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# GREAT PRINCIPALS AT SCALE:

CREATING DISTRICT CONDITIONS THAT  
ENABLE ALL PRINCIPALS TO BE EFFECTIVE

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## WHO WE ARE

### NEW LEADERS

New Leaders is a national nonprofit that develops transformational school leaders and designs effective leadership policies and practices for school systems across the country. Since 2001, New Leaders has trained over 1,000 school leaders, impacting more than 300,000 students in 12 urban areas across the country. New Leaders has developed expertise in evaluating principal preparation programs and has conducted its own robust longitudinal study of its program quality and the impact of its graduates on student outcomes. Additionally, in partnership with RAND, New Leaders is studying the conditions and context that enable transformational leaders to succeed and have the greatest impact on student achievement. The New Leaders' policy and evaluation team captures and spreads knowledge to improve the context in which school leaders operate.

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The George W. Bush Presidential Center is home to the George W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum and the George W. Bush Institute. President and Mrs. Bush founded the Bush Institute to continue their policy work expanding freedom at home and around the globe.

Rooted in President and Mrs. Bush's belief that "excellent schools must first have excellent leaders," the Bush Institute developed the Alliance to Reform Education Leadership (AREL) to dramatically improve the way our Nation's principals are prepared and supported. AREL is the Bush Institute's flagship program which signifies that school leaders are critical in the lives of our children. Because every child deserves an excellent principal, AREL shapes its ideas and actions around its mission of ensuring there is an effective principal, able to significantly advance student achievement, at the helm of every school.

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## INTRODUCTION

**Principals matter.** Research demonstrating the importance of principals for student learning has grown substantially over the last decade.<sup>1</sup> On average, a principal accounts for 25 percent of a school’s total impact on student achievement—significant for a single individual.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the difference between having an average and an above-average principal can impact school-level student achievement by as much as 20 percentage points.<sup>3</sup> Principals can have a stronger effect on all students in a school than teachers do because teachers affect only their particular students.<sup>4</sup> Researchers have also documented the actions and practices that differentiate the most effective principals, in particular, the way that they

develop great teachers and create school culture and working conditions that keep great teachers in the field.<sup>5</sup> The ambitious education reform initiatives our nation has undertaken over the past few years heighten the imperative for leaders who can successfully lead this work. Simply put, to turn around low-performing schools, ensure effective teaching in every classroom, and educate all children to college and career-ready standards, we need to ensure that there is an effective principal in every school.<sup>6</sup>

The difference between having an average and an above-average school principal can impact student achievement by as much as 20 percentage points.

**A superhero strategy is not scalable.** Truly exceptional and often heroic leaders can and do succeed in even the most challenging circumstances found in some districts.<sup>7</sup> These “superhero principals”—preternaturally driven leaders who buck bureaucracies, work around the clock, and circumvent endless barriers to create oases of high performance even if they are in the midst of dysfunctional systems—have become something of a motif in our national education narrative. However, while these leaders deserve tremendous praise, their prominence is actually a reflection of systemic failure rather than success. There are simply not enough superheroes for all the schools and students who need them. Yet, the “superhero

principal” narrative has encouraged some districts and policymakers to pin their hopes on such leaders, churning through principals while wondering why they cannot find enough people capable of delivering superhuman results in untenable contexts. Given the superhero jobs these leaders have to do, they often burn out quickly and leave the very schools and districts that need their long-term commitment and sustained work.<sup>8</sup>

There are simply not enough superheroes for all the schools and students who need them.

**Current conditions often hinder principal success.** Over the past 13 years of developing and supporting school leaders, the New Leaders team has seen firsthand the impact that system conditions can have on leader success. Excellent school systems help propel strong leaders to greater levels of success and student achievement—and enable this effectiveness across their districts.

