



WHAT DISTRICTS KNOW—AND NEED TO KNOW—ABOUT THEIR PRINCIPALS

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INTRODUCTION

Research on school leadership has highlighted the impact principals have on student achievement through their influence on classroom instruction, organizational conditions, community support, and setting the teaching and learning conditions in schools.¹ However, there is limited rigorous quantitative research² on the best district policies and practices for principal preparation, the selection and recruitment of effective principal candidates, effective principal career development and management, and the retention of the most effective principals. Despite this gap in clear evidence on best practices, districts are responsible for finding, supporting, and keeping effective principals for their schools.

We define an effective principal as one who positively affects student achievement, retains and develops effective teachers, and maintains a positive school culture and climate.

State agencies play a key role in ensuring principals are adequately prepared through their regulation of preparation programs and licensure policies. Many states are undertaking efforts to improve data systems to capture more information about teachers and school leaders, which can help begin to answer outstanding questions about the effectiveness of different policies and practices. Districts should also take steps to ensure that they have the data necessary to answer important questions about how to identify, develop, and retain great principals. For example, to support any understanding of leader effectiveness, districts must be able to accurately link principals to the schools they lead. This requires consistent data about principal assignments to schools over time, including accurate tracking of principal mobility at the beginning, middle, or end of a given school year.

Despite its potential to inform district decision making, high-quality data about principal preparation, experience, and assignment are rarely available within districts. This brief highlights limitations of district-level data on principals encountered during data collection for a study conducted by the George W. Bush Institute and American Institutes for Research on principal preparation programs serving five medium-to-large districts. The brief describes the importance of improving the accuracy and availability of these data to explore questions about how to find, support, and keep the best leaders. We include examples of ways in which districts have addressed data limitations (in the “Practices to Watch” box) and include a suggested data checklist for districts to consider how the data they collect can support policy and research on effective school leadership.

¹ See, for example, Clifford, Behrstock-Sherratt, & Fetters, 2012; Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005.

² By “rigorous research” we are referring to studies that produce direct evidence that a certain policy, practice, or intervention causes or does not cause a direct or an indirect outcome.

KEY LIMITATIONS OF DISTRICT-LEVEL DATA

Data on principal preparation, certification, education, and training are often incomplete or inaccurate at the district level.

In our work, we have found one or more of the following limitations in the data available on principals in each school district:

- Information on preparation is being collected for new principals but often is unavailable for more experienced principals.
- Data describe a principal's education level (e.g., that the principal had a bachelor's or master's degree) but do not always indicate the university or certification program within the institution. In cases where the data do include the education level and university, many times there is no information on the subject studied, grades received, or content of the degree (e.g., if the degree was in a field that led to certification or if a graduate degree was obtained in another area unrelated to principal training and certification). Data related to doctoral programs also do not necessarily specify whether a principal is or was enrolled in the program or has completed the degree program.
- Even when data are available on certifications and training, the information is not thorough and rarely captures all certifications or training programs in which a principal may have participated. For example, principals may have completed more than one type of principal preparation and training (e.g., a formal certification from a university, and an in-district training program or alternative pathway program), and district data capture only one of these programs. Data may be collected for about a small number of regional principal preparation partners and not for all entities where principals working in the district may have completed training.
- Data that describe principals' participation in district professional learning, support, or other leadership initiatives (e.g., grant programs targeting leadership support, mentoring programs, and coaching) are available but must be manually collected from several departments or external entities, and these findings may be incomplete for individuals or available for some but not all programs.
- Data provided by the district do not always match the data provided by the preparation or training program. For example, a preparation program may report a principal as a graduate, but in some cases, the district does not have a similar record, or vice versa.

Career pathway or principal mobility data are not consistently collected at the district level.

In our experience, information about other roles that principals served within the district and in other districts prior to becoming principals is rarely available, or if available, it is incomplete. For example:

- Limited or no data exist describing a principal's path to school leadership, such as years as a teacher (in or outside of the current district) or time spent in other leadership positions (such as assistant principal, as a coach or district central office position, or as a principal or other role in other districts or states).
- Sometimes data are available about principals' experiences within the district but not outside.
- Data tracking principals through their careers in the district (i.e., start and end of assignment dates at each school a principal has led) are not always complete. While districts generally track which principals lead which schools during each year, interim principals and midyear transitions were not always documented, which can complicate the attribution of a principal to a given school in a given year and can hinder a general understanding about the patterns of leadership stability.

