Leveraging Principal Evaluations to Scale Up Instructional Improvement

Strong school leaders play a vital role in accelerating student achievement across a state. Research has found that principals account for 25 percent of a school's total impact on student achievement,[1] and an above-average principal can raise student achievement by as much as 20 percentage points more than an average principal[2] — equivalent to seven months of additional learning.[3] Teacher surveys support these findings, with more than 90 percent saying that great leadership has a very important impact on student achievement.[4]

Rodney Rowan, principal of Cherokee Elementary School in Memphis, exemplifies

It is a truth universally acknowledged that great leaders are critical to great schools. Yet states have just begun to focus on how to use evaluations to develop great principals.

by Ben Fenton

what great school leaders can do. Cherokee was failing when Rowan took the helm. He established a culture of high expectations for all students and—through meticulous use of data, strong curriculum, smart hiring, and intensive feedback and guidance for teachers—turned those expectations into reality. Since he arrived three years ago, student proficiency quadrupled in math and doubled in reading. Today, Cherokee is a "Reward" school—among the top 5 percent in Tennessee for progress.

Given the powerful multiplier effect of great school leaders, states must put recruiting, developing, and supporting great principals at the center of any school improvement strategy, with principal evaluation as a keystone. Recently, the question of how to raise the quality of teachers has dominated the public discourse, but states have overlooked the fact that expanding principal capacity is crucial to achieving that goal. As a result, state education agencies have devoted a lopsided proportion of their time and resources to developing and implementing new teacher evaluation systems but have invested little in the principals who are largely responsible for carrying out those evaluations.

In fact, teacher quality and principal quality are deeply intertwined. As illustrated in figure 1, strong school principals are vital in building teacher capacity. They provide effective instructional leadership, create a vibrant and positive school culture, and provide teachers with opportunities to grow professionally, collaborate with their peers, and take on leadership roles. All of these actions can reduce teacher turnover, motivate average teachers to improve, and encourage great teachers to remain in the profession.[5] Indeed, 97 percent of teachers cite school leadership as a deciding factor in whether good teachers remain at a school.[6]

If we want teacher evaluations to play a significant role in improving instructional capacity among our teaching corps, districts need principals who can conduct meaningful observations, accurately identify strengths and weaknesses, provide useful feedback, and facilitate support that will help teachers get better. Unfortunately, reports are rolling in from teachers across the country that their principals do not have these skills and that they are not being held to the same level of scrutiny. This deficit is breeding widespread cynicism and distrust in the new evaluation systems. To ensure that the work invested in teacher evaluations does not go to waste, states must also invest in developing principal evaluation models that hold principals to high standards of performance and help them improve in their work supporting teachers.

My organization, New Leaders, has spent 15 years preparing, observing, and studying school leaders. We have learned much about what great principals do and how to help them become even better. Over this same period, a number of states and districts have worked hard to get more great leaders at the helm of their schools, honing in on improving principal evaluation systems as one important way to achieve this goal. While this work is promising, we have observed that these states and districts frequently spend much time and energy designing evaluation tools but invest too little in implementation.

Ultimately, the goal of principal evaluations is to improve principals' instructional leadership capacity. For this to occur, principal evaluations must put in motion a true cycle of goal setting, frequent observation and feedback, self-reflection, and adjustment in practice. Principals must have a thorough understanding of the expectations and standards they will be held to and be active participants in their self-improvement. And just as effective teacher evaluations depend on knowledgeable principals to carry them out, principal evaluations require skilled principal supervisors (such as superintendents and assistant superintendents) to enact them effectively.

Principal Evaluation as Performance Management

An effective principal evaluation process does two things at once: It assesses principal performance, and it helps principals develop the knowledge and skills they need to be highly effective. Unfortunately, this developmental role tends to get short shrift in the push for accountability.

