

National Association of State Boards of Education

Preparing Principals to Lead Innovative High Schools

By Barbara Condliffe, Celina Pierrottet, and Rebecca Unterman

Many states have championed innovative high schools, which offer flexible, student-centered pathways toward college, career, and civic success. But the gap between what these high schools demand and what principals are prepared to do can undermine even the best-designed models. By better aligning principal preparation, licensure, and support systems with these demands, state boards of education can unlock the potential of innovative high school models.

Innovative high schools take many forms: early-college programs, small theme-based high schools, career academies, and P-TECH schools that integrate high school and college coursework and work-based learning. These models can improve outcomes, including graduation rates and postsecondary enrollment.¹

The schools often feature redesigned student schedules, facilities, staffing, instruction, and community partnerships. Such transformations raise the bar for school leaders. New York City, for example, closed many large, low-performing high schools in the early 2000s and replaced them with smaller, theme-based schools to create more personalized learning environments with ties to a community partner. The city also invested in new-principal development and gave principals more autonomy.² The schools meaningfully improved student outcomes, including graduation rates and postsecondary persistence.³ Effective leadership contributed strongly to the schools' nearly 10 percentage-point increase in graduation rates.⁴

While innovative high school models have proliferated, access to the high-quality pro-

fessional learning and support that principals need to lead those schools has not consistently kept up and varies across states.⁵

WHAT EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP LOOKS LIKE

Four school leadership strategies stand out as essential for starting and sustaining innovative schools: establishing an instructional vision, building relationships, distributing leadership, and aligning partnerships and resources to the vision. We derived these from school leadership frameworks,⁶ research on comprehensive high school reform,⁷ and insights gathered from current and former principals at a spring 2026 NASBE meeting of the High School Transformation State Network and Principal Collaborative.

A Rigorous, Coherent Instructional Vision.

With students, teachers, and families, effective principals co-design clear instructional visions that align with college and career readiness standards and their school's innovation model. This vision provides an anchor for those navigating the transition to an innovative model and a platform for communicating expectations. Alex Shub, a former principal and current president and CEO of the School Empowerment Network, highlighted what he looks for in a leader of an innovative school: "Can [principal candidates] articulate the vision of the school to the adults and the kids so that everybody knows what they're supposed to be doing every day and how to do it?"

High expectations and academic rigor are essential elements of effective high schools. In New York City's Small Schools, academic rigor was associated with higher graduation rates for disadvantaged students.⁸ Principals support rigor through "instructionally focused interactions" with teachers, including classroom observation and coaching.⁹

The vision lends coherence amid multiple priorities. P-TECH principals, for example, must ensure that students can handle college-level coursework while also connecting to career pathways and work-based learning. "In my school, the classroom includes learning that occurs in high school, college, and industry settings," said Rashid Davis, founding principal of New York City's P-TECH model. Without clear leadership, programming and partners can fragment. Principals must help teachers and partners understand how their work connects to the school's goals.

Relationships. Strong, trusting relationships—between students and adults, among adults, and among students—are also essential. Principals establish the structures and expectations that make these relationships possible. In particular, strong student-teacher relationships are associated with more student engagement and better outcomes, particularly in high school.¹⁰ Advisory programs or small learning communities keep students connected to the same adults over time. Principals support them by protecting time in the schedule and providing guidance to staff, many of whom may have never been advisors or mentors.

Distributed Leadership. Innovative high schools require teachers and other staff to take on leadership roles. Effective principals can give teachers real influence over instruction, grade-level teams, and partnerships, while also providing training and support. They dedicate time to team meetings, set protocols, and clarify where teams have autonomy. In New York's small schools, teacher empowerment and mutual support were associated with positive student outcomes.

Distributed leadership can also help build a pipeline of future leaders. Shub recounts that before becoming a principal himself, he "had experience working in a model where I could try out the things that I was then going to include in the school that I opened. I was intimately familiar with the pitfalls and dangers that would derail my school. I was

ready to steer us away from them.”

Partnerships. Innovative high schools often partner with external organizations. Principals must identify partners that align with the school’s vision and manage these relationships to create coherent student experiences. For example, P-TECH principals or their designees coordinate across higher education and work-based learning partners. Because partnerships evolve, leaders must monitor quality and adjust as needed. Leaders of successful partnerships note that principals often need training and support to lead effective ones.¹¹

STATE POLICY LEVERS

State leaders can support innovative high school principals by aligning leadership preparation, practice, and support to the schools’ needs.¹²

Preparation and Licensure. States can ensure preparation programs address essential elements of high-quality principal preparation, including instructional leadership, people and resource management, and change management, alongside internships in relevant settings.¹³ State boards can review programs and licensing standards to ensure alignment with best practices. North Carolina’s Principal Fellows Program provides candidates financial support, cohort-based training, coaching, and a full-time internship leading to a master’s degree in school administration. In return, participants commit to serving as school leaders in the state.

Professional Development and Support.

Once principals are in the role, they need mentoring, coaching, and leadership development. States can require or encourage these supports early in principals’ careers. Pennsylvania, for example, requires principals and assistant principals to participate in its cohort-based Principal Inspired Leadership program during their first five years as new administrators. Combining coursework and on-the-job learning, the program increased student math achievement by increasing teacher effectiveness.¹⁴

Principals value peer-to-peer learning, which can be especially important in innovative schools, whose challenges traditional pro-

fessional development may not address.¹⁵ “Leading is lonely, but innovating specifically is lonelier,” Davis said. State support for mentoring cohorts of principals can help.

Regulatory Flexibility. Even well-prepared leaders struggle when regulations—such as those around staffing ratios, scheduling requirements, seat time, and course sequencing—constrain their ability to innovate. State agencies or boards can sometimes grant waivers for innovative schools allowing for more flexibility. Colorado lets schools submit innovation plans identifying state statutes, district policies, and/or collective bargaining provisions they seek to waive. The district submits these plans to the state. In exchange, schools remain accountable to state assessment and accountability systems.

QUESTIONS FOR STATE BOARDS

Several questions can guide state boards as they consider how to support innovative high school leadership:

- Do principal preparation and licensure standards reflect leadership practices needed in innovative high schools?
- Do aspiring principals have opportunities to learn and practice leadership in innovative schools?
- What professional learning and support systems exist for principals? How can states strengthen peer networks and coaching?
- Which policies constrain innovation? Where can flexibility be introduced while maintaining accountability?

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NOTES

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11 Susan Sepanik and Kevin Thaddeus Brown Jr., “School-Community Partnerships: Solutions for Educational Equity through Social and Emotional Well-Being,” *brief* (New York: MDRC, November 2021); Susan Sepanik and Kevin Thaddeus Brown Jr., “School-Community Partnerships: Voices from the Field,” *brief* (MDRC, December 2021).

12 At least 26 states have established statewide leadership development initiatives—such as leadership academies or institutes. Fitz et al., “State Approaches.”

13 Darling-Hammond et al., “Developing Effective Principals,” *report*.

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15 Jason A. Grissom et al., “Understanding the Landscape of Professional Learning for School Principals,” *report* (Vanderbilt University, 2026).