



EPISODE 7

Principal Pipelines: A District Strategy to Improve Student Achievement

- 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 this second series of podcasts in order to discuss major new findings from a study of the foundation's six year Principal Pipeline Initiative. The multi-year implementation and effects study on the pipeline was conducted jointly by Policy Studies Associates and the RAND Corporation. And importantly, the evidence from this study of pipelines is strong enough to make pipelines eligible for federal funding under the Every Student Succeeds Act.
- Lucas Held: [00:42](#) 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, ETA informed hiring and 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, and those include leader tracking systems and new roles for principal supervisors.
- Lucas Held: [01:16](#) Now, 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 carried out. So, our topic today is student achievement benefits from principal pipelines. And I want to extend a very warm welcome to my three guests. We have Susan Gates, who's a senior economist with the RAND Corporation, and co-principal investigator of the final report on the study, which was released on April 8th 2019, and which assessed the effects of principal pipelines on districts, schools, and students.
- Lucas Held: [01:57](#) I'm also joined by Linda Chen, chief academic officer for the New York City public schools system, which was one of six districts that participated in the Principal Pipeline Initiative. And by Wanda Luz Vazquez, principal of El Puente Academy, a high

school in New York City. And Wanda's also a coach for new principals.

Lucas Held: [02:20](#) So thank you very much to the three of you for taking the time to talk with today. And let's start with you, Susan. So, can you walk us through some quick headlines from the report, "Principal Pipelines"?

Susan Gates: [02:35](#) Sure Lucas, happy to do so. So, the report looks at the effectiveness of principal pipelines. And to look at effectiveness, what we did is compared changes in outcomes in pipeline schools and in non-pipeline schools. When we say pipeline schools, what we're referring to are schools in the pipeline districts that got a newly placed principal during the timeframe of our study. And there were over 1,100 such schools in the pipeline districts. We compared their outcomes to the outcomes of over 6,300 in non-pipeline districts that also got a newly-placed principal. And what we found is those schools in pipeline districts outperformed the schools in non-pipeline districts. There were positive effects of the Pipeline Initiative on student achievement in both math and reading when we averaged results across all of the districts. Those positive student achievement outcomes were widespread across districts, over time, they were found in both reading and math, and we also found positive effects at the elementary, middle, and, in math, at the high school level as well. It turns out the benefits kicked in quickly for the pipeline districts; even the earliest cohorts of schools that got the newly-placed principals did have positive benefits.

Lucas Held: [04:22](#) Susan, tell us a little bit about the magnitude of the student achievement benefits.

Susan Gates: [04:31](#) Sure. Well, the magnitudes vary depending on what specific metric we're looking at. But, after three or more years of having a newly-placed principal, we estimate the effects of the initiative were as large as 6.22 percentile points in reading and 2.87 percentile points in math.

Lucas Held: [04:59](#) And is that a kind of common magnitude to see in district-level initiatives?

Susan Gates: [05:07](#) So, that's a great question. It turns out that district-wide initiatives of this nature, that are comprehensive and touch many or even all schools in school districts, often do not have any statistically significant effects, much less statistically significant effects of this magnitude. So, these findings are quite notable in that regard.

