

POLICY ISSUE BRIEF:

HIGHLY EFFECTIVE PRINCIPALS

Issue at a Glance

The most recent ESEA reauthorization in 2015, Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), is the most recent version of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, which recognizes the importance of school leadership and its impact on school and student performance. However, it greatly reduced the federal role in education. Where federal policies once required states to develop evaluation systems for teachers and principals that included data on student growth measures as a “significant factor,” ESSA transferred the authority for creating educator evaluation systems to the states.

ESSA also overturned federal regulations that had defined a highly effective principal as one “whose students, overall and for each subgroup, achieve high rates (e.g., one and one-half grade levels in an academic year) of student growth.” Previously, many states used that federal guidance as rationale for an overreliance on standardized test scores in principal evaluations and ignored the complex and various responsibilities that principals carry out to foster high-quality instruction and learning. ESSA only requires states to publicly report the “methods or criteria” used to measure teacher and principal effectiveness, so states have an opportunity to rethink their evaluation systems and the definition of a highly effective principal.

According to a 2021 research synthesis by the Wallace Foundation titled, “How Principals Affect Students and Schools,” organizational, people, and instructional skills are needed to support strong principal performance. Four key behaviors for principals are identified:

- Focusing their work with teachers on instruction. This covers a range of activities, from coaching and evaluation to smart use of data to inform improvements.
- Building a productive school climate. Strategies include building respectful relationships and supporting teacher leadership.
- Forging collaboration and professional learning among teachers and others. High-quality principals provide teachers with time to discuss how to better support students and improve instruction.
- Managing personnel and resources well. Effective leaders are skilled managers of a school’s facilities, budget, and safety. They know how to hire, place, and retain effective teachers. They also manage their time to focus on instruction.

National Principals Association Position

- National Principals Association recommends school leaders be consulted when school-related policy is in development.
- National Principals Association supports principals having access to high-quality, evidence-based, and relevant professional learning including coaching and evaluation.
- National Principals Association supports adaptive leadership using equitable practices and data-driven instruction which guides high academic achievement.
- National Principals Association promotes leading a productive, positive school culture for the well-being of all students.
- National Principals Association promotes a comprehensive view of principals' responsibilities that is based on most current educational leadership standards, including the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders and best practices of highly accomplished school leaders including management of school facilities, budget, safety, resources, recruitment, and retention.
- National Principals Association believes that principals prepare each student for success in college, career, and life while ensuring the learning community continues to grow as an economic and workforce driver in the community they serve.
- National Principals Association believes that quantitative and qualitative data should inform decisions at the classroom, school building, and district levels. Data should therefore inform the evaluation of principals' effectiveness.
- National Principals Association recommends that principal performance be based on multiple measures that are objective and take into account the context in which a principal operates the school, not limited to student performance indicators.
 - Effective principal evaluations are:
 - Created in consultation with school leaders and for the complex and various roles of principals
 - Part of a comprehensive system of support and professional development
 - Flexible enough to accommodate differences in principals' experiences and their context
 - Relevant to the improvement of principals' dynamic work
 - Based on accurate, valid, and reliable information that is gathered through multiple measures
 - Fair in placing a priority on outcomes that principals can control
 - Useful for informing principals' learning and progress

Recommendations for Federal Policymakers

- Fully fund Title II, Part A of ESSA, which provides resources for states and districts to reform educator certification and licensure requirements, create comprehensive teacher and principal evaluation systems, offer preservice and school-based professional learning opportunities, and train principal supervisors to develop their capacity to support and coach principals as instructional leaders.
- Fund programs to recruit, prepare, and support highly effective principals through capacity-building measures that will improve student academic achievement and well-being in high-need schools.

Funds should be used to support programs for aspiring school leaders that align to the National Educational Leadership Preparation standards and include the following components:

- A preservice residency that includes at least 250 hours in field-based experiences
- Focused coursework on instructional leadership; organizational management; the use of multiple sources of data for the purposes of instruction, development, and evaluation of teachers; and the development of highly effective school organization
- Ongoing support, mentoring, and professional development for at least two years after aspiring school leaders complete residencies and commence work as assistant principals or principals

Recommendations for State Policymakers

- Inclusion of at least one school leader on each state board of education or governing body to fully understand the impact and implication of policy.
- Establish a definition of “highly effective principal” that ensures school leaders can:
 - Build a school culture that nurtures each individual to live the shared norms, values, and beliefs, and to grow in a safe, caring and high performing school community.
 - Lead learning that empowers each individual to apply the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to grow in and contribute productively to a global society.
 - Engage in continuous professional development, utilizing a combination of academic study, professional learning communities, feedback tools, authentic simulations, reflection, online and in-person collaborations and learning opportunities, mentorships, coaching, and internships.
 - Effectively lead learning appropriate to the needs of each student and adult in the school, which results in measurable student academic progress.
 - Support and manage the school’s organization, operation, and use of resources to achieve student and adult success and well-being.
 - Foster the success of each student by facilitating the development, communication, implementation, and evaluation of a shared vision of teaching and learning that leads to student academic progress and school improvement.
 - Actively engage the community to create a shared responsibility for student academic performance, well-being, and safety.
- In measuring a principal’s performance based on student indicators, use multiple assessments that are aligned with state standards of college and career readiness, include performance-based measures, and measure individual student growth from year to year. National Principals Association suggests the use of such assessments as:
 - State assessments
 - Portfolios, performance tasks, and other examples of a student’s accomplishments and leadership
 - Classroom-based assessments
 - Interviews, questionnaires, surveys, and conferences
 - End-of-course exams
 - Comprehensive personal academic and graduation plans
 - Assessments aligned with high school and college entrance requirements (ACT, PSAT, SAT)
 - Project-based learning assignments

- Attendance rates
- Discipline referrals
- Graduation rates

Recommendations for District Leaders

- Examine quantitative and qualitative data pertaining to both academic and nonacademic indicators in their evaluation of principals.
- Use the following measurements, in addition to student indicators, for assessing principal performance:
 - Self-assessments
 - Supervisor site visits
 - School documentation of classroom observations, faculty agendas, and the like
 - School climate surveys
 - Teacher, staff member, parent, and student evaluations
 - Teacher retention and transfer rates
 - Student engagement with and rates of participation in cocurricular and extracurricular activities
 - Stakeholder involvement in school activities, clubs, or functions