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SPOTLIGHT

Principal Effectiveness: Definitions and a Systems Approach

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Principal effectiveness can be a powerful area of school district management, but when viewed as a system of complementary activities, most related research is nascent.

Principal Effectiveness:

Definitions and a Systems Approach

Does your district's theory of action place an increasing emphasis on the role of the principal in improving student achievement outcomes? Are you pondering how to align your principals' job descriptions and evaluation processes with other major human capital improvement areas, such as teacher effectiveness initiatives? You are not alone. The concept of leadership effectiveness within school districts is a topic of paramount importance that remains relatively nascent and lacks established district track records of implementation. Parallel to the teacher discussion, the national dialogue about principals is turning from one of inputs—such as training or experience—into one increasingly driven by student outcomes. Academic research famously shows that principals and other school leaders are second only to teachers in terms of the impact they have on children during school hours.¹ Since school leaders have such an important effect on our nation's children, districts must develop new approaches to define, develop, and evaluate leadership effectiveness to ensure that our students receive the education they deserve.

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While districts may be tempted to dive in and reform certain areas relevant to principal success, such as recruiting or training, The District Management Council (DMC) believes that building a truly coherent and aligned system of principal effectiveness must begin with a frank assessment of the district's theory of action and how the principal fits in. Second, the role of the principal needs to be clearly articulated and expectations set accordingly. Managing principal effectiveness forces the discussion of a broad scope of questions, beginning

with an assessment of the principal's role as a leader versus that of the central office. What results will the principal be measured against? How will "success" be defined? Third, the leadership characteristics and behaviors viewed as necessary to drive success need to be carefully articulated. Finally, a comprehensive performance management system that uses evaluations and other data to measure success and inform improved strategies and decision-making in areas like recruiting and professional development should be implemented. This four-step process is illustrated in Figure 1.

FIGURE 1

Managing Principal Leadership Effectively Aligning Roles and Leadership Definitions



Source: DMC

Stage 1: Establish the District's Theory of Action

A theory of action is meant to be a proactive effort to guide and align district policies, priorities, and budget. School district theories of action vary widely in scope and approach—from incremental to comprehensive—and also vary widely in how they are written and communicated, from a few lines of text to multi-page narratives. Implicitly or explicitly, these theories of action vary the role and expectations of a school leader. Of primary interest is where the split in responsibility between the central office and the building occurs in such areas as workforce development, stakeholder engagement, and resource allocation. How much autonomy does the principal really have?

