CHANGE AGENTS: HOW STATES CAN DEVELOP EFFECTIVE SCHOOL LEADERS
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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New Leaders

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Great principals are change agents. As school leaders, principals are the lynchpin of effective implementation of any school-level reform and are critical to student success. Principals account for 25 percent of a school's total impact on student achievement[1] and can have a greater impact on all students than teachers because principals ensure effective instruction year to year across the entire school.[2] The best way to see effective teaching and student achievement gains at scale is to deepen the bench of great school leaders.

However, many principals entering the profession are not equipped with the skills they need to succeed. At the same time, state licensure systems are not measuring the competencies principals should demonstrate to receive an initial license or renew that license. The lack of an outcomes-oriented focus in principal preparation and licensure negatively impacts the quality of the principal pipeline. Since great principals deliver on the promise of other improvement efforts—by implementing new standards; analyzing teacher and student data; recruiting, developing, evaluating, supporting, and retaining the best teachers; and leading teams to turn around our lowest performing schools—states must focus on principals in order to meet student achievement goals. Setting the right bar for who can lead a school is among a state's highest-impact activities to support all students—and accelerating improvement is a space of great opportunity for state action.

THE CHALLENGE:
PRINCIPAL READINESS GAP

While the importance of a principal's impact on student achievement has long been documented, our preparation programs are not preparing the school leaders we need.

While there are examples of high-performing principal preparation programs based at institutions of higher education, there is an urgent need to overhaul the current approach to principal preparation in order to accelerate the pace of improvement—raising the bar for all types of preparation programs and holding all programs accountable for outcomes. Strong principal preparation programs have a rigorous selection process, pair rigorous curriculum with a strong clinical component, and are committed to program review and improvement.[3] They also systematically recruit high-caliber candidates, use an ongoing assessment cycle to tailor learning, and focus on effective applications of lessons.[4] Yet, most preparation programs do not contain all of these elements. The current program approval process employed by most states does not incent preparation programs to adopt research-based best practices nor does it hold programs accountable for outcomes when making renewal decisions. Finally, compensation structures that reward educators for obtaining a Master's degree—regardless of a change in role or effectiveness—provide few incentives for preparation programs to improve.

1.   Leithwood, K., Louis, K. S., Anderson, S., & Wahlstrom, K. (2004). How Leadership Influences Student Learning. New York, NY: Wallace Foundation; Marzano, R.J., Waters, T., & McNulty, B. (2005). School leadership that works: From research to results. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

2.   Branch, G., Hanushek, E. A., & Rivkin, S. G. (2012). Estimating the effect of leaders on public sector productivity: The case of school principals (pp. 45). Washington, D.C.: National Center for Analysis of Longitudinal Data in Education.

3.   Cheney, G., Davis J., & Holleran, J (2010). A New Approach to Principal Preparation: Innovative Programs Share Their Best Practices and Lessons Learned. Fort Worth, TX: Rainwater Leadership Alliance.

4.   Hitt, D., Tucker, P., & Young, M. D. (2012). The Professional Pipeline for Educational Leadership. Charlottesville, VA: University Council for Educational Administration.

Superintendents have said for years that they have trouble finding candidates who are prepared for the principalship. And principals agree that their preparation programs do not prepare them for the expectations of being a school leader. This lack of preparation means school districts must scramble to find high-quality candidates and spend resources to compensate for gaps in understanding. It also means that states are providing initial licenses to principals who haven't mastered key leadership competencies, such as the ability to serve as an instructional leader, talent manager, and culture builder.

THE CHALLENGE: WEAK LICENSING REQUIREMENTS

States use licensure policies as a gatekeeping mechanism, but many policies lack rigor on the front end and do not require any demonstration of performance throughout a principal's career.

Most state licensure systems lack rigor, are not closely aligned to the expectations for principals, and are disconnected from job performance. States could better use licensure to revamp how decisions are made—focusing initial licensure on clear evidence of readiness to succeed and basing renewal decisions on demonstrated effectiveness and the expectation of continued effectiveness.

Re-licensure is often a cursory exercise requiring little more than years on the job and attendance at professional development sessions. Most states do not connect evaluation results with license renewal or incorporate other performance-based elements. As states implement high-quality evaluation systems that reliably differentiate strong and weak principals, they can use this data to inform license renewal.

THE CASE FOR ACTION: OUTCOMES-FOCUSED SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

Now is the time for states to improve their own processes for principal preparation and licensure in order to build a pipeline of school leaders who get results for students.

