

National Association of State Boards of Education

➔ Aligning Leadership Preparation Programs with Student Learning Standards

By Stephen Prociw

Leadership standards describe what competencies principals need in order to support and improve student achievement, while educational standards serve as the hub for all education components and the foundation for policy design and development (figure 1). If principals are to effectively lead schools where all students achieve high standards, leadership standards must closely align to the standards for students. Yet often they do not.

This lack of alignment has consequences for students. A 2013 report on the impact of principals found that “highly effective

principals raise the achievement of a typical student in their schools by between two and seven months of learning in a single school year; ineffective principals lower achievement by the same amount.”¹

The list of required competencies for principals is long and overwhelming. They must balance responsibilities for managing school resources, evaluating teachers, testing and assessment of students, fostering relationships with families and the community, implementing new academic standards, incorporating changing technologies, and mentoring future school leaders.

The role of school principals in recent years has shifted from being the leaders of buildings to leaders of learning. Instructional leadership calls for principals to lead teacher improvement, possess a deep understanding of student standards, promote a positive learning climate, and identify and implement instructional practices to reach these goals.

Recognizing the importance of high-quality leadership in schools, state boards of education have increasingly focused attention during the last decade on policies that prepare and develop qualified principals. The first step many states took was to adopt leadership standards. The skills and dispositions contained in the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium’s (ISLLC) Standards for School

Leaders have served—and continue to serve—as the basis for many states’ expectations of principal performance. The ISLLC standards provide a broad framework and vision that states are encouraged to adopt and then adapt to their specific environment and needs. Designing leadership standards with a local context in mind helps align the education system and delivers a coherent message about expectations and intent.

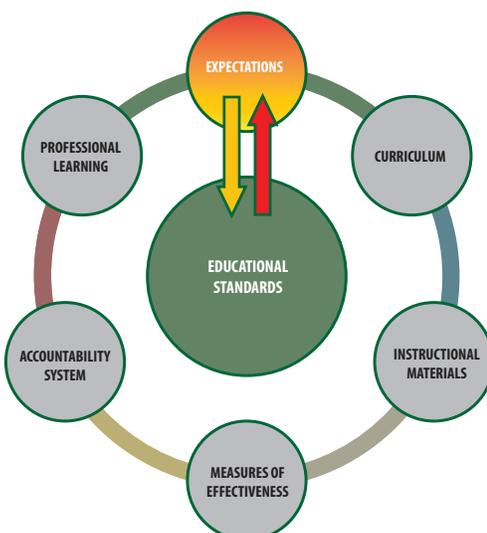
STATE BOARDS’ ROLE

State boards of education should ensure that the adopted leadership standards also inform and shape other policies for school principals; simply adopting more rigorous standards is not enough. Robert Hull, director of NASBE’s Center for College, Career, and Civic Readiness, has called on state boards to “embark on the complex but crucial work of truly leading and governing a standards-based education system, which, when done with fidelity, can help ensure high levels of student performance.”²

Leadership standards are operationalized through systems, structures, and policies. Aligning programs that prepare school principals with the state’s leadership standards has proved to be an effective strategy for creating a competent workforce of leaders who know what is expected of them. State policies drive alignment of principal preparation programs to leadership standards through program approval, certification, and targeted technical assistance.³ While state boards of education hold varying levels of authority, many do approve and set accreditation requirements for principal preparation programs.

Iowa attempted this alignment in 2001 after using the ISLLC standards as a baseline for its Iowa Standards for School Leaders (ISSL). A task force then wrote new guidelines aligned to the ISSL for the development and approval of principal licensure programs. Programs that had been approved under previous legislation were required to submit proposals that met the new requirements or risk not being reapproved and losing their ability to license new principals.

Figure 1. Expectations for New Principals Align to Educational Standards



Closing programs that consistently underperform or produce poor-quality principals may be necessary to improve the quality of leaders in a state's pool. State boards can convene a variety of stakeholders when developing the curriculum and content of principal preparation programs to ensure that every facet provides candidates with training and instruction aligned with the leadership standards. The most effective forms of principal development—problem-based clinical experiences, fieldwork, and mentorships—should be required components in all preparation programs seeking approval.

Collaboration between state boards and leadership programs is essential to preparing effective instructional leaders. A recent study by NASBE and the Consortium for Policy Research in Education revealed that many states report shortages of quality candidates to fill leadership positions, even where there are a sufficiently large number of individuals with principal licenses.⁴ Illinois passed a law in 2010 mandating that principal preparation programs meet newly adopted standards for approval. At the time, 31 programs were enrolling more than 7,500 candidates for only 400 to 450 positions. Today, 26 programs enroll around 700 candidates; as a result, the quality of graduates has improved, and the workforce more closely aligns with the positions available.⁵

FINDING TOP CANDIDATES

State boards working with the leaders and developers of preparation programs can create more rigorous admission standards to ensure that only the most qualified applicants are trained. Likewise, local school districts can participate in the applicant review process by endorsing individuals with specific qualities tailored to their needs. Districts should also be allowed to design their own principal preparation programs, so long as they adhere to rigorous requirements set for program approval.

State legislatures may need to examine and alter the incentives for teachers seeking degrees in educational leadership to encourage only serious candidates. By tying salary increases to attainment of a degree in education administration, some states have experienced a glut of licensed school

administrators, many of whom have no intention of becoming school principals.

State boards can influence and recommend recruitment strategies for aspiring principals by implementing teacher-leader positions and certifications that groom highly effective teachers, or by requiring that teacher candidates receive an endorsement from school leadership or administration before being eligible to apply. By seeking available data on programs and the careers of principals who attend them, state boards can track the effectiveness of preparation programs and hold institutions of higher education accountable for the quality of principals they produce.

STRIKING A BALANCE

State boards must strike a balance between requiring the implementation of high-quality leadership preparation standards and encouraging innovation and continuous improvement of preparation programs and their faculty. Given the decentralized nature of higher education, orienting institutions of higher education toward providing instruction rooted in the state's leadership standards is challenging. Nevertheless, failure to invest in the development of principals would be a significant missed opportunity in the effort to raise levels of student achievement.

Principals have a multiplier effect through their ability to improve teacher capacity and oversee successful implementation of student learning standards. To date, no evidence exists of turnaround schools improving without strong principals. If every student is to graduate college, career, and civic ready, state boards of education must keep striving to align principal preparation programs with instructional knowledge and leadership training that leads to student achievement.

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NOTES

1. Gregory F. Branch, Eric A. Hanushek, and Steven G. Rivkin, "School Leaders Matter: Measuring the Impact of Effective Principals," *Education Next* 13, no. 1 (2013): 62–69, <http://educationnext.org/school-leaders-matter/>.

2. Robert Hull, "Leading a Standards-Based System: Aligning Policy to Standards," *Policy Update* 21, no. 3 (2014).

3. Linda Darling-Hammond, Michelle LaPointe, Debra Meyerson, and Margaret T. Orr, *Preparing School Leaders for a Changing World: Executive Summary* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University, Stanford Educational Leadership Institute, 2007).

4. Bobbi Newman, "State Leadership Development Policies: A Comprehensive Analysis of 50 States and Territories," (Alexandria, VA: NASBE, forthcoming).

5. Courtney Rowland, "Improving Educational Outcomes: How State Policy Can Support School Principals as Instructional Leaders," (Washington, DC: National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, 2015).