Sometimes, however, districts undermine leaders’ efforts. Currently, too many school systems require principals to perform a multitude of tasks misaligned with the core school-based practices and actions that differentiate the most effective principals. In interviews, principals spoke of having to navigate complex bureaucratic approval processes for basic services like schoolwide Internet access, attend district-mandated meetings on topics tangential to their core jobs, make repeated

inquiries to human resource departments to ensure new teachers are added to the payroll, and track down procurement departments to get paper and light bulbs replenished. Such tasks distract principals from the core work that has a greater connection to student achievement. As a result, principals are often unable to focus on the leadership activities that matter, such as coaching teachers, evaluating student data, and creating a culture and climate of success within their buildings.

In addition, some school systems have practices and cultural norms that inadvertently hinder school leader success. Rather than working as a team to achieve shared goals for students, mistrust divides central office staff and school-level leaders.<sup>9</sup> In such circumstances, central office staff sees their roles as monitoring compliance rather than supporting school-level leaders.<sup>10</sup> Instead of providing tools and support, central office systems become obstacles that make it more difficult for principals to accomplish their goals.<sup>11</sup> Even in the many districts with positive school-central office relationships, these interactions are sometimes characterized by bureaucratic formality.

Creating the conditions for school leader success requires both more effective district systems to support effective leadership practice and a radically different district culture in which district staff and school leaders support one another, hold themselves and one another accountable, and work together as partners to reach shared student achievement goals. There must be a shift away from a compliance-based “gotcha” culture to a developmental culture where school leaders are encouraged to take risks and are supported in their efforts

to achieve shared district and school-level goals of student achievement progress. While these are the kinds of cultures on which high-performance results are built, they are not yet the norm in many school systems.

**Many school systems need to update their practices.** Ensuring that all of our children succeed necessitates having strong school leadership in every school,<sup>12</sup> which in turn means that we need to stop holding out for—or burning through—superheroes. Instead, we need to start providing the tools and support that enable good principals to replicate the results that only a few superheroes currently produce. Effective districts and charter management organizations provide conditions that enable good leaders—not heroes—to produce exceptional results because school systems provide the right circumstances to support their success.

Although researchers have documented that well-trained principals are more effective when they are provided with the working conditions necessary for success,<sup>13</sup> the literature on this topic is inconsistent in the descriptions of the dimensions of principals’ working conditions that impact their ability to improve student achievement. Most studies and frameworks have focused on a few specific conditions that matter, but have not identified and prioritized a comprehensive set of conditions that could enable good principals to succeed. In the absence of a clear, consistent voice as to which particular working conditions really do matter or how to integrate these critical conditions, states and districts are unable to take the important next steps of designing and executing strategies, policies, and practices that create the conditions necessary for good leaders to succeed.

Ensuring that all of our children succeed necessitates having strong school leadership in every school, which in turn means that we need to stop holding out for—or burning through—superheroes.

1 Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson (2010); Branch, Hanushek, & Rivkin (2012); The Wallace Foundation (2012).

2 Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom (2004); Louis et al. (2010).

3 Marzano, Waters, & McNulty (2005).

4 Branch, et al. (2012).

5 New Leaders (2012).

6 Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton (2010); Louis et al. (2010).

7 New Leaders, 2009. [School case study]. Unpublished raw data.

8 Bêteille, Kalogrides, & Loeb (2011); Horng, Kalogrides, & Loeb, (2009); Loeb, Kalogrides, & Horng (2010).

9 Daly, Der-Martirosian, Ong-Dean, Park, & Wishard-Guerra (2011).

10 Honig (2012).

11 Honig (2012).

12 Quality of leadership is particularly important in low-performing schools where school improvement does not occur without strong leadership (Bryk et al., 2010; Louis et al., 2010; Aladjem et al., 2010).

13 Augustine et al. (2009); Southern Regional Education Board (2009).

New Leaders and the Bush Institute's Alliance to Reform Education Leadership (AREL) launched the Conditions for Effective Leadership Project and partnered with leading researchers and practitioners to generate a comprehensive and research-based framework outlining the conditions necessary for transformational school leaders to succeed. The project used a combination of literature review, empirical data collection, and expert convenings to build consensus and bundle the disparate ideas into a single framework that is accessible to school system leaders. In addition to this framework, the project also created the *Great Principals at Scale Toolkit*. This is a set of tools aimed at helping school system leaders access and improve their leadership conditions to scale the number of effective principals able to impact student achievement.