Principals are the change agents needed to deliver on the promise of educational achievement for all students. As expectations for principals increase, states can help ensure new school-level reforms are implemented well by improving the way principals are recruited, prepared, and licensed.

In order to create a highly effective principal corps of change agents, states can start with a strong leadership pipeline that identifies and attracts effective educators with adult leadership skills into preparation programs. With that pipeline in place, the strongest potential leaders need clear pathways to leadership positions that include rigorous preparation with a coherent and relevant curriculum, opportunities for clinical practice, assessment of skill attainment in an authentic setting, and ongoing support.

States are in a strong position to make this vision a reality by creating approval and renewal systems for preparation programs that are informed by program outcomes. To ensure principal preparation is working and that principals in the field remain effective, states will also need to develop better licensure criteria with regular, performance-based renewal cycles, and use those outcomes to continuously improve the pipeline, preparation, and licensure system.

THE RECOMMENDATIONS: A POLICY FRAMEWORK FOR IMPROVING PREPARATION & LICENSURE

How can states drive towards a stronger focus on what really matters? There are a number of key policies states can consider to build a pipeline of change agents by keeping the focus on student outcomes

Priority Policies for Principal Preparation

The purpose of principal preparation programs is to prepare leaders for the principalship and ensure they are entering the school system prepared with the competencies they need to lead a school that gets results for students. States can set specific expectations for preparation programs that are grounded in the state's leadership standards and research-based attributes of effective preparation, and hold all programs to those expectations through initial review and renewal processes.

1 | Raise the bar by designing a state structure for review and approval of principal preparation programs based on consistent expectations.

Ideally, identify a single entity tasked with both principal licensure and approval of principal preparation programs. Elevate the approval or non-approval decision to a clear set of decision-makers in order to promote accountability. Work with principal preparation programs to develop review processes focused on demonstrating alignment between the competencies emphasized in the preparation program and the state's leadership standards. Establish a process for selecting and training qualified preparation program reviewers and consider including representatives from successful preparation programs as a way to honor and leverage their expertise. Incent programs through fast-track reviews and other methods to address state priorities, such as preparing turnaround leaders.

2 | Focus the initial review of principal preparation programs on a demonstration of institutional capacity to implement a rigorous program plan.

In order to ensure new institutions have the capacity to run a successful program, work with preparation programs to develop an initial review process where programs demonstrate their capacity to effectively run a program and an operational plan to execute on a rigorous program design. The program's design should include a plan to recruit and select the highest potential candidates, certain research-based programmatic elements, and be aligned to the state's leadership standards. In particular, ensure programs include clinical practice in a sustained and authentic setting where candidates can be evaluated on their leadership practice as part of program completion. Finally, expect preparation programs to demonstrate meaningful partnerships with one or more school districts (described in the companion guide) in order to identify high-potential talent and provide for authentic clinical practice experiences.

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5.   Burkhauser, S., Pierson, A., Gates, S.M., & Hamilton, L.S. (2012). Addressing Challenges in Evaluating School Principal Improvement Efforts. Santa Monica, CA: The RAND Corporation.

Principal Preparation Recommendations

Raise the bar by designing a state structure for review and approval of principal preparation programs based on consistent expectations.

Focus the initial review of principal preparation programs on a demonstration of institutional capacity to implement a rigorous program plan.

Use outcome measures to differentiate the renewal process for principal preparation programs and as data points for continuous program improvement.

Hold all types of principal preparation programs accountable for results, including enforcing consequences for under-performing programs and providing incentives to high-performing programs.

Reinvest the fruitless "Master's Degree Bump" (salary increases based only on credentials) in more effective approaches.

3 | Use outcome measures to differentiate the renewal process for principal preparation programs and as data points for continuous program improvement.

After a number of years running a program, require institutions to demonstrate the program's outcomes, implementation of research-based best practices, and continuous reflection and use of data for improvement. Outcome measures, including placement rates, retention rates, district satisfaction, leadership effectiveness, and impact on student outcomes can be used to differentiate the intensity and frequency of program review. How student outcome data is used may depend in part on your methodology: consider a number of factors such as outcome measures for high schools, longitudinal data, and the ability to control for prior student achievement. See the companion guide and RAND's report *Addressing Challenges in Evaluating School Principal Improvement Efforts*[5] for more information.

4 | Hold all types of principal preparation programs accountable for results, including enforcing consequences for under-performing programs and providing incentives to high-performing programs.

