Creating STRONG PRINCIPALS

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Armed with compelling new evidence about how principals can enhance teaching and learning, many large school districts are focusing on bolstering school leadership. This stepped-up attention to school leadership stems from two realizations. First, the quality of school principals can make a real difference in classrooms. In fact, research has established that leadership is second only to teaching among school-related factors as an influence on learning (Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010).

Second, the job of the principal entails much more than administration or enforcing discipline. Principals today must be instructional leaders, hearkening back to public education’s early days when heads of schools were called “principal teachers.” Instructional leadership requires principals to be consummate team builders who can shape a vision of success for all students, cultivate leadership in others, help teachers upgrade their skills, and use data to foster school improvement (Portin, 2009).

As Daniel Domenech, executive director of the American Association of School Administrators, noted,

Any school system superintendent who views his or her principal more as a manager than an educational leader is making a huge mistake. No question there are management practices that are important in terms of running an organization. But your primary function is to be the educational leader of the building, and if you don’t do that well, you might be the best manager in the world, but you’re going to run afoul of the parents, and, at the district level, [of] the community as a whole. (personal communication, October 1, 2012)

It’s not just the definition of school leadership that’s evolving. So is the relationship between districts and principals. Central office staff members in several districts have recast themselves from “compliance cops” to “helpers-in-chief” for principals and their teams. In an important bit of symbolism, Gwinnett County, the largest district in Georgia, named its headquarters building the Instructional Support Center. The title reinforces the district’s conviction that educators have one of two roles—either they teach or they support teaching and learning.

Gwinnett and a growing number of other large districts are focusing on two objectives to strengthen school leadership: (1) building a pipeline of new principals who are ready to tackle the most underperforming schools and (2) fully supporting those leaders, especially during their novice years.

Objective 1: Build a Strong Pipeline of School Leaders

Start with Standards

Standards spell out the key behaviors and competencies of a successful school leader. Many districts follow their state’s leadership standards—usually some form of the standards created by the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (see p. 27), with a focus on skills needed to improve instruction. Others, such as New York City; Boston; Jefferson County, Kentucky; and Fort Wayne, Indiana, have enacted standards tailored to their own needs (Orr, King, & LaPointe, 2010).

For example, to reinforce a districtwide drive to get principals and teachers to use data more effectively and consistently, New York City’s “school
leadership competencies” provide highly detailed criteria for assessing how effectively principals are applying and promoting those skills in their schools. A top-rated “exemplary leader” must demonstrate, among other things, that he or she “creates a school culture in which staff reflect on data to determine their professional development needs and create learning opportunities to address their own needs” and “creates excitement around tracking progress and develops a school culture that uses data to drive continuous improvement.”

The point is that leadership standards only come to life when districts actually use them to shape how they select, hire, train, and evaluate school leaders. In Chicago, Illinois, for example, high principal turnover that affected 25 percent of schools pointed to the need to develop highly detailed “principal competencies”—now being drafted—on which to base everything from principal mentoring to performance assessments, according to Steve Gering, the district’s chief network officer. “We needed a tool that clearly laid out a pathway for us to improve,” he said.

The latest draft details six competencies, each with accompanying leadership behaviors and actions. Principals need to (1) champion teacher and staff excellence through a focus on continual improvement, (2) create powerful professional learning systems that guarantee learning for children, (3) build a culture focused on college and career readiness, (4) empower and motivate families and the community to become engaged, (5) relentlessly pursue self-disciplined thinking and action, and (6) lead their schools toward achieving their vision.

Improve Principal Training

Principal training at the majority of university-based programs has long been upbraided for being out of touch with district needs and leaving graduates ill-prepared to lead. As a result, more districts are exercising their “consumer clout” to prod training providers to introduce more selective admissions, update their curriculum, provide better internships, and pay closer attention to district realities (Orr et al., 2010).