In the framework presented in this report, school system conditions that enable principals to be successful are arranged into four key strands:

- *Alignment among goals, strategies, structures, and resources*  
so that the work of every staff member in the district is supporting system-wide goals focused on increasing student achievement;
- *Culture of collective responsibility, balanced autonomy, and continuous learning and improvement*  
that allows central office and school leaders to work collaboratively towards goals;
- *Effective management and support for principals*  
with on-going opportunities for development and feedback—and most notably, roles and responsibilities that are doable; and
- *Systems and policies to effectively manage talent at the school-level*  
giving principals the authority and support to appropriately staff teaching and leadership roles in ways that meet school needs.

Unfortunately, our expert advisors agree that these conditions typically do not exist in most school systems (including school districts and charter management organizations). Furthermore, creating them will not simply be a matter of new policies and programs—it will require a sea change in how most school systems operate. Moreover, the changes will require a well-functioning governance system—be that a school board or mayor—that prioritizes students' learning and needs, and has the stability to sustain commitment to a plan over time.

These conditions are in no way substitutes for the essential training and competencies that all leaders should have when they become principals—rather they are the conditions that enable a well-prepared principal to fully utilize key skills and competencies to improve children's learning.

This final report is a synthesis of input from research, experts, and stakeholders. The following section provides an overview of the four strands. The overview is followed by in-depth descriptions of the conditions within each strand, including explanations for why these conditions matter. We discuss the ways in which current practice in many school systems diverges from these conditions, and offer examples of school systems that have been successful in implementing the conditions effectively. Specific tools and recommendations are provided on how school systems can move toward more fully implementing the conditions for success.

## Conditions need to change because the principal's role has changed.

The changing economy, more rigorous standards, and increased accountability have placed new demands on our students, schools, and leaders. Enabling all of our students to meet these increased demands has led the field to redefine the principal's role. A growing body of research on school leadership—including more than 70 studies commissioned by The Wallace Foundation—has documented the critical role that principals play in leading improvements in teaching and learning.<sup>i</sup> Effective school systems allow school leaders to focus on the specific set of leadership activities that research shows are related to improved student achievement:<sup>ii</sup>

- **Developing a shared vision for high achievement and college and career readiness for all students:** Effective principals establish a school-wide vision for high student achievement and college and career readiness. They inspire all staff, students, and families to believe that all students can achieve at high levels academically and it is everyone's responsibility in the school to enact the vision.
- **Creating a culture that values all students and provides a supportive environment for learning and family engagement:** Effective principals create a supportive environment that sets high expectations for all students and adults. To support these expectations, principals implement a consistent code of conduct aligned with school values; maintain a supportive, safe, orderly, and respectful learning environment; and implement schoolwide routines to maximize instructional time and ensure seamless transitions. They develop students' and adults' understandings of different cultural backgrounds and a commitment to equity by publicly modeling beliefs in the potential of every student to achieve at high levels. They engage families and communities as partners to enhance student achievement and success.
- **Improving teaching and learning:** Effective principals ensure that the curricula and instruction are aligned to standards for college and career readiness. They track student-level data to drive continuous improvement by using multiple sources of quantitative and qualitative data to assess and monitor instruction. They build their staff's capacity to analyze and use data, modify their instruction based on the data, and to develop and implement standards-based lessons and unit plans that will prepare students for year-end goals.
- **Managing and developing talent:** Research shows that one critical way that principals impact student learning is by hiring, placing, developing, retaining, and managing talent to improve overall teacher effectiveness in the schools they lead. Effective principals recruit and select effective teachers; help teachers to improve their practice through observation, coaching, and other professional learning opportunities; dismiss underperforming teachers who do not improve with support; and retain effective teachers by providing them growth or leadership opportunities. A key component of this work is cultivating teachers' leadership capacity and developing highly effective leadership teams to whom principals can delegate and distribute instructional and other leadership roles to allow the principal to focus on the most critical tasks that only the principal can do.
- **Strategically planning, implementing, and monitoring systems and resources in support of the vision:** Effective principals set school-wide priorities and goals and allocate resources—including budget, staff, and time—to align those priorities. They set the clear strategies and implementation plans and processes to ensure that all other elements of their work (such as curriculum alignment, data use, talent management, school culture, school scheduling, and resource allocation) are aligned to and support the vision. They create the management and system processes to help them oversee and lead the execution of the strategy and continually check in on the process. They relentlessly pursue opportunities to access additional resources that align to strategic priorities.

