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SEA Opportunities to Support Principals and School Leadership Teams

Purpose

This brief describes steps to create distributed school leadership teams and provides an overview of mechanisms State Education Agencies (SEAs) can use to support principals, and with modifications, school leadership teams. Opportunities and examples accompany each strategy. The brief ends with links to resources for further reading. This document is intended to generate state-level conversations about current practice and future opportunities.

Context

Principals are central to school improvement, safety, and instructional quality; leadership is second only to classroom instruction in its impact on what students learn.[1] Research demonstrates that activities designed to improve school leadership have a positive impact on student, teacher, and principal outcomes.[2] Principals report being almost solely responsible for a range of instructional leadership activities including observation, coaching, professional development, evaluation, and talent management for each teacher they lead.[3]

School leadership teams are one strategy to distribute instructional leadership and support. Existing school leadership structures (e.g., department chairs, professional learning communities, instructional coaches) are often underutilized leaving principals overworked and educators under supported. Schools built around exceptional principals do exist but are unsustainable without systems that truly distribute leadership responsibilities.

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1 How Leadership Influences Student Learning https://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/pages/how-leadership-influences-student-learning.aspx
2 School Leadership Interventions Under the Every Student Succeeds Act: Evidence Review https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1550-3.html
3 Transforming Schools: How distributed leadership can create more high-performing schools https://www.bain.com/insights/transforming-schools/

Steps to create distributed school leadership teams

- **Design and implement an explicit distributed leadership model**

  - A model can guide schools to utilize leadership to improve teaching and learning.

  - A model must specify core leadership roles and responsibilities, the structure of how leaders are organized to support teachers, and the systems and processes that describe how observation, feedback, and coaching will take place.

  - A common, but flexible, district leadership model helps schools to get started. It also makes it easier for districts to assess implementation from school-to-school and provide appropriate support.

  > Denver developed a pilot leadership model that was 80% common across the system while allowing for 20% flexibility based on individual school needs. This commonality allowed the district to more easily evaluate the pilot.

- **Cultivate new leadership roles**

  - Cultivate leadership roles based on school goals and existing structures. Schools could, for instance, add more assistant principals or elevate teacher leaders.

  - Principals must provide and let others exercise authority and responsibility.

- **Focus new leadership roles on improving teaching and learning**

  - When leaders beyond the principal are provided with the time, resources, and authority to act, teachers are more likely to receive coaching and mentorship beyond observation.

  - Teachers are energized when they receive ongoing support rather than one-time evaluation and guidance.

  > Leaders at Green Dot Public Schools use evaluation to support and develop teachers. Evaluation is a tool for leaders to determine if they are providing teachers with the right support.

- **Build teams around a shared mission**

  - A successful distributed leadership model matches leaders with teams of teachers with a common goal.

  - Teachers working together promotes shared responsibility and accountability.

- **Provide leaders in new roles with time and authority**
  - Leadership is distributed when new leaders are provided the flexibility to visit the classrooms of and collaborate with teachers whose development and student outcomes they are responsible.
  - A new role without the authority doesn't offer much of an advantage; principals are still responsible for a majority of the tasks in a school.

> In Charlotte-Mecklenburg some teacher leaders can adjust their schedules in order to collaborate and co-teach with team members. Teacher leads are held accountable for the outcomes of all students taught by team members and have input into teachers' evaluations.

State strategies to support principals and leadership teams[4]

- **Strengthen school leadership as a strategy for school improvement**
  - States can set aside 7% of their Title I, Part A allocation to implement evidence–based interventions to strengthen school leadership.
  - States can provide professional development to networks of school leaders from CSI and TSI schools where participants can exchange knowledge and learn collaboratively.
  - The integration of principal support and school improvement requires coordination across SEA divisions, regional service agencies, and individuals who work with schools and districts on improvement.

> Wisconsin launched an institute to build the capacity of 30 leaders to increase outcomes in the state's lowest performing schools. Participants receive professional development, coaching, and networking, organized around the state's leadership standards.

- **Set state leadership standards**
  - Standards can help define the scope of a principal's job and provide an organizing frame to inform principal training, professional development, and licensing practices.
  - Standards can reinforce and be reinforced by other state policies and standards (e.g., school improvement standards).

> Tennessee used the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) standards to develop the Tennessee Instructional Leadership Standards, which are used to guide requirements in the state's principal preparation programs.

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4 The strategies described in this section should be read as potential leavers to support a range of leadership activities, such as leadership teams, in addition to principals.

- **Define the role of principal as instructional leader**
  - Consistency in the definition of instructional leaders in principal evaluation systems makes it easier for states to measure and support instructional leadership.
  - States can create common tools, guidance, and training if districts use a state–developed or approved evaluation model.

  > Pennsylvania conducted a series of principal evaluation trainings in partnership with regional education service agencies.

- **Conduct state–lead leadership development activities**
  - States may allocate up to 5% of their Title II, Part A allocation to teacher and leader development and an additional 3% exclusively for leadership investments.
  - Investments in leadership can be used to identify and induct new principals into the profession, orient existing principals to new state policies, support leadership team planning with data, and fund coaches and mentors who directly support principal learning.
  - States have delivered principal learning opportunities through weeklong workshops and monthly webinars where participants are able to learn from each other and benefit from coaching and mentorship from experienced principals.

