

Professional Learning for School Leaders Literature Review

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INTRODUCTION

Literature on Professional Learning for Principals

The resources described in this paper emphasize continuous learning for on-the-job administrators, both school-site administrators and those who support them at the district level. Current research and examination of practice show that, just like the teachers they supervise, principals benefit from ongoing professional learning (PL) to maintain and improve their effectiveness. This PL can take many forms, such as leadership courses, opportunities to work with coaches and mentors, professional networking, and independent study and reflection. The key is that principals are afforded time and opportunities to pursue their own professional growth, while also leading and nurturing teachers under their supervision and managing their school's operations.

By first looking at the characteristics and qualities of effective leaders, this paper sets out goals for principal professional learning, and informs the content and strategies that compose effective PL. Next, it presents research reviews specific to PL beyond new principal induction programs, highlighting types of opportunities that are beneficial to more experienced school administrators.

California's Foundation for Supporting Principals

In 2011, the California Department of Education (CDE) and the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing (CTC) co-sponsored a statewide Educator Excellence Task Force charged with reviewing the entire system of teacher and administrator recruitment, preparation and licensure, induction, professional learning, evaluation, and leadership and career development. A year later, this initiative resulted in more than 70 recommendations captured in the [summary](#) and in the report, [Greatness by Design: Supporting Outstanding Teaching to Sustain a Golden State](#) (GbD, 2012). For the past seven years, leaders and staff from both state agencies, along with educators, policymakers, advocacy representatives, and other stakeholders, have collaborated on enacting many of the improvements outlined in both of these sets of recommendations.

Multiple panels were convened to update and revitalize the administrator preparation and professional learning process. As a result, the Commission adopted the [California Professional Standards for Education Leaders](#) (CPSEL, 2014), as well as the aligned California Administrator Performance Expectations (CAPE, 2016) and the California Administrator Content Expectations (CACE, 2016).

The CPSEL identify what an administrator must know and be able to do in order to demonstrate effective and sustained leadership. In updating the state's administrator preparation system, recommendations from the advisory panels included an urgent call to revise the CPSEL, which were first developed in 2000. In 2014, a panel of representatives from higher education, county offices of education, districts, and professional organizations, facilitated by the California Comprehensive Center at WestEd (CA CC) and CTC, reviewed current research, shared administrator preparation and support practices and experience, and reached consensus on a refreshed version of the CPSEL.

The result of these efforts was a set of expectations for administrators that are relevant and useful and reflect an updated perspective on teaching and learning, current priorities for schooling, and the needs and assets of California’s widely diverse students. The six broad standards, along with specific elements within each of them and the example indicators of practice, describe the major areas for development and support of administrators if they are to evolve as effective education leaders over the course of their careers. The Commission approved the updated CPSEL in February 2014 and revised statute to require their use.

Following the CPSEL update, a second panel was convened to advise on refreshing [Moving Leadership Standards Into Everyday Work: Descriptions of Practice](#) (DOP, 2015), a set of developmental continua that illustrate leadership behaviors outlined in the CPSEL, from beginning practice to accomplished practice, over the course of an administrator’s career. The *Descriptions of Practice* are a recommended resource used by leadership coaches and induction candidates for self-assessment activities, coaching sessions, and end-of-program reporting. The DOP were distributed by CTC to administrative services credential programs throughout California.

Taken together, these Standards and Descriptions of Practice provide a roadmap to effective preparation and lifelong learning for school and district administrators, which can inform continuous learning practices as administrators refine their skills and increase their effectiveness.

Another important outcome of the GbD recommendations was the [California Quality Professional Learning Standards](#) (QPLS, 2015). Similarly to the CPSEL refresh process, in 2014, a panel of representatives from county offices of education, districts, and professional organizations, facilitated by the CA CC and CDE, reviewed current research and existing standards, shared professional learning practices and experience, and reached consensus on the QPLS.

The QPLS lay the foundation for creating a coherent set of professional learning policies and activities that span the career continuum of an educator, leading to improved educator knowledge, skills, and dispositions and, ultimately, increased student learning results. The standards describe the criteria for quality PL and point educators and stakeholders toward using evidence-based elements and indicators when making decisions about how to create and/or improve professional learning in their own systems.

To further the implementation of practices that reflect effective leadership described in California’s standards, the legislature recently approved the 21st Century CSLA initiative to provide professional learning for principals, along with other site and district leaders and coaches. The following annotated literature review from 2010–2019 reflects current thinking and evidence-based practices related to the professional learning school and district leaders outlined in legislation.

