

Leadership Development in California

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Getting Down to Facts

A research project designed to provide California's policy-makers and other education stakeholders with comprehensive information about the state's school finance and governance systems, and lay the groundwork for a conversation about needed reforms. The project was made possible by grants from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the James Irvine Foundation, and the Stuart Foundation.

This summary was prepared by IREPP.

For the full text of the author's research report and the other studies in this project, see: www.irepp.net

For background on California's school finance system, see: www.californiaschoolfinance.org

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More than two decades of research has established the importance of school leadership as a factor in improving academic achievement. This study addresses the question that naturally follows: If leadership matters, how can it be developed? The central questions of the study include:

1. What do we know about how to develop principals who can successfully transform schools?
2. What is the current status of leadership development in California?
3. What might the state do to systematically support the development of leaders who can manage a new generation of schools that are successful in teaching all students well?

Summary of Key Findings

Strong leadership development programs connect theory to practice

A 2005 review of research on successful leadership development programs showed that they emphasize content built upon a set of leadership standards related to:

- Learning and instruction,
- The development of quality teaching and professional learning,
- Organizational development,
- Analysis and use of data to inform school improvement,
- Change management, and
- Leadership skills.

This content is delivered through problem-based learning methods that connect theory to specific instructional efforts at schools. Principals work with a coach or another practitioner who can guide reflection and provide feedback. They participate in groups that create opportunities for teamwork in practice-oriented situations. And there is close collaboration between the program and one or more partner school districts.

The case studies of eight exemplary principal-preparation programs confirmed the presence of these features. Participants undertook a comprehensive and coherent program of study

Study Methods

The authors draw from a recent study of principal development programs focusing on eight states (including California) to identify the components of effective training programs and the state's role in creating such programs, and to determine whether principals are developing the requisite knowledge and skills. That study includes a survey of a national random sample of 1,086 principals, oversampling from the eight focus states and including graduates and participants from eight preparation programs reputed to be highly effective. Researchers augment survey results with policy case studies and stakeholder interviews in the eight states. They also document the approaches and outcomes of eight exemplary leadership development programs, including the program in San Diego Unified School District.

Based on survey responses from 189 participants in California, the authors compare California principals to colleagues across the nation in terms of levels of experience, the quality of their preparation programs, and perceived preparedness for work.

with opportunities to apply what they learned through field-based projects, internships, action research, and analysis of classroom instruction. These programs also use proactive outreach and financial supports to recruit into the principalship a diverse group of dynamic teachers with strong instructional expertise and leadership skills.

Principals need to know how to allocate resources effectively

The authors also draw a connection between raising student achievement and investing in the knowledge of school leaders, particularly to the extent that the state wishes to delegate more authority for making resource decisions to the school level. They say that principals need to be well prepared to allocate resources, making productive use of time, expertise, and dollars. They need to know the kinds of practices and investments that are likely to make a difference in student learning and how to build the skills and abilities of teachers and other staff. As change agents, they must be able to manage a school improvement process and use data effectively for continuous school improvement. The survey showed that, like principals nationally, fewer than half of California’s principals reported feeling well prepared to do these things.

California’s efforts in regard to leadership development fall behind the other states studied

California has established professionally grounded credential requirements and accreditation standards, but the quality of its preparation programs is uneven. Beyond that, the state has only one major state-level initiative directed at principal professional development, and it is a short-term program.

The state’s preparation and credentialing process is based on professional standards, but programs are uneven in quality

School principals in California must have an administrative credential, which requires completion of a two-tiered credentialing program. The first tier is for preparation, and the second—which must be completed within five years—is intended to be an induction experience.

To maintain their accreditation, administrative-preparation programs in California must align their curricula to six thematic areas defined in the California Professional Standards for Education Leaders (CPSEL). These standards were adapted from the national standards of the Interstate School Leaders’ Licensure Consortium (ISLLC). However, due to budget constraints, accreditation visits were discontinued, and there has been little oversight of preparation programs to ensure this alignment or program quality. Observers view existing preparation programs as uneven in quality. Some preparation programs are exemplary, while others are decidedly weak.

In addition, not all administrative candidates participate in these programs. The credential officially requires participation in an accredited program. In practice, however, candidates can obtain both their preliminary and professional credentials by passing a written exam or completing an alternate program based on an internship. The authors find that education leaders question the value of these alternatives but observe that they were developed to address shortages and, “perhaps, policymakers’ lack of faith in existing programs.”

The state’s continuing education initiative, the Principal Training Program, has reached a large share of principals but is limited in its approach

California provides incentive funding for local education agencies

(LEAs), such as school districts and county offices of education, to train school administrators through the state’s Principal Training Program, established in 2001 by Assembly Bill (AB) 75. Districts receive \$3,000 per participant to pay for the program and are required to contribute \$1,000 more. State officials estimate that 10,000 administrators participated in the program during its first five years. The focus of this training is on implementation of standards-based reform, with emphasis on core academic standards, assessments to improve pupil performance, and specifically, state-adopted instructional materials.

The Principal Training Program has reached a large share of principals and assistant principals in the state and is credited with helping principals become more familiar with curriculum and instruction—especially as related to state-approved texts and standards. The training also familiarizes principals with management and resource allocation strategies and technology uses. Criticisms are directed at its brevity, its one-size-fits-all nature, and the fact that it generally does not include direct mentoring or coaching of principals.

