The principal difference in effective schools

Will Miller
President, The Wallace Foundation

Cahn Fellowship Annual Leadership Conference
October 6, 2023
My topics this morning

• The evidence base on why (and how) principals matter
• Some of the challenges of the principalship
• Ways to better support principals
• Implications
Why (and how) principals matter
The evidence base on why principals matter

- Effective principals are key to the success of school improvement efforts
- Effective principals linked to improved student achievement, better student attendance, less exclusionary discipline, lower teacher turnover and higher teacher satisfaction
  - Principals’ impacts are mainly but not exclusively indirect
- Principals affect an entire school
  - “Principals really matter... It is difficult to envision an investment with a higher ceiling on its potential return than a successful effort to improve principal leadership.”

Growing evidence on how principals can make a difference

- A research team synthesized 200+ studies over last 20 years
- Skills in three areas are crucial: People, instruction, organization
- Skills support four areas of high-leverage behaviors linked to student learning, other outcomes

An emerging picture on how principals can apply an equity lens

- Growing, largely qualitative literature on leadership for equity.
- Principals can have important impacts on key populations, including low-income students and students and teachers of color.
- Through direct channels (e.g., disciplinary actions) or indirect channels (e.g., by working with teachers and in hiring decisions).
- Principals of color appear especially likely to have positive impacts on both students of color and teachers of color.

Source: How Principals Affect Students and Schools: A Systematic Synthesis of Two Decades of Research, Grissom, et al., Wallace, 2021
Principals getting greater attention in policy

1987
“The educational administration field lacks... a definition of good educational leadership.” *

2015
45 states have school leadership standards.

2019
• 36 in-depth interviews including district leaders, school board members, and state education officials **
• Across all three audiences:
  • Leadership was seen as a lever for improving student achievement at the school level
  • Principals seen as key to recruiting and retaining effective teachers

“If you don’t have good leadership, you’re not going to have the outcomes that you want for kids. So, you’ve got to invest in that.”
– State education official, Midwest

* Source: Leaders for America’s Schools. The Report of the national Commission on Excellence in Educational Administration, University Council for Educational Administration

**Source: Effectively Communicating about Principal Pipelines: Key findings from qualitative research with superintendents, school board members, and state education officials, Hart Research Associates and Brossard Research. The research included a range of district sizes: medium (10), large (8), very large (6) and a mix of states including Arizona, California, Colorado, Georgia, Kansas, Maryland, Missouri, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Utah and Virginia.
Some of the challenges of the principalship
A challenge: Polarization of K-12 education

- Declining overall trust in schools, like other institutions
  - Decline is greater among Republicans than Democrats
- Though trust in ‘my child’s school’ remains higher
  - 57% extremely or very satisfied with overall quality of education their children are receiving at school

Source: Americans’ confidence in public schools: Confidence in Public Schools Turns More Partisan (gallup.com); Historically Low Faith in U.S. Institutions Continues (gallup.com); Confidence in 16 institutions compared: Historically Low Faith in U.S. Institutions Continues (gallup.com); Parents’ satisfaction with the quality of education their children are receiving: A majority of parents of K-12 students are extremely or very satisfied with the quality of the education their children are receiving | Pew Research Center
Leading to greater conflict

• Partisan divides over teaching on race, gender
• Those outside of public education playing a growing role
  • 45% of districts are seeing heightened FOIA requests
  • 31% of districts report receiving verbal or written threats from the public against their educators, mainly from parents and family members
• Nearly half of principals of color reported experiencing racial discrimination, mainly from parents and families

Principals are feeling the stress

- COVID put twice the stress on principals and teachers vs. other working adults
  - 85% compared to 35% on average
- Learning recovery an ongoing challenge
- The percentage of principals who say the ‘stress and disappointments of the job... are worth it’ fell from 85% to 60% from 2016-22

Source: Well-being of teachers and principals: Educator Turnover Has Markedly Increased, but Districts Have Taken Actions to Boost Teacher Ranks: Selected Findings from the Sixth American School District Panel Survey | RAND
; The percentage of teachers and principals who say the stress and disappointments are worth it: Educators’ Poor Morale Matters, Even if They Don’t Quit. Here’s Why | RAND ; Restoring Teacher and Principal Well-Being Is an Essential Step for Rebuilding Schools: Findings from the State of the American Teacher and State of the American Principal Surveys | RAND
Warning signs of attrition among principals

• Principal attrition is increasing faster than teacher attrition
• Poor well-being, adverse working conditions were associated with teachers’ and principals’ intentions to leave
• Supportive school environments linked to better well-being, lower intentions to leave

“The principals have been the glue that has kept education together…. Principals pour into the vessels of everyone else – students, teachers, central office staff. But who is meeting the needs of the principal?”