Allow any program that meets a rigorous bar of program approval to prepare principals—including institutions of higher education, school districts, and non-profit organizations. Hold all programs to the same standards. Include support for program improvements and provide both incentives (for high-performing programs) and consequences (for low-performing programs). Implement a fast-track renewal process for high-performing programs whose graduates have high placement and retention rates and demonstrate evidence of effectiveness once they are placed as principals and have been leading the same school for three years. Given limited bandwidth, spend time doing a more in-depth review on a more frequent basis for programs that have weaker outcomes. Data can also help identify high-performing programs where the state can extract and highlight best practices. At the far end of the spectrum, subject programs that—even with support to improve—continue to produce the lowest-performing principals to consequences.

5 | Reinvest the fruitless "Master's Degree Bump" (salary increases based only on credentials) in more effective approaches.

Require districts to link salary increases to a teacher or principal's actual job, not their license or endorsement. While licenses and endorsements can be an important signaling tool, compensation should reflect a person's job and their effectiveness in the role. In order to ensure educators do not seek licenses or endorsements simply for a salary increase with no plans to take on additional responsibilities, take action to limit compensation increases to actual changes roles and responsibilities. Then redirect savings towards more effective approaches, including pilots of innovative compensation systems that help support and retain effective educators.

Priority Policies for Principal Licensure

The purpose of a principal licensure system is to ensure new principals are prepared to enter the profession and practiced principals are demonstrating ongoing effectiveness. Licensure can also safeguard against insufficient use of high-quality principal evaluation data to make difficult personnel decisions at the local level. States can create a simple tiered licensure system that differentiates between a probationary license for early career educators and a professional license for educators who have demonstrated effectiveness in their role. The expectations for both licensure levels should be embedded in the state's leadership standards.

1 | Streamline and increase the rigor of licensure by providing a single licensure system for principals completing traditional or alternative preparation programs.

Create a single license for entry into the profession based on rigorous expectations of readiness, regardless of the pathway. While licenses should only be granted to aspiring principals that meet a high bar, be careful not to create a complex licensure system with too many levels of licensure or endorsement. Complex systems make it difficult to license an appropriate number of administrators and can inadvertently create barriers for hiring change agents.

2 | Develop an initial licensure process focused on a demonstration of the competencies necessary to lead a school.

Require completion of an approved preparation program, including a robust clinical experience, and passage of any relevant performance assessments, for receipt of an initial—or probationary—license. While aspiring principals can demonstrate their skills through either certification from an approved principal preparation program or passage of a performance-based assessment that reflects the authentic work of a school leader, approved preparation programs that have met a high bar are in a better position to assess competencies in an authentic environment.

3 | Create a regular license renewal process focused on a demonstration of ongoing effectiveness.

Tie the effectiveness data drawn from a robust principal evaluation system—that reliably differentiates strong and weak principals—to license renewal. Grant a professional license to school leaders who have demonstrated effectiveness over time. If an evaluation system is still being built, consider additional factors in renewal decisions. (See the companion guide for more information.)

4 | Promote growth and improvement by recognizing ongoing achievements with a limited number of endorsements, such as opportunities for teacher leaders or advanced achievements for principals.

Recognize and encourage outstanding performance with a tiered system of optional endorsements. For example, endorse teachers who have a demonstrated pattern of effectiveness as teacher leaders and recognize principals who are effective over time with an advanced or master endorsement that is connected to shifts in job responsibilities or their performance. Use these endorsements to signal that educators have a certain level of professional expertise and are ready to have a broader impact. It is important that these endorsements do not create bureaucratic barriers for educators, but instead serve to acknowledge and celebrate good practice.

5 | Encourage change agents to stay in the profession by working with other states to create a simple, but rigorous reciprocity process.

Work together with other states to create a simple, but rigorous licensure reciprocity process through which talented educators from other states can become certified. Develop consistent definitions of critical inputs necessary to receive an initial license and come to agreement on the types of evidence that principals need to provide in order renew their license. These common understandings will help develop confidence in comparability across states.

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New Leaders is a national nonprofit that develops transformational school leaders and promotes the system-level policies and practices that allow strong leaders to succeed. Over the past 10 years, New Leaders has trained more than 1,000 school leaders who are raising student achievement and graduation rates in high-need schools across the country. Beyond its signature principal training program, New Leaders conducts leadership development with existing school and district administrators, and designs effective leadership policies and practices for school systems nationwide.

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