A strong principal evaluation system should have the following key attributes:

■ a shared understanding among district offices, principals, principal supervisors, and preparation programs of what effective school leadership looks like, translated into a focused set of principal standards that are grounded in research, aligned with school

accountability goals, and that inform all policies and programs related to principal quality (preparation, licensure, recruitment and hiring, in-service training, and evaluation);

- a strong and simple evaluation system that meaningfully differentiates levels of performance (we recommend a minimum of four levels);

- a design that is based on both inputs (principal actions) and outputs (school and student outcomes); and

- a robust system for observing, giving feedback, and providing support to principals. This requires significant investment in principal supervisors so they understand principal standards and expectations deeply and can provide accurate, actionable feedback.
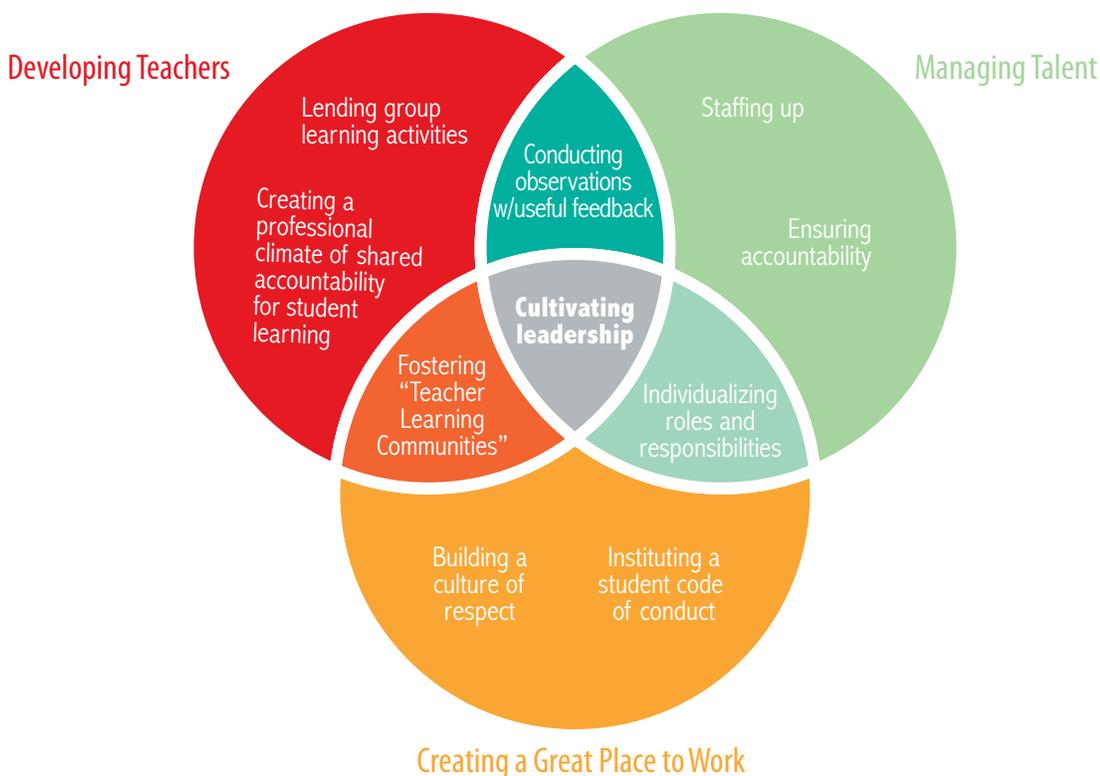
For such systems to stick, states and districts need buy-in from the people who will be carrying out this work. Therefore, from the start of any effort to revamp principal evaluations (and as the work continues over time), it is important to bring in effective principals and principal supervisors to help craft the system. These educators can help you develop a system that feels manageable, that prioritizes the standards that resonate with them, and that will enable them to receive the support they need to become the strongest leaders possible.

