

POWER OF THE QUESTION

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? Seven Questions Boards Should Ask about School Leadership

By Don Long

More than a decade of research and practice attests to the significant impact that school leaders have on student learning, teaching, and school quality.¹ In response, many states crafted exemplary policies for recruiting, developing, or supporting school leaders but stopped short of building coherent, comprehensive systems.² Similarly, districts launched fine local initiatives to strengthen principal pipelines and university principal preparation programs that lack statewide reach.³

For many, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) promised an opportunity to turn these limited efforts into broad, sustained investment in school leadership systems.⁴ Authorized at \$15 billion to \$16.2 billion per year (2017–20), ESSA's Title I offered a 7 percent state set-aside for school improvement with new support for school leaders in struggling schools and greater flexibility for school interventions.⁵ Title II, Part A, authorized at about \$2.3 billion per year, provided more flexibility for states' use of a 5 percent set-aside for leader and teacher development and added a 3 percent set-aside just for leader development. Yet with the administration's proposed federal budget for fiscal 2018, states are facing new funding uncertainty and a lack of regulatory clarity over some ESSA provisions.⁶

These developments have complicated the picture for creating more holistic leadership systems but may also signal that states have even greater responsibility and a more compelling call to "lead for equity."⁷ State boards of education and state education agencies can take cues

State boards of education exercise policy authority that varies from state to state. Yet no matter what their level of authority, all boards have the power to convene stakeholders and to ask questions on matters affecting their state education system. This series is designed to present boards with a set of questions they may want to ask on key education matters before them.

from the work their peers have done in crafting ESSA state plans to plot their own sustained investments in school leadership. To this end, I offer seven questions state board members can ask about effective school leadership policies that keep equity at the forefront.

1 HOW DO STANDARDS DRIVE YOUR STATE'S SYSTEM TO RECRUIT, DEVELOP, SUPPORT, AND EVALUATE SCHOOL LEADERS?

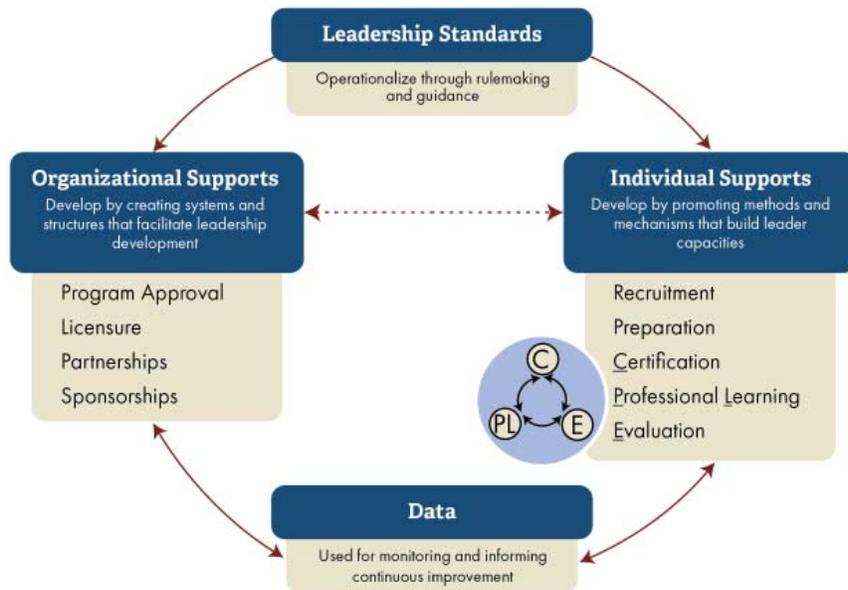
Standards that define expectations, knowledge, skills, and norms across the career continuum are at the center of an effective leadership development system.⁸ Developing such standards is a cost-effective way for districts to build a pipeline of principals, according to RAND researchers.⁹ Standards infuse and connect every component of the system to recruit, develop, support, and evaluate leaders in a mutually reinforcing, coherent way.

States operationalize these standards in two ways (see figure). There are organizational systems and structures, such as principal preparation program approval, licensure, and partnerships, and there are direct services to build the capacity of individual leaders, such as recruitment, professional learning, and evaluation. Both are instrumental in articulating and supporting career progressions that move leaders toward mastery and maximize their impact on students, teachers, and schools.