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING FOR SCHOOL LEADERS – LITERATURE REVIEW

Effective School Leaders

The Effective Principal – 5 Pivotal Practices That Shape Instructional Leadership

Pamela Mendels

The Wallace Foundation

JSD (Feb. 2012). Vol. 33, No 1, pp. 54–58

Retrieved from: <https://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/Documents/The-Effective-Principal.pdf>

What makes an effective principal? A decade of Wallace Foundation–supported research and work in school districts and states suggests that five practices are key to helping principals improve teaching and learning in their schools:

1. **Shaping a vision** of academic success for all students, based on high standards;
2. **Creating a climate hospitable to education**, in which students feel supported and responded to in a safe and orderly environment;
3. **Cultivating leadership in others**, making good use of all the skills and knowledge of the faculty and others, so all can assume their part in realizing the school’s vision;
4. **Improving instruction**, making close observations of what is working and what is not and providing feedback to enable teachers to teach at their best and students to learn at their utmost; and
5. **Managing people, data, and processes**, by planning, implementing, supporting, advocating, communicating, and monitoring, in order to foster school improvement.

Research on Effective Practices for School Turnaround

Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (MDESE)

Retrieved from: <http://www.doe.mass.edu/turnaround/howitworks/turnaround-practices-508.pdf>

The Turnaround Practices section of this report summarizes four key research-based practices identified as characteristic of schools that have experienced rapid improvements in student outcomes, and provides detailed examples of what each turnaround practice typically looks like moving from year 1 to year 3, for both achievement gain and non-gain schools.

Highlighting the role of the principal in establishing each of these practices and detailing the skills and knowledge a principal requires in a struggling school informs the type and content of professional learning experiences that can get them there.

Recommended, **successful leadership practices** include:

- **Deliberate, distributed leadership** focused on student achievement
- **A community of practice** with shared responsibility and accountability
- **Active monitoring of student achievement**, student assessments, instruction, and effectiveness of tiered responses to student needs throughout the school
- Frequent and ongoing **visits to classrooms** that provide positive and useful feedback to teachers, as perceived by teachers
- **Ongoing modeling** of and support for a **safe, orderly, and engaging environment** for teachers and students

Leadership Qualities of Effective Principals – Research Brief (2015)

Basha Krasnoff

Northwest Comprehensive Center at Education Northwest

Retrieved from: <https://nwcc.educationnorthwest.org/sites/default/files/research-brief-leadership-qualities-effective-principals.pdf>

Research and practice confirm there is little chance of creating and sustaining a high-quality learning environment without a skilled and committed instructional leader to shape teaching and learning. Research has clearly shown that the principal is a key ingredient in the performance of a school, especially if that school enrolls a large number of low-performing and/or poor and minority students. Unfortunately, challenging schools are more likely to be led by less experienced and less effective principals. And, while effective principals tend to remain at challenging schools longer than ineffective principals, most effective principals ultimately transfer to less challenging schools within the district — not because of the students, but because of the working conditions. This research review describes what is known about the impact of effective principals as well as highlights the following **effective principal and leadership qualities**:

- Setting high expectations
- Creating an optimal learning environment
- Cultivating leadership in the school community
- Improving instruction
- Managing people, data, and processes

Professional Learning for School Leaders

For Principals, Continuous Learning Critical to Career Success

Arianna Prothero

Education Week, 1/21/15, Vol. 34, Issue 18, Pages s10, s11

Retrieved from: <https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2015/01/21/for-principals-continuous-learning-critical-to-career.html>

This *EdWeek* article summarizes research on the importance of professional development (PD) for principals, concluding that:

- Robust and ongoing **training for principals can help alleviate isolation and help keep them from leaving their jobs.**
- **PD for principals is often bypassed for other pressing needs**, such as teacher PD, and is often of questionable quality.
- A 2014 report from the School Leaders Network cites that half of new principals quit by the end of their third year on the job. The report argues that administrators put too much emphasis on recruiting and preparing principals and **tend to neglect the principals' professional learning once on the job**, especially after the first two years.
- A 2013 NCES study showed that principals who did not get professional development the previous year were 1.4 times more likely to leave their school than leaders who did receive training.
- **Mentoring programs**, where experienced principals are paired with those just beginning their careers, **can also benefit the veteran principals**, by forcing them to think about what works, what does not, and why they are successful.