-- Tabari Wallace, special advisor on principal engagement, North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, quoted in “Principals Are on the Brink of a Breakdown,” EdSurge, July 6, 2022

Source: Chart reflects estimates from 300 districts based on surveys administered in Fall 2022 compared to summer 2021. Educator Turnover Has Markedly Increased, but Districts Have Taken Actions to Boost Teacher Ranks: Selected Findings from the Sixth American School District Panel Survey | RAND | Tabari Wallace quotation: Principals Are on the Brink of a Breakdown | EdSurge News
An implication: The need for better support

“Researchers, philanthropies, professional associations of school principals, and the federal department of education... should seek to understand how the school leader job is changing. ...[and] develop policies to attract and retain high-quality principals.”

-- RAND, findings from the Sixth American School District Panel Survey, 2023

... so what can we do?

Source: Educator Turnover Has Markedly Increased, but Districts Have Taken Actions to Boost Teacher Ranks: Selected Findings from the Sixth American School District Panel Survey | RAND
Ways to better support principals
Research suggests three potential solutions

- **Peer learning**: e.g., The Cahn Fellowships
  - “Collegial learning networks support principals’ learning by providing opportunities for principals to learn from their peers, build their communication and collaboration skills, and learn new ways of thinking.”

- **Districts**: Comprehensive, aligned principal pipelines for development and ongoing support of principals

- **States**: Collaborative efforts between state agencies, districts, universities and community organizations

Comprehensive, aligned principal pipelines:
An evidence-based approach to developing and supporting principals and improving student achievement

Comprehensive, aligned principal pipelines:
An evidence-based approach to developing and supporting principals and improving student achievement

• **Achievement:** In six large districts, benefits for math and reading in elementary schools, math in high schools, including in lowest quartile of schools.
  - After three years, schools in pipeline districts outperformed their comparison schools by 5 percentile points in reading and 2.3 percentile points in math.
  - RAND: Pipelines “provided districts with larger gains for fewer resources spent per student than is typically found in research.”

• **Retention:** New principals 8% more likely to remain for 3 years

“We found no other comprehensive district-wide initiatives with demonstrated positive effects of this magnitude on achievement.”

--- Principal Pipelines: A Feasible, Affordable, and Effective Way for Districts to Improve Schools, RAND, 2019

“It's good to just have someone to lean on. I think that that's one of the reasons why I have stayed in Prince George's County, is just because I know that there's a network of people who are there supporting me along this walk, along this journey of being a principal.”

-- Jaime Whitfield-Coffen, principal, Prince George’s County, 2013-2023

Jaime Whitfield-Coffen, principal, gives last-minute instructions to students and parents before opening the newly renovated Tulip Grove Elementary School in Bowie, MD on the first day of school.
One reason: Reshaped supervision

• When principal supervision focused on development and support, principals saying central office is ‘organized to support me’ went from 41 to 57 percent.

• Supervision was a two-way street: Supporting principals, and communicating their importance to district colleagues.

• A limitation: Teachers’ perceptions of principals did not change.

Source: Changing the Principal Supervisor Role to Better Support Principals: Evidence from the Principal Supervisor Initiative, Goldring, et al., Vanderbilt Peabody College, Mathematica, 2020
Statewide approaches for supporting principals are emerging

- States can foster **networks** that connect districts, universities, and others to support principals
- **Wisconsin**: Launched the Wisconsin Urban Leadership Institute for “Big 5” principals; cohorts of 25 gain 10 months of professional learning, coaching and networking.
- **Missouri**: Missouri Leader Development System (MLDS) boosted 3-year retention from 82-87%; 98% for MLDS graduates.

Source: States as Leaders, Followers, and Partners: Lessons from the ESSA Leadership Learning Community and the University Principal Preparation Initiative, Wallace Foundation, 2022; All the Voices: Statewide Collaborations for School Leadership under ESSA, Policy Studies Associates, 2022; Missouri’s Ongoing Effort to Develop Principals Pays Off | The Wallace Foundation.
Implications
Summing up

• Growing evidence of the impact of effective principals for teacher, student and school success
• Growing recognition of their importance in federal and state policy
• K-12 education has become – as in many areas of society – politically polarized
• Both principals and teachers are feeling the strain
• The implication: We need continued – and greater -- attention to developing and supporting principals, and to their importance in our public education system
What you can do

• Sustain (or incorporate) the behaviors and underlying skills that make for an effective principal in your own work

• Advocate for your district to adopt and adapt a comprehensive, aligned principal pipeline

• As you advance in your career, if you become a principal supervisor, consider its dual function – supporting principals and advocating for them

• If you become a superintendent or associate superintendent, make the principalship and what it takes to support it a top strategic priority
Thank you

• For dozens of research reports available without charge, visit wallacefoundation.org