Implementing these activities is not an easy job. It is an incredibly challenging one that requires new skills (such as strong knowledge of instruction and ability to coach and lead adults) as well as substantial preparation and commitment. But it is one that a non-superhero can do, with the right preparation and support, and under the right conditions.

i See The Wallace Foundation (2013) for a summary. See <http://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/school-leadership> for links to individual studies.

ii New Leaders, (2011); The Wallace Foundation, 2013; Young & Mawhinney, Eds. (2012).

## Project Methodology: Identifying Essential Conditions for Effective Leadership

The project began with a thorough literature review of the conditions for effective leadership.<sup>iii</sup> We found that the existing research studies and frameworks tended to focus on one area of conditions—such as principal autonomy—and/or they tended to represent the views of one organization or group of researchers. There was a need for a clear, comprehensive summary of what conditions matter and how they matter. School system leaders also needed tools to assess and engage in the often complicated and challenging task of improving their conditions.

New Leaders and the Bush Institute convened a working group of experts—including researchers and practitioners listed at the beginning of this report—to identify, prioritize, and define conditions for effective school leaders. We provided the experts with a series of references to ground their work in evidence-based research, including an annotated review of literature on conditions, copies of seminal research studies on the topic, and a paper that New Leaders commissioned from the RAND Corporation.<sup>iv</sup>

The experts read the research review and, during two 2-day meetings in September and November 2012, engaged in a set of activities to identify, prioritize, and define the conditions based on the research and on their expert field experience. This group of experts then provided input on the draft of this paper. Expert researchers were asked to critique the framework with regard to its consistency with prior research. Expert practitioners were asked to contribute detailed examples that helped to clarify the conditions as well as critique the *Great Principals at Scale Toolkit* with regard to usefulness and usability. We also solicited input from a group of America Achieves Fellows consisting of 22 principals and 12 district leaders who are exemplary educators committed to improving national education policy. The fellows engaged in similar activities to prioritize and define the conditions that the expert group had identified in its first convening. Finally, several experts, including researchers, provided a final review to this paper.

iii New Leaders unpublished annotated bibliography; contact authors to obtain a copy.

iv Ikemoto, Gates, & Hamilton (2009).

## OVERVIEW: CONDITIONS FOR EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP

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:

- **Strand 1:** Alignment among goals, strategies, structures, and resources, so that the work of every staff member in the district is supporting system-wide goals focused on increasing student achievement;
- **Strand 2:** Culture of collective responsibility, balanced autonomy, and continuous learning and improvement;
- **Strand 3:** Effective management and support for principals with on-going opportunities for development and feedback—and most notably, roles and responsibilities that are feasible; and
- **Strand 4:** Systems and policies to effectively manage talent at the school-level, giving principals the authority to implement staffing models that meet school needs and to appropriately staff teaching and leadership positions.