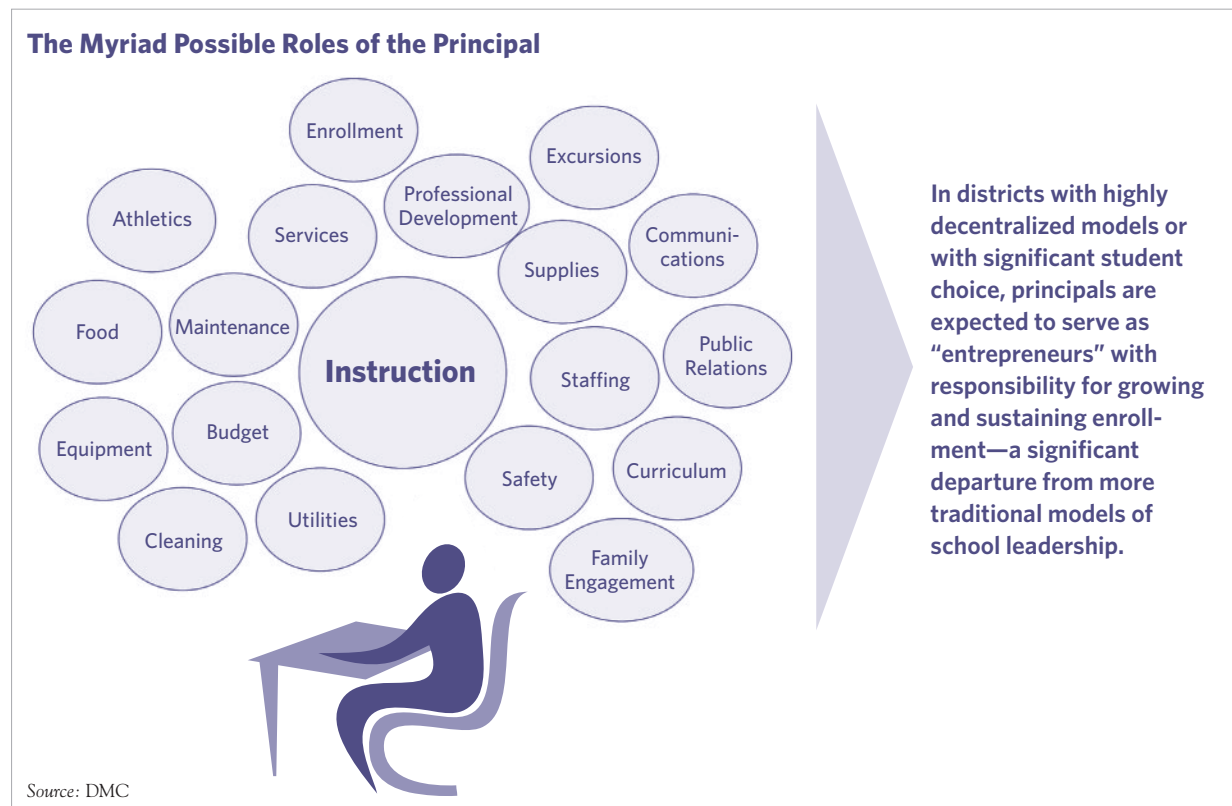
For example, a theory of action might be centered on managed instruction—a belief that the district's central office must directly manage instruction in order to increase student achievement. At the opposite end of the spectrum, a theory of action might be focused on “performance/empowerment”—a belief that the system should focus on results, with increased accountability and empowerment for decision-making throughout the organization. Each model clearly demands a significantly

different role for the principal. In the former, emphasis may be more on execution and compliance; in the latter, emphasis may be more on creativity and entrepreneurialism. Districts must clearly articulate this theory of action and clarify a common understanding of the principal's role. In DMC's experience, many districts lack this clarity, and instead present multiple visions and understandings of the principal's role.

Stage 2: Clarify the Role of the Principal

The spectrum of responsibilities placed on a principal can vary significantly from building to building and from district to district. Consider your own district's hiring process: when onboarding a principal from another district, are expectations made clear through the hiring process: what the role will be? Are these expectations reinforced through the district's coaching and mentoring structures? Further, are those expectations carried over to the principal's evaluations? While simply an illustration, the myriad concerns juggled by the fictional, but realistic, principal in Figure 2 show a broad mix of leadership responsibilities that may paint a job profile more in line with a private sector >

FIGURE 2



entrepreneur than the traditional lay understanding of a public school principal. The relative prioritization of these concerns can also vary, due both to intentional policies and unintentional management variances. For example, districts with a high amount of intra-district student choice or a high degree of budget decentralization (such as weighted student funding mechanisms) position the building leader with a broad scope of managerial authority to affect both the school's revenues and costs, and with significant responsibility to decide strategic resource allocation.

Further complicating the expectations placed on the principal, No Child Left Behind, Race to the Top, and other federal- and state-level initiatives combine with the ongoing fiscal crisis to create an educational climate where schools are being asked to do more, often with fewer resources. As the national education climate changes, the role of the school leader necessarily changes along with it. Our collective ideals of "leadership" need greater definition. How should we define what a great principal does? To structure this dialogue, DMC defines a principal's leadership expectations along three broad dimensions: 1) instructional leadership, 2) organizational leadership, and 3) public leadership. This split coincides with many formal training and preparation programs in educational leadership. As the role of the principal changes, the relative emphasis placed on these leadership areas changes as well.

