TRANSCRIPT

Learning from Leadership Pipeline Interventions – A REL West Virtual Convening

NARRATOR

On May 20th, 2020, Dr. Susan Gates, a Senior Economist and Director of the Office of Research Quality Assurance at the RAND Corporation, spoke to a Regional Educational Laboratory West convening of state education leaders on her research on effective school leadership pipeline interventions and the logic models she and her RAND colleagues have developed to support such efforts. This video shares some highlights from her presentation.

Dr. Gates began with an overview of the key findings from her recent principal pipeline initiative, or PPI study, in six large U.S. school districts. The initiative supported comprehensive local efforts to improve four pipeline components: rigorous standards for what principals need to know and do, high-quality preparation in collaboration with local higher education institutions or other partners, selectively hiring and placing administrators based on data, and improving on-the-job support.

As the PPI project evolved, the districts began to also reshape the job of principal supervisors to focus more on instructional improvement and also put in place different central office systems of support such as a new position dedicated to school leadership. Ultimately, the study found that this work is very cost-effective. On average, districts spend less than one half of 1% of their budgets to operate and enhance their principal pipelines. And schools in pipeline districts with new principals outperformed comparison schools in math and reading.

Dr. Gates then described RAND's recent review of other evidence-based principal professional learning supports, leading to the research-based logic model she developed with her RAND colleagues.

SUSAN GATES

About three years ago, my RAND colleague, Becky Herman, led an effort at RAND that was supported by the Wallace Foundation to review the evidence base on initiatives related to professional learning for principals to understand what might be supportable through Title I or Title II under ESSA. When we reviewed the evidence base on professional learning efforts, what we found is that there were efforts that were out there that were targeted on tackling a range of problems or pain points. There might be a concern that ongoing professional development is not meeting the needs of all principals. It might be that the amount of support that's being provided is not sufficient. Another concern might be that the content could be misaligned with district, school, or even principal needs, or that the delivery of the content might not be effective. And so I know you all have identified one or more such problems, and that these

problems have informed the way that you're tackling these initiatives and the kinds of outputs and outcomes that you might want to track.

A big emphasis in the pipeline districts was on revising systems and processes for providing on-the-job support. And this included the development of new materials and content, sometimes contracting with third-party providers or nonprofit organizations on that, and developing the technology to support those kinds of efforts on an ongoing basis.

And then finally there was also an effort to train district staff to do that work. One of the things that was interesting to me is that a lot of times, even when the pipeline districts looked outside to exemplary organizations or NGOs to bring a particular type of training and support in-house, they also had an emphasis on kind of a train-the-trainer model. So asking those third-party providers to bring the district officials up to speed, so that going forward, they could do it themselves and not have to rely on an outside organization.

And then in terms of—another way in which the pipeline districts really used their pipeline resources was in actually providing the on-the-job support and induction for principals and assistant principals. And that included the induction support, which was in many cases quite intensive and included kind of classroom-based learning as well as coaching. But they also supported veteran leaders. In one case, one of the districts had kind of a five-year plan for supporting new leaders as they progressed from brand-new novice principals to veteran principals, with a different focus in each year.

And then finally they were also very focused on providing executive coaching and support to those who would supervise and support principals. In addition, the districts spent a fair amount of time rethinking the structure of that principal-supervisor role. So it wasn't just about making sure that the people had the skills that they needed, but they also devoted time to thinking about how they were structuring that job, where it fit within the district's central office, how it was linked with other offices in the districts that were providing school supports, and I would say even kind of rethinking this concept of school support and how it interfaced with mentoring, coaching, and support for principals.

In many of the districts, principal support and school support at the beginning of the pipeline initiative were often considered very different things. Like the principal support was like an HR thing, and the school support was more of a—well, a school support, or you know, it was part of a different office. And so another thing that the districts had to do was to think about unpacking those silos and putting things together in a different way.

This logic model illustrates how—it kind of distills the different types of activities that we observed professional learning initiatives undertaking, and then the kinds of outputs that we observed in the literature, and the outcomes that folks were trying to tie back to those professional development activities. And so what I want to do is drill down a little bit into those outputs that we learned about.

So on this slide, we show two common outputs associated with the activity of providing principals with high-quality training that we observed in the examples we reviewed. And then on the right side of the chart, we articulate the indicators that we observed in the literature that were associated with those outputs. And so the first output that was a pretty common one was that principals would receive sufficient, high-quality training during formal training sessions. And when we looked at the kinds of indicators that were being used to assess whether

that output was being achieved, the kinds of things that we saw were things like the proportion of principals who might be able to apply certain concepts that were the focus of the training, or the proportion of principals who could demonstrate improved knowledge, skills, and abilities related to those key learning objectives for the training.

Now, I'll pause here and just note that those first two metrics, if you were to use them, would require some definition of the knowledge, skills, competencies that are in fact the target of the professional development, as well as a mechanism for assessing them. And when you're thinking about a statewide initiative, one of the opportunities is that there can be some consistency, like maybe a common set of knowledge, skills, competencies, as well as a common way of measuring them which could then be applied by districts across the state in tracking the effectiveness of the professional development.

Another metric that we observed was kind of a more subjective measure about principal satisfaction with the training, and that would be reflected in the proportion of principals reporting that they felt the training was sufficient in terms of its duration and intensity to kind of get them to a higher level of performance. So those kinds of metrics can be useful as well, although they reflect more on the implementation as opposed to some of the outcomes.

So the second output, which was less common but also observed in a lot of the programs, was that principals would receive support outside of formal training sessions. Now this is a somewhat tricky outcome because if you have a program or you're delivering the support, that's all self-contained, and you have more control over what you measure and when you measure it. When you're talking about supports that are provided outside of formal training sessions, it can be a little bit more difficult to track information indicators. But some of the things that we saw were things like the degree to which principals engage in high-quality support discussion communities, the proportion of principals that report that they had access to supports when they needed it, or the proportion of principals reporting that the support that they got was useful. Those kinds of supports could be assessed through surveys that are done at a particular point in time, like statewide or something like that.

So we just discussed some output metrics, but ultimately your hope is that these efforts that you're undertaking will improve outcomes. And in the literature, we see programs focusing on short-term outcomes, medium-term outcomes, and long-term outcomes. And long-term outcomes are usually pretty distal, like three to five years. And so what I wanted to focus on today was the short-term and the medium-term outcomes. In the near term, professional development efforts would maybe be expected to influence improved leader capacity. You would hope that if people go through a training or participate in a professional learning community, that their capacity would improve in key areas like setting direction, vision and goals, managing the school environment, time management, adapting to school needs, communication.

And all of these kinds of capacities and competencies are things where there are different groups who have developed means of assessing it, and so there are resources out there that can kind of help you in thinking about how you might assess those leadership capacity outcomes that might be most important. And then in the medium term, there are school and student outcomes that you might look to, like improvements in instructional quality schoolwide, improvements in the school culture and climate, as well as the retention of high-quality staff. But I think some of the questions for you are, what indicators of short- and medium-term

outcomes are relevant targets for your efforts? And then what data can you draw on to determine whether your efforts are being implemented as intended and having the desired short- and medium-term effects?

NARRATOR

For more information about Dr. Gates's work in this area, please visit her profile page at the RAND Corporation. Other research on this topic can be found in these articles. If you have questions or need more information on this topic, please contact REL West at RELWest@wested.org.