

## Promising Practices in Boosting School Leadership Capacity: Principal Academies

### Introduction

The role of the public school principal has expanded dramatically in recent decades. Gone are the days when a principal's sole managerial responsibilities were largely administrative and included overseeing transportation logistics, discipline and budgetary issues. Today, these roles are just a sliver of a principal's day-to-day responsibilities. To lead a school effectively, today's principal must also fulfill the role of instructional leader and create the learning conditions that support teaching and learning. To do this, principals must be in classrooms, observing and evaluating instruction, engaging with teachers in lesson planning, and connecting teachers and content coaches with appropriate professional learning opportunities.

The expanded role of principals means they are now significant multipliers of effective teaching and have a real opportunity to affect student achievement.<sup>1</sup> Most states have spent recent years working to improve teacher effectiveness, recognizing its importance in improving student outcomes. States have focused considerably less on principals as levers for school improvement, however, research on the importance of school principals in advancing student learning is compelling.<sup>2</sup>

Effective principals can raise student achievement by two to seven months of learning in one school year; ineffective principals can lower student achievement by similar levels.<sup>3</sup> Principals can also be the difference between good teachers staying in their classrooms and improving student outcomes or leaving for another opportunity.<sup>4</sup> Further, the research is clear that effective principals are essential to turning around low-performing schools.<sup>5</sup> Even in the face of strong evidence that show they are key drivers of

student outcomes, principal preparation programs are falling short in producing job-ready principals. Superintendents—the beneficiaries of principal preparation programs—indicate that principal training programs lack the relevant coursework and sufficient opportunities for the clinical, school-based training principals need to be effective.<sup>6</sup>

Governors have authority over principal preparation programs in their state and so are uniquely positioned to address gaps in the systems that influence aspiring and current school leaders at the state and local school district levels—known as the “principal pipeline.” This pipeline includes evidence-based leadership standards, preparation, licensure, hiring and placement, evaluation and support, and school and district working conditions. To improve the principal training and preparation components of the principal pipeline, governors can lead efforts to raise entrance prerequisites for preparation programs, institute state board of education rules and regulations and push for strengthened partnerships between preparation programs and districts. Policy prescriptions that move the principal pipeline toward a more aligned system can yield enormous benefits, and governors should consider pursuing such policies to ensure that effective leaders are at the helm of every public school in their state. This paper explores an additional high-impact policy lever, principal academies—a tool that governors can add to their policy toolkit to augment preparation and training for aspiring and sitting public school principals.

### Overview of Principal Training Academies

In this paper, “principal academy” refers to an independent, state-run entity that provides a range of

approaches to delivering high-quality, clinically based professional development. Principal academies can be run as joint collaborations with a university, but they are established by and run through the state and are independent of traditional university-based principal preparation programs. Principal academies can include some of or all the following features:

- Clinically based training for novice principals;
- Instruction and clinical training for assistant principals;
- Simulation-based training and other analogues to real-world leadership challenges;
- Coaching and feedback for novice principals, assistant principals or veteran principals;
- In-depth professional development for budgeting, instructional leadership and managing human resources; and
- Professional development focused on community and parental engagement.

Clinically based training is a critical component of an aspiring principal’s preparation, yet it is also the training component most in need of improvement.<sup>7</sup> Principal academies can serve as effective gap fillers by providing the clinical training and real-world scenarios that traditional principal preparation programs and professional development may lack. The **New York** City Leadership Academy’s Aspiring Principals Program, for example, uses experiential learning methods to impart the on-the-ground skills necessary for effective school leadership, immersing aspiring principals in complex school simulations and authentic school leadership work in actual school environments.<sup>8</sup> This type of clinical training is substantially different from most traditional university-based programs, which can be disconnected from the reality of leading schools.<sup>9</sup> Although they vary in size, scope and structure, the hallmarks of successful principal academies include practice-based training, job-embedded opportunities to shadow mentor principals, ongoing coaching and feedback, and a network of thought partners on which participants can rely to ensure continuous improvement.

## Focus on Both Aspiring and Sitting Principals

Because most principals begin as assistant principals, training academies can benefit from placing more emphasis on building the skills and knowledge of assistant principals as instructional leaders. This idea is in response to the reality that assistant principals’ chief responsibilities are largely nonacademic—for example, discipline, cafeteria duties and transportation logistics—and offer little exposure to in-classroom activities. When they make the transition to principal, these individuals likely have had minimal experience with the most important aspects of their job. By providing job-embedded practice, principal academies can help address these gaps in skill development.

