



EPISODE 11

How Districts, Universities and States Can Play a Role

Lucas Held:

[00:03](#)

Welcome to the second series in The Wallace Foundation's Principal Pipeline podcast. I'm Lucas Held, director of communications at the Wallace Foundation, and we've added the second series of podcasts in order to discuss major new findings from a study of the Foundation's six year Principal Pipeline Initiative. The multiyear implementation and effect study on the pipeline was conducted jointly by Policy Studies Associates and the RAND Corporation.

Importantly, the evidence from this study of pipelines is strong enough to make them eligible for federal funding under the Every Student Succeeds Act. Now when we talk about a principal pipeline, we mean a comprehensive district led effort to put into place four interlocking components: rigorous leader standards, high quality pre-service principal preparation, data informed hiring in placement, and well-aligned on the job support and evaluation, especially for new principals. Those four components can also be accompanied by system supports to help make pipelines work, including leader tracking systems and new roles for principal supervisors.

In prior episodes, we discussed the impact pipelines have on student achievement and principal retention, as well as how impact was measured and how pipelines are being sustained. Today we're going to delve into the roles that districts, universities and states each can play in creating and sustaining principal pipelines. So let me give a warm welcome to our three guests. Each of them represents a different level of the education system: districts, university based principal preparation programs, and states.

Eric Gordon is the chief executive officer of the Cleveland Metropolitan school district. Douglas Fisher is the chair of the department of educational leadership at San Diego State University and Carissa Moffat Miller is the executive director of the Council of Chief State School Officers. Thank you all so much for being with us today. Now, Eric, your district has been part of the foundation's principal supervisors initiative, which certainly builds on the pipeline's efforts to understand the importance of this district position. So can you tell us a bit what's required



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from district leaders to improve on the job support for principals that the supervisors provide?

Eric Gordon:

[02:36](#)

I would say that actually the same four elements that the Wallace research shows is important for principals, turns out to be even more important for principal supervisors. So having standards for what they do, which is an area that is actually not trained for and our universities at this time making sure that we have really rigorous pre-service training specifically for the role of supervising principals as opposed to the old superintendent generalists license that we might've gotten in the past using data to say just because you are a great principal doesn't automatically make you a great supervisor of principals.

What are the characteristics in the match to make sure you're well prepared to lead exemplary leaders. And then finally, making sure that you have coaching and support and mentoring in a role where there are typically very few supervisors in an otherwise very large organization. So the same four principles that Wallace discovered in the principal work, I think actually applies even more smartly at the supervisory level.

Lucas Held:

[03:35](#)

Really interesting, and I notice, Eric, on your beautiful green polo shirt that the motto of the Cleveland Metropolitan school district is emblazon on: aligned, support and empower. Maybe just say a little bit about what are principal supervisors there for—are they there to kind of transmit the direction of the district or are they to provide individualized coaching to principals; what's their job?

Eric Gordon:

[04:07](#)

So in Cleveland, if you asked us our reform strategy, we would say in six words, families choose, schools educate and the district supports. And so our principal supervisors are actually called network support leaders and their goal is to support the educational leader in their schools. And so how do we do that? We align on the core principles of the district. What are those bound autonomies that our schools can have?

We support schools in implementing them well, and we work to empower everybody to have the agency to act on behalf of kids and families as close to schools as possible. So for us, the network leader or the principal supervisor is really intended to create an empowered school leader, who is more able to be the



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CEO of his or her school building, and that when we do that well in all of our school buildings, will have served all 40,000 of our families better.