More districts, such as St. Louis and Springfield, Illinois, are collaborating with area training providers to create programs tailored to district needs and conditions—what it takes to turn around a failing school, for example, or how to lead effectively and sensitively in multicultural, multilingual schools—and then giving hiring preference to graduates of these programs. New York City; Boston; and Prince George’s County, Maryland, have set up their own training programs.

Georgia’s Gwinnett County has created a novel “consumers’ guide” that informs would-be principal candidates about high-quality training programs in Georgia—high-quality meaning, among other things, that the program’s curriculum is well connected to the realities of practicing principals and is aligned to state and professional leadership standards. The guide not only helps those shopping for good programs, but also signals to providers that are not listed that they should consider improving their offerings.

“We’re sending a loud and clear message to universities that if you want your program to be described and shared [in the new guide], then here’s the process you follow,” says Glenn Pethel, Gwinnett County’s executive director of leadership development. “If you’re not in our guide, then the implication is pretty clear.”

Tighten Hiring Practices

In many districts, aspiring principals have been able to nominate themselves for leadership positions regardless of their aptitude, motivations, or preparation. A number of school systems have tightened their principal hiring practices to make them less capricious and more standardized, rigorous, and selective.

Chicago, St. Louis, and Spring-field, Illinois, require would-be leaders to agree to serve as principals for a minimum number of years in exchange for a district commitment to pay for their training and internships (Orr et al., 2010). The Denver, Colorado, school system began testing new tools in 2012 to screen résumés, match candidate skills and experiences to leadership openings, and provide district supervisors with standard protocols for interviewing candidates and observing and assessing them during school “learning walks.” The district’s new interview protocol rates a candidate’s knowledge and behaviors in such areas as cultural and equity leadership, instructional leadership, human resources leadership, strategic leadership, and managerial and external leadership.

Attract Strong Leaders to Struggling Schools

High-needs schools have more difficulty than others attracting a large pool of highly qualified candidates to be principal (Mitgang, 2003). In Chicago, for example, as few as two applicants vie for principal vacancies in the most challenging schools, whereas as many as 100 apply for posts in higher-achieving schools (Orr et al., 2010). In response, some districts are creating inducements to lure top-notch principals to their toughest schools.

In 2008, for example, North Carolina’s Charlotte-Mecklenburg school district launched a “strategic staffing initiative” to attract highly qualified principals and teachers to its lowest-performing schools. The district allows these principals to recruit their own teams of talented teachers and administrators. Each principal receives salary increases and bonuses in exchange for agreeing to stay in the new post for at least three years and producing strong student achievement gains.

The results so far? Nearly all 24 participating schools have been successfully turned around, with single-year state
Objective 2: Support Principals Throughout Their Careers

Once they hire new principals, districts have a continuing responsibility to promote these principals’ growth and success. Here are key actions districts can take.

Develop Better Ways to Assess Principals
Principal assessment is in the midst of overdue change. Prompted in part by Obama-era federal grants programs like Race to the Top, some 35 states have enacted new principal assessments that put less emphasis on “inputs,” such as personality traits, and more emphasis on student “outcomes” and the leadership behaviors likeliest to improve instruction, such as cultivating high-quality instruction and creating a climate conducive to learning. Some states—Delaware and Tennessee, for example—have developed assessment systems that all their districts must use. Others, such as New York, Colorado, Florida, and Illinois, give districts varying degrees of control over the design and implementation of new assessments (Jacques, Clifford, & Hornung, 2012).

There’s growing consensus that, along with putting instructional leadership first, principal assessment should
- Enable districts to diagnose principals’ strengths and weaknesses and tailor professional development to identified needs.
- Provide a factual basis for hiring and firing, tenure, salaries, and promotions.
- Promote school change and reinforce district improvement goals.
- Be fair and reliable (Portin, 2009).