Most states adopted the 2008 Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) standards, but ISLLC was superseded in 2015 by the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL) to reflect current research and increasing demands on school leaders.¹⁰ PSEL represents a more holistic approach to student learning, with every standard reiterating this aim: "to promote each student's academic success and well-being."¹¹ It emphasizes equity and cultural responsiveness, greater responsibility for cultivating professional learning communities, and engaging parents in the school community. Only Delaware, Missouri, Nebraska, Rhode Island, and West Virginia have adopted PSEL formally or informally, though education organizations such as the National Association of Secondary School Principals use them to inform their services and products for school leaders.¹²

State board members should be leading the transition to PSEL. But they should also conduct a policy audit to inventory and evaluate the alignment of current policies—principal preparation, licensure, professional learning, and evaluation—with their existing standards. Through this analysis, boards can identify critical gaps, determine the relative benefits and costs of adopting PSEL or otherwise addressing these gaps, and develop a strategic plan for implementation.

State Leadership Development Policy Framework



Source: Robert Hull et al., "Successful Leaders for Successful Schools: Building and Maintaining a Quality Workforce," report of the NASBE Leadership Development Study Group (Alexandria, VA: NASBE and CPRE, 2015).

2 ARE YOUR SCHOOL LEADERS READY TO LEAD INSTRUCTION AND MANAGE TALENT?

States and districts raised the bar for equity and excellence by adopting college, career, and civic readiness standards. Many seek to raise the bar still higher by engaging students in higher, deeper learning that will set them up for success in life. PSEL encourages leaders to meet these expectations by becoming effective instructional leaders and managers of talent.¹⁵ Mastery of these skills transforms leaders into "invaluable multipliers of learning and teaching."¹⁶ Ultimately, school leaders' capacity is the "proof" in the standards-based leadership system "pudding."

State boards can assess school leadership capacity across their state by homing in on how these two core competencies are reflected in district and school policies and practices. This review should be informed by a vision of distributed leadership—teacher leaders, aspiring principals, assistant principals, and principal supervisors—that enables

principals to prioritize their instructional leadership and talent management tasks while cultivating new leaders.

One promising practice for talent management is the use of leader tracking systems, developed in partnership between districts and universities to improve principal pipelines, professional learning, and school leadership. These systems identify competencies, attributes, needs, and other analytics, along with placement and performance data for leader positions. They can be customized to inform decision making in recruitment, hiring and placement, career progressions, balanced scorecards for preparation programs, and long-term planning.¹⁷

State boards should emphasize these core competencies when they approve and oversee principal preparation programs as well. At the same time, boards can empower district and school leaders through support for peer-to-peer learning, innovation, collaboration, and networking.¹⁸ Illinois is using Title II and state funds to expand its cross-district educator leader network, and it is creating resources that build their leaders' capacity to facilitate continuous teacher learning and development.

Most important, states and districts can support these competencies through effective professional learning that is "sustained, intense, job-embedded, collaborative, data-informed, and classroom-focused" (as defined in ESSA). **Oregon** is using its 3 percent set-aside under Title II to develop local policies that commit to more robust talent management, including recruitment and retention of culturally and linguistically diverse educators. **Louisiana** supports principals in a fellowship program for school leaders, who engage in learning bimonthly over 16 months on how to drive change, coach and mentor, and be a visionary

Seven states so far have decided to use the 3 percent set-aside in ESSA's Title II, Part A to develop or enhance school leadership systems.¹³ Four of these elevated school leadership to a strategic priority in their state's vision for education.¹⁴

Based on an intensive evaluation of its educator workforce priorities, **Michigan** will use these funds for district subgrants to implement investments called out in its strategic plan: preparation programs, supported transitions, professional learning, and career pathways. **Tennessee's** strategic priority of educator support includes investments in preparation, evaluation, professional learning, distributed leadership in support of career progressions, and pipelines. The state plans to use its 3 percent set-aside to expand the work of the Tennessee Transformational Leadership Alliance (TTLA) and create statewide and regional pipelines based on four-year leadership models aligned with leadership standards.

