

# Policy Recommendations for Transforming Principal Leadership

## The Importance of Principals

In recent years, education research and policy have focused extensively on teacher quality, and for good reason. Yet far less attention has been paid to principal quality, despite growing evidence of the vital role that principals play in creating effective school communities. Based on years of research on school leadership, the Wallace Foundation has observed: *Education research shows that most school variables, considered separately, have at most small effects on learning. The real payoff comes when individual variables combine to reach critical mass. Creating the conditions under which that can occur is the job of the principal.*<sup>1</sup>

Houston A+ Challenge embraces this perspective. While teachers have a more direct impact on students' lives, principals are the ones who are (ideally) responsible for selecting teachers. They also have a powerful impact on how and what teachers teach, how they are evaluated, how they develop over time, and whether or not effective teachers are retained. Moreover, they significantly shape the school culture. In sum, because they control a school's human resources and manage the context within which teaching and learning occur, principals play a pivotal role in the life of a school.

Since 1999, Houston A+ Challenge has worked with more than 300 principals across the greater Houston area. Recognizing that school leaders urgently need better preparation, training, and support, but believing that a "one-size-fits-all" approach is not in their best interests (nor that of their school communities), our programs develop principals' leadership skills in an individualized way through on-the-job coaching, mentoring, and collaboration.<sup>2</sup>

Based on this extensive work in local public schools, A+ staff and coaches have accrued an array of insights about factors that either facilitate or inhibit principals' effectiveness.<sup>3</sup> These insights and lessons learned provide the basis for the following policy and strategic recommendations for state, district, and school leaders, which are intended to expand the supply of effective principals and greatly increase their capacity to achieve positive impact in their school communities.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

### Recommendations for State Leaders

1. **Strengthen principal preparation programs and evaluate their effectiveness using student achievement data and formal feedback from districts and charter management organizations.**

The job description of principals today is considerably broader and more complex than that of their predecessors. As one study summarized: "[Principals] can no longer function simply as building managers, tasked with adhering to district rules, carrying out regulations and avoiding mistakes. They have to be leaders of learning who can develop a team delivering effective instruction."<sup>4</sup> Moreover, because they are responsible for motivating teachers and students to higher levels of success, they must be adept in marketing their schools, allocating money effectively, communicating, analyzing data, and managing human resources. Many principals concur; more than two-thirds perceive that traditional principal training programs are out of touch with the current realities of the job.<sup>5</sup>

A+ believes that the state should use its licensing and accreditation authority to update and strengthen principal preparation programs by aligning the criteria with the higher school leadership standards that will come from the implementation of SB 1383 (approved by the 82nd Legislature).

Furthermore, consistent with our recommendations for improving teacher quality and effectiveness, principal preparation programs should be required to be more selective about who they admit and who they graduate, and should also be held accountable for the performance of their graduates. At the front end of the pipeline, we believe that admission to principal preparation programs should be more selective – and that there should be "gatekeeper" requirements along the way so that candidates have to demonstrate high levels of performance before being permitted to advance through the program. At the other end of the preparation pipeline, the state should evaluate the effectiveness

of every principal preparation program using student achievement data and formal feedback from school districts and charter management organizations.<sup>6</sup> Based on these data, programs should be classified into different levels of quality (e.g., ranging from “low performing” to “high quality”) – and this information should then be published so that stakeholders can easily compare the quality of various preparation programs and hold providers accountable for improvement.

**2. Strengthen principal appraisal and professional development by monitoring the implementation of SB1383.**

As a result of the passage of SB 1383, the Commissioner of Education is in the process of establishing school leadership standards and indicators of successful school leadership to guide principal training, appraisal, and professional development. State leaders need to monitor this process carefully to ensure high standards.

**3. Incorporate parent surveys into the state’s district and school accountability system.**

There is a rapidly growing movement, both nationally and in Texas, toward empowering parents to play a more central role in their school communities and ensuring that schools and school districts are responsive to parents’ concerns. The growing interest in parent trigger laws is one example of this movement. By requiring schools to regularly survey parents, the state can ensure that districts are paying attention to their perceptions and concerns – yielding important feedback on principals’ leadership, and providing valuable information that policymakers, district leaders, and principals alike can use to further improve schools.