Figure 1: The Effective Leadership Conditions Framework



### Strand 1: Alignment Among Goals, Strategies, Structures, and Resources

Principals can be more effective when their district has a strategic plan that identifies and aligns goals, strategies, structures, and resources. First, the strategic plan has set up ambitious goals for all students that create a sense of urgency for realizing high levels of student achievement necessary for success in college and in their careers. The strategic plan identifies the few focused strategies that each school and district department will use and sustain to achieve these goals. The plan

also specifies the organizational structures, staffing models, and budget plans that are aligned to the goals and strategies. Finally, the plan identifies a system for monitoring progress that informs improvement. The whole is greater than the sum of its parts: Alignment among elements of the strategic plan enables principals to actualize the plan at the school-level.

The whole is greater than the sum of its parts: Alignment among elements of the strategic plan enables principals to actualize the plan at the school-level.

### Strand 2: Culture of Collective Responsibility, Balanced Autonomy, and Continuous Learning and Improvement

Principals can be more effective when there is a district-wide culture of joint responsibility for achieving shared student outcome goals. In effective districts, central office staff works in the service of schools and are responsible for providing quality services and developing the capacities of school leaders to implement their improvement plans.<sup>14</sup> Expectations, norms, and formal accountability structures hold central office staff accountable for supporting schools in addressing the challenges that arise, including coordinating with other central office departments to marshal the support that schools need.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, schools and principals support district-wide priorities, goals, and initiatives, and demonstrate belief in the district vision. Responsibilities for successes and failures are co-owned. All players share a feeling of “we’re in this together, trying to achieve the same goals.”

In a culture of collective responsibility, there is balanced autonomy. School leaders are trusted by the central office with discretion to implement policies and initiatives in ways that meet student needs without compromising their intent and essential components—ensuring successful implementation. In the spirit of a partnership culture, school leaders are safe in telling central office staff—including their managers—when policies and initiatives need more support or are not working. When necessary to meet the needs of a particular school population, central office staff and school leaders collaborate to adapt policies or initiatives as needed to best serve students. In other cases, when similar feedback is received across multiple schools, the central office uses the feedback to improve the policy or initiative. The central office staff also determines

how the feedback will be utilized. As such, the district is a learning organization that actively seeks to understand the quality and impact of its reform initiatives, soliciting feedback to improve its approach.

Principals are more effective when central office staff and school leaders work together to differentiate district policies and improve them over time.

<sup>14</sup> Southern Regional Education Board (2010).  
<sup>15</sup> Honig, Copland, Rainey, Lorton, & Newton (2010).

### Strand 3: Effective Management and Support for Principals

Principals can be more effective when districts implement holistic performance management systems that systematically develop, support, motivate, and retain quality leadership talent. Effective performance management of principals is not simply a matter of creating new principal evaluation systems—although evaluations designed to support principal development are a critical component of a performance management system. Principals need to be managed in ways that facilitate on-going learning and improve their practice over time. Effective systems provide principals with on-going 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. As one principal from Denver, Colorado, reflected, “My [principal] manager helps me define what the real work is and then helps me improve at doing the work.”<sup>16</sup> Principal managers redefine the role of principals to make it more feasible and to retain principals in their role. This approach necessitates staffing principal manager positions with individuals who have the knowledge, skills, and caseloads that enable them to effectively hire, develop, and evaluate principals.

“My manager helps me define what the real work is and then helps me improve at doing the work,” a principal from Denver, Colorado.

### Strand 4: Systems and Policies to Effectively Manage Talent at the School-Level

Principals can be more effective when they have systems and policies in place to manage talent in the schools they lead. According to our expert researcher and practitioner work group, the most important, yet most commonly lacking condition for principal effectiveness is the authority of principals to create appropriate staffing models for their school, including the ability to hire, promote, and dismiss teachers, school leaders, and other school-based staff. Districts enable principal effectiveness when they eliminate barriers to principals’ authority and create systems and tools, such as effective human resource and teacher performance management systems, as well as effective evaluation systems that enable principals to effectively manage their teachers and school staff. Supportive districts provide teachers with access to high-quality professional learning opportunities that align to school and district goals and with teachers’ specific needs and areas for growth. They also redesign human resource departments to serve as strategic partners, working to identify and recruit talent and create a district-wide pipeline of effective teachers, teacher leaders, and other leadership personnel.