IMPLICATIONS

Without consistent, timely, and comparable data, neither district staff nor researchers can track how much training principals have received; whether graduates of different programs show differences in retention, performance, or other outcomes; or how district-provided programs to help principals develop may be functioning. Accurate and comprehensive data collection and analysis has implications for improving district talent management systems.

Better Prepared Principals. When school districts know where their most and least effective principals come from, they can work to improve their supply of great principals. Districts who wish to consider partnerships with the institutions that train their principals cannot do so without systematic data on where principals were prepared. Key statistics like effectiveness ratings, student growth scores, or retention of principals that graduated from a given institution could offer insight into the strengths and challenges of a preparation program. Other indicators could be useful as well, such as changes in school climate and culture, teacher effectiveness and growth, retention of staff under specific principals, or parent engagement and satisfaction survey results. Districts could use this information to support program partnership and development decisions.

Improved Recruitment. More detailed data on principal education and training could prove even more powerful when combined with additional information on principal background characteristics, such as the level of selectivity of a principal's undergraduate and graduate institution, grade point average, or certification exam scores. Districts could then explore the extent to which these qualifications are associated with principal effectiveness or other outcomes within their systems. Armed with a better understanding of what types of principal experiences and qualifications are associated with principal effectiveness or other outcomes, districts might require principals to have certain leadership experience as a teacher, teacher leader, or assistant principal before transitioning into the principal role. Districts might also purposefully recruit teachers and other educators with specific experience profiles into leadership development tracks.

More Strategic Placement. Better research on the extent to which specific types of experience or qualifications improve outcomes in particular settings may lead districts to discover that some characteristics or qualifications are more or less important in the placement process for different schools. In addition, school districts can work to place a candidate with certain leadership experiences in a school that has a matching need. For example, if a district has an opening at a school in a turnaround situation, then it would be helpful to know if any of the principal candidates for that school had teacher leadership or other experiences in a turnaround situation.

Well-Developed School Leaders. The absence of complete or accurate data on principals' in-service learning and development may make it difficult to assess the success of initiatives to strengthen leadership. Districts invest thousands and sometimes millions of dollars in professional development or leadership training programs, often with little evidence of whether these efforts yield the intended results. With better data on which principals participate in which programs or initiatives, districts can track whether participants yield better outcomes such as improved evaluation effectiveness scores or improved student learning gains.

Enhanced Retention and Succession Planning. When districts know how many principals leave each year—and why—they can improve their retention policies and practices, and they can better plan for future vacancies by ensuring they have a pool of well-prepared candidates ready to take on the principal role. In addition, it is critical that districts know which principals are most effective so that they can create targeted retention plans to keep those principals in their schools for as long as possible.

CONCLUSION

We know principals are an important lever to improving student achievement and schools overall. If districts want to increase the number of great principals in their schools, then they must collect and analyze data to help them understand where the best leaders are trained, when a leader may need additional support and resources, and how to keep the best leaders in the district.

Districts may need to allocate greater resources toward data-collection efforts, provide more specific data-collection protocols, and collect more information from principals upon hiring. They may also wish to collect this information from current principals to complete data sets for both new and experienced principals. States might support the development of improved data infrastructures and help districts collect data in ways that are consistent and comparable.

In the sections that follow, we highlight three examples of districts that have developed comprehensive leader tracking systems, and we provide guiding questions and a checklist of data elements for districts to consider in addressing key questions to support finding, supporting, and keeping the best leaders.

PRACTICES TO WATCH

Leadership Tracking Systems in Hillsborough County Public Schools, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, and Prince George's County Public Schools

Some districts have begun to develop data-collection systems that allow for the type of data analysis that we have discussed in this brief. Hillsborough County Public Schools (HCPS) Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (CMS), and Prince George's County Public Schools (PGCPS) are three examples.