Sitting principals can also reap the benefits of principal academies. As the role of the principal evolves, so does the importance of ensuring that professional development keeps up with the on-the-ground realities of the job. The Master Principal Program—established by the **Arkansas** General Assembly and administered by the Arkansas Leadership Academy—provides full-time, sitting principals with three years of rigorous professional development. The program requires principals to demonstrate successful application of its principles before they can reach advanced certification. After successful completion of the first three years, principals can choose to participate in a rigorous assessment overseen by a team of trained examiners. The assessment includes evidence of improvement in student achievement data, portfolio review and a site visit to the principal’s school. Successful performance in these three areas qualifies participants for Master School Principal status, which makes them eligible to receive a \$9,000-per-year bonus for five years after earning the designation and an additional \$25,000 per year for five years if they are selected to serve at a low-performing school.<sup>10</sup>

## Emerging Practices

Over the past decade, some governors—recognizing the importance of boosting principals’ leadership capacity—have established principal academies. Governors in these states recognized that principals not

only possess an enormous ability to influence teaching and student learning but also that these individuals need high-quality, practice-based professional development to hone their leadership capacity—a critical skill for turning around low-performing schools. The following section examines best practices of principal academies in various states and the different approaches to delivering this innovative model of professional development.

### ***Job-Embedded Practice***

Job-embedded practice is essential to effective training, but examples of educator preparation programs that provide high-quality, clinically based practice are few (although some have been usefully documented and studied).<sup>11</sup> Principal academies, meanwhile, make job-embedded training an essential component of the program, emphasizing connecting theory to practice. Job-embedded practice provides candidates with the opportunity to engage in authentic learning opportunities, immersing them in day-to-day experiences that deepen their knowledge of the core competencies they will need to be successful in the job.

Under **Tennessee** Governor Bill Haslam, the Governor’s Academy for School Leadership (GASL)—an initiative that unveiled in 2013—helps aspiring principals (called “leadership candidates”) receive mentoring and coaching from a highly effective mentor principal and a regional coach. Leadership candidates spend at least three full days per month in the mentor’s school engaged in authentic, principal-level leadership experiences. Co-designed by the fellow and mentor, these experiences are aligned with the state’s performance indicators for effective instructional leadership: the Tennessee Instructional Leadership Standards (TILS). Activities may include conducting classroom observations and instructional walk-throughs with the mentor; leading or participating in instructionally focused committee meetings; or leadership candidates developing responses to challenging communication issues, such as parent emails or phone calls. This front-row seat to the day-to-day challenges of the job expands leadership candidates’ capacity to solve problems,

accelerates learning instructional leadership skills and exposes them to the process of creating and executing a schoolwide vision. By providing job-embedded practice, GASL is accomplishing one of the necessary components of impactful principal pipeline programs: experiential and cohort-based learning over time that is aligned with state content, pedagogy, and leadership standards.<sup>12</sup>

### ***Robust Induction Program***

Because of constraints, school districts provide limited time, structure and training for new principals during their first three years on the job. This limited onboarding period can leave principals in a “sink or swim” position. Principal academies, in collaboration with districts, can provide a structured, phased-in approach to onboarding new principals, thus giving them the time and space they need to identify areas for growth and the tools and resources to improve. Most importantly, it enables new principals to learn and observe under the tutelage of a seasoned veteran and strengthen their leadership skills before running their own school. Effective onboarding, however, requires effective mentoring, so mentors should be rigorously screened based on multiple measures, such as their previous performance; their commitment to the mission, vision and goals of the induction program; the effectiveness of their communication and collaboration skills; and a demonstrated ability to coordinate professional learning experiences to guide growth and development.

Through support from former Governor Martin O’Malley, **Maryland** established the Promising Principals Academy, which in the 2014–2015 school year trained nearly 50 assistant principals. Superintendents across the state’s 24 school districts selected two of the most promising school leaders from each district to participate in the academy. The year-long academy provides intensive support during the induction period, aiming to prevent the sink or swim experience that many new principals face. A centerpiece of the academy is the pairing of each aspiring principal with a former principal, who serves

as a mentor. This one-on-one training is an effort to scaffold the trainees' learning, build their confidence and expand their leadership capacity before they take over a school. Between training sessions, principal candidates work online to complete exercises and network under the guidance of their mentors. Graduates of the program are eligible for top jobs at schools the following school year.