Instructional leadership encompasses many critical activities: implementing curricular changes with fidelity, modeling good teaching, mentoring teachers, and providing critical feedback and evaluation to drive improvement. The current emphasis on instructional leadership is so predominant that Linda Darling-Hammond, *et al*, offer the following modern definition of the principal role: "The primary role of the principal is to align all aspects of schooling to support the goal of improving instruction so that all children are successful."²

A second, and growing, area of focus can be distilled under the label "organizational leadership." For DMC, organizational leadership encompasses the ability of a principal to align, collaborate, and motivate all categories of teachers and staff within the building and lead through budget cycles, resource allocation decisions, and myriad change management initiatives. Under the umbrella of organizational leadership, significant attention has been focused on situational leadership approaches such as Daniel Goleman's concept of emotional intelligence, which pushes leaders to adapt different styles of leadership to match situational challenges.

A third area is public leadership—the principal's role in working with outside stakeholders such as families, taxpayers, and community members to enable school success. The relationship between these leadership domains is shown in Figure 3. As careers evolve, continuing beyond the principalship all the way to the superintendency, DMC observes that the balance of expectations shifts more heavily to the outer spheres of leadership. In other words, despite being hired for instructional leadership prowess, a leader might find him- or herself spending the vast majority of his/her working hours managing public leadership issues. As a result of this changing leadership dynamic, districts must imbue their leadership expectations with a dose of realism.

The role of the principal thus continues to evolve in an effort to improve school and student performance. However, the national conversation about what makes a good principal, how to develop principals, and the direction in which the role of a principal *should* evolve, is still relatively nascent. The burgeoning responsibilities of the

FIGURE 3

Evolution of Needed Leadership Skills



Source: DMC

FIGURE 4

Standards for Principal Leadership and Evaluation

Comparison of Core Leadership Standards

	INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP	ORGANIZATIONAL LEADERSHIP	PUBLIC LEADERSHIP
ISLLC Standards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Develops a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth ○ Sets a widely shared goal for learning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Ensures effective management of the organization, operation, and resources for a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment ○ Acts with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical manner 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Collaborates with faculty and community members, responding to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilizing community resources ○ Understands, responding to, and influencing the political, social, legal, and cultural contexts
SREB Standards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Has a comprehensive understanding of school/classroom practices that contribute to student achievement ○ Ability to work with teachers and others to design and implement continuous student improvement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Provides the necessary support for staff to carry out sound school, curriculum, and instructional practices 	
NLNS Standards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Has a vision for results and equity ○ Learning and teaching 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Carries out planning and operations ○ Develops and maintains a positive school culture ○ Oversees staff development and management ○ Exhibits personal leadership and growth 	

Source: DMC comparison of ISLLC, SREB, and NLNS standards

principal role mean that to get everything done, principals have to be effective in all aspects of their leadership.

Stage 3: Articulate the Principal's Desired Leadership Profile

The challenges of defining what constitutes effective leadership are similar to defining what constitutes effective teaching—we all know it when we see it, but are hard pressed to develop a cogent definition of exactly what it is. Defining something as effective necessitates focusing on outcomes. The difficult question, posed by the varying responsibilities outlined above, is which outcomes should we focus on? Given the three areas of leadership above, shouldn't the district articulate "outputs" not just "inputs" from these desired behaviors and activities? DMC feels that the evaluation system, and the management of that system, should align behind these desired outcomes. Moreover, outcomes should not include just student achievement, but should span other critical areas of school performance including workforce development, operations, and stakeholder engagement.

