

PRINCIPAL PIPELINES

A DISTRICT STRATEGY TO IMPROVE STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT



It's been clear for at least 15 years that principals matter in school improvement. They are second only to classroom instruction in school-related influences on student learning—and central to turning around distressed schools.¹ Now, wide-ranging, independent research has shown that a more deliberate approach to cultivating and supporting school leaders—a principal pipeline made up of four aligned parts—offers a strategy to improve schools districtwide and boost principal retention.

PIPELINE BENEFITS: STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT, PRINCIPAL RETENTION

The RAND Corp. and Policy Studies Associates, Inc., examined what happened when six large school districts, supported by The Wallace Foundation, developed principal pipelines from 2011 to 2016.² As part of the study, RAND compared some 1,100 pipeline schools to 6,300 non-pipeline schools in the same states as the pipeline districts. The results were eye-openers: *Pipeline district schools with newly placed principals outperformed comparison schools with newly placed principals by a statistically significant degree, almost three percentile points in math and more than six in reading after three years.* That means the same school performing at the 50th percentile in reading in a non-pipeline district would be performing at the 56th percentile in a pipeline district. Principal retention benefited, too.

A PRINCIPAL PIPELINE IS FOUR INTERLOCKING COMPONENTS

The pipeline refers to four tightly connected, research-based components:

- Rigorous job standards that specify what a principal needs to know and do—and are reflected in how principals are trained, placed and managed,
- High-quality pre-service training,
- Selective procedures for hiring principals and matching them to schools, and
- Aligned on-the-job support and evaluation, especially for those new to the job.

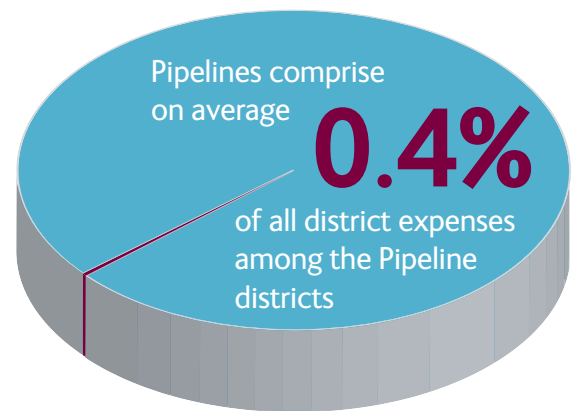
There was no single blueprint for constructing these components; the six districts were able to shape them to their own needs and priorities. This means the approach is adaptable.

The districts buttressed their work with supports. One was “leader tracking systems,” data compilation to aid in making decisions about principal/principal candidate career paths and spotting job vacancy, pre-service prep and other trends. Another was re-focusing the principal supervisor role from administration to honing principals’ instructional leadership skills.

PIPELINES CONFERRED BENEFITS ACROSS DISTRICTS

Positive, statistically meaningful effects were felt in schools with particularly high needs, those in the lowest quartile of student achievement. Further, pipeline benefits kicked in quickly, appearing with the earliest cohorts of new principals. Benefits also appeared K to 12: Elementary and middle schools with new principals saw positive, statistically significant results in reading and math; high schools in math. Pipelines even affected schools without a new principal, as schools in the six districts overall outperformed comparison schools in non-pipeline districts.

As for principal retention: For every 100 newly placed principals, pipeline districts as a whole had eight fewer losses after three years than comparison schools. This is notable because turnover is disruptive to schools and costs an estimated \$75,000 per principal.



PIPELINE COSTS AND ELIGIBILITY FOR TITLE I

Pipelines were affordable, accounting for less than one-half of 1 percent (0.4 percent) of the districts’ annual expenditures.³ Plus, the study’s rigor makes pipelines eligible for Title I and other federal Every Student Succeeds Act funding.⁴ The six districts, meanwhile, were still running their pipelines two years beyond Wallace support, suggesting pipelines are sustainable.⁵

The study’s findings come amid growing state interest in using the principalship to improve schools.⁶ The new research offers compelling evidence that pipelines are a strategy for that. J. Alvin Wilbanks, CEO and superintendent of pipeline district Gwinnett County, Ga., calls the findings “proof positive that the efforts and cost in both human resources and physical resources can and do make a difference to student achievement.”

Or, in the researchers’ words, principal pipelines are “a feasible, affordable and effective way for districts to improve schools.”

Endnotes

- 1 Kenneth Leithwood, Karen Seashore Louis, Stephen Anderson and Kyla Wahlstrom, *Review of Research: How Leadership Influences Student Learning*, University of Minnesota and University of Toronto, 2004.
- 2 Brenda J. Turnbull and others, *Building a Stronger Principalship*, Vol.1-5, 2013-2016, Policy Studies Associates, Inc., and Susan M. Gates, Matthew D. Baird, Benjamin K. Master and Emilio Chavez-Herrerias, *Principal Pipelines: A Feasible, Affordable, and Effective Way for Districts to Improve Schools*, RAND Corp., 2019.
- 3 Julia H. Kaufman, Susan M. Gates, Melody Harvey, Yan Wang and Mark Barrett, *What It Takes to Operate and Maintain Principal Pipelines: Costs and Other Resources*, RAND Corp., 2017.
- 4 Cristofer Price, Barbara Goodson, *Memorandum: ESSA Evidence Review of Principal Pipeline Initiative*, Abt Associates, 2019.
- 5 Leslie M. Anderson and Brenda J. Turnbull, *Sustaining a Principal Pipeline*, Policy Studies Associates, Inc., 2019.
- 6 Council of Chief State School Officers, *Opportunities for School Improvement Under the Every Student Succeeds Act*, 2019, 3.