EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

GREAT PRINCIPALS AT SCALE:

CREATING DISTRICT CONDITIONS THAT ENABLE ALL PRINCIPALS TO BE EFFECTIVE

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Gina Ikemoto, Lori Taliaferro and Benjamin Fenton
New Leaders

Jacquelyn Davis
George W. Bush Institute, Alliance to Reform Education Leadership

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NewLeaders

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Great Principals at Scale: *Creating District Conditions that Enable All Principals to be Effective*

Principals Matter. An effective principal can impact student achievement by as much as 20 percentage points.[1] School leaders are a high leverage point for improving student achievement because they develop great teachers and create working conditions that keep great teachers in the field. Effective principals also lead successful implementation of education reform initiatives like Common Core. To educate all children to college and career-ready standards, we need to ensure that there is an effective principal in every school – not just a few.

In order to scale the number of great principals, we need to improve principal preparation—and the district conditions that enable effective leadership. Too often, principals are effective in spite of—rather than because of—district conditions. They are superheroes who work around the clock and circumvent barriers to create an oasis of high performance in the midst of unsupportive systems. We need to stop holding out for—or burning through—superheroes. Instead, we need to start providing the tools, supports and organizational culture that enable well-prepared principals to replicate the results that only a few superheroes currently produce.

New Leaders and the Bush Institute's Alliance to Reform Educational Leadership (AREL) launched the Conditions for Effective Leadership Project and partnered with leading researchers and practitioners to generate a comprehensive and research-based framework outlining the conditions necessary for transformational school leaders to succeed. The project used a combination of literature review, empirical data collection, and expert convenings to build consensus and bundle the disparate ideas into a single framework that is accessible to school system leaders. In addition to this framework, the project also created the *Great Principals at Scale Toolkit*. This set of tools is aimed at helping school system leaders assess and improve their leadership conditions to scale the number of effective principals able to impact student achievement.
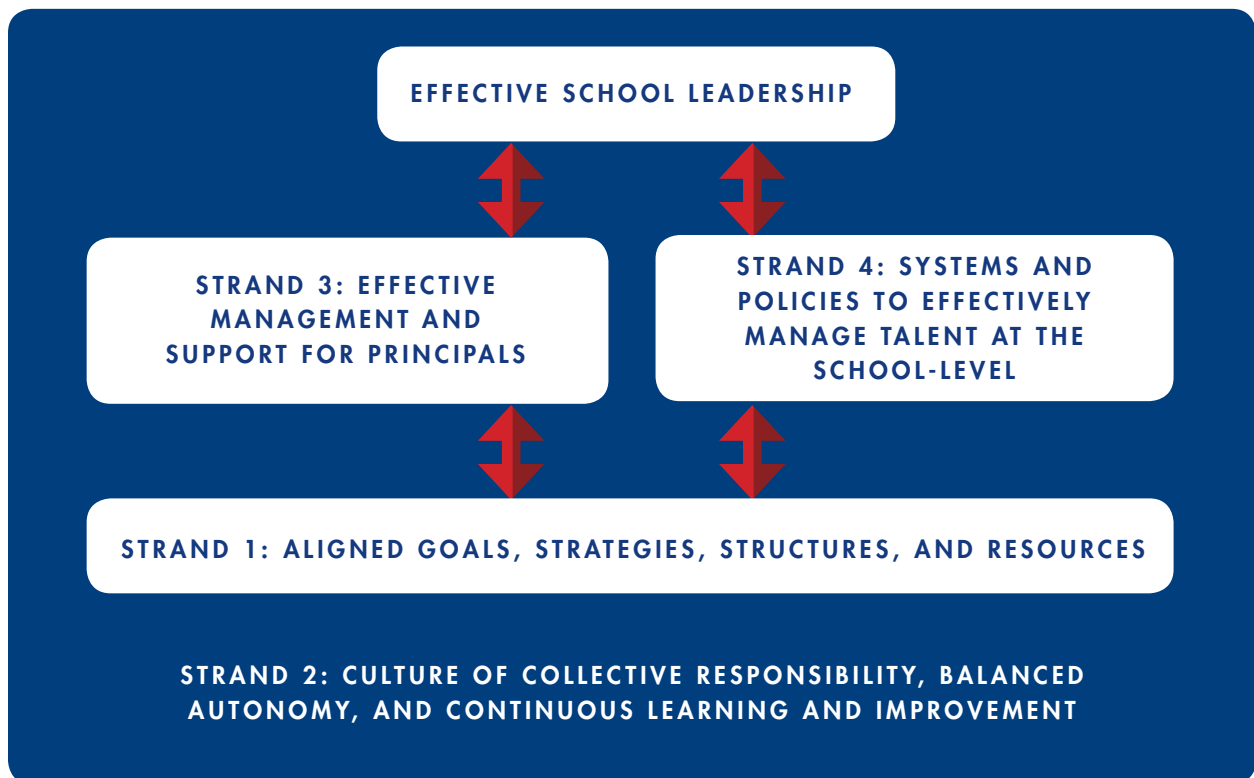
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1   Marzano, R. J., Waters, T., & McNulty, B. A. (2005). *School leadership that works: From research to results*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

This report provides a framework to describe the set of conditions that effective school systems have in place that enable principals to be successful:

- *Strand 1:* Alignment among goals, strategies, structures, and resources, so that the work of every staff member in the district is supporting system-wide goals focused on increasing student achievement;
- *Strand 2:* Culture of collective responsibility, balanced autonomy, and continuous learning and improvement;
- *Strand 3:* Effective management and support for principals with on-going opportunities for development and feedback—and most notably, roles and responsibilities that are feasible; and
- *Strand 4:* Systems and policies to effectively manage talent at the school-level.