Here are some questions state boards should ask about school leadership standards and alignment:

- Is school leadership an important priority in the state's strategic vision?
- Do state and district educators and preparation programs share an understanding of what effective school leadership looks like?
- Has the state developed a process for transitioning to PSEL, if not already adopted?
- Has the state education agency conducted an audit and alignment study of its policies governing the state's school leadership system and developed a plan to address gaps?

leader. Four more states have so far also committed to investing in leadership academies or residencies for professional learning. **Tennessee** will use the Title II set-aside to support leader residency programs in high-need districts.

Board members can ask these questions to ensure that school leaders are ready to lead instruction and manage talent:

- Are leaders supported by high-quality professional learning throughout their careers, including through induction, mentoring, and coaching?
- How well do districts, schools, and stakeholders understand standards for instructional leadership and talent management? How are school leaders supported and held accountable for these standards?
- What changes are needed in working conditions (e.g., time for learning and collaboration) and organization of schools (e.g., “collective leadership” that includes teachers and parents) in support of this kind of leadership?

3 ARE YOU MAKING THE MOST OF YOUR BOARD’S AUTHORITY OVER LICENSURE AND PREPARATION PROGRAMS?

State boards can improve school leader preparation by adopting robust, research-based program approval criteria. In a 50-state survey of principal preparation program approval and licensure policies in 2015, only Illinois and Tennessee were found to use well-developed policies in all five policy areas denoted as “high leverage” by the University Council for Educational Administration.¹⁹ For stronger accountability, boards should consider adding graduate placement and performance data, disaggregated by student groups, to their program approval criteria.

All 17 ESSA state plans submitted in the spring cohort feature school leadership strategies that cover preparation, induction, mentoring, and professional learning—a remarkable change, since only 4 percent of Title II funding has historically been directed toward school leaders.²⁰ Thirteen are developing or expanding principal preparation programs, many with a focus on equity. **Connecticut**, for example, is making its certification system more flexible and expanding its principal preparation partnerships with districts, with a goal of increasing educators of color in designated and priority shortage areas over the next five years. **Delaware** seeks to improve educator preparation programs and alternative routes to certification by raising standards and strengthening assessment and support. The state will compile performance data on graduates, including student achievement, and track placements in schools that predominantly serve low-income students and students of color.

Four states seek to ensure effective school leaders through changes to licensure. **Maine** and **Arizona** are exploring tiered systems of credentials and licensure. Delaware is exploring competency-based micro-credentials, which target professional learning to classroom-specific needs. Nevada will revise its licensure requirements to support reciprocity across states, meet workforce needs, and promote professional growth in areas of need (e.g., students with disabilities, English learners).

Boards can ask these questions regarding program approval and licensure:

- Has the state conducted a review and audit of these policies against established criteria? Do these include graduate placement and performance data disaggregated by student groups?
- How are university and alternative preparation programs assessed, and what strategies are in place to improve them? Do these include partnerships with districts?
- How do program approval and licensure policies support leaders’ abilities to ensure differentiated instruction and more demanding, standards-aligned content for diverse students?

4 HOW DO YOU ENSURE ALL STUDENTS GET EFFECTIVE SCHOOL LEADERS?

Good school leaders are inequitably distributed across communities by race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status.²¹ Moreover, the principal labor market is remarkably unstable. The principal labor force is aging, turnover is approximately 20 percent a year, and high-poverty, low-achieving schools feel the effects of that turnover the most.²² School leader shortages also hurt them more since the potential impact of stable leaders is greater in these schools. The inequitable distribution of effective teachers only compounds these problems.

ESSA nudges states to identify and address these disparities and shortages. For example, a state may use up to 2 percent of its Title II, Part A allocation to establish or expand school leader preparation academies targeted to high-need schools. States should ensure a supply of effective, diverse leaders that correspond to the diversity of their students. They should assess their workforce needs through a comprehensive, inclusive, and collaborative process and then prioritize these needs and leverage ESSA opportunities accordingly.

Most of the spring cohort of ESSA states focused on this question. **Tennessee** plans to use the 3 percent set-aside to fund competitive grants for leader residency programs in high-need districts. **Nevada** intends to award grants to entities that demonstrate evidence-based practices in their programs of educator preparation, peer assistance and review, leadership training and development, and recruitment, selection, and retention. **Connecticut** intends to develop more robust partnerships among institutions of higher education, preK-12 systems, and other entities to increase collective responsibility and accountability for developing school-ready principals.