In Tennessee, assistant principals nominated for GASL undergo a semester-long selection process. Following selection, they go through an induction phase before starting their coaching and coursework. During this time, assistant principals are paired with a mentor, who provides guidance, knowledge and support. The induction phase helps ensure that assistant principals receive the proper training and support from the beginning and are given a solid foundation on which to build their competencies.

### ***Rigorous and Relevant Standards and Curriculum***

Rigorous program coursework provided in principal training programs must be relevant to the skills, knowledge and dispositions needed for a principalship. It should expose candidates to the latest evidence-based leadership practices and be taught by expert practitioners who have a track record of success leading schools and boosting student outcomes.

To meet this need, 13 states use the National Institute for School Leadership's (NISL) Executive Development Program (EDP), an intervention deemed evidence-based under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).<sup>13</sup> The EDP includes 24 days of face-to-face instruction over 12 months, professional readings, applied learning activities and 30 hours of online curriculum. The NISL curriculum is broken into 12 units that center on building candidates' capacity to be effective instructional leaders. Participants gain expertise in three critical aspects of the principal position: leadership skills, standards-based best practices and content area instruction. The combination of effective

programming and its capacity-building model has made NISL's EDP an attractive lever to address school leadership for some state education agencies (SEAs).

Former Governor Ed Rendell worked with the **Pennsylvania** legislature to strengthen certification requirements for administrators at the principal and assistant principal level. Under the law, to reach Level 2 certification, principals must complete a state-approved program of professional development within five years of becoming an administrator and successfully complete three years of satisfactory service at the Level 1 certification level. In Pennsylvania, Level 1 certification is provided by institutes of higher education and Level 2 certification is delivered by the state. In response, the Pennsylvania Department of Education (DOE) created the Pennsylvania Inspired Leadership (PIL) program, which uses NISL. The state partners with NISL to identify, train and certify in-state staff to deliver the curriculum throughout the Commonwealth. As part of establishing the PIL program, state officials also developed infrastructure at the Pennsylvania DOE to track licensure and communicate with districts and participants to effectively deliver the EDP training. The PIL program has continued through three Governors and multiple changes in state leadership.

Governor Rick Scott and the **Florida** DOE are in the process of strengthening the rigor of Level 2 certification in the state. In Florida, districts provide Level 2 certification and have the autonomy to develop or select a program to meet the new requirements. Many of these districts are expected to propose NISL as their Level 2 Certification program when the new rules are approved in the coming months. As part of a U.S. Department of Education Investing in Innovation grant, NISL is working with districts representing more than half of Florida's kindergarten through grade 12 (K-12) enrollment, training more than 250 school leaders and developing train-the-trainer capacity across the state. **California** and **Mississippi** are receiving similar support under the same grant.

Tennessee’s GASL curriculum is designed to be relevant, rigorous and responsive to the skills and competencies effective principals in the state need. Based on best practices and current research, the state’s TILS identify the core performance indicators of effective instructional leaders. The standards focus on developing principals’ key competencies, facilitating the use of instructional practices that incorporate assessment data, establishing a strong culture of teaching and learning, developing instructional leadership capacity and developing a highly effective learning community that enlists diverse stakeholders and resources.

### ***Opportunities Under ESSA***

With the passage of ESSA in 2015, governors have a unique opportunity to take a fresh look at age-old gaps in the K–12 system and lead efforts to address them, including reimagining how Title II funding—the approximately \$2.3 billion federal funding stream dedicated to the preparation, training and support of teachers and principals—is prioritized. Currently, districts allocate approximately 4 percent of Title IIA funds to support the professional capacity of principals and superintendents.<sup>14</sup> Under ESSA, states can allocate up to 5 percent of their Title IIA allocation for teacher and leader development and an additional 3 percent to school leader activities. Title I under ESSA offers an additional opportunity to pursue statewide and district-aligned, comprehensive systems to boost evidence-based principal preparation and professional development, including principal academies. Governors interested in using leadership capacity as a lever for school improvement efforts in low-performing schools may especially want to look at Title I funding.<sup>15</sup> In short, considering the significant effect school leaders have on student learning and other student outcomes, governors can consider reorienting more funding from Titles I and II toward activities that boost school leadership.