- Lucas Held: [05:00](#) It's been said on occasion that a principal occupies a lonely job. How do the principal supervisors help ameliorate that?
- Eric Gordon: [05:11](#) Well, I think the notion of having networks of support allows our principals to interact with their peers. We also have expanded through the network leaders, the opportunity for professional learning, communities of principals cross-network so that if I'm a K-8 school I can interact with high school. But I would also argue that the principal supervisor role can be a very lonely one if we're not careful. These actually are the people who sit kind of pinched in between the principal and the district, and often are the ones that can, if not carefully controlled for, be the people who are simply delivering the central office message. And so we also think we have to put a lot of intentional support in making sure the principal network leader doesn't feel isolated, him or herself.
- Lucas Held: [05:56](#) So maybe we need a pipeline for principal supervisors.
- Eric Gordon: [06:02](#) We've actually tried to create one with Wallace's support. It turns out to be harder to do because you don't want to take your up and coming principles, their strongest principals out of their school, but we have done some really creative things with Wallace's support to really invest in people that we think have the capacity to be our next set of principal supervisors.
- Lucas Held: [06:22](#) Really interesting, and this is a position that is relatively new to getting this kind of attention. Districts of course have to think about money. There are a lot of competing investments. What's your perspective on the cost of principal pipelines and investments, including investments in supervision?
- Eric Gordon: [06:44](#) Well, the recently released RAND studies shows us that this is a really good bang for our buck that, in the RAND study it was about \$42 per student to invest in some of the most significant gains in reading and math, led by principal pipelines and principal's supervisor pipeline. So, there's data to back it up, but I would also just say there were hidden costs. We had people supervising principals all along. So getting very intentional about



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investing in what principal supervisors should be doing is actually an almost free experience because we were paying people to manage these schools before we got really intentional.

And so for actually small amounts of dollars, mostly in professional development, some in making the networks of schools smaller too about that 12 to 13 school range. Those are really the big costs, and when we look at it from a return on investment, and we see that, through the RAND study and the Wallace's research that there is significant positive gain in reading and math, which is our goal. I think the return on investment is what people should look at as opposed to thinking of it simply as expenses.

Lucas Held:

[07:53](#)

And now Doug, let me turn to you. Partnership with the universities are a key component as a pipeline with a goal of ensuring that pre-service training is principals is of high quality and is aligned with district needs. From your perspective, Doug, how can universities help the districts fill the pipeline, and what's in the way?

Douglas Fisher:

[08:46](#)

Thanks, Lucas. As you noted in your introduction, it's one of the four foundational components of the pipeline. How do we design fantastic, amazing, pre-service programs? In part that comes with having relationships with districts? What do districts need? Who are they looking to hire, and how do we align those programs to those systems that exist in school districts? We have advisory groups or co-taught classrooms and things like that that help us make sure that the experiences we have at the pre-service level are aligned to what they need to do in their job as a school leader.

The field work for example, needs to be authentic and consequential. We need to think about the experiences that our aspiring leaders have, that has allowed them to practice the work of a principal. We can't just assign those things. We need to access to real schools, real teachers, real students. Those partnerships with districts allow us to design field work, clinical experiences for candidates that allow them to get their hands dirty and do real work.



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It's not just a list of random administrative trivia tasks, that comprise a quality program. It's really about designing experiences that lead people into the leader role. In addition, we work with districts to identify the right people to come into the program. We don't exclude people and we don't cut them out because of this, but we look to our relationships with our school systems to say who are the people who have demonstrated leadership? Perhaps that they're in grade level or department or on a school committee who are looking to increase their influence to magnify their effect, and how can we recruit those folks, to leave their classrooms, their counseling jobs, whatever their role is, and become a site leader?

So recruitment and selection are important, clinical fieldwork is important. Coursework is also important. We want to make sure that the coursework is not only theoretical, it also includes actions, activities, tasks, definitely real principals need to do. And we can keep connected to the school system to make sure that the tasks and assignments and activities we're giving people in their coursework, build the skillsets that are needed within the district. We should also use our district partners as feedback if we prepare someone that we believe is ready. Does the school system agree? So that evaluation feedback loop is really important because we can continue to improve university-based principal preparation as we get feedback from our partners about the success of our candidates in their school system.

Lucas Held:

[11:35](#)

Thanks, Doug. And Doug, that sounds like a truly thoughtful assembly of experiences that brings to mind something closer to the medical model of training that involves coursework, internships, that real world practice. And I wonder if you could just take a step back, because for some decades, principal preparation had been criticized as being, on occasion, a bit of a step trial for education schools. And from your perspective, is principal preparation finally getting the attention and respect it deserves?

Douglas Fisher:

[12:19](#)

I think we're on our way to be respected as a knowledge base and as a discipline. And that there are things we can learn about instructional leadership, equity driven leadership, operational leadership. There are things we can learn in classrooms and in field work that prepare us to be amazing leaders when we



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assume those jobs. I think being a school administrator requires more than just some on the job training. I think there are some prerequisite knowledge and idea of some clarification of value of that serve people well before they assume the job of the principal.