Supporting Principals' Learning: Key Features of Effective Programs

Leib Sutcher, Anne Podolsky, and Danny Espinoza

Learning Policy Institute (Feb. 2017)

Retrieved from: https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/product-files/Supporting_Principals_Learning_REPORT.pdf

The most effective principals assume a range of responsibilities, including setting direction, developing people, redesigning the organization, and leading instruction. There is a great deal for school leaders to learn in order to manage all of these responsibilities productively. Effective preparation and professional development programs enable principals to improve student and school outcomes. Research points to several **key building blocks of high-quality programs** for new principals and ongoing professional learning for experienced principals.

Applied Learning

- **Problem-based learning opportunities**, using context-specific problems to connect coursework and practice to enrich candidates' skill development.
- **Field-based internships and coaching by an expert**, implementing on-the-job coaching by strong and supportive leaders.

Cohorts & Networks for Collegial Learning

- **Cohorts of principal candidates**, with learning and courses to be carried out in collaboration amongst a small group of peers.
- **Networks of practicing principals** with professional learning communities where school leaders learn together on the job.

Partnerships Between Districts and Programs

- Provide a coherent experience in clinical training and coursework to **bridge theory into practice**.

Focus on Instruction, Organizations, & Using Data for Change

- Strong focus on **improving schoolwide instruction**.
- Attention to creating **collegial organizations** where administrators, teachers, staff, and students engage in continual learning and improvement.
- **Using data and collective inquiry** to identify problems and address needs, in collaboration with staff, parents, and community organizations.

Principal Professional Development: New Opportunities for a Renewed State Focus

Cortney Rowland

Education Policy Center (Feb. 2017)

Retrieved from: <https://www.air.org/sites/default/files/downloads/report/Principal-Professional-Development-New-Opportunities-State-Focus-February-2017.pdf>

This brief describes:

- The **need for more and better principal professional development** to improve principal effectiveness, decrease principal turnover, and more equitably distribute successful principals across all schools.
- The research on the importance of principals and **how professional development can improve principals' effectiveness**.
- Options and examples for leveraging current policies to revisit and refocus efforts concerning principal professional development, describing **what effective principal PL should look like**, including:
 - the use of **instructional rounds**,
 - the importance of building **networks and learning communities**,
 - working with **coaches and mentors**, and
 - using **in-person and virtual** training.
- Research suggests that a core **set of principal leadership practices** can influence teaching and learning in schools, including:
 - human capital management
 - agenda setting
 - coaching
 - instructional leadership

Research also indicates that few principals actually engage in these practices in their day-to-day work; rather, principals tend to spend the bulk of their time on administrative activities (e.g., student discipline and

compliance requirements), budgets and staff, and internal and external relations, such as fundraising and working with staff and students.

The Three Essentials: Improving Schools Requires District Vision, District and State Support, and Principal Leadership

Southern Regional Education Board (SREB)

August, 2010

Retrieved from: https://www.sreb.org/sites/main/files/file-attachments/10v16_three_essentials.pdf

This research is part of a comprehensive effort to pinpoint the key leadership factors that improve student achievement and increase the number of high school graduates who are ready for college and careers. In this study, SREB examined the role of the district office in providing principals with the working conditions they need in order to improve teacher effectiveness and student performance in middle and high school.

Most relevant to this review is Strategy 4: Invest heavily in instruction-related professional learning for principals, teacher-leaders, and district staff.

Strategies of Highly Supportive Districts

- Provide a balanced set of professional learning experiences at the district and school levels **aligned with the district and school strategic plans**, making it a priority to develop the capacity of principals, teachers, and support staff to create rich and engaging experiences for students.
- Create **active professional learning communities** in which key district and school leaders have common learning experiences.
- Provide induction programs and **mentoring** for new principals and teachers.
- **Provide time** for professional development.
- **Help school leaders develop a school culture** based on the belief that students can succeed at high levels when they have a sense of belonging and support, can relate their learning activities to their goals, and are supported to make greater efforts to succeed.
- **Have a professional learning plan** that continuously increases the capacity of district staff to support principals and schools.