Michigan has these strategies for addressing equity: 1) cultivating partnerships between specific districts and preparation program providers; 2) ensuring strong, supported transitions for school leaders from their preparation programs through their early years in the profession; and 3) developing career pathways. **Massachusetts** also has multiple strategies, the most promising being teacher and principal performance assessments.

Boards can ask these questions about equitable distribution of effective leaders:

- What strategies is the state using to build the capacity of all leaders to better serve low-income students, students of color, students

with disabilities, and English learners?

- How will the state put effective, diverse leaders into schools with the highest need?
- Does the ESSA state plan address equitable access to effective, diverse leaders?
- Are leaders equipped to foster safe, inclusive, and supportive learning communities in their schools?

5 ARE YOUR SCHOOL LEADERS READY TO CREATE A CULTURE OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING?

ESSA Titles I, II, and IV give states leverage to improve professional learning at the state and local levels. In addition, ESSA's Title II requires districts to report how their strategies "improved teacher, principal, or other school leader effectiveness." Professional learning, as redefined by ESSA, must reflect standards that are clearly linked to student, teacher, and school outcomes. What distinguishes top-performing education systems around the world is their ability to create a culture of professional learning in which leaders receive sustained, intensive support and experience in the strategies and practices that they will then foster in their schools.²³

Boards can promote a shared vision of professional learning that supports "continuous collective and individual improvement."²⁴ Data on student learning and teacher performance are critical in professional learning cultures, enabling leaders to identify gaps between goals and performance for their students, teachers, and themselves.²⁵

Twelve of the 17 states submitting ESSA plans in the spring emphasized professional learning standards to ensure training for leaders is consistent with ESSA's definition of effective professional learning: sustained, intensive, job-embedded, collaborative, classroom-focused, and data-driven.²⁶ **Delaware** supports school leaders through professional learning that is tailored to educator and student needs and supported by customized resources and follow-up services. A key focus is to deepen leaders' ability to identify effective instruction and provide specific feedback to teachers based on student outcomes. The goal is to develop a common language for educators (principals, teachers, central office, coaches) to describe their work in terms of its impact on student learning and achievement.²⁷

Vermont will use the 3 percent set-aside to create the Vermont Leader's Professional Learning Academy/Institute. It aims to improve student outcomes in low-performing schools, particularly those identified for comprehensive or targeted supports. **Michigan** intends to use the set-aside for context-specific clinical and residency-based teacher and school-leader preparation programs.

Here are some questions to ask about professional learning:

- What evidence-based professional learning standards have been adopted?
- How does the state support school leaders in their roles of building professional learning communities?

- How does the state develop and improve leadership competencies? Are there examples in leading districts that can be shared?

6 HOW DO STATES HELP MAKE EXISTING SCHOOL LEADERS BETTER?

Clear, supported career progressions help teachers and leaders move toward greater mastery. On average, principals have their greatest impact after being at a school five to seven years.²⁸ Yet many do not stay in schools that long. Boards can look at a great variety of policies and practices to support principals in their careers: compensation, recognition, working conditions, mentoring and coaching, and multitiered licensing.

Tennessee is centering its school leadership work on a particular vision of career progression. According to its ESSA state plan, it is "setting high standards for effective leadership based on research and best practice, supporting leaders to reach those standards, and empowering districts to build a network of exceptional instructional leaders who get results." The state plans to accomplish this through induction academies, professional learning, and university partnerships to advance licensure. In partnership with the governor, Vanderbilt University's Peabody College, and districts, the Governor's Academy for School Leadership supports assistant principals' participation in a one-year leadership development experience. Six other states are also developing or strengthening mentoring and coaching for leaders,²⁹ and nine others are creating peer-led networks and communities of practice for leaders.³⁰

Consistent with NASBE's standards-based leadership model, state boards can help develop effective leaders by establishing a cycle of professional learning, evaluation, and licensure (see inset circle in figure). The evaluation component encompasses planning and goal setting, dialogue and feedback, professional learning and support for meeting real needs in schools, and formative and summative evaluation. Well-designed evaluation both creates and assesses good leaders. Moreover, it generates evidence of effectiveness that can be used for meeting licensure requirements, improving professional learning, and for moving school and teacher leaders upward in their careers (e.g., through multitiered licensing).