- Lucas Held: [05:36](#) So, Linda, let's turn to you. So, Susan notes that the findings are quite notable in their magnitude. Now, as chief academic officer in New York City, you're overseeing a vast array of academic activity—what benefits are you seeing from this principal pipeline approach?
- Linda Chen: [06:00](#) Sure. So, what's exciting about the research, and thank you for giving us an overview of that, is it confirms what many of us as practitioners already know is that a great principal really impacts the outcomes of students. So in terms of the work for our pipeline, I think what's central to this is mentoring, and that has been a significant value-add for us. Especially in a district or a system the size of 1.1 million students across 1800 schools, we're grateful for the role that mentoring plays, and we offer mentors to our aspiring principals as they're going through the program as well as in the first two years. And we've seen that that really leads to being able to support a principal newly-appointed, in their first years, that can often be a lonely job. And then that really is someone who is there to support you in your day-to-day work.
- Lucas Held: [07:08](#) So, across the country mentoring was not the norm; was it a little more sink or swim?
- Linda Chen: [07:17](#) There has been that sink or swim feeling, and what we've done is really intentionally matched mentors. We also have training for mentors so that they are best positioned. We also go through a pretty rigorous process to select mentors, so they are successful in their own right and also have the characteristics to support others.
- Lucas Held: [07:41](#) Got it. Which makes me want to just take one little step back before we talk about leader standards, which is, you began by saying, Linda, that most folks in the district kind of knew or felt that principals had an effect on student achievements. Somebody might ask, Why do principals have an effect on student achievement? What's the mechanism? How does that happen?
- Linda Chen: [08:10](#) Because they are ultimately responsible for everything that happens in the learning environment. And I think, first and foremost, they cultivate learning environments that advance teacher learning and developments since teachers are the greatest connection to student impact. But we also know that the environmental are critically important in terms of the climate and the culture of the school building, the engagement of the community, all of those things matter, and the role of the principal ties all of those things together.

- Lucas Held: [08:42](#) Susan, did you want to add anything to that?
- Susan Gates: [08:45](#) Well, just to amplify one point, I think we all recognize the importance of teachers, and teachers are often described as the number one school-level factor influencing achievement. Teachers go to work every day in a school building and the principal is their boss. And so, if you don't have a good principal in that building, teachers are not going to be very happy nor are they going to be very effective.
- Lucas Held: [09:17](#) Wanda, does that resonate with you as a principal?
- Wanda Vazquez: [09:21](#) Yes, it does. I think, as a school principal, we are in charge of leading instructional development across the school but also developing the capacity of our teachers, guidance counselors, paras, and students to lead in a way that is culture responsive and that will support positive student outcomes. And it requires in many ways that you are everywhere and nowhere at the same time. And so, you know, it's multi-tasking to the tenth degree and then some. And I think one of the things that the leadership programs and the pipeline did for me and for our school was to support my ability to design adult learning, to really engage with leadership theories, to really understand how to provide teachers and adults in the building with feedback.
- Wanda Vazquez: [10:07](#) And I then had the wonderful opportunity to serve as a leap mentor to folks who are now principals and assistant principals, both within the school and throughout New York City. And so that gave us a solid group of people who had a shared understanding on what it meant to be an effective school leader, and also what it meant to lead within a school that was committed to nurturing and inspiring leadership, peace, and justice.
- Lucas Held: [10:30](#) So, Linda, Wanda's given an almost magical description of the work of the principal as being everywhere and nowhere. And as Susan pointed out, the person who is really setting the tone for the people who go to work and do the work of teaching. Say a little bit about how leader standards play a role in guiding what principals like Wanda are doing.
- Linda Chen: [10:58](#) Yes, anchoring our principal pipeline work in standards of practice that are also aligned to our evaluation makes a significant difference. So, not only is our pipeline program aligned to those standards, but because they are paired—most of our pipeline programs include being paired with a mentor, oftentimes, the principal of the school that the aspiring principal

is in. So what you have is, and I've seen great examples of this this year where, as the principal is unpacking the standards of practice and setting their goals according to it and thinking about a strategy to attain and meet all those goals, that aspiring principal is mentored in that same process. And so together, and actually in many of our buildings, that aspiring principal is also supporting the principal in attaining those goals school-wide. So, you have the best of mentorship, which is actually not just a one-way relationship, but both are learning together.

Lucas Held: [12:03](#) Really interesting. So aspirants and a current are learning together. Wanda, I know you wanted to comment on that, so go ahead please.

Wanda Vazquez: [12:17](#) I guess I'm just nodding my head in complete and total agreement that I think, as a teacher, we learn that when we teach something is when we really learn it. As a mentor, in the process of mentoring, we're learning and there's a reciprocal relationship that is happening for the person who is mentored and the person who is mentoring.