Research has identified **key characteristics of an effective professional learning system** for schools and principals. Below are the strategies most pertinent to principal professional learning:

- **Provide high-quality mentoring** for principals throughout their first two years as school leaders and provide struggling principals with mentoring as needed.
- **Give principals control over their professional learning budgets**, but require that they link their professional learning plans to their school improvement plans, with a focus on implementing proven practices that engage and motivate students.
- **Obtain feedback from participants** and use walkthroughs and student achievement data to analyze the effectiveness of professional learning.
- **Organize learning for principals in study groups** involving the principal and a team of teacher leaders, rather than in isolation.
- **Provide professional development to address problems critical to high schools** — low student motivation, low student engagement, low levels of student preparedness for college and advanced

training, low reading achievement, etc. — by identifying root causes and formulating and implementing actions to address these problems.

- Provide professional development to assist principals and teachers in **using authentic problems and projects** as a way to engage and motivate students to master essential academic knowledge and skills.

Still in the Game: How Coaching Keeps Leaders in Schools and Making Progress

NYC Leadership Academy POLICY BRIEF (2018)

Retrieved from: <https://www.nycleadershipacademy.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Still-in-the-Game-policy-brief.pdf>

This policy brief describes a recent study of the impact coaching has had on New York City principals who have been working with a leadership coach for at least five years. The NYC Leadership Academy found that these principals:

- Remained in their schools more than twice as long as the national average of a principal tenure in a school. In New York City, four out of ten new principals leave their first school within five years; in this study, all of the principals stayed in their first school for more than five years.
- Improved their ability to supervise staff, distribute leadership, communicate, and lead with resilience.
- Avoided complacency. After their schools made some initial progress, the principals in this study did not just coast. They worked with their coach to continue to make improvements at their schools.
- Benefited from coaching thanks to the trusting relationships they were able to develop over time with their coach.

Recommendations

1. Make coaching a part of new principal induction.
2. Offer coaching beyond the first two years of principalship.
3. Budget coaching into per-pupil expenditures.
4. Take advantage of the flexibility offered by the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).
5. Provide principals with an ongoing, non-evaluative thought partner.
6. Re-envision the principal supervisor role as supportive, not just evaluative.
7. Consider cost-effective ways to supplement and enhance one-on-one coaching.
8. Develop coaching skills and monitor progress to ensure success.

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

Ikemoto, G., Taliaferro, L., Fenton, B., & Davis, J. (2014)

Retrieved from: <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED556346>

This report describes the **set of conditions that effective school systems need to implement to enable principals to be successful**. Effective systems include the following Strands:

1. Alignment among goals, strategies, structures, and resources, focused on student achievement;
2. Culture of collective responsibility, balanced autonomy, and continuous learning and improvement;
3. Effective management and support for principals with ongoing opportunities for development and feedback — and most notably, roles and responsibilities that are feasible; and
4. Systems and policies for principals to effectively manage talent at the school level.

Strand 3 emphasizes that principals can be more effective when districts implement holistic performance management systems that systematically develop, support, motivate, and retain quality leadership talent. Principals need to be managed in ways that **facilitate ongoing learning and improve their practice over time**. Effective systems provide principals with ongoing 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.

Effective school systems provide professional learning models that are grounded in the belief that **leadership skills can be developed and expanded through ongoing, job-embedded opportunities for authentic practice, feedback, and follow-up**. Well-planned PL for principals creates direct connections between the district, the school, and the leader's goals. It focuses on **building skills for adult leadership**, developing and maintaining effective school cultures, improving instructional practices, implementing **strategic plans**, and **supporting change management**. Additionally, it provides opportunities and space for leaders to **receive detailed feedback on their practice from peers and their managers** — reinforcing a culture of continuous learning and improvement districtwide.

Principal Support Framework Action Area Resources and Tools

Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Center for Educational Leadership (2019)

Retrieved from: <https://www.k-12leadership.org/bill-melinda-gates-foundation-leading-effective-teaching>

This collection of conceptual and practical resources and tools is intended to help districts as they use the [Principal Support Framework \(PSF\)](#) and the [PSF District Self-Assessment and Planning Template](#) to implement new systems and practices that support principals as instructional leaders. The Principal Support Framework describes key actions of central offices that effectively support principals as instructional leaders. Based upon a broad understanding of how principals work to improve teaching and learning at scale, this framework provides guidance so that central office leaders can do the following:

- **Develop a vision of what it means to support principals.**
- **Assess and determine strengths and next steps in their school system's approach to supporting principals as instructional leaders.**
- **Surface technical assistance needs.**
- **Highlight areas for inquiry and next-stage policy development.**