A milestone in crafting such an assessment occurred with the creation of “VAL-ED”—the Vanderbilt Assessment of Leadership in Education—by a team from Vanderbilt University and the University of Pennsylvania. VAL-ED places far greater weight than most other tools on leadership behaviors known to promote better instruction. Principals assess themselves and, in turn, get feedback from their district supervisor as well as from their teachers. Since it became commercially available in 2009, VAL-ED has been used by more than 615 districts.

Before VAL-ED was adopted by his Hillsborough County, Florida, district in 2011, elementary school principal Woodland Johnson was judged by a single supervisor, and student achievement wasn’t even counted. His assessment now includes teacher feedback, and student learning gains account for 40 percent of his score. Moreover, the district’s annual evaluations are accompanied by a professional growth plan that offers 40 different district training options to remedy identified weaknesses. “In any given school, with any given needs, there are things to work on,” Johnson says. “To me, the evaluation reflects how well I’m doing on those. Have I identified the right needs, and have I figured out how to focus on them?”

Invest in Mentoring and Professional Development
Historically, mentoring and on-the-job training for principals have not been high priorities. “You go back over the years, and you see that every time budgets have to be cut, the first to go is professional development,” says Daniel Domenech. Adding to that vulnerability has been a long-held sink-or-swim attitude toward school leaders, even novices most in need of experienced guidance.

Fortunately, as districts have come to appreciate more fully the principal’s pivotal role in driving reform, they’ve shown greater willingness to invest in supporting leaders’ continuing growth. Since 2000, more than half of U.S. states have adopted mentoring requirements for newly hired principals (Spiro, Mattis, & Mitgang, 2007). In addition, more districts have expanded and sustained their support despite budgetary headwinds.

Newly hired principals in Gwinnett County receive two years of mentoring and attend a summer institute that covers a range of instruction-related topics. In New York City, new principals receive an average of 72 hours of one-on-one coaching during their first year. The sessions are customized to each individual’s needs, which are identified through a self-assessment tool that gauges the principal’s strengths and weaknesses in nine essential aspects of school leadership, including communications and student performance. The exercise leads to three top coaching goals that then guide mentoring and professional development.

The Providence, Rhode Island, school district now regards extensive principal coaching and professional development as a “right” embedded in its culture. According to Ed Miley, the district’s director of leadership support and development, the district credits the school system’s support for principals for sharply lowering leader turnover.

Provide Data—and Training on Their Use
Many school systems have gotten the message that they should be more “data-driven.” A rich variety of timely data can be the basis for judging a school’s effectiveness, identifying learning problems, detecting patterns of low teacher expectations or social promotion, or forming professional development plans (Louis et al., 2010).

Some districts have created data warehouses, often at considerable expense, to gather and store information for use by schools. New York City’s $81 million Achievement Reporting and Innovation System offers principals, teachers, and others a single interactive online system where they can explore a wide range of data to improve student outcomes and share lesson plans with others in the district.

But having mountains of data doesn’t
guarantee better decision making. That requires expertise and time that district and school employees frequently lack, opening the way for misuse of data. Anthony Conelli, New York City’s deputy chief academic officer for leadership, described one common pitfall:

When principals see a set of data and see a group of students who aren’t doing well, some will think that what they need to do is create something to “fix” those kids. So they’ll create an after-school program or some form of intervention that is good and necessary but doesn’t get them to the question of, What are we not doing as a school that allows those kids to fail? We address the symptom but not the problem.

To optimize data use and avoid its hazards, districts such as Portland, Oregon, and Fort Wayne, Indiana, emphasize training school employees in data use and encouraging them to schedule regular data discussions to pinpoint and solve learning problems. New York City has pushed for inquiry teams, in which the principal and at least two other school employees discuss data to identify a change in instruction that would address a learning problem for a specific group of underperforming students.

For instance, an inquiry team that is considering how to raise the performance of 6th graders who have a weak understanding of phonics might look at student test scores, a review of student work and curricular materials, and classroom observation data. The group could use this information to arrive at a new instructional strategy to test and monitor for effectiveness. Along with helping the specific target group, the aim is to develop a new approach to instruction that benefits many other students in the school.

