



Spotlight on Research by The Wallace Foundation: Sustaining a Principal Pipeline

In February 2019, The Wallace Foundation released *Sustaining A Principal Pipeline* by Policy Studies Associates. The report examines how six districts participating in The Wallace Foundation's Principal Pipeline Initiative (PPI) continued their work after funding expired and can be found at wallacefoundation.org

Introduction

In 2011, six urban school districts with the support of The Wallace Foundation set out to develop a principal pipeline that could positively impact school outcomes. The districts were Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, North Carolina; Denver Public Schools, Colorado; Gwinnett County Public Schools, Georgia; Hillsborough County Public Schools, Florida; New York City Department of Education, New York; Prince George's County Public Schools, Maryland. The principal pipeline strategy had four interrelated components to cultivate a supply of well prepared and well supported new principals.

1. Adopting standards of practice and performance that would guide principal preparation, hiring, evaluation, and support.
2. Delivering high-quality preservice preparation to high-potential candidates, typically through a combination of in-district programs and partnerships with university preparation programs.
3. Using selective hiring and placement, informed by data on candidates' demonstrated skills, to match principal candidates to schools.
4. Aligning on-the-job evaluation and support for novice principals, with an enlarged role for principal supervisors in instructional leadership.

Overall, *Sustaining a Principal Pipeline* updates the story of pipeline implementation and principal perceptions with interview and survey data gathered in 2018. Interviews were conducted with district officials who have responsibilities related to principal development and support, including principal supervisors and key central-office staff. The report assesses continuity and change in district policies and practices and in principal perceptions as of 2018. The research questions are:

1. To what extent and in what ways are districts still carrying out each of the four components of the Principal Pipeline Initiative?

2. What changes have they made to their pipelines, and why?
3. What do principals say about their preparation, hiring and placement, evaluation, and support, and how is it similar to or different from key findings that we reported earlier?

The report describes the findings regarding standards, preservice preparation, hiring and placement, support and evaluation, and system supports for a career continuum. Findings are discussed followed by guidelines for creating a sustainable principal pipeline.

Perceptions of Pipeline Success

Before understanding specific pipeline findings, it is important to discuss overall perceptions of principal pipeline success. Observations from individuals involved in hiring and supporting new principals centered around impressions that new principals were more skilled than previous incoming leaders. Additionally, district leaders in three districts (e.g., Charlotte-Mecklenburg, Denver, and New York City) said they have seen improved retention of principals.

Standards

Similar to previous years, district leaders reported standards have been important in creating and maintaining alignment across the components of the principal pipeline. Principals continue to work on refining the standards, but also extending them to leaders other than current principals. The content standards have evolved over time and exist as living documents within the districts which allows for continual refinement and adaptation to the context and role. For example, one district has created specific standards relevant in turnaround schools. Additionally, as principals become proficient in existing standards, districts understand they can raise expectations for overall performance.

Preservice Preparation

In building their principal pipelines, the districts worked to strengthen principal preparation across all types of leadership preparation programs for aspiring principals. They introduced or strengthened their own selective preparation programs for those who appeared close to readiness for a principalship. They also forged or strengthened partnerships with the universities that prepared principal candidates. However, due to the average length of time (six years) from starting preservice to being appointed a principal, full results were not available in previous reports. Whereas past reports found few differences in preservice preparation, in *Sustaining A Principal Pipeline* enough time elapsed to have a better picture of changes. Overall, all six districts continually worked to improve preparation and focused on in-district programs and partnerships with

universities. Notably, they restructured residency programs and some added special programs for turnaround schools.

Principals involved in the Principal Pipeline Initiative describe different experiences than principals prepared before the initiative. For instance, PPI principals report a greater focus on school improvement and instructional leadership in the content of their preservice program, and also report higher levels of preparedness across a number of leadership practices. Districts have put great care into creating strong matches between new principal residents and sitting principals. One district stopped moving aspiring principals out of their home schools for residencies. Districts also developed programs that support the leadership capacities of assistant principals in their district. All of these changes are in line with priorities districts set at the start of the initiative to improve preservice programs.

Hiring and Placement

Districts continue to use a two-stage process for principal hiring: acceptance into a hiring pool followed by placement into a principalship. They also continue to require credentialed principal candidates to demonstrate skills as part of the pool admission process by participating in simulations and other practical exercises. One concern districts continue to express is the amount of staff time devoted to selection but they understand the investment is necessary to make the best match. Within the matching process districts use Leader Tracking Systems (LTSes), which provide dashboards summarizing individual and aggregate data on the district's aspiring and sitting principals, and the growing role of principal supervisors. Feedback from principal supervisors is being incorporated into the LTS to facilitate better matching.

Support and Evaluation

Overall, districts are utilizing all of the previously discussed initiatives within evaluation and support systems. Districts have kept consistent the evaluation and support systems leading novice principals to rate these systems favorably. This consistency is facilitated by principal supervisors, coaches, mentors, and induction programs. First, in terms of principal evaluation, districts are conducting annual high stakes evaluations of leader performance tied to leader standards. Secondly, the principal supervisor role continues to be redefined as a facilitator of principal success and some districts have offered external professional development to support principal supervisors. Thirdly, coaches and mentors reflected on tight budgets and their struggle to defend their jobs even as districts contend those jobs are an essential part of support and evaluation systems. Lastly, districts are continuing to invest in training and induction support for novice principals.

System Supports for a Career Continuum

Not only is support and evaluation important for novice principals, but are also vital throughout their career continuum. Districts are attempting to address and resolve system-level issues regarding lines of communication and authority. There are significant trends showing positive prospects for the future of support for principals. For example, districts improved placement and coaches, mentors, and principal supervisors received high ratings. Overall, districts are creating leadership positions aligned with more responsibilities as well as matching better mentor leaders and future leaders within the schools. Succession planning is not limited to filling principalship vacancies. For instance, Charlotte- Mecklenburg provides all central office staff with leadership training. There is also a focus on filtering out conflicting messages and excessive time demands for principals.

Concluding Thoughts and Advice for a Sustainable Pipeline

To conclude, the six districts urge other districts to treat principal pipeline development as a process that cannot be reached through shortcuts. The districts offered encouragement in several ways.

1. Pipeline development does not have to be expensive. There are low cost ways to start and/or sustain a pipeline to initiate change. For example, starting with revising and establishing leader standards or mentoring novice principals using experienced leaders in districts.
2. Although these six districts found success with their principal pipeline, the districts caution against replicating these models. This is because the focus should be on considering the local circumstance and priorities while developing a pipeline system.

Overall, the leaders in these six districts are confident their principal pipelines are sustainable, and new leaders indicate there are meaningful strengths in how they were prepared and how they are developed and supported through their principal pipeline.

Read *Sustaining A Principal Pipeline* at Wallacefoundation.org.

By Shannon Holder, University of Connecticut

References:

Anderson, Leslie M., and Brenda J. Turnbull, *Sustaining a Principal Pipeline*, Washington, D.C.: Policy Studies Associates, 2019