The following sections of the report review each of these strands of conditions in detail. Each section includes descriptions of how the conditions are relevant to leadership effectiveness, what effective districts do to support leaders, and what happens when they do not put these conditions in place. The appendices include a summary chart of the conditions and indicators. Additionally, accompanying this report is the *Great Principals at Scale Toolkit*, which includes a set of tools to support school systems in diagnosing and improving their leadership conditions.

According to our expert work group, the most important and most commonly lacking condition for principal effectiveness is the authority of principals to create appropriate staffing models for their school, including the ability to hire, promote, and dismiss teachers, school leaders, and other school-based staff.

<sup>16</sup> New Leaders, 2012. [Focus group with America Achieves Fellows]. Unpublished raw data.

## STRAND 1: ALIGNMENT AMONG GOALS, STRATEGIES, STRUCTURES, AND RESOURCES

Effective school leaders set the school vision. They set goals, identify strategies, and allocate resources—including budget, staff, and time—to align to priorities and build an understanding of these goals with their staff and community. This school-level improvement planning is more effective when it is embedded in and aligned to a high-quality strategic planning process at the school system (i.e., district or charter management organization) level.

### The whole is greater than the sum of its parts: Alignment among elements of the strategic plan enables principals to actualize the plan at the school-level.

A high-quality district strategic plan identifies clear and ambitious goals and strategies and resources that are aligned to the goals. The goals create a sense of urgency to attain the high levels of student achievement necessary for success in college and careers. This includes goals for narrowing the achievement gap between sub-groups of students and ensuring that students who were behind get caught up. The strategic plan also identifies the priority strategies that the district will use and sustain to achieve its goals. This includes specifying goals and strategies for each school and district department and linking those school and department-level goals to the broader organizational goals. The plan also specifies organizational structures, staffing models, and budget plans that are aligned to the goals and strategies. At the central office level, resources (including staffing) are targeted towards areas of strategic priority. At the school-level, resources are allocated equitably, providing greater resources to address student populations with greater need. Finally, the plan identifies a system for monitoring progress and informing improvement. The whole is greater than the sum of its parts: Alignment among elements of the strategic plan enables principals to actualize the plan at the school-level.

Historically, the impact of the district strategic plans has been limited due to a number of factors: A lack of continuity across school years, uneven implementation, and plans that attempt to address too many priorities simultaneously.<sup>17</sup> Strategic plans have been abandoned when school boards with different visions or philosophies are elected or when superintendents transition. Inadequate planning and poor implementation have prevented strategies, staffing, organizational models, and resources from supporting school improvements. The resulting efforts leave school leaders with the responsibility of navigating mandates and seemingly uncoordinated initiatives in order to be able to create their school-based plans and create coherence for their staff. These challenges unintentionally hinder school leaders' effectiveness by undermining the urgency for rigor and improvement, creating incoherence, and requiring the school to implement too many initiatives at the same time. Districts can alleviate this situation by engaging in high-quality improvement planning that includes and aligns all of the following:

- **Strategic Plan:** A strategic plan that identifies clear and ambitious goals as well as strategies for achieving those goals;
- **Organizational Structures:** Organizational structures and staffing aligned to the strategic plan;
- **Budget Alignment:** Organizational budget that is aligned to the strategic plan;
- **Systems and Resources for School Support:** Curricula and data that are aligned to the strategic plan and support its implementation; and
- **Goal Monitoring:** Systems for monitoring progress toward the goals and expectations that allow the system to make real-time adjustments to strategies as needed.

The power in improvement planning is in the alignment among all of these elements and in their consistent implementation of the elements.

<sup>17</sup> Ikemoto et al. (2009).

