

# Principal Evaluation Policies in California

On the Precipice of Reform

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INTEGRATED LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVE

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The Integrated Leadership Development Initiative (ILDI) is a cross-agency partnership that focuses on collaboratively guiding and supporting leader development and improving conditions of leadership so that there are highly accomplished leaders in every district and school in California. ILDI members include the: California Department of Education, California County Superintendents Education Services Association, Association of California School Administrators, California Commission on Teacher Credentialing, California Professors of Education Administration, Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning, California Comprehensive Center at WestEd, and Regional Education Laboratory-West at WestEd.

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# Introduction

## INTRODUCTION

By nearly all accounts, the manner in which teacher and principal performance is assessed is near the brink of reform. Yet, while there is substantial agreement that the status quo is sub-par, there is also clear political conflict among major stakeholders about how to proceed.

The complex and multi-faceted process of evaluating the impact of teaching on student achievement is increasingly shaped by a perpetual trickle of new initiatives at the regional, state, and national levels. Further complicating the issue is the tendency to link teacher and principal evaluations in policy proposals, although the two are fundamentally discrete undertakings. For example, while a multitude of studies suggest teacher quality is the “single most important in-school factor influencing student learning and achievement,”<sup>1</sup> studies on the influence of principals’ practice on student learning are still emerging. Furthermore, evaluation reform efforts are greatly influenced by the presence of teachers’ local bargaining units, an issue of much less concern with principals. Nonetheless, the revamping of both teacher and principal evaluation systems is being promulgated at the state and federal levels, causing reasonable concern regarding the viability of reforming both simultaneously.

### LAYING THE FOUNDATION

Even before principal evaluation became a pivot point for reform, educators and policymakers

expressed support for improving principal quality and concern for its connection to student achievement in California. The state has long had complementary initiatives to support the hiring and training of quality principals, activities that inherently precede evaluation.

In 2001, the California Professional Standards for Education Leaders (CPSEL) were adapted from the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) Standards for School Leaders.<sup>2</sup> The CPSEs provide an overview of successful leadership behaviors specific to California schools. More than 900 educators reviewed this methodic and purposeful undertaking by representatives from the California School Leadership Academy at WestEd, the Association of California School Administrators, the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing, the California Department of Education, and California public and private universities. The California Commission on Teacher Credentialing eventually adopted the CPSEs as program standards for administrator licensure.

Also central to the administrator licensure process is the tiered credential system, in which knowledge

and skills build upon each other systematically. Initial applicants are granted a Preliminary Administrative Services Credential, which is valid for up to five years. To obtain a Clear Administrative Services Credential, candidates must verify at least two years of successful experience in a full-time administrative position and complete additional hours of training in an approved program. This structure is designed to ensure supplementary training in the skills principals need that are not captured in a basic-level credential. The ancillary requirement targets essential skills, such as working with stakeholders, training and supporting staff, using data to make decisions, and promoting effective organizational culture.<sup>3</sup>

One statewide method of delivering this professional development for administrators is via the Administrator Training Program (ATP), funded by Assembly Bill 75 (reauthorized as Assembly Bill 430). In 2001, the State Board of Education convened an advisory group of principals, district administrators, and other education experts to develop criteria for ATP modules. These modules center on building principals' capacity to serve effectively in their critical and complex roles. Specific education goals include training principals to "establish sound and clear instructional goals, collaboratively develop data-driven instructional strategies, and lead a school through powerful instructional change."<sup>4</sup>

In addition to principal capacity, California has committed to the dual goals of quality and equity. To that end, Senate Bill 1133, the Quality Education Investment Act of 2006, provides \$3 billion over seven years to low-performing schools to support closing the "achievement gap."<sup>5</sup> One of the primary requirements is that superintendents stipulate that principals are "exemplary."<sup>6</sup> In lieu of a prescribed definition, resource documents are available to assist school districts in framing their characterization of an exemplary administrator (see previous note).

While these policies have centered on principal quality, important milestones still need to be met to ensure exceptional education leaders are in place

throughout California's schools. One of these milestones is the reexamination of evaluation procedures for principals, as it is difficult to determine if improvements in quality are taking place without quantitative measures of effectiveness. The California Education Code requires the evaluation and assessment of performance for principals, but it does not detail specific methodologies to be used.<sup>7</sup>

## THE FEDERAL FRAMEWORK

A slate of national agenda items, primarily funded through the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act (ARRA) of 2009,<sup>8</sup> has surely spurred the prospect of impending evaluation reform. Perhaps the most impressive aspect of this omnibus legislation is the deliberate weaving of clearly defined reform goals throughout the various education initiatives. Quite prominent among these reform goals is the requirement to link evaluation results for both teachers and principals to student achievement.

The most publicized of the ARRA initiatives was the Race to the Top (RTTT) competitive grant program, funded at \$4.3 billion. This competition stimulated significant teacher and principal evaluation reform across the country, even for states that ultimately did not receive funding. State applicants were required to design and implement annual "rigorous, transparent, and fair evaluation" systems for principals and teachers in which a significant part was measured by student growth.<sup>9</sup> The RTTT application further provided one of the first-ever federal definitions of an effective principal: one whose students "overall and for each subgroup, achieve acceptable rates (e.g., at least one grade level in an academic year) of student growth."