Developing Strong Principal Standards for Your State

The first step toward a robust evaluation system is establishing a shared vision among all stakeholders of what great school leadership looks like and developing performance standards aligned to that vision. These standards should be grounded in principal actions that research has shown to increase student learning. Based on our extensive and ongoing review of research on principal effectiveness, and direct study of New Leaders principals, my organization has developed a list of standards that characterize great school leadership. Of these, three

Figure 1.

key areas of practice are the most critical:

- **Instructional Leadership.** Implementing high-quality, rigorous curriculum and instruction and using data to continually improve classroom instruction.

- **Talent Management.** Increasing the quality and capacity of teaching staff through effective evaluation, accurate feedback, professional learning, and shared leadership.

- **Culture Building.** Creating a strong school culture that includes high expectations, student support, a consistent approach to behavioral management, family engagement, and shared responsibility for school goals.

Many state standards lump the first two areas under one banner of teaching and learning, which discourages careful scrutiny of the actions principals take to increase the quality and capacity of their staff. In addition, many state standards do not include school culture as a separate standard from other instructionally focused practices. To ensure that principals get feedback and support on all three aspects of their leadership, New Leaders strongly advises differentiating between these three strands. The recently released Professional Standards for Educational Leaders, which update the earlier Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) standards, include discrete standards focused on all three key areas.[7]

As state boards of education work to establish and prioritize principal standards, they should give educators a role in the process. For instance, state boards can convene leading principals, principal supervisors, and representatives from effective principal preparation programs to review different versions of principal standards, which could include a state's current standards, the 2015 Professional Standards for Educational Leaders, and others such as New Leaders' recommended principal evaluation standards.[8] Then boards can prioritize those they determine will resonate and align best with their states' improvement goals and accountability systems.

These expectations set for principals—regardless of which ones a state selects—should also inform principal preparation programs and licensure requirements. Ideally, states will have systems for communicating to preparation programs their graduates' ratings so these programs can improve their training. At a minimum, states should align expectations across preparation, licensure, and evaluations.

Designing an Evaluation Tool

Beyond establishing a clear set of priority standards, it is important to have a strong and simple evaluation system and tools. Creating a good evaluation tool can be time consuming and often distracts from the core work of implementation. To avoid this common pitfall, states should develop a model that districts can adapt while keeping the core elements. This approach has the added benefits of increasing the probability that all districts will use a high-quality tool and of making it easier to compare principal capacity across the state.

Historically, most evaluation tools have sorted principals into only two levels of performance: satisfactory or unsatisfactory. This binary rating does not give principals the nuanced, comprehensive feedback they need. Instead, there should be at least four levels: excellent, satisfactory, performance that needs improvement, and performance that is clearly unacceptable. The tools should use multiple measures, significantly weighing both professional practice and school and student outcomes. While clearly the ultimate aim for any school leader is to improve outcomes for students, an annual review of principal practices provides insight into why they may or may not be effecting gains in student achievement and helps to pinpoint areas where they may need support.

Teachers and other school staff observe their principals every day and therefore are an important source on their principal's talent management, instructional leadership, and culture-building skills. States should administer annual teacher surveys and incorporate that information into the professional practice portion of the evaluation. Note that several universities and organizations have developed strong surveys focused on principal practice that states can adopt or adapt.[9]

In the best systems, ratings based on student outcomes use measures of both absolute attainment and gains, thus encouraging growth for all students rather than just those approaching proficiency. They set targets that close achievement

Figure 2. Continuous Cycle of Improvement

gaps (e.g., greater than one year predicted academic growth), include "on track to college" measures for secondary schools (such as accumulation of high school credits and completion of rigorous, college prep courses), and align to other state and district school accountability systems. Because the principal plays such a foundational role in student success, evaluation systems should require that principals meet student growth targets to be rated proficient or above.