HCPS is a large school district in Tampa, Florida, serving more than 200,000 students, and CMS is located in Charlotte, North Carolina, serving 146,100 students.^{3,4} PGCPS is the second-largest school system in Maryland, serving 128,937 students.⁵ Although all three districts began rethinking their principal leadership data systems as part of a grant from the Wallace Foundation, they have designed systems that can be sustained without additional grant money in the long term. Several years ago, district leadership found that they were making uninformed decisions about who was put in the principal role. Even though they had some processes in place to improve decisions about leadership—such as creating a pool of candidates for the role, improving partnerships with principal preparation programs, and implementing more lengthy preparation and induction processes—they still felt that they were not always getting the strongest person for each particular principal position.

As a result, each district developed its own “leader tracking system.” PGCPS is still in the process of building their system, and they advise other districts to allow up to five years to plan, develop, and implement a system like this. These leader-tracking systems allow districts to collect longitudinal data on aspiring leaders, such as previous experience (both type of role and length), certification, detailed preparation information, performance evaluation data, and data about participation in professional development.

Although the specifics of the systems are different in each district, all three districts ensure that data are collected regularly and maintained in a way that makes it easily available and usable to district staff. Also, both districts use the data frequently to inform important practice and policy decisions about leadership initiatives. These systems have allowed the districts to:

- **Strengthen partnerships with principal preparation programs.** Partner programs use leader-tracking system data to better align their programs with district needs.⁶
- **Improve the principal candidate pool.** The district can systematically review candidate credentials, experiences, and training. The district can also target professional development to meet the needs of aspiring leaders.
- **Better match candidates to schools.** When principal positions open up, the district can make improved matching decisions on which qualified aspiring leader should be placed in

³ Student data for Hillsborough County Public Schools are accurate as of February 2016 (<http://www.sdhc.k12.fl.us/students/>).

⁴ Data for Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools are provided for the 2016–16 school year (<http://www.cms.k12.nc.us/mediaroom/aboutus/Documents/CMS%20Fast%20Facts%20Sheet%202015-2016.pdf>).

⁵ Data for Prince George's County Public Schools is accurate as of January 2016 (<http://www1.pgcps.org/factsandfigures/>).

⁶ Data released to outside partners follow each district's data policies, which protect its employees and students.

which school based on that candidate's experiences and training.

RECOMMENDED DISTRICT DATA ELEMENTS CHECKLIST

Districts or researchers will need different information to effectively manage and support their school leaders and answer different research or policy questions about them. Districts may want to answer key questions to make hiring and training/support decisions related to school leaders. The checklist that follows indicates the types of data districts or researchers would need to answer some or all of these questions, and it provides some additional research questions that might be explored through the availability of certain data variables.

- **Which principal preparation programs produce more or less effective principals in our district? Which programs produce principals with other desirable characteristics or outcomes (e.g., principals with particular backgrounds or principals that are retained longer or have strong impact on school climate)?**

To explore which preparation programs that prepare principals in a given district are doing the most effective job, districts or researchers need data that specifically identify where principals were prepared (principal preparation data), data on which principals led which schools during which school years (principal assignment data), data on student or school achievement or climate or principal evaluation data (effectiveness data), and/or data on principal characteristics (principal background data).

