

Factoring Principals Into School Improvement

When policymakers search for ways to improve public education, rarely do they focus on the role of the school principal. Yet research shows that, next to the teacher, the principal has the strongest influence on student learning, particularly in high-poverty schools.

Over the past decade, principals have been publicly called upon to take the lead in school improvement and turnaround—often with little policy support or guidance. And few research studies have been conducted to determine what kind of training and support makes such leadership possible.

“When we talk about improving schools and education, principals must be part of the equation,” says Karen Kearney, Director of Leadership Initiatives and Senior Program Associate for the California Comprehensive Center at WestEd. “It’s teachers, *plus* principals, *plus* superintendents, equals school improvement.’ An ‘either-or’ formula will not work.”


As a former building principal, Kearney recognizes the consequences of assuming that effective school leadership will “just happen.” That’s why she has played a pivotal role in shaping and sustaining California’s Integrated Leadership Development Initiative (ILDI), an unusual collaboration of public and private agencies whose purpose is to upgrade the preparation, licensure, and career development of principals. Bringing together state agencies with organizations such as universities, professional associations, and county education offices, ILDI is forging new alliances to serve the long-term objective of developing effective leaders for every school in the state.

“Collaborative efforts such as ILDI are much-needed vehicles,” says Fred Tempes, Director of the California Comprehensive Center at WestEd, which convened the groups that in 2005 became ILDI. “They get important work done that might otherwise be impossible to accomplish.”

While ILDI work focuses on California, it also contributes to broader efforts to define standards and practices for highly effective principals nationwide and to support professional development for all stages of their careers. In 2010, several years of work came to fruition with the publication of ILDI’s *Effective Principals for California Schools: Building a Coherent Leadership Development System*, which synthesizes the research to date on developing highly skilled principals and recommends changes in existing policies and practices to support each stage of an administrator’s tenure.

The report describes a “coherent system” of leadership development, Kearney emphasizes, because, to be effective, all the elements must work together: research-based performance standards, clearly defined practices that exemplify the standards, and professional development

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support that enables principals to master the practices. When there are disconnects between a district's standards, best practices, and supports—as there often are—the system breaks down. A leadership development system, the report points out, also needs to be flexible enough to be used in a wide range of school and district contexts.

The *Effective Principals* report asserts that principals, like teachers, develop their professional skills in stages over the course of their careers, and ILDI defines common problems and ways to improve at each stage:

- **Aspiring Principal**—The identification and recruitment of principals should be active and dynamic, seeking outstanding teachers with demonstrated leadership skills, rather than passively accepting anyone with the required credentials.
- **Principal Candidate**—Policies affecting the preparation and licensing of principals are often misaligned with actual job responsibilities, especially in schools serving high-poverty areas. A crucial improvement over the current status quo would be to give “principal candidates the opportunity to apply knowledge and skills in real situations, with the support of a mentor or coach,” the report says.
- **Novice Principal**—Induction programs, a shared responsibility of preparation programs and districts, must become more deliberate and consistent to ensure that new principals not only develop on-the-job skills but also apply them and improve their effectiveness.
- **Developing Principal**—Principals must participate in ongoing professional development to increase their skills. The report says that in California, unlike in some other states, “professional development for principals has rarely been coordinated or part of systemwide learning.” The report suggests a range of changes, such as establishing a best-practices clearinghouse and defining and setting criteria for effective professional development.
- **Expert Principal**—Providing guidelines, recognition, and incentives for accomplished practice could sustain and retain the most skilled school leaders.

The *Effective Principals* report encapsulates a steady, 25-year effort by small groups of agencies and organizations to keep principal development on California's education policy agenda. During much of that time, and through several policy shifts, Kearney says, many of the same individuals worked together on small projects as a way to use limited resources to address important school leadership issues.

Partly as a result of this shared history, the *Effective Principals* report represents a consensus for action by key California agencies and organizations that develop policy, research, and professional practice related to improving school leadership standards. And that consensus carries some clout: Together, ILDI member organizations guide or assist every K-12 administrator in California.

Linda Wisher served as Director of Educational Services for the Association of California School Administrators (ACSA) until her recent retirement, and has been an active ILDI member for five years. “ILDI's current focus on school leadership development is especially timely,” she says, “given the large number of projected principal retirements and the growing student population in California over the next ten years. We've established a research base for promising practices and set

into motion approaches for recruiting and developing the highly effective school leaders that our state will need in coming decades.”

Compiling the Research Base for Principal Evaluation

To secure federal funding for school improvement, states and districts are required to use research-based, standards-based, valid, and reliable approaches to improve educator effectiveness. That, in turn, necessitates principal evaluation instruments and systems that are valid, reliable, and research-based, to measure changes in educator performance over time. To set the foundation for such evaluation, in 2011, ILDI released *The Policies and Practices of Principal Evaluation: A Review of the Literature*, a comprehensive review that collected and analyzed the small set of available research on principal evaluation systems. It also identifies additional research needed to link principal support and evaluation practices to improving principal effectiveness.

Adding information from expert interviews and guidance from the personnel evaluation standards to the limited empirical data, ILDI researchers were able to identify 12 features of comprehensive principal evaluation systems. These include:

- Close alignment of principal evaluation with state and district mission, goals, and professional standards, with an emphasis on instructional leadership;
- Effective strategies for implementing evaluation, including evaluator training and follow-up; and
- Ongoing review of the technical qualities and effects of the evaluation model and instruments.

These 12 features were published in a companion piece to the literature review, *Key Features of a Comprehensive Principal Evaluation System*. Validated through focus groups with key stakeholders, including superintendents, human resources administrators, principals, and professors of education, and reviewed against the *Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation Framework 2009*, the *Key Features* are intended for use by practitioners, researchers, and policy-makers designing or monitoring principal evaluation systems.

“This is a particularly exciting stage of ILDI’s work,” Kearney says. “These recently published reports incorporate all the hard work on the issue to date: the research base, state and national leadership standards, and input from people in the field. Now we can roll these into practical guidance to move the work forward.”

Kearney acknowledges that focusing attention on principals during a period of fiscal restraint will challenge efforts to implement ILDI’s agenda. But the collaboration has already solidified partnerships that should bolster support for school leaders. Next steps are to further implement some of the recommendations in *the Effective Principals* report, appropriately identify how principal performance contributes to student achievement, and track the results. Sharing successful practices and developing a robust body of research on effective school leadership and principal evaluation could help make principals a priority instead of an afterthought.

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