Implementing Robust Evaluations

The principal evaluation process should animate a rigorous cycle of continuous improvement. Principals and their evaluators collect evidence about school practices and student results over the course of a year; deliver, review, and reflect on feedback; calculate a final rating; and identify goals and recommendations for the following year. For this process to work, principals' supervisors must spend more time in schools observing practice and providing actionable feedback, and principals must play an active, engaged role in their own professional development. This level of participation from both parties enables deep, practice-based conversations and ensures that evaluation does not devolve into an exercise in compliance.[10]

As illustrated in figure 2, evaluation begins with data analysis, self-reflection, and goal setting. Throughout the school year, the plan is carried out and evidence is collected. The cycle continues with a midyear formative review and further implementation. Then principals get a chance to formally self-assess, review interim data, and reflect on progress, a step that informs the summative evaluation. Evidence from the summative evaluation and self-assessment feeds the principal's subsequent goal setting, as the cycle continues into the following school year.

While principals will be rated on the full spectrum of standards designated by the state, principals demonstrate stronger growth when they and their evaluators select two or three areas for focus. Observations and feedback can then be targeted to those areas, supporting deeper development. Critically, the chosen areas of practice should tie clearly to student learning goals.[11]

Bringing Educators into the Process

Educators must be involved in developing a strong evaluation system, and this involvement must go beyond participation in the initial design. Instead, states can create structures to collect ongoing feedback from those who are carrying out the work.

Delaware has done this well. Over the past few years, Delaware developed and implemented a new evaluation system for principals, in partnership with New Leaders, the University of Delaware, and the Delaware Department of Education. Principals and principal supervisors served on the design committee and also received initial training in implementation, including how to develop and carry out an evidence collection plan, prepare for and conduct effective midyear conversations, and carry out self-assessments and summative judgments based on collected evidence. But their participation didn't end there. They continued to serve on the committee and, after the first year of implementation, shared what they had learned from the experience to adjust and improve the system. Perhaps most important, the principal supervisors who best leveraged the evaluation process to improve principal practice were assigned to train other supervisors in the state.

Building Principal Supervisor Capacity

Even if states spend substantial time establishing strong standards, designing an effective evaluation tool, and developing a clear structure for carrying out the process, little will change if the evaluators themselves do not schedule regular school visits or cannot deliver ongoing feedback and coaching to make principal evaluations a truly developmental experience.

Traditionally, principal supervisors' job was to ensure that school leaders complied with local, state, and federal rules and regulations. Transitioning from compliance officer to coach requires effort and investment. Aside from the role in monitoring compliance, the principal supervisor position varies across states and districts, and there frequently is no clarity about responsibilities and expectations.[12] Often, school visits are not anyone's responsibility at the central office: Some principals in New Leaders' client states have reported that they never had a school visit from their supervisor and that their evaluation consisted of little more than submitting a binder and receiving a rating. And some New Leaders principals have been promoted to supervisory positions where the responsibilities are vague, so that every supervisor in their district is left to interpret job requirements.

I cannot stress enough the central importance of developing capacity among principal supervisors. States and districts can begin this process by setting out clearly what principal supervisors should know and be able to do (see the forthcoming CCSSO 2015 Model Principal Supervisor Standards as a starting point), rewriting the job description so that observation and coaching is a core responsibility, and shifting responsibilities to other central office employees so that principal supervisors—whether they are superintendents or assistant superintendents—have time to conduct multiple school visits. Finally, states or districts must invest in upfront training for both principals and principal supervisors to ingrain leadership standards and expectations and a strong understanding of the evaluation process. Then they will need ongoing support to develop their skills in observation and instructional leadership coaching.

Many principal supervisors were school leaders themselves and are familiar with the job's daily challenges. That familiarity, however, does not automatically translate to skills at identifying growth areas in the leaders they supervise and in delivering accurate, actionable, and results-driven feedback. Like everybody else, principal supervisors need practice and coaching in adult leadership skills.

Recognizing the need to strengthen the role, the Cleveland school district hired New Leaders to establish a community of practice that prioritized developing a shared understanding of the principal supervisor's responsibilities. Once the group came to a consensus about the role, the New Leaders instructor led principal supervisors on site visits to practice collecting evidence and in group discussion on what was observed, what constituted effective practice, and the kind of feedback that would help principals improve. New Leaders led exercises in conducting difficult conversations with principals and reviewed sample school data with the supervisors to develop their skills in establishing appropriate growth targets for the principal and the school.