## Strategic Plan

District has a strategic plan that identifies clear and ambitious goals as well as strategies for achieving the goals. *Effective districts begin their strategic planning process by setting goals for improving overall student achievement and for ensuring that every subgroup is achieving at high levels.* A frequently referenced 2011 study funded by The Wallace Foundation found a statistically significant relationship between the existence of a district-wide shared vision, mission, and goals for students and student outcomes.<sup>18</sup> This finding is particularly striking because it is generally very difficult for researchers to find statistically significant relationships between district-level actions and student achievement. This same study found that all high-performing districts developed and effectively communicated a comprehensive vision and set of rigorous goals for student learning—the clarity of the vision and goals allowed principals and central office staff to implement an aligned strategic plan.

These goals should be developed with stakeholder involvement and input. They should be informed by the school data and perspectives and opinions of school leaders. Research has found that effective districts develop their improvement plans in very close partnership with their school leaders.<sup>19</sup> Some of the most successful districts “build up” their plans from their schools’ improvement plans. Close involvement of schools also helps to improve buy-in and implementation of the district plan.

Without a clear mandate from the district for improved performance that closes achievement gaps and prepares all students for college and career success, it becomes more difficult for principals to establish a culture of high expectations at the school-level. RAND conducted a series of case studies that documented the challenges faced by several New Leaders’ trained principals in building momentum for change when district goals did not support their vision of raising all students to proficiency.<sup>20</sup> In one school, for example, only 60 percent of students achieved grade-level proficiency, yet the school performed well relative to other more troubled schools in the district. As a result, the staff had become accustomed to viewing the school as a model of success for other schools to emulate rather than a school that had significant work to do to raise all its students to standards commensurate with college and career readiness. Perceptions—reinforced by the district—that this level of achievement was “good enough” hindered the principal’s ability to get the teachers and staff to buy-in and implement the meaningful changes needed for significant increases in student achievement.

Once goals are set, *district improvement plans should identify the critical few strategies that are collectively likely to have the highest impact.* In doing so, they establish clear priorities to guide resourcing and implementation decisions. For example, the District of Columbia Public Schools prioritized improving teacher talent across the district by implementing a robust teacher evaluation system. Because the goal was clear and the evaluation system was prioritized, the resources required to implement the system were protected despite multiple budget cuts. These tough choices about priorities stand in stark contrast to many district improvement plans that include a laundry list of initiatives that compete with each other for the time and attention required for successful implementation at the school and classroom-level. Principals in such districts may attempt to implement their districts’ improvement strategies, but they can become stretched so thin that they are not implementing anything well. For example, one New Leaders’ principal listed the numerous district-mandated programs aimed at students who were off track for graduation that were being concurrently implemented in his building, including a twilight program, night school, and an evening credit recovery program. However, the principal disclosed that most of these programs were poorly implemented and had limited efficacy: “The district has mandated them but has not provided the resources and funding to implement them effectively.”<sup>21</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Leithwood (2011).

<sup>19</sup> Leithwood (2013).

<sup>20</sup> Burkhauser, Gates, Hamilton, & Ikemoto (2012).

<sup>21</sup> New Leaders, 2010. [School case study]. Unpublished raw data.



*Effective improvement strategies are intentionally and thoughtfully communicated to maximize the likelihood of successful implementation.* Effective districts realize that initiatives are more likely to succeed if they are shared with stakeholders well in advance of roll out. Once plans for a new strategy are decided, they create an implementation timeline and communication plan that will enable and support high-quality roll-out. They invest time in creating district-wide readiness by including an information-sharing phase in their implementation timelines. They clearly articulate the rationale for new initiatives and indicate how they will work with or replace other initiatives in service of the district goals.

Too often, central offices operate in triage mode—looking for a solution only when crisis strikes. As a result, information is shared “just-in-time” and new initiatives are introduced at the last minute. This puts schools in the difficult position of trying to adapt to new initiatives while being expected to implement them as well. School leaders are further disadvantaged when shifts in strategies are made without clear communication that explains the goal and rationale for the shift. For example, districts sometimes adopt a new curriculum just days before the start of school or after the start of school when there is no time left to introduce or prepare teachers for the new body of work.<sup>22</sup> This problem is exacerbated when several initiatives are rolled out all at once.