An important question is whether the leadership definition will be universal in nature. Can the desired leadership characteristics and behaviors be applied across a single district, let alone across multiple districts? Or, should

principals be segmented by school characteristics such as grade range, size, or academic status? While there will be some broad overlap between goals at a large turnaround school in an urban area and a small, high achieving school in a wealthy district, the specific steps to reach those goals at each school are likely to be very different. For instance, though both schools will likely include a variation of "increase student achievement on the statewide test" as a goal, the specific actions that must occur at each school, and the actions that each principal must take to reach that goal, will probably be very different.

Many DMC member districts have debated this foundational issue recently, and have arrived at different conclusions based on situational need. While many districts (and states) have chosen to align closely to universal leadership standards, such as those from the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC)³ or the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB), others have decided to create something more unique to reflect the specific needs of the district. A third option is to modify an existing set of standards to "make them feel like they are ours." While the purpose of this article is not to analyze or critique these standards in depth, a brief comparison of these standards is included in Figure 4, including those from New Leaders for New Schools, a leading non-profit organization focused on school leader preparation. ➤

As can be seen in this comparison, each set of standards includes components for instructional and organizational leadership, but a greater focus on the “public leadership” aspects of the principalship is seen in the popular ISLLC standards. Each of these definitions of leadership include providing direction to an organization and exercising influence over those being lead.⁴ Each of these high level components can be broken down into specific behaviors and characteristics that can be tested and analyzed for results. Thus, defining these desired results is necessary to create a system for managing principal effectiveness.

Stage 4: Manage the System for Principal Effectiveness

For teacher effectiveness, success is increasingly defined in terms of student achievement: effective teachers have high student achievement and growth in their classrooms (although the debate rages on about how to measure this most effectively). What should “success” mean in terms of principal effectiveness? Depending on the desired principal role, “success” should include measures of student achievement, and should be broad

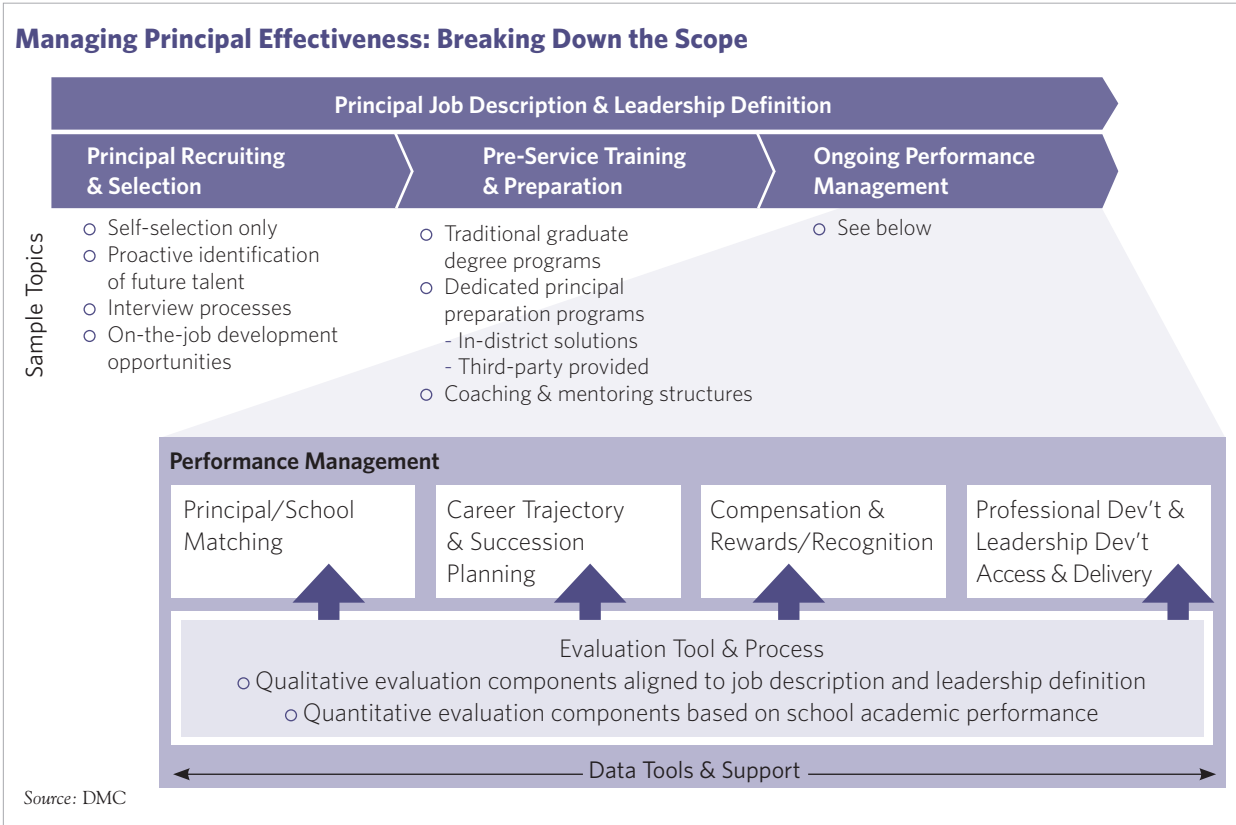
Principal effectiveness should be measured through outcomes in the following areas:

- School-wide academic achievement (e.g. growth in school-wide value-added)
- Human capital/people management (e.g. decreased unwanted turnover)
- Operational and financial success (e.g. increased on-time transportation performance)
- Family and community engagement (e.g. increased family satisfaction scores)

enough to encompass relevant operational, human capital, and stakeholder engagement outcomes.

For each major category of desired outcomes, goal setting and evaluation can be structured to ensure alignment between a principal’s actions and priorities and the overarching district strategies. Keeping an eye focused on “success”—how it is defined and whether goals are being met—should drive and align activities all along the scope of principal effectiveness (Figure 5).

FIGURE 5



Knowing what “success” might look like, measuring outcomes, and evaluating progress against such standards will allow a systemic approach for principal effectiveness to evolve.

Emphasizing leadership effectiveness and development is increasingly important as the national conversation continues to focus on developing teacher effectiveness. A transition in the types of teacher evaluations currently performed requires a parallel shift in how principals and district leaders are held accountable for developing their teachers’ effectiveness. Leadership effectiveness must be seen as the flip side of the teacher effectiveness coin—neither can truly and sustainably happen without the other.

As alluded to above, the primary challenge for district administrators is one of alignment. Three major stages of alignment are: 1) the recruiting and selection of future principals, 2) the pre-service training and preparation of candidates, and 3) ongoing performance management. Each stage can be broken down into component efforts, and districts can begin the alignment process by first taking an inventory of what is currently happening in each category. Districts can then evaluate the degree of alignment and success deriving from that particular initiative. For example, comparing the quality of competing preparation programs could lead to improved partner relations or decisions to increase cohort sizes in a particular offering. The ongoing performance management phase of the scope should serve as the engine to generate insights and management practice to proactively close leadership gaps over time. The key components and logic of a performance management system are similar to those laid out in *The District Management Journal* vol. 6 Spotlight on teacher effectiveness.

Developing a System

Improving teacher effectiveness must be based on a system that continually learns and improves based on the insights generated from new information. As DMC found with teacher evaluation (see *The District Management Journal* vol. 6 Spotlight), a comprehensive principal evaluation tool and process are crucial underpinnings of all performance management processes. They are also a way to develop leadership by focusing on improving individual principal growth in targeted outcome areas, and can be used as a tool for intervention, where needed. Implementing a robust

evaluation system yields insights to improve leader effectiveness at all points on the career continuum.

