

# POLICY ISSUE BRIEF: PRINCIPAL PATHWAYS AND TRAINING

## Issue at a Glance

Research conducted by the Wallace Foundation finds that effective school leadership is second only to direct classroom instruction among school-based factors in raising student achievement—and principal impact is the greatest single factor in low-achieving, high-poverty, and minority schools. Principals also improve teaching and learning through their ability to shape a vision of academic success for all students; create a safe and supportive school climate; cultivate leadership among teachers and other school staff; improve instruction; and manage people, data, and processes to foster school improvement.

Forty states require that principals have a master's degree and three years of teaching or similar school-based experience to earn their certification and licensure. Thirty-nine states require aspiring principals to have clinical experience as part of their preparation program, but only 11 states require that candidates spend at least 300 hours in field-based experiences. Other aspects of training for aspiring principals vary across the country and within states, which is why school leaders often cite a gap between their preparation and their readiness for the job. Once principals are on the job, few receive ongoing professional learning that reflects changing student demographics, new technology, evolving instructional strategies, or large-scale reform initiatives. Principals also often report participating in professional learning that is designed for teachers rather than their own learning needs.

## NASSP Position

- NASSP seeks to transform education through school leadership, recognizing that the fulfillment of each student's potential relies on great leaders in every school committed to the success of each student.
- NASSP advocates for highly effective school leaders who strategically, collaboratively, and purposefully manage their school and are equipped and empowered to support their school community, students, teachers, and staff to reach their highest potential.
- NASSP believes in the importance of developing and investing in the building capacity and professional learning and preparation programs of school leaders from levels PreK–12.
- The Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL) are organized around the domains, qualities, and values of leadership work that research and practice indicate contribute to students' academic success and well-being. NASSP supports following PSEL standards for all practicing principals.

- The National Educational Leadership Preparation (NELP) standards, which are aligned to PSEL, provide specificity around performance expectations for beginning-level building and district leaders. Where the PSEL standards define educational leadership broadly, the NELP standards specify what novice leaders and program graduates should know and be able to do as a result of completing a high-quality educational leadership preparation program. There is one set of NELP standards for candidates preparing to become principals and a second set of standards for candidates seeking to become superintendents. NASSP also supports the NELP standards for principal practice.
- NASSP has a separate policy issue brief on [Principal and Teacher Shortage](#) with more recommendations on actions to address the principal pipeline and ongoing development that will keep more qualified school leaders in the profession.

## Recommendations for Federal Policymakers

- Fully fund Title II, Part A of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which provides resources for states and districts to strengthen teacher and principal preparation programs, reform educator certification and licensure requirements, develop career advancement initiatives for teachers, and offer professional learning opportunities for teachers and school leaders.
- Research principal professional learning and provide support and technical assistance to states and districts to help them incorporate best practices into their education systems.
- Continue the ongoing collection of Title II, Part A data to ensure that states and districts are implementing programs consistent with ESSA and to help stakeholders determine the effectiveness of these investments in improving school leadership.
- Reauthorize the Higher Education Act and ensure that all principal preparation programs are held to the same high standards and include strong clinical training; rigorous requirements and training for mentors; and ongoing mentoring and support for new educators, which research shows increase educator retention and effectiveness.
- Incentivize the development of school leader residency programs to provide a full year of clinical training in partner districts and subsidize aspiring principals' salaries.
- Conduct research and provide guidance for principals on how to balance targeted supports.
- Provide tax incentives and grant funding for principal pathway programs, expansion of loan forgiveness to school leaders, and community-based partnerships and training grants.

## Recommendations for State Policymakers

- Adopt or adapt the PSEL and NELP standards to ensure that principal certification and licensure requirements are aligned to the domains, qualities, and values of leadership that empower each individual to apply the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to grow in and contribute productively to a global society.

- Use the allowable 3% reservation of Title II funds under ESSA to strengthen the content of preparation programs and professional learning opportunities for principals, including through partnerships with nonprofit organizations, to help all principals be highly effective school leaders.
- Require school districts to report how they use Title II funds to build their capacity to better support and train principals and aspiring principals.
- Revise licensure, certification, and principal preparation program accreditation requirements to ensure aspiring principals spend at least 250 hours in field-based experiences—which is consistent with NELP standards—and incentivize the creation of school leader residencies.
- Incentivize institutions of higher education to create and expand principal preparation programs that emphasize:
  - Strong district partnerships;
  - Leadership skills with a demonstrated impact on student and school success, including the ability to create a continuous learning environment for teachers, staff, and students;
  - Rigorous recruitment and selection criteria for successful educators who have shown potential as leaders;
  - Instructors with prior school leadership experience and deep knowledge of effective leadership practices;
  - Comprehensive clinical experiences that are linked to coursework and help principal candidates address context-specific problems and the needs of special population groups, including students with disabilities, English language learners, and students from economically disadvantaged families;
  - Peer networks;
  - High-quality mentoring, supervision, and evaluation of candidates throughout the clinical experience;
  - Opportunities for ongoing professional learning and coaching for practicing school leaders.
- Provide funding for principal candidates to receive a competitive salary and benefits while participating in their preparation program and field experiences.
- Ensure that data systems link teacher evaluations and student performance data back to principal preparation programs so that policymakers and institutions of higher education can identify best practices and growth opportunities.

## Recommendations for District Leaders

- Communicate explicit expectations for principal leadership and ensure that professional development, mentoring, and ongoing support for principals are aligned to these expectations and link to school or district mission and needs.
- Develop partnerships with principal preparation programs that include genuine engagement and incorporate district needs into recruitment, training, and clinical experiences.
- Ensure that principals receive ongoing mentoring and support from individuals who have been successful school leaders and are trained and compensated to be successful.
- Provide training for principal supervisors to develop their capacity to support and coach principals as instructional leaders.

- Engage principals in a formal evaluation process and use evidence of principals' effectiveness and student achievement to develop continuous professional learning opportunities that reflect individual school and leader needs.
- Provide professional development opportunities for principals that are aligned to PSEL standards and focused on those skills proven to affect teacher and student outcomes.
- Develop frameworks that support the recruitment, development, and retention of strong school leaders.

## Recommendations for School Leaders

- Participate in [NASSP Academy](#), which has an interactive e-learning platform built by school leaders for school leaders, designed specifically for principals and assistant principals. The Academy provides training and courses that directly focus on career-connected and work-based learning for sustainable school improvement that benefits all students.
- Participate in [NASSP's Leadership Networks](#) to further develop peer-to-peer support, build innovative initiatives, receive the latest training and best practices in areas such as advocacy, school safety, trauma-informed instruction and services, mental health supports for school leaders, staff and students, education technology and artificial intelligence.
- Develop your professional learning skills on how your practice as a school leader contributes to a supportive environment focused on PreK–12 student and adult learning.
- Identify and pursue continuous learning opportunities related to your areas of strength and growth, including collaboration with other principals to share best practices.
- Advocate for Title II and other sources of funding for professional learning opportunities and learn how additional resources can support your continued professional development.
- Invite staff, parents, families, and students to provide feedback and demonstrate a transparent willingness to work in collaboration on recommendations.
- Familiarize yourself with the complexity of your role as you attend to the interdependence of building culture and leading learning in your unique school context.