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All states can play a similar role in ensuring that their principal supervisors receive and complete high-quality training around evaluation implementation. Alternatively, or in addition, they may want to create a more formal certification process for principal evaluators, as many states have done for teacher evaluators.

Questions State Boards of Education Should Ask

Principals are at the front line of national reform efforts and are a key lever for ensuring their success. They lead implementation of new, more rigorous college- and career-ready standards and assessments and carry out a far more complex and in-depth teacher evaluation process than in the past. Yet policies and programs around principal quality and development have not kept up. Most states spend far more on teacher evaluations and professional development than they do on principals—a counterproductive omission. We cannot improve teacher quality at scale without great principals.

It is heartening that at least some states and districts are spending time and money to improve principal evaluation tools. While this is the right instinct, there are troubling signs of a misplaced emphasis on design. There are already a number of high-quality principal evaluation models available for free[13] that can easily, and with minimal cost, be adapted to align with local accountability systems and improvement priorities. Instead, states and districts should spend far more time and money on implementation. This entails training principals and principal supervisors in the new evaluation system, building principal supervisor capacity, and ensuring that principals have high-quality, job-embedded opportunities to build the skills they need to help their students achieve dramatic academic gains.

State boards of education can play an important role. To determine where to focus attention and resources, state boards can ask themselves the following:

- Do our policy discussions about educator effectiveness focus enough on principals?

- Are our standards for principals adequately focused on the most important aspects of a principal's role?

- Does our state have a strong model for principal evaluation that districts can adopt or adapt?

- As we consider new systems, how are we engaging practitioners—particularly principals and their supervisors—in design and implementation?

- Are we thinking beyond the initial design of new systems and considering how we will support good implementation?

- What other policies (e.g., licensing rules, principal preparation regulations) help or hinder efforts to increase principal effectiveness through improved evaluation? ■

[1] R. J. Marzano, T. Waters, and B. A. McNulty, *School Leadership That Works: From Research to Results* (Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2005).

[2] Based on a 2005 study by McREL that analyzed 70 studies from more than three decades of research.

[3] G. F. Branch, E. A. Hanushek, and S. G. Rivkin, *Measuring the Impact of Effective Principals* (Cambridge, MA: Education Next, 2012).

[4] Marzano et al., *School Leadership That Works*.

[5] G. Ikemoto, L. Taliaferro, and E. Adams, *Playmakers: How Great Principals Build and Lead Great Teams of Teachers* (New York City: New Leaders, 2012).

[6] Scholastic Inc., *Primary Sources: America's Teachers on the Teaching Profession* (New York City: Scholastic and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2012).

[7] National Policy Board for Educational Administration, *Professional Standards for Educational Leaders 2015* (Reston, VA, 2015), http://www.ccsso.org/Documents/2015/

[8] New Leaders, "New Leaders Principal Evaluation Rubric," (New York City, 2012).

[9] Examples of teacher surveys focused on principal quality include 5Essentials survey from University of Chicago and VAL-ED from Vanderbilt University. The New Teacher Center also has a survey tool, TELL and the Cultural Insight Survey, that can be obtained upon request.

[10] S. M. Kimball and A.T. Milanowski, "Assessing the Promise of Standards-Based Performance Evaluation for Principals: Results from Randomized Trial," *Leadership and Policy in Schools* 8, no. 3 (2009): 233–63.

[11] For more detailed information, see New Leaders, *The Principal Evaluation Handbook* (New York City, 2012).

[12] B. J. Vitcob and G. S. Bloom, "A New Vision for Supervision of Principals," *School Administrator* 67, no. 11 (2010): 19–21.

[13] See, e.g., New Leaders, "New Leaders Principal Evaluation Rubric," and Kimball and Milanowski, "Assessing the Promise of Standards-Based Performance Evaluation."

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