**Help Principals Focus on Instruction**

Recent studies (Turnbull et al., 2009) find that principals may spend as little as one-third of their time each day on instructional matters, bogged down instead by lunch menus, bus schedules, and other administrivia. One response is the School Administration Manager (SAM) process, created in Jefferson County, Kentucky, and, as of 2012, in use in 82 districts in 17 states (see www.wallacefoundation.org/Pages/SAM.aspx).

Participating schools hire a “SAM” to take over noninstructional tasks from the principal, or more commonly, the principal designates a person or small team from the existing staff to take on the functions. The SAM or SAM team then meets regularly with the principal to help him or her schedule more instructional leadership time, reflect on whether changes in time allocations are affecting instruction as intended, and designate other school employees to take on noninstructional chores that the principal need not handle.

An evaluation of 93 principals who used the SAM process found that after two years, they spent an average of one-and-a-half to nearly two hours more each day on instruction (Turnbull, Arcaira, & Sinclair, 2011).

It’s still unclear, however, whether the SAM process ultimately bolsters student achievement. An early study showed a mixed picture in a comparison of student achievement gains at SAMs schools with gains of similar schools that did not use SAM (Turnbull, White, & Arcaira, 2010).

**Plan for Changes in Leadership**

Not all turnover is bad. Districts should be able to remove subpar principals who can’t or won’t improve, even with support. And a good deal of turnover is inevitable from retirements, promotions, and transfers. The real harm comes from frequent, unplanned leadership changes, which can have significant negative effects on student achievement and can lead to staff cynicism about principal commitment and a loss of momentum in accomplishing school change (Louis et al., 2010).

How might districts lessen unwanted turnover and its damage? More careful screening of potential principals is one approach. Better training and mentoring for novice principals is another.

In 2002, the Jefferson County, Kentucky, school district collaborated with University of Louisville faculty members to create a leadership development process that aims to narrow the field to the most promising leadership candidates and guide them from initial training through their early years on the job. The process begins with a selective, yearlong certification program co-created and taught by faculty and district staff members, followed by a yearlong, district-paid internship. Finally, the district provides mentoring for all its new principals. District leaders credit this multistage process with a 70 percent drop in principal turnover between 2005 and 2010.

Some districts allow transferring principals to bring in their own teachers and administrators to smooth the transition. When Massachusetts classified its Springfield school district as underperforming in 2010, the district was ordered to replace instructional staff in its 10 lowest-performing schools. In the five schools in which the principals were removed, the district allowed the replacement principals to bring along a team of teachers and administrators who had helped them succeed in their previous schools.

The results? Three of those five schools have outperformed state averages in math and English language arts, according to Mary Kate Fenton, the district’s chief instructional officer.

**Cultivating Success**

These actions to build and support a stronger bench of school leaders are all essential and mutually reinforcing. Recent experiences have yielded some other lessons on how districts can contribute to the success of their principals:

- Leadership and authority don’t reside in any single person or position.
Durable school change occurs through the consistent, shared exercise of leadership by many within the school and district. A principal’s influence and authority don’t ebb when broadly shared (Louis et al., 2010; Portin et al., 2009).

Investing in better leadership makes economic sense as a way to spread good practices to every classroom. Still, there are real costs: Developing well-crafted leadership standards typically takes months or even years of work; and creating data systems, providing high-quality principal internships and mentoring programs, or assigning specific district employees to work closely with school leaders all come at a price (Orr et al., 2010; Wallace Foundation, 2011).

Districts owe their principals a well-articulated vision of academic success based on high expectations for all students—and the flexibility and authority to achieve that vision in their own schools (Bottoms & Schmidt-Davis, 2010).

The big lesson, however, is that principals matter to the academic success of students—and districts should therefore take a strong hand in selecting and training their leaders and cultivating their continuing success.