While RTTT was emphatically debated, the State Fiscal Stabilization Fund (SFSF), with more than \$53 billion in non-competitive appropriations and a host of required assurances, was virtually unheralded. Yet the requirements were only slightly less ambitious than those found in RTTT. The application for funding required states, for the first time, to

collect and publicly report for each school district the systems used to evaluate principal performance; the use of the results to inform decisions regarding principal development, compensation, promotion, retention, and removal; and the use of student achievement scores to determine evaluation results. Finally, states were required to publicly report the number and percentage of principals rated at each performance rating or level.<sup>10</sup> States that did not have or collect these data were required to submit a plan detailing the manner in which they would meet the requirements and publicly display the results.

Evaluation reform was interwoven in another ARRA program, the \$4 billion School Improvement Grant. Districts were to use these funds to improve student achievement in Title I schools identified for improvement, corrective action, or restructuring. The goal was to enable those schools to make adequate yearly progress and exit “improvement status” by selecting one of four turnaround models. One of the options, the transformation model, requires the school, among other things, to replace the principal and use a “rigorous, transparent, and equitable evaluation system” for teacher and principal evaluation that takes into account student growth.<sup>11</sup>

Yet another arm of ARRA was the Teacher Incentive Fund (TIF), which provided \$437 million in competitive funds for districts to develop performance-based compensation systems. Funding was contingent on basing these systems on “rigorous, transparent, and fair evaluation systems for teachers and principals” that differentiate levels of effectiveness among multiple rating categories and use student growth as a significant factor.<sup>12</sup>

The set of ARRA initiatives provided a preview of the focus on evaluation that was to come in the Blueprint for Reform: The Reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. In this document the U.S. Department of Education outlined its plan for states to “identify effective and highly effective teachers and principals on the basis of student growth and other factors.”<sup>13</sup> The

Blueprint suggests that in exchange for evaluation systems that meaningfully differentiate between at least three performance levels, districts will be granted more flexible use of federal funds.

While the majority of ARRA funds have been allocated and the Blueprint awaits political action, yet another federal proposition is on the horizon. Senate Bill 3242, known as the Teacher and Principal Improvement Act, departs from ARRA initiatives’ language and requires districts to create an evaluation system that “provides formative feedback for principals, identifies targeted areas of improvement, and includes summative evaluations that differentiate effectiveness using multiple ratings categories, including multiple measures of student learning.”<sup>14</sup>

## BUILDING REFORM LOCALLY

In California, the full impact of federal reform policy is still being measured.

In both rounds of RTTT, the state submitted applications that would have required significant modifications to current evaluation methods. Legislation was passed to strengthen the chances of securing funding. Senate Bill 5X1 required districts to develop, in consultation with teachers and principals, “a rigorous, transparent, and equitable evaluation system for teachers and principals that includes the use of pupil growth data and other factors such as multiple observation-based assessments.”<sup>15</sup> However, it is unclear how this legislation now applies to districts statewide, as California was unsuccessful in its bid for RTTT funding.

While the long-term effects of the federal drive for reform are still being ascertained, there have been some notable developments in California. For instance, a group of seven superintendents have partnered to create a non-profit organization to pursue education reforms that began with the state’s second RTTT application. This group, the California Office to Reform Education (CORE), seeks to assist districts in revising evaluation proce-

dures. Another residual effect is that data collected from districts for the SFSF provide, for the first time, a rich look at evaluation practices across the state. When analyzed, the information will give policymakers their first clear look at how principal evaluations are conducted and used. Additionally, although California did not apply for a TIF grant as a state, there were four awards to districts in the state for over \$30 million, including a coalition of five charter management organizations.

The State Board of Education (SBE) also advanced the cause of evaluation reform in 2010. Teacher and principal evaluation was a topic of debate in meetings throughout the second part of the year. In the final meeting of 2010, the SBE passed policy guidance that allows for a waiver from virtually all aspects of the California Education Code if districts adopt an annual evaluation system for teachers and principals.<sup>16</sup> Evaluations must be based on multiple measures, including no less than 30 percent based on growth in student achievement toward meeting grade-level proficiency.

## LOOKING FORWARD

While there were significant changes to evaluation policies in 2010, it remains unclear what the future holds for California. With both a new Governor and a new State Superintendent of Public Instruction taking office in 2011, the direction of California's education reform can hardly be predicted. Newly elected Governor Jerry Brown pledges that reform efforts must include changes to principal recruitment and evaluation,<sup>17</sup> but specifics will be revealed only as his administration settles in and starts making long-term decisions. Newly elected State Superintendent Tom Torlakson said during his campaign that "[our] evaluation system is in something of a shambles,"<sup>18</sup> but that current student achievement tests are not meant to measure teacher effectiveness. He asserts that the state needs "a robust evaluation system that's personal and not just based on statistics."<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, because of the shift in the SBE's

membership – seven of the ten seats are now held by new appointments – it remains to be seen if the new board will address the previous board's actions on the subject of evaluation.

The underlying assumption of the last year has been that evaluation reform is imminent. A critical underpinning of this progress depends on measuring the effects of teachers and leaders. It is clear that the new administrations will be tasked with making policy decisions, even amid great fiscal turmoil, that are designed to reconcile colliding views of evaluation reform at the local, state, and national levels.



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