One compelling argument for directing additional funding to principals is that they are a more accessible

group. Quite simply, the pool of principals in a state is much smaller than the pool of teachers. Thus, focusing on building principals’ capacity as instructional leaders can be a high-leverage use of Title I and II funding. Directly supporting principals means that funds are divided among fewer individuals, increasing the buying power of these funds and expanding the reach of the investments to students. This “more bang for the buck” strategy means that a small increase in investment in principals has the potential to significantly improve the quality of instruction and boost student performance statewide.<sup>16</sup> Even a small shift from spending directly on a state’s larger pool of teachers to the much smaller pool of principals has the potential to significantly improve the quality of instruction and boost student performance statewide. This is not to suggest that improving teacher quality should be deprioritized; rather, focusing on principals is a high-leverage strategy that governors may consider using in concert with efforts to support teachers directly.

## **Recommendations**

As chief executives of their state, governors are well positioned to lead efforts to boost principal pipelines. With direct authority over many of the policies and programs that influence how principals are prepared, trained, supported and evaluated, governors can work closely with school districts to strengthen principal capacity. Such policy prescriptions include strengthening program entrance and licensure requirements, pushing for greater harmony between preparation programs and districts and—as this brief suggests—establishing principal academies. Governors should consider the following strategies to achieve concrete outcomes.

### **ESSA Accountability Planning Process**

Above all, ESSA clearly establishes that decision-making authority for K–12 issues rests with state and local school districts, which presents an extraordinary opportunity for governors to present a clear vision for what the principalship should look like in their states. ESSA requires SEAs to consult with governors on the

development of state plans. Governors also have the opportunity to review and sign off on the plan prior to submission to the U.S. Department of Education. In addition, as SEAs engage in the process of writing state accountability plans, governors can use their seat at the table to articulate their vision for advancing the quality of principals. Through this process, governors can push for reimagining the use of Title I and II funds, including dedicating the 3 percent set-aside of Title II funds to establish a statewide principal academy.

### ***Bully Pulpit***

Governors can use the bully pulpit to articulate a vision to elevate principals. To do this, they can make public statements that highlight the importance of principals at state-of-the-state addresses, at state education events and in media interviews. In addition, governors can set the goal of improving the principal pipeline and ensuring that leaders from across the state understand and work toward the same goal.<sup>17</sup> One example of this is to work with the SEA to develop a principal pipeline plan or vision document that can be used to advance

legislative priorities. In addition, the governor can work with the SEA in capacity-building efforts for local education agencies on school leadership.

### ***Convening***

Governors can use their position to convene the best and brightest minds to identify strategies to develop principals as a critical lever for supporting student achievement.<sup>18</sup> One convening lever is for governors to establish a task force or advisory council devoted to identifying strategies to strengthen the principal pipeline. This group can include representatives from the state, advocacy organizations, national stakeholders, higher education and school districts and can be used in a variety of ways. Tennessee, for example, established the Transformational Leadership Advisory Council to identify best practices for transformational leadership programs to inform policy changes and develop a set of recommendations. The group is also working to support the design and implementation of new pipeline programs in the state based on the recommendations the council made.

*Jared Billings  
Program Director  
Education Division  
NGA Center for Best Practices  
202-624-5822*

*Danny Carlson  
Policy Analyst  
Education Division  
NGA Center for Best Practices  
202-624-5319*