While principal evaluation tools and processes do exist in most districts, they are largely not structured to enable a systemic approach; too often they contain too few measures (often only two checkboxes for “satisfactory” and “unsatisfactory” performance), limited process compliance, limited use of consolidated insights and data from across the district. DMC’s research into principal evaluation systems showed that many models focus on defining what effectiveness is rather than how leadership effectiveness relates to the broader system. Perhaps unsurprisingly, these issues are similar to those targeted in improving teacher evaluation processes today. Many similarities were found between different evaluation frameworks; these commonalities highlight the importance of the principal’s effect on certain aspects of a school, but do not assist districts directly with developing and implementing an effectiveness-oriented system.

Given the three areas of leadership, shouldn’t the district articulate “outputs” not just “inputs” from these desired behaviors and activities?

Good examples of evaluation processes and rubrics include Vanderbilt University’s Assessment of Leadership in Education (VAL-ED), which aligns to the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) Standards for School Leadership, and New Leaders for New Schools’ Principal Evaluation Rubric and Urban Excellence Framework. As well, several larger school districts, including the New York City Department of Education and Chicago Public Schools, have developed their own evaluation rubrics that are specific to their district.

Vanderbilt University Assessment of Leadership in Education (VAL-ED)

Vanderbilt’s VAL-ED rubric aligns to the ISLLC standards described in Figure 4, and continues to be the only psychometrically valid instrument for principal evaluation.⁵ VAL-ED has received high marks from the research community, more so than any other evaluation system.⁶ It has been praised for its connection between >

leadership attributes/behaviors and student performance (i.e., its validity), as well as its reliability in terms of consistent measurement.⁷ Part of what makes VAL-ED unique is its 360-degree approach to evaluation. Much like the multi-measure teacher evaluation approach DMC proffered at our November Leadership Development Meeting, VAL-ED combines a variety of measures and evaluations from a number of different sources to create a comprehensive leadership assessment. The complexity of the VAL-ED system is reflective of the complexity of the principal's role in a school. A multi-measure evaluation rubric is necessary for a job that demands accountability for a variety of tasks/performance outcomes; a single measure is unable to capture this level of complexity.

Districts are quick to acknowledge that as leadership situations change, leadership style should change accordingly.

New Leaders for New Schools

New Leaders for New Schools (NLNS) is a national non-profit organization offering non-traditional leadership training for aspiring school leaders. NLNS defines effective principals as those who “boost academic achievement for all students, increase the effectiveness of their teaching staffs, and consistently take leadership actions shown to improve outcomes for students.”⁸ Since NLNS' definition of an effective principal is dependent upon student outcomes, they argue that these priorities should be reflected in the principal evaluation system. Thus, principals should be primarily evaluated on their ability to increase student achievement and teacher effectiveness, which are reflective of a principal's instructional leadership, and secondarily on their leadership actions and use of effective practices. This ideal is reflected in their standards for principal evaluation seen in Figure 4.

Importantly, NLNS also argues that principal evaluators need to be evaluated as well, based on both student outcomes data and principal effectiveness data. Principal evaluators must hold principals accountable for the

academic achievement of their students, but they also must give principals the professional development and support they need to become more effective (just as principals must do with their teachers). Thus, principal evaluation systems need to be aligned with overall district human capital strategies and professional development processes in order to be most effective.

New York City Department of Education

The New York City Department of Education (NYC DOE) operates an in-house principal training program, the Leaders in Education Apprenticeship Program (LEAP). LEAP is designed for teachers or assistant principals who have been in the NYC DOE for at least three years, and matches apprentice principals with mentors. In addition, NYC DOE developed an extensive school review and accountability process that plays into its principal evaluation system, and a principal hiring process. NYC DOE uses a variety of accountability tools that are aligned with their five School Leadership Competencies to assess school performance, both in terms of academic achievement and school environment. The role of the principal for NYC DOE is very similar to NLNS's view—school and student growth/achievement data constitutes the majority of a principal's evaluation, with teacher effectiveness management and operations management comprising the rest of the pie.