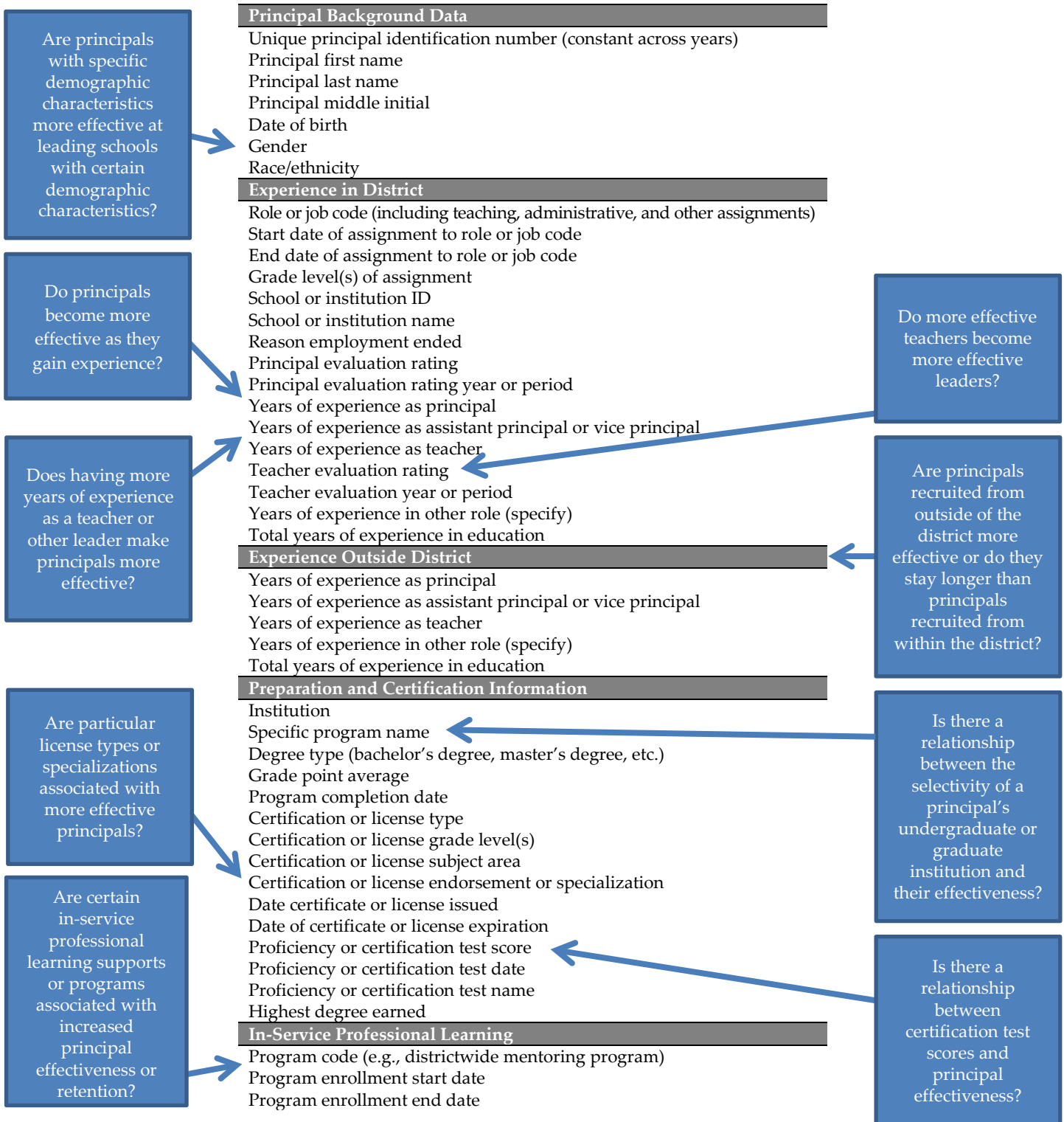
- **What types of experience or qualifications do the most effective principals in the district have?**

To determine what types of experience or qualifications the most effective principals in a given district have (e.g., teaching experience, experience as an assistant principal, and selectivity of undergraduate or graduate institution), districts or researchers need data that specifically identify principals career pathways (experience in other school or district roles), data on their graduate and undergraduate preparation, data on which principals led which schools during which school years (principal assignment data), and data on student or school achievement or principal evaluation data (effectiveness data).

- **What types of professional development and other support have the most effective principals received?**

To determine what types of training or other district supports may contribute to developing effective principals (e.g., in-service learning opportunities), districts or researchers need data that specifically identify principal participation in all professional learning opportunities, programs, or initiatives (experience in other school or district roles); data on which principals led which schools during which school years (principal assignment data); and data on student or school achievement or principal evaluation data (effectiveness data).

PRINCIPAL DATA REQUIRED FOR EFFECTIVE TALENT MANAGEMENT⁷



⁷ Note that the exact data elements for districts may vary based on state licensure requirements and on internal data systems or structures. In addition, some data may need to be updated yearly and some may be permanent. Finally, files may require multiple records per principal (e.g., to include information about teacher and administrator certification, multiple preparation and assignments, etc.).

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