Figure 1: The Effective Leadership Conditions Framework

Alignment Among Goals, Strategies, Structures, and Resources

Principals can be more effective when their district has a strategic plan that identifies and aligns goals, strategies, structures, and resources. First, the strategic plan has set up ambitious goals for all students that create a sense of urgency for realizing high levels of student achievement necessary for success in college and in their careers. The strategic plan identifies the few focused strategies that each school and district department will use and sustain to achieve these goals. The plan also specifies the organizational structures, staffing models, and budget plans that are aligned to the goals and strategies. Finally, the plan identifies a system for monitoring progress that informs improvement. The whole is greater than the sum of its parts: Alignment among elements of the strategic plan enables principals to implement the plan at the school-level.

> The whole is greater than the sum of its parts: Alignment among elements of the strategic plan enables principals to actualize the plan at the school-level.

Culture of Collective Responsibility, Balanced Autonomy, and Continuous Learning and Improvement

Principals can be more effective when there is a district-wide culture of joint responsibility for achieving shared student outcome goals. In effective districts, central office staff works in the service of schools and are responsible for providing quality services and developing the capacities of school leaders to implement their improvement plans.[2] Expectations, norms, and formal accountability structures hold central office staff accountable for supporting schools in addressing the challenges that arise, including coordinating with other central office departments to marshal the support that schools need.[3] At the same time, schools and principals support district-wide priorities, goals, and initiatives, and demonstrate belief in the district vision. Responsibilities for successes and failures are co-owned. All players share a feeling of "we're in this together, trying to achieve the same goals."

> We need to start providing the tools, supports and organizational culture that enable well-prepared principals to replicate the results that only a few superheroes currently produce.

2   Southern Regional Education Board. (2010). *The three essentials: Improving schools requires district vision, district and state support, and principal leadership*. Atlanta, GA: Author.
3   Honig, M. I., Copland, M. A., Rainey, L., Lorton, J. A., & Newton, M. (2010). *Central office transformation for district-wide teaching and learning improvement*. Seattle, WA: Center for the Study of Teaching Policy, University of Washington.

In a culture of collective responsibility, there is balanced autonomy. School leaders are trusted by the central office with discretion to implement policies and initiatives in ways that meet student needs without compromising their intent and essential components—ensuring successful implementation. In the spirit of a partnership culture, school leaders are safe in telling central office staff—including their managers—when policies and initiatives need more support or are not working. When necessary to meet the needs of a particular school population, central office staff and school leaders collaborate to adapt policies or initiatives as needed to best serve students. In other cases, when similar feedback is received across multiple schools, the central office uses the feedback to improve the policy or initiative. The central office staff also determines how the feedback will be utilized. As such, the district is a learning organization that actively seeks to understand the quality and impact of its reform initiatives, soliciting feedback to improve its approach.

Principals are more effective when central office staff and school leaders work together to differentiate district policies and improve them over time.

STRAND 3:
Effective Management and Support for Principals

Principals can be more effective when districts implement holistic performance management systems that systematically develop, support, motivate, and retain quality leadership talent. Effective performance management of principals is not simply a matter of creating new principal evaluation systems—although evaluations designed to support principal development are a critical component of a performance management system. Principals need to be managed in ways that facilitate on-going learning and improve their practice over time. Effective systems provide principals with on-going supervision and support from highly skilled principal managers who partner with principals to improve student achievement, provide support and a sounding board, and who work to remove barriers to principal success. As one principal from Denver, Colorado, reflected, "My [principal] manager helps me define what the real work is and then helps me improve at doing the work."[4] Principal managers redefine the role of principals to make it more feasible and to retain principals in their role. This approach necessitates staffing principal manager positions with individuals who have the knowledge, skills, and case loads that enable them to effectively hire, develop, and evaluate principals.

"My manager helps me define what the real work is, and then helps me improve at doing the work."

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4   New Leaders, 2012. [Focus group with America Achieves Fellows]. Unpublished raw data.

Systems and Policies to Effectively Manage Talent at the School-level

Principals can be more effective when they have systems and policies in place to manage talent in the schools they lead. According to our expert researcher and practitioner work group, the most important, yet most commonly lacking condition for principal effectiveness, is the authority to create appropriate staffing models for their school, including the ability to hire, promote, and dismiss teachers, school leaders, and other school-based staff. Districts enable principal effectiveness when they eliminate barriers to principals' authority and create systems and tools, such as effective human resource and teacher performance management systems, as well as effective evaluation systems that enable principals to effectively manage their teachers and school staff. Supportive districts provide teachers with access to high-quality professional learning opportunities that align to school and district goals and with teachers' specific needs and areas for growth. They also redesign human resource departments to serve as strategic partners, working to identify and recruit talent and create a district-wide pipeline of effective teachers, teacher leaders, and other leadership personnel.

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RECOMMENDATIONS

To enable a great principal in every school, school systems need to recognize the pivotal role of school leaders and implement these conditions. This change will require a deep cultural shift in many districts to create a climate of shared ownership, trust, and mutual accountability in which central office and school-level leaders see one another as partners in meeting students' needs. Systems leaders can access the companion report, *Great Principals at Scale Toolkit*, that includes a set of tools they can use to assess the current status of their conditions, and to identify priority areas and actions that they can put in place to enable all well-trained principals to be effective. The process of diagnosing and addressing conditions can in-of-itself begin to build the foundational culture that enables not just principals, but all district improvement efforts, to be effective.