  > Massachusetts is using funding from the 3% set-aside to strengthen principals' skills in: observing classroom practice, analyzing measures of student learning and teacher effectives, and providing timeline and high-impact feedback to their faculty.

- **Provide meaningful support to principal supervisors**
  - Principal supervisors can have a positive impact on student outcomes by evaluating instructional leadership skills, coaching and giving feedback, identifying professional learning that can help support teacher practice, and helping principals access needed district and state resources.
  - States can set principal supervisor standards to help inform professional development, which should focus on strategies to support effective instruction rather than general leadership development.
  - States can provide professional development to leaders and their supervisors at the same time to support alignment and strengthen relationships.

  > Colorado created a network of district personnel who work to build the capacity of principals on teacher evaluation, observation, and feedback. Network members learn from each other, share best practices, and receive training on how to support instructional improvement by the state.

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- **Audit principal roles and responsibilities**

  - Principals face growing demands on their time from both state and local policies.

  - States can conduct an audit of principals' tasks, both in theory and in practice. What does the state want principals to do? What do principals actually do? In what areas are the answers to these questions inconsistent and why? This process can highlight where state policies create layered and potentially conflicting demands on principals.

  - As states put forward new responsibilities for principals, they can simultaneously remove less important responsibilities that occupy principals' time.

> Ohio convened an educational leadership support workgroup where stakeholders identified the demands of the principal role, barriers to effectiveness, and gaps between demands and available supports. The workgroup reviewed pertinent research for each area of concern and developed possible solutions to address them.

Resources

Advancing Student Learning Through Distributed Instructional Leadership: A Toolkit for High School Leadership Teams https://www.schoolturnaroundsupport.org/sites/default/files/resources/distributed_leadership_toolkit.pdf

This toolkit provides ideas and activities to support instructional leaders build leadership teams focused on improving teaching and learning by defining a shared vision, building the capacity of leaders and leadership teams, mobilizing distributed leadership to analyze problems and plan solutions using data, and aligning leadership structures and roles to support improvement efforts. The document was developed for the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction by University of Wisconsin–Madison working in conjunction with 16 urban Wisconsin high schools.

Developing Excellent School Principals to Advance Teaching and Learning: Considerations for State Policy https://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/pages/developing-excellent-school-principals.aspx

This comprehensive resource from the Wallace Foundation provides reasons why principals should be higher on state policy agendas; describes policy levers that are available to state leaders to identify, train, and support new leaders; and identifies contextual factors within states that may impact how these policies may unfold.

Guiding Principals: State Efforts to Bolster Instructional Leadership https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/policy-papers/guiding-principals/

This document describes the role of principals as instructional leaders and tracks principal evaluation and support systems across the country for commonalities and best practices, including supporting principals by supporting principal supervisors. The resource ends with a set of recommendations for states.

Investing in Effective School Leadership: How States Are Taking Advantage of Opportunities Under ESSA https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/investing-effective-school-leadership-brief

> *This brief from the Learning Policy Institute lays out the research on the importance of school leaders and describes funding opportunities in the Every Student Succeeds Act to support them. The document concludes by providing examples of how states have spent their Title II funds for leadership development activities.*

Investigating the Links to Improved Student Learning https://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/Documents/Investigating-the-Links-to-Improved-Student-Learning-Executive-Summary.pdf

> *This document summarizes the research on many aspects of leadership, including leadership models (i.e., collective, shared, distributed), instructional leadership, district leadership, and the role of states as leaders.*

Principals: Our advice and resources for establishing instructional leadership teams http://blog.k-12leadership.org/instructional-leadership-in-action/principals-our-advice-and-tools-for-establishing-instructional-leadership-teams

> *This blog post introduces a set of tools to support instructional leadership teams, including characteristics of instructional leadership team members, a framework for effective instructional leadership teams, and an instructional leadership growth continuum. These resources were developed by the University of Washington Center for Educational Leadership (CEL) in collaboration with the Florida Association of School Administrators, the Florida Department of Education, and a pilot group of Florida districts.*

School Leadership Team Review Process Guide Structuring an Effective School Leadership Team https://www.gadoe.org/School-Improvement/School-Improvement-Services/Documents/Process%20Guides/2019%20Leadership%20Team%20Process%20Guide.pdf

> *This toolkit was developed by the Georgia Department of Education to support the formation and function of school leadership teams for school improvement. It includes a set of high impact practices, review protocols, worksheets, and self-assessments. Additional resources address team composition, roles and responsibilities, processes and protocols, and data review practices.*

State Efforts to Strengthen School Leadership: Insights from CCSSO Action Groups https://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/pages/state-efforts-to-strengthen-school-leadership.aspx

> *This document summarizes the interests and lessons learned of twenty-eight states participating in a CCSSO action group focused on strengthening school leadership. The document tracks trends, priorities and past progress and describes actions each participating state is taking to support school leaders.*

Transforming Schools: How distributed leadership can create more high-performing schools https://www.bain.com/insights/transforming-schools/

> *This resource describes the promise of distributed leadership teams versus how many schools are structured and operate. It includes a set of five principles that successful distributed leadership teams share and concludes with steps schools can take to transition to an effective distributed leadership model.*