undersigned – AASA, the School Superintendents Association; the National Association of Elementary School Principals; the National Association of Secondary School Principals; New Leaders; and The Wallace Foundation (Wallace) – wish to express our thanks to you and your team for the recent, productive conversations with many of us on how the implementation of ESSA can advance leadership quality in all schools, and particularly high-need schools. In developing the thoughts on topics discussed in this letter, Wallace consulted with the superintendents of districts in its network, including Baltimore, Broward County, FL, Cleveland, Charlotte-Mecklenburg, Denver, Des Moines, Gwinnett County, GA, Hillsborough County, FL, Long Beach, CA, Minneapolis, New York City, Prince George’s County, MD, Tulsa, and Washington, DC. These 14 districts represent nearly 2.4 million students, 66 percent (or about 1.6 million) of whom are eligible to receive free or reduced price lunch.

We are writing to urge the U.S. Department of Education (the Department) to make issuing specific guidance for addressing principals and other school leaders under ESSA a high priority. Research shows that effective school leadership is second only to teaching among school-related factors in improving student achievement, explaining about one quarter of the variation in student outcomes compared to more than one-third for teachers;¹ principals are multipliers of effective teaching;² and effective school leadership has a particularly significant impact on high-poverty schools,³ for example by helping these schools to attract and retain good teachers. However, while Title II and other parts of ESEA have traditionally allowed attention and funding to go towards both teachers and leaders, leadership is often not at the core of state and district plans and strategies.⁴ Given the evidence that improving the preparation and support of principals and other school leaders can be a high-leverage strategy for school improvement, it is important that this body of evidence inform the preparation of state and district plans under ESSA. Toward that end, we believe it is necessary that the Department issue guidance on principals and other school

1 Kenneth Leithwood et al., *Review of Research: How Leadership Influences Student Learning*, Univ. of Minnesota and Univ. of Toronto, 2004, and Karen Seashore Louis et al. *Learning from Leadership: Investigating the Links to Improved Student Learning*, Univ. of Minnesota and Univ. of Toronto, 2010.

2 Paul Manna, *Developing Excellent School Principals to Advance Teaching and Learning: Considerations for State Policy*, The Wallace Foundation, 2015.

3 Karen Seashore Louis et al., 2010.

4 Manna, 2015.

leaders separate from guidance on preparing and supporting teachers, in order to call attention to the flexibility states and districts have under ESSA in making leadership a priority, if they so choose. Indeed, we believe leadership is an essential ingredient in enabling states and districts to be able to implement all aspects of ESSA effectively.

In the last 15 years, Wallace and others have published a great deal of high quality research and field experience reports addressing the role of principals and other school leaders in contributing to improved education for disadvantaged students. This evidence was not available when ESEA was last re-authorized. Within the next year, Wallace plans to publish additional research, including an analysis by RAND of the existing evidence on principals and other school leaders that meets the criteria for tiers of evidence in ESSA. The attached appendix summarizes both currently available and forthcoming reports.

Specifically, this separate guidance should:

- **Provide clarity and information on the evidence base and make clear the opportunity for states and districts to create school improvement plans and strategies that strengthen leadership,** based on the evidence;
- **Encourage and provide support to states and districts to explicitly outline their plans to develop and support effective principals and other school leaders,** particularly through consolidated state and local ESSA plans and school improvement plans (e.g., setting high standards for what leaders need to know and be able to do; offering high quality preparation programs for aspiring principals; hiring to get the best “fit and match” for each school; and supporting principals through one-on-one coaching and ongoing professional development, such as how to lead learning communities and work collaboratively with teachers to develop lessons for disadvantaged students);
- **Make clear the express authority to use funds for principals and other school leaders through:**
 - Formula programs (e.g., Title I school improvement 7% set-aside, Title II – including set-asides for state efforts to improve teacher and leader quality);
 - Competitive programs (e.g., the Teacher and School Leader Incentive Fund, the School Leader Recruitment and Support fund, the Supporting Effective Educator Development fund, and the Education Innovation and Research fund); and
 - The new express authority for states to set aside 3% of Title II funds for activities focused on leadership.
- **Make clear the express authority to include principal supervisors as an allowable use of Title II funds,** where those supervisors are specifically focused on fostering instructional leadership in school buildings based on widely accepted standards (e.g., districts are finding it important to transform the role of the principal supervisors away from “compliance” and toward mentoring principals on matters of how to improve instruction; and principals themselves responded to an independent survey saying that their supervisors led them to make changes in their work⁵); and

⁵ Leslie M. Anderson and Brenda J. Turnbull, *Building a Stronger Principalship, Vol. 4: Evaluating and Supporting Principals*, Policy Studies Associates Inc., 2016.

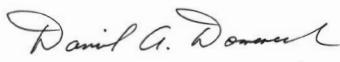
- **Highlight the requirements to report on retention of effective principals and other school leaders and equitable distribution of teachers, and note that research links high quality principals and other school leaders to attracting and retaining high quality teachers, to advance equitable distribution (See forthcoming RAND summary of evidence.)**

There has been a general lack of clarity in the field about allowable uses of K-12 federal funds for principals and other school leaders, which may contribute to reluctance to use federal funds to address leadership quality. Investments in principals and other school leaders should be viewed as critical components to achieving ESSA’s goals for student success, teacher effectiveness and equitable distribution, and turning around low-performing schools, among others. Guidance and other federal efforts to encourage state and local work to improve principals and other school leaders – and to do so in evidence-based, effective ways – are an important part of addressing these issues.

ESSA presents a significant moment in time for states and districts to use this evidence base in efforts to improve schools, and the Department has an important role to play in calling attention to it and shaping the context for state and district action. In order to encourage and inform state and local action on how ESSA can be used to strengthen principals and other school leaders consistent with ESSA’s new clarity and focus on leadership, and for the evidence base to be most useful to states and districts, we urge you to issue guidance on principals and other school leaders.

We stand ready to provide further information the Department might need throughout the transition to and implementation of ESSA, all with the goal of benefiting the field of K-12 public education and the students who are served by it.

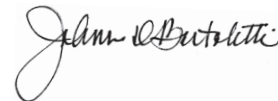
Sincerely,



Daniel A. Domenech
Executive Director, AASA



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Jean S. Desravines
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Will Miller
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Attachment