Since the NYC DOE is both a provider and a consumer of effective principals, the department is able to align its preparation and hiring systems in a way that NLNS or other organizations cannot. NYC DOE uses its leadership competencies to drive its Principal Candidate Pool—this process creates uniform standards for principal selection based on the competencies criteria, and has resulted in better communication between candidates and hiring managers, as well as increased engagement in the hiring process by NYC DOE administrators. As a result, successful candidates are better positioned for success in NYC schools, since they have been assessed and hired based on their fit and ability to meet the NYC DOE's leadership competencies. Creating such an iterative evaluation tool takes time, and must be constantly re-evaluated in order to remain valid.

Chicago Public Schools

Chicago Public School's (CPS) Office of Principal Preparation and Development has developed a comprehensive principal evaluation system that ties building academic achievement to a principal for a school-level

value-added score. The Office also works towards developing internal candidates for principalships within CPS, and has created alignment between their principal growth process and the standards on which current principals are evaluated. Principals also complete a self-assessment of their own performance based on a variety of other factors, as well as the five competencies. Aspiring principals are encouraged to monitor their own progress on their professional growth plan using the same standards.

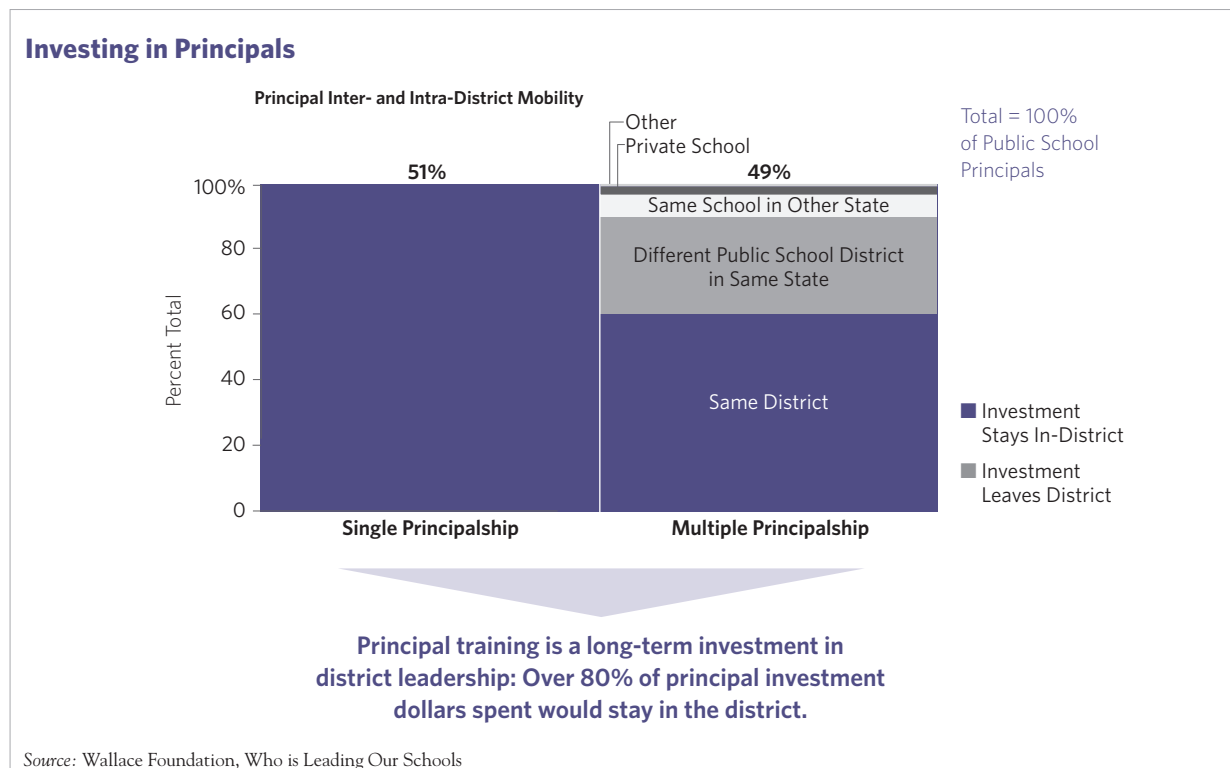
Key Takeaways

While none of these evaluation rubrics may be perfect or ready for use in every school district, there are some overarching themes and best practices that warrant highlighting. The concept of evaluating for effectiveness and performance is a common thread that runs throughout these evaluations, as is the idea that evaluations should rely on leading, rather than lagging, indicators. Leading indicators are prognostic data—the type of seemingly low-level data often found on a district dashboard that in reality functions as a thermometer of district health. Leadership evaluations should be action-oriented and meaningful, as well as

tied to benchmarked data so that growth can be evaluated over time.⁹ One result of the proper use and development of an iterative evaluation is that the purpose of that evaluation may change over time.¹⁰ As leaders grow and develop their leadership capacity, and school situations change (e.g., a failing school begins to improve), the tools used to evaluate them should change as well. In this sense, an evaluation tool should be a fluid, living document that can adjust to changing school circumstances. This is where the proper use of succession planning can help school and district leaders refine their vision of leadership performance success and how to build broad capacity for filling leadership gaps.

Each of the above systems share a focus on the principal's role in developing and maintaining a school culture (including a shared vision for learning), the importance of the principal as an instructional leader, the role the principal plays in operational efficiency and building management, and the importance of building community and stakeholder engagement. Differences amongst these programs are reflective of the relative importance of each aspect of a principal's role; the relative ranking of these various attributes of effectiveness are, as discussed above, strongly correlated ▸