**Recommendations for District Administrators & School Boards**

**1. Reform principal hiring and placement practices.**

First, districts need to establish clear, rigorous job requirements specifying what principals should know and be able to do, then recruit and hire selectively based on these criteria.<sup>7</sup> Second, districts need to critically examine how principals are deployed to schools. This process can be rife with problems, ranging from school board meddling to cronyism and manipulation. In some cases, the core problem is that district policies regarding principal selection and assignment are unclear or outdated; in others, processes are clearly defined but not adhered to. Regardless, the end results can be pernicious, as leaders and schools are frequently mismatched and ineffective

leaders are shuffled from school to school. One way to democratize the process and provide for local checks and balances is to engage principal selection committees composed of parents, teachers, department chairs, feeder school principals, etc. in the selection process.

**2. Give principals more authority over key aspects of their role, including personnel, schedule, assessments, and budget.**

Today, state and district rules and requirements stifle principals’ ability to lead their schools and to innovate. While continuing to hold principals accountable for the “ends”, the state and school districts must give principals much more control over the “means.” In other words, they must allow them to control the levers needed to create an effective school community, including hiring personnel, providing instructional leadership, and managing schedule, assessments, and budget. In particular, principals must have far more latitude over their human resources; the practice of force-placing teachers and staff to schools must end if principals are to truly be empowered.

**3. Conduct rigorous, fair, and multifaceted annual evaluations of principals’ performance.**

With autonomy comes accountability. Principals should be evaluated annually based on student achievement results, the effectiveness of their teachers, parent satisfaction, and market demand for their schools. Furthermore, they should be held accountable for their willingness and ability to select, place, support, and retain effective teachers.<sup>8</sup>

**4. Provide high-quality, individualized professional development and support targeted to principals’ needs and district priorities.**

Evaluation and professional development of principals should operate in tandem. Thus, we recommend that school districts tailor their professional development offerings based on performance evaluation results to ensure that principals receive the comprehensive induction, training, and targeted support they need to be successful in their complex roles.

Emerging research suggests that less formal, ongoing professional development for principals is more effective than traditional “one-size-fits-all” approaches. As one researcher put it: “For useful, robust, situated knowledge to develop most readily, participation with others must occur in activity that is “authentic” – circumstances that involve the ordinary activities of school leadership

and management.”<sup>9</sup> This is consistent with the guiding philosophy for A+’s work with principals. For example, those participating in the A+ Leadership Academy wrestle with real-life problems such as reorganizing schedules to increase learning time; using data to inform instructional and grouping decisions; meeting accountability demands for college and career readiness; and implementing strategies to improve the school culture.

**5. Provide differential compensation for principals.**

Many school districts compensate principals in a way that is largely unrelated to the nature of their assignment or to the quality of their performance on the job. A+ believes that principals should be compensated based on their performance as well as their willingness to take on challenges, their success in achieving major goals (particularly the ability to retain effective teachers), and other important criteria.<sup>10</sup>

**6. After giving ineffective principals ample opportunities to improve, transition out those who are chronically ineffective to prevent further detrimental impact on students.**

Just as many school districts continue to shuffle ineffective teachers from school to school, so too does the “dance of the lemons” persist with principals. Therefore, it is not enough simply to evaluate principals in order to differentiate between those who are effective and those who are not. Districts must also commit themselves to acting on this information.

**Recommendations for School Leaders**

**1. Establish and continually reinforce a culture of academic success for all students, based on high standards.**

Schools vary widely in terms of their “culture of success” – some have it in abundance, while in other schools, there is a tangible sense that the teachers and staff do not believe that their students (primarily low-income and minority students) can achieve at high levels. Principals can and should “create a climate hospitable to education, so that safety, a cooperative spirit, and other foundations of fruitful interaction prevail.”<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, they need to cultivate leadership in others so that teachers and other adults within the school embrace the school vision and reinforce the culture of success.