Survey responses reflect California’s weak leadership development efforts compared to other states

Based on the random sample of California principals, the authors find that school leaders in this state are less likely than principals elsewhere to be regularly engaged in evaluating and supporting teachers, working with teachers to change practices when students are not succeeding, helping to develop curriculum plans, fostering professional development, or using data to monitor and improve instruction. The authors cite access to information and

the opportunity to apply it under expert guidance as necessary for principals to do these things well.

California principals are also much less likely to have participated in an administrative internship or to have access to mentoring or coaching in their work than principals in other states. They are also less likely to have access to a principal's network while on the job and significantly less likely to have participated regularly with teachers in professional development—a practice associated with strong instructional leadership. While preparation and focus may be a component of the problem, it is also true that principals must have the staffing resources that allow them to free up their time to focus on these key activities—another challenge in many California schools, where there are fewer administrative staff than in other states.

On average, California principals report that the professional development experiences they had were somewhat less useful to improving their practice than principals nationally. The differences in perceived utility were significant with respect to workshops and conferences, peer observations and coaching, and university courses.

Yet expertise regarding best practice exists within the state

The authors conclude that California's statewide infrastructure for ongoing professional development is much less developed than in most of the other states studied.¹ Those states have funded ongoing leadership academies, and several have launched mentoring/coaching models to support principals. Ironically, the discontinued California School Leadership Academy (CSLA) was nationally recognized and was the model for many other states' suc-

cessful academies. After 20 years of state support, funding for CSLA was stopped in 2003. CSLA offered intensive training for beginning and veteran principals and supported school leadership teams in turning around low-performing schools.

The authors find that large majorities of the principals who experienced exemplary leadership development programs—including those offered in San Diego Unified School District through the Educational Leadership Development Academy (ELDA) and the district's in-service programs—feel well-prepared to lead instructional improvement, engage much more regularly in instructional leadership activities, and are effective in stimulating school improvement leading to student-learning gains. Their preservice preparation included a coherent program focused on instructional improvement wrapped around a full-time internship with an expert veteran principal. When working as principals, participants experienced additional support, such as mentoring and coaching, a principal's network and ongoing study groups, highly focused visits to other schools, and monthly principals' conferences.

Improvements in preservice, recruitment, and ongoing professional development would support California's leadership development

The authors observe that California has “strengths to build upon” in regard to leadership development, including its adoption of the CPSEL professional standards. They conclude, however, that the state needs to improve preservice programs, enhance principal recruitment, and create an infrastructure for high-quality professional development on an ongoing basis.

Program review and accreditation, performance assessments for licensure, and dissemination of best practices could improve preservice programs

Unlike California, several other states base their accreditation of institutions offering administrative credentials on regular, intensive program reviews and on the preparation of graduates who can lead instructional improvement, design learning organizations, and manage resources. Performance assessments undertaken by prospective principals can be used to gauge both the success of the preparation program and the readiness of leaders to assume their positions. The authors note that such assessment for prospective principals would be in keeping with the state's recent requirement to use teacher performance assessment as a basis for licensure and input for accreditation of teacher education programs.

In partnership with organizations such as the Association of California School Administrators, the state could collect and disseminate evidence of what works in leadership development, identifying specific practices and exemplary programs in both preservice and in-service.

Financial incentives and internships could help districts recruit principals in a tight labor market

North Carolina has succeeded in recruiting hundreds of principals by underwriting individuals' preparation and internships in exchange for a commitment of at least four years of service. Other states are offering support for full-time internships—sometimes sharing costs with the district or reimbursing salary. While California faces principals leaving their positions before retirement, a tight labor market, and a shortage of qualified applicants, it has no direct subsidies to support proactive recruitment.

The state's infrastructure for professional development needs strengthening

California provides an incentive for ongoing learning through its renewable five-year credential. But apart from the one-time principal training program, it does not offer state-supported professional development opportunities.

In contrast, all the other states examined in this study have ongoing professional development requirements for principals to renew their licenses, and several have developed a three-tier licensing system to incorporate supports for this learning. Most have created institutions to organize and provide ongoing professional development opportunities (housed in universities or in free-standing academies), which typically have line-item state funding.

California could follow its own example in creating a cutting-edge professional development academy. All the observers in this study agreed that the state needed the

same kind of opportunities provided by CSLA for nearly 20 years. Many also pointed to the desirability of mentoring and coaching opportunities for new and veteran principals.

Authors' Conclusions

California's intent to raise student achievement and reduce the achievement gap requires investments in leadership. A central need is to develop approaches that support principals' abilities to lead instructional improvement and to design school organizations that invest resources in productive ways. Successful programs emphasize learning and instruction, development of quality teaching and professional learning, data analysis, change management, and leadership skills. The exemplary programs in San Diego, those in other states, and California's own successful statewide leadership academy can serve as models for the kind of continuous, consistently available, and customized

professional development needed to support principals' learning.

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This study was completed in November 2006.

Endnotes

1 The only direct state funding for leadership development in California is provided by AB 75—reauthorized as AB 430—which proved helpful but has its own limitations, such as brevity, the one-size-fits-all nature of training, and the lack of any mentoring or coaching opportunities.