Twelve of the 17 states that submitted ESSA plans in the spring are using Title II funds for developing or expanding principal evaluation.³¹ **Maine** intends to braid Title II, Part A funds and allowable funds from other programs to support districts in implementing such programs. **Arizona**, in conjunction with its state board of education, has provided districts with the Arizona Framework for Measuring Educator Effectiveness for use in local principal and teacher evaluation systems. Districts can implement their own instruments as long as they are aligned with the framework. **Louisiana's** Compass system includes processes for principal and teacher goal setting, observation, and feedback. To ensure this system is effective, Louisiana provides opportunities for principals to participate in a National Institute for School Leadership fellowship program. Here are some questions boards can ask:

- What policies and incentives support career progressions?
- How are leaders held accountable for learning and growth?
- What is the status of principal evaluation, and how does the state

support districts in designing and implementing evaluation systems that support and measure effectiveness?

7 HOW DOES YOUR STATE LEVERAGE ESSA TO SUPPORT LEADERS IN IMPROVING SCHOOLS?

ESSA moves away from the prescriptive approach to school improvement under No Child Left Behind toward greater flexibility and authority for districts. This presents an opening to focus on leadership interventions, which research shows produces some of the strongest effects on low-performing schools.³² A 2016 RAND report matches evidence-based school leadership interventions to the three tiers of evidence in ESSA's framework.³³ For example, the New Leaders model, which meets ESSA's second tier, prepares principals to address achievement gaps and related challenges in high-need urban schools through selective recruitment and admissions, residency-based training, and endorsement and support for principals early in their tenures.

Many state education agencies are responding to ESSA's greater flexibility by getting their teacher and leadership departments and their Title I school improvement departments to collaborate. They are also giving their districts resources, data, and coaching to enable them to take the lead role in school improvement. **Massachusetts** has a well-established, robust process for identifying and intervening in its lowest performing schools. Its state education agency provides tiered services and resources, in partnership with school leaders, that support high-quality curriculum and instruction, research-based interventions, collaboration and communication between educators and parents, and coaching. Massachusetts also plans to expand the pipeline of principals able to lead turnaround schools.

The Delaware Leadership Project (DLP) and University of Delaware's Principal Preparation Program (PPP) seek to focus on the challenges associated with poor leader preparation for high-need schools. These new programs will support rigorous school leadership training for at least 10 principals. **Delaware** is also creating a network of leaders in high-need schools.

New Mexico intends to beef up its Principals Pursuing Excellence program, which pairs a turnaround mentor with principals in struggling schools. Participants saw their schools improve in state assessments more than three times the average school in the state in English language arts and 1.7 times higher in mathematics. Colorado, Illinois, and Oregon will also focus on school leaders in their school improvement interventions.

Boards can ask these questions on school leadership interventions:

- How does the state help districts in implementing school leadership interventions that meet ESSA's three tiers of evidence?
- How does the state empower districts to collaborate and innovate?
- How do school leadership interventions improve performance for all student groups?

States are taking advantage of ESSA's opportunities to elevate school leadership, reversing its historic neglect in education policy.³⁴ Many plan to use Title II funds for improving principal preparation programs, professional learning, and evaluations. Yet only a third of the early cohort of states are choosing the 3 percent set-aside. It may be that federal budget uncertainty stymied bolder, more widespread efforts.

Even in this uncertain environment, however, state boards can exercise their full powers of policy, questioning, and convening to amplify the importance of school leaders. They can bring together governors, chiefs, key legislators, and stakeholders to press for sustained investment. First, boards should act to inventory and examine their state's current school leadership policies and then develop a strategic plan for revising old or developing new policies to reflect evidence-based best practices. Second, boards can lead a full-throated advocacy for full funding of Title II, as well as from other sources, to address school leadership capacity, with a focus on ensuring an equitable distribution of effective, diverse leaders. Finally, boards should empower district and school leaders to build peer-led networks to spearhead innovation, and they should ensure districts have standards-aligned resources, materials, and tools.

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NOTES

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31 Arizona, Colorado, Washington, D.C., Delaware, Louisiana, Maine, Massachusetts, Michigan, Nevada, North Dakota, Oregon, Tennessee.

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