**2. Manage people, data, and processes effectively, all with an eye toward school improvement.**

No school can improve without an effective teaching force, and there are many ways in which principals can support their teachers and retain those who are most effective. These include providing positive feedback on a regular basis, publicly affirming their accomplishments, identifying potential leadership opportunities, and establishing (and modeling) a climate of mutual respect and trust.<sup>12</sup> In addition to making concerted efforts to retain highly effective teachers, principals must also commit themselves to making deliberate and systematic efforts to improve the skills of all of their teachers through ongoing evaluations, and to remove ineffective teachers.

**3. Actively cultivate parent engagement in the school community.**

A+ believes that one of the principal’s most important responsibilities is to actively communicate with parents regarding the school’s vision, expectations, and ways they can help their child achieve success.

## Conclusions

Over the past few decades, Texas has pursued a wide array of reforms; nevertheless, the majority of students in our public schools still lack crucial reading and math skills, and far too few are prepared to be successful in college and career. As a result, their futures are determined far more by their family income, race, and ethnicity than by the opportunities they are given to succeed.

Researchers and policymakers have recently been focusing intently on the need to prepare, train, evaluate, and support high-quality teachers. While these efforts are well justified, Houston A+ Challenge maintains that it is no less important to focus intently on preparing, training, evaluating, and supporting high-quality principals. By pursuing the policy recommendations herein, Texas can make great strides toward its goal of dramatically improving post-secondary outcomes for all students.

<sup>1</sup> The Wallace Foundation, *The School Principal as Leader: Guiding Schools to Better Teaching and Learning*, January 2012.

<sup>2</sup> A+’s Middle School Leadership Academy provides individualized coaching and support to middle school principals in the Houston area. The Challenge Network, an intensive middle school initiative launched in 2010, provides coaching and targeted professional development for principals as well as teachers.

<sup>3</sup> These insights and lessons learned from Houston A+ Challenge’s work in schools are summarized in a new white paper: *Moving Up the Middle: What Texas Must Do To Prepare Its Middle School Students for Post-secondary Success*, September 2012.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Public Agenda survey.

<sup>6</sup> For more insights into state policies to strengthen principal preparation and licensure, see National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, *State Policies to Improve the Effectiveness of School Principals*, April 2011; and Gretchen Rhines Cheney and Jacquelyn Davis, *Gateways to the Principalship: State Power to Improve the Quality of School Leaders*, Center for American Progress, October 2011.

<sup>7</sup> For further information on district policies to strengthen principal leadership, see Pamela Mendels, “Principals in the Pipeline: Districts Construct a Framework to Develop School Leadership,” *Learning Forward*, 33(3), June 2012.

<sup>8</sup> The New Teacher Project, *The Irreplaceables: Understanding the Real Retention Crisis in America’s Urban Schools*, 2012.

<sup>9</sup> Kenneth Leithwood, Karen Seashore Louis, Stephen Anderson and Kyla Wahlstrom, *How Leadership Influences Student Learning*, The Wallace Foundation, September 2004.

<sup>10</sup> According to The New Teacher Project, high-performing teachers were more than twice as likely as low performers to cite dissatisfaction with compensation as a reason for leaving their position.

<sup>11</sup> The recommendations in this section are informed by The Wallace Foundation’s new series, *The Wallace Perspective*, distilling their leadership research and identifying key elements of effective leadership.

<sup>12</sup> The New Teacher Project, 2012.

### **Houston A+ Challenge acknowledges the many community partners who make this work both meaningful and possible:**

- Our generous funders: The Brown Foundation, Houston Endowment, Rockwell Foundation, Bank of America
- School board members and district leaders of Challenge Network districts: Aldine, Alief, Cypress-Fairbanks, Goose Creek, Humble and YES Prep Public Schools
- Principals, leadership teams, teachers, students and families in Challenge Network schools
- Programmatic partners: Communities In Schools, Region 4 ESC

This policy brief was written by Lynn Jenkins and Dianne Johnson for Houston A+ Challenge. To learn more about Houston A+ Challenge’s current and historic work, visit [www.houstonaplus.org](http://www.houstonaplus.org).



Houston A+ Challenge’s mission is to serve as a catalyst for change in the public schools that educate nine of every ten children in our region, teaming with principals and teachers in targeted schools to ensure that every student is prepared for post-secondary success.