FIGURE 6



with the individual circumstances of each school or district. Thus, any truly comprehensive evaluation rubric should be flexible enough to respond to the individual needs of a variety of schools within a district.

Once the ‘what’ and the ‘how’ have been determined for a district/school, these rubrics can be melded into a comprehensive succession plan for each leader, and be used to develop career pathways for leaders within the district/school. Identifying the main responsibilities of the principal/leader enables the identification of responsibilities at the assistant principal level. After

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a clear vision for principal-level tasks is established, district leaders can develop a more pointed trajectory towards that principalship. The role of an assistant principal becomes clearer, since there is already a distinction between what should be done at the principal level versus at other levels. By identifying the end point first (what constitutes principal success), districts can more easily identify the steps needed to get to that end point. Developing such a trajectory eases the creation of new job descriptions, performance evaluation, and management at these secondary levels, as well as the overall district succession plan.

Investing in Principals: A Secure Investment

How much should districts invest in leadership effectiveness? The needed prioritization and financial investment will vary by local context, but leadership retention is important and research shows that invest-

ing in principal leadership development is likely to be an investment that does not walk away. The Wallace Foundation found that over 80% of principals stay in-district as their career patterns emerge. As can be seen in Figure 6, principal inter- and intra-district mobility patterns show about half of principals remain in a single principalship as a terminal career point. Another 20% shift to other principalships, but remain in-district. This 80% total speaks to the need for a long-term system that builds knowledge across the system about leader effectiveness, as well as the power of appropriate principal-school matching. The primary focus should be on getting the best growth in performance outcomes for the investment made.

Final Thoughts

Principal effectiveness can be a powerful area of school district management, but when viewed as a system of complementary activities, most related research is nascent. The system must be aligned with the district’s theory of action and definition of leadership. Further, the performance of the system should be re-evaluated over time for efficacy. If the system or the desired definitions change, that change should be measured. In turn, the definition of success should align with the principal’s job description, evaluation, and professional development, in order to enhance the desired activities and behaviors that system promotes. These measureable success areas must include student achievement, but should also include areas of human capital and work-force development, operations, and stakeholder engagement. Districts must develop practices to make management and prioritization more effective for this critical role.



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