I also think they should be supported in their first several years, mentored and coached and guided. People are making life and death ethical decisions. They're making consequential decisions that have equity implementation, and they need some processing time when they make those decisions. So we prepare them to be amazing novices. I think that's the role of the university. How do we prepare someone to be the best novice that they can be? And yet when they're hired in the school system, they need that support, that coaching, that guidance, to become that expert leader that our children deserve.

- Lucas Held: [13:35](#) That's a wonderful phrase, Doug, Thank you. We prepare them to be amazing novices. And if it suggests not only a measure of humility but also realism that the coming of principal is really part of a learning journey that probably will last for decades. And I think that's one of the messages of the principal pipeline initiative. Would you agree?
- Douglas Fisher: [14:06](#) I do agree, you're not finished when you're a teacher. You're not finished when you're getting your credential. You're not finished in your induction. It's a journey as you become highly skilled in leading the work of others.
- Lucas Held: [14:18](#) And it also suggests, to your point, why theoretical knowledge is important along with practical knowledge, because it's theory that really guides the eye, guides the mind to diagnosing situations, to looking at them for patterns and devising solutions. Theory provides you with a set of conceptual tools to understand what is going on in the day to day maelstrom, if I may use that word of life in the school. Would you agree?
- Douglas Fisher: [14:55](#) Right, I do agree. And I think we have to walk the line between theoretical and practical. If we only air on the practice side, people don't know why they're making the decisions they're making. And if we air too far in the theoretical side, they have



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no practical experience and they're hoarded when they get that first job.

- Lucas Held: [15:15](#) So it's a kind of a Yin and Yang, and last question for you, Doug, before I go to Carissa for a look at the state perspective was how different is this kind of thinking that you've spoken about this, thinking about coursework, a selection, clinical experience, theory of field work, were people thinking about this differently 20, 30 years ago in education schools?
- Douglas Fisher: [15:44](#) Yeah, I think they were, I think there was more of an expert model, that we have the knowledge of the university and we're going to help people how to do it. There have been places around the country that have been innovative and creative and have great outcomes for decades and decades. But ed school and especially at the leadership, school has been kind of left alone and to the side as you noticed.
- I think now we're more in the mainstream in part because there's strong evidence that school leaders matter. That adds the school level teachers matter a lot and principals matter second to teachers. Principals, as Paul Manna says, magnify effective instruction. There's even evidence that principals can cause teacher turnover. And I think that's an area that we have to further explore is, what is the role of principals in establishing a culture and climate of a school where teachers can do their work?
- Lucas Held: [16:41](#) Well that's a terrific segue, Doug. Thank you, let's turn to Carissa, who is executive director of the Council of Chief State School Officers, which is the leading organization that both represents chief state school officers and provides important information to them, and Carissa, from your perch, what do you see as the key role or stage in enabling the creation of principal pipelines?
- Carissa Miller: [17:14](#) Yes, thanks. Thanks, Lucas. And thanks for having me today. I want to just say that it's been such a pleasure to be a partner with the Wallace Foundation on another set of principal leadership work around the Every Student Succeeds Act. And the work we're doing on equity and this study is so promising for the work that we've been doing as partners with you.



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I want to go back to what Doug said to begin with, which is about the partnership that this requires, right? And when we think about universities and districts, and then the state role, I think it's all working in tandem to make sure that we're creating the best opportunities for principals. Doug alluded to this too, that we know how important principles are, in being the instructional leader for the school and how that magnifies performance for students and then incentivize teachers, and so the investment in that is really critical. I think the biggest part for states, there's a number of ways states can play a really important role in this, you mentioned early on about the leader standards.

States can obviously set serious conditions for making sure that there are leaders standards and that they're providing support for those leaders standards. But there's also a lot of opportunities, particularly in the federal law and the titles, they give us opportunities to use set asides, which I can get into if we want to talk about that a little more. We're working with districts or universities to set up this design and create programs helping set those up for a group of districts.

I'll give you an example from my experience. We had a number of rural districts in Idaho that, you know, we needed to bring them together as the state and to be able to provide a program for districts that may have only had one or two principals. But that kind of magnified program allowed us to give that good help to a number of districts rather than just doing single district work.