*December 2016*

Recommended citation format: Billings, J. and Carlson, D. (2016) *Promising Practices in Boosting School Leadership Capacity: Principal Academies*. Washington, D.C.: National Governors Association Center for Best Practices.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Manna, P. (2015). Developing excellent school principals to advance teaching and learning: Considerations for state policy. New York: The Wallace Foundation. Retrieved from <http://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/Pages/Developing-Excellent-School-Principals.aspx>.
- <sup>2</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>3</sup> Branch, G. F., Hanushek, E. A., & Rivkin, S. G. (2013). School leaders matter: Measuring the impact of effective principals. *Education Next*, 13(1). Retrieved from <http://educationnext.org/school-leaders-matter>.
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>5</sup> Leithwood, K., Seashore Louis, K., Anderson, S., & Wahlstrom, K. (2004). How leadership influences student learning. New York: The Wallace Foundation. Retrieved from <http://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/Documents/How-Leadership-Influences-Student-Learning.pdf>.
- <sup>6</sup> The Wallace Foundation. (2016). Improving university principal preparation programs: Five themes from the field. New York: The Wallace Foundation. Retrieved from <http://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/Documents/Improving-University-Principal-Preparation-Programs.pdf>.
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>8</sup> NYC Leadership Academy. (2014). Taking charge of principal preparation: A guide to NYC Leadership Academy's Aspiring Principals Program. New York: The Wallace Foundation. Retrieved from <http://www.nycladershipacademy.org/news-and-resources/tools-and-publications/pdfs/app-guide-full-guide>.
- <sup>9</sup> The Wallace Foundation. (2016). Improving university principal preparation programs: Five themes from the field. New York: The Wallace Foundation. Retrieved from <http://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/Documents/Improving-University-Principal-Preparation-Programs.pdf>.
- <sup>10</sup> Arkansas Leadership Academy. Master Principal Program. Retrieved from <https://arkansasleadershipacademy.org/programs/master-principal>.
- <sup>11</sup> Darling-Hammond, L., LaPointe, M., Meyerson, D., Orr, M. T., & Cohen, C. (2007). Preparing school leaders for a changing world: Lessons from exemplary leadership development programs. Stanford, CA: Stanford University, Stanford Educational Leadership Institute. Retrieved from <http://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/Documents/Preparing-School-Leaders.pdf>.
- <sup>12</sup> Syed, S. (2015). Building principal pipelines: A strategy to strengthen education leadership. New York: The Wallace Foundation. Retrieved from <http://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/Documents/Building-Principal-Pipelines-A-Strategy-to-Strengthen-Education-Leadership.pdf>; and Rhines Cheney, G., Davis, J., Garrett, K., & Holleran, J. A new approach to principal preparation: Innovative programs share their practices and lessons learned. Fort Worth, TX: Rainwater Leadership Alliance. Retrieved from [http://www.anewapproach.org/docs/a\\_new\\_approach.pdf](http://www.anewapproach.org/docs/a_new_approach.pdf).
- <sup>13</sup> Herman, R., Gates, S. M., Chavez-Herrerias, E. R., & Harris, M. (2016). School leadership interventions under the Every Student Succeeds Act. Volume I—A review of the evidence base, initial findings. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation. Retrieved from [http://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR1550.html](http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1550.html).
- <sup>14</sup> Coggshall, J. G. (2015). Title II, Part A. Don't scrap it, don't dilute it, fix it. Washington, DC: Education Policy Center at American Institutes for Research. Retrieved from <http://educationpolicy.air.org/sites/default/files/FixItBrief.pdf>.
- <sup>15</sup> Herman, R., Gates, S. M., Chavez-Herrerias, E. R., & Harris, M. (2016). School leadership interventions under the Every Student Succeeds Act. Volume I—A review of the evidence base, initial findings. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation. Retrieved from [http://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR1550.html](http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1550.html).
- <sup>16</sup> C. Rowland. Improving Educational Outcomes: How State Policy Can Support School Principals as Instructional Leaders (Washington, D.C.: National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, June 25, 2015).
- <sup>17</sup> Turnbull, B., Anderson, L. M., Riley, D. L., MacFarlane, J. R., & Aladjem, D. K. (2016). Building a stronger principalship: Volume 5. The Principal Pipeline Initiative in action. New York: The Wallace Foundation. Retrieved from <http://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/Documents/Building-a-Stronger-Principalship-Vol-5-The-Principal-Pipeline-Initiative-in-Action.pdf>; and Mendels, P. (2016). Perspective: Building principal pipelines. New York: The Wallace Foundation. Retrieved from <http://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/Pages/Perspective-Building-Principal-Pipelines.aspx>.
- <sup>18</sup> Manna, P. (2015). Developing excellent school principals to advance teaching and learning: Considerations for state policy. New York: The Wallace Foundation. Retrieved from <http://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/Pages/Developing-Excellent-School-Principals.aspx>.