Lucas Held: [12:34](#) So what we've heard about is really the importance of that first couple of years that a principal is in a building mentoring; we've heard that as kind of a dialectical relationship between the mentor and the mentee. Wanda, let's turn the clock back a little bit to preparation and, because you came through the pipeline, tell us a little bit about what that preparation was like.

Wanda Vazquez: [13:01](#) So, the preparation: I went through New York City Leadership Academy. The preparation was really intense and the program did a really incredible job of creating the conditions that were very similar to the principalship in the sense of urgency, the challenges, and a sense of ambiguity that lied before us. And I think in preparing us, it taught us a great deal around working with and collaborating with other leaders to implement initiatives and programs around infrastructure, you know, around school, restorative justice measures that were school-wide and so that, in many ways, it pulled us out of the classroom and into a school setting. I really walked away learning a great deal also about what was important, and it was timely. So that was the year of the common core. It was the year where everything was shifting with advance and that gave me a really firm grounding, and it was a place to step forward knowing what we were being immediately held accountable for.

Wanda Vazquez: [13:59](#) I then had to figure out how to implement it in our school's community and in alignment with our mission and vision. And so that required a little reflection and creative thinking to make

sure that we were in alignment with city and state compliance measures but also in what our school has always coined the measures of the heart, compliance measures of the heart for our young people.

Lucas Held: [14:19](#) So, it sounds like your pre-service preparation really gave you a set of concepts that allowed you to think creatively, diagnostically about what was needed in the school to help it achieve its potential. So, let me turn now to Susan. One of the really surprising findings, to us at least, was that high school saw student achievement benefits in math. How unusual was it, and would you tie it to the points that Linda and Wanda have made about the mentoring for novice principals and the acquisition of a kind of thoughtful set of analytic tools?

Susan Gates: [15:07](#) Well, first of all, it is quite surprising to find effects of an initiative at the high school level. And as researcher, I was surprised to see that for the Pipeline Initiative. I think all the points that have been mentioned already are good ones and important ones. But, with regard to the Pipeline Initiative, an important thing to keep in mind is that the Pipeline Initiative was really focused on getting districts to think strategically about how they not only prepare but also select, and place, and support principals. So, while certainly at the high school level I would expect that better support would lead to better outcomes, through our conversations with districts it also became quite clear that districts began to think differently about how they were selecting and placing people for high school openings.

Susan Gates: [16:15](#) So, moving into a high school principalship can be very challenging and it may not be the best placement for a novice principal, someone who has never been a principal before. And so some of what we're seeing with regard to the effect of the Pipeline Initiative could be that districts were less likely to put brand new people in place in those instances.

Lucas Held: [16:44](#) Linda, does that resonate with you?

Linda Chen: [16:46](#) I think with our system being so large, there are many of those different factors. I would say, to speak specifically to what we've done, a lot of the work in principal preparation for us is also on instructional leadership. That's an important component. So, whether it is a new or aspiring principal going into a position or one that's, to your point, that already have a proven track record, it is a big part of our professional learning. And, it is true that a principal has to do everything under the sun, literally. But, at the end of the day, the purpose is to advance learning

and instruction for every student and that is what we really focus our efforts on. And the Office of Leadership actually sits within the Chief Academic Office, which is a little different in some other places where it sits under the line of school supervision or human capital.

Lucas Held:

[17:52](#)

And so, that is a wonderful note on which to close: Linda reminding us that the main focus of this is to help all students achieve to their full potential. And I think just to tick off a couple of themes we've heard today, we now do have evidence that a strategic approach to developing and supporting principals can pay off for student achievement. We've heard suggestions about why, because principals that are both everywhere and nowhere at the same time set the climate, support teachers in honing their craft, and make connections with folks in the community. We've heard about the importance of pre-service training, and that new mentoring relationship, which is a two-way street. And undergirding all of them, leader standards which unify the approach across a district.

Lucas Held:

[18:54](#)

So, let me give a thank you once again to our three terrific panelists, Susan Gates, Linda Chen, and Wanda Luz Vazquez. Thank you for helping us think more thoughtfully about student achievement and the connection to leadership.