Lucas Held:

[19:18](#)

That's terrific, and before getting into some of the particulars, Carissa, I wanted to raise with you a recent report that the Council of Chief State School Officers commissioned from Policy Studies Associates on state education priorities. And there's this fascinating finding that efforts to strengthen leadership. We're tied for third place. And the author, Brenda Turnbull, went on to say, and I quote, "FCAs are poised to ramp up efforts to strengthen school leadership as a school improvement strategy." Why do you think this is happening now?

Carissa Miller:

[20:06](#)

I think there's a number of reasons. The study that we're talking about today, I was showing a clear evidence base for the kind of work that's going to create long term and sustainable activity



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for schools. So it's not going in and doing a quick fix for reading or mathematics scores, but thinking about how we create long term sustainable efforts in a school, and if we can see that teachers and principals make that difference, investing in those folks in the school will create that long term sustainable effort.

Lucas Held: [20:43](#)

Are you seeing more recognition, Carissa, of the importance of leadership as a lever? I go back to what Doug said, that this is not a case of either, or this is a case of teachers matter immensely and principals also matter as well. Do you think that that recognition is spreading among state education leaders?

Carissa Miller: [21:10](#)

Absolutely. I would also say that if we think about it like a more holistic system, we have to think about all the pieces and players that play a huge role in making the system work. And so if we're taking apart pieces of the system and thinking we're going to just work on one thing, we're never going to see the kinds of results that we want to see. So we've got to think about how we support teachers, how we support principals, how we support district leaders, how we create standards that set of conditions for that. So I think it's about seeing, hearing about it as an entire system and how the state can provide, can be a big partner in that, and there's good work happening at universities in districts and learning from our partners and also responding to their needs, I think is a big part of what our state chiefs are working on.

Lucas Held: [22:02](#)

That's really terrific to raise that holistic perspective. And one of the things that we have learned has been that the principal pipelines, specifically, composed of these four components that we mentioned, leader standards, high quality principal preparation, data informed hiring and placements that is selective and then well aligned on the job support that allows for ongoing learning. What we learned is that pipelines that do this are going to be eligible for federal funding through Title One, based on the strength of the evidence. And I wanted to ask you, Carissa, and then, ask Doug as well, how important is that evidence designation and what opportunities does that open up?

Carissa Miller: [22:58](#)

Yeah, I mean I think, I think this report adds to the evidence base, and it can be a really important component of that. As we looked at the Every Student Succeeds Act and some of the



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flexibility granted in that. It also opened up ways of thinking about how we do school improvement in a different way, but we have a real, there's not an opportunity with that, but also a real obligation to make sure that the kinds of things that we're doing in school have a strong evidence base for that. So, in Title 1 there's actually kind of helped 2A and 2B, you could even look at Title 3. There's a variety of ways in which I stayed there looking more creatively about the use of titles to how they can promote this whole systematic change.

- Lucas Held: [23:46](#) Terrific. Thank you. And Carissa, do you have any thoughts about what barriers might be in the way to overcome, to enable more districts to field these kinds of leadership pipelines or systems to use your term?
- Carissa Miller: [24:12](#) I'll start with one that I think seems fairly obvious sometimes and that's resources, right? That we look at some of the ways in which we can allocate resources or join together with a cohort so that we can get a bigger bang for our buck, and also leverage really good work from our university partners or, say it's a large district that's done some really great work. How could we use that to work with and train other principals so that that might actually perpetuate through the system? I think resources can be a real challenge to have to think creatively about that.
- Lucas Held: [24:55](#) And that's where Title 1 funding perhaps could help.
- Carissa Miller: [25:02](#) Absolutely.
- Lucas Held: [25:02](#) Okay, good. Given that pipelines are eligible, well, let us, conclude this episode of the principal pipeline podcast series two, and let me offer my great thanks to Eric Gordon, chief executive officer of the Cleveland metropolitan school district, Douglas Fisher, who's chair of the Department of Educational Leadership at San Diego State University and Carissa Moffat Miller, the executive director of the Council of Chief State School Officers. This has been an enlightening conversation that suggests great possibility in the coming years. And we thank our guests for their insights.