Finally, strategic plans *ensure stability and consistency of focus over time*, even while allowing for adaptation of specific strategies in response to feedback and evidence of their efficacy. The district should stick to its long-term strategy—in spite of possible leadership changes—to provide schools with the time and focus to implement strategies effectively. In a RAND survey of principals, over half of the principals reported that “district policies and priorities change frequently” and their reports of this problem correlated with weaker student achievement results.<sup>23</sup>

Too often, radical swings in priorities occur when there is a change in district or school board leadership. Regardless of the cause, when priorities change, school leaders often do not have the time or opportunity to reconfigure resources, work, and structures to align to the new initiatives. The situation becomes even more frustrating when district leaders decide to change direction abruptly, abandoning initiatives to focus on new priorities just as educators become familiar with them. To prevent abrupt shifts in strategy and maintain greater continuity, district leaders will need to build deep commitment to the strategic plan within and beyond school board members. They need to build public awareness and garner support from other stakeholders, such as parents and guardians, community members, business members, and philanthropists.

## Organizational Structures

Organizational structures and staffing are aligned to the strategic plan. Just as important as establishing goals and strategies, *effective district improvement plans include an organizational structure aligned to the priorities in the plan.* Effective districts thoughtfully review the function of each department to ascertain if current teams and divisions are aligned to and support the strategic plan. When there is not alignment, effective districts shift personnel and reconfigure structures to match the new priorities. To make this happen, districts may need to build the skills and capacity of their current staff members or make changes if a new strategy or body of work requires a different skill set.

Too often, district organizational structures resemble a house that is built one room at a time without a total house plan, and in this case, silos and legacy positions are created with no clear connection to one another or alignment with the existing district goals and strategy. Districts add departments or functions on top of existing structures, but rarely make tough choices to deprioritize or discontinue existing functions and reorganize teams to fit the new strategic work streams. One large district, for example, continued to support both a centralized professional development team and professional development teams in each of the district’s nine regions.<sup>24</sup> The teams did not coordinate content or timing with one another, yet both expected principals and their staff members to attend out-of-school day-long trainings. Outdated structures and redundancies that school leaders have to wade through are inefficient and distract from the essential work of a school leader.

22 Ikemoto (2007).

23 Ikemoto et al. (2009).

24 New Leaders, 2011. [School case study]. Unpublished raw data.

## Budget Alignment

Organizational budget is aligned to the strategic plan. A 2011 study examining the relationship between district conditions and student outcomes found that high-performing systems were able to *align resource allocations—including personnel resources—to their strategic priorities.*<sup>25</sup> Resource alignment sometimes means making an unpopular decision to discontinue funding for a long-standing program that is no longer aligned to district priorities or a politically challenging decision to distribute funds equitably (according to need) rather than equally across schools. For example, one North Carolina school district has adopted a “sunset clause” that requires programs and services to be reviewed on a three-year cycle and a determination made about whether to reduce, eliminate, or expand them.<sup>26</sup>

## Systems and Resources for School Support

Curricula and data are aligned to the strategic plan and support its implementation. Effective principals ensure that the *curricula and instruction are aligned to standards for college and career-readiness.* They track student-level data to drive continuous improvement by using multiple sources of quantitative and qualitative data to assess and monitor student progress. They build their staff’s capacity to analyze and use data, implement standards-based lessons and unit plans that will prepare students for year-end goals, and modify their instruction based on the data to ensure that students are making progress.

To effectively execute these instructional leadership practices, principals need access to high-quality tools and systems, including curriculum, assessments, and student data systems. The move by 44 states and the District of Columbia to implement Common Core State Standards creates a renewed need for districts and states to provide updated tools. Two types of systems and tools are particularly critical: (a) high-quality curriculum and assessments aligned to college and career-ready standards, and (b) data systems that support data-driven instruction and tracking progress toward school goals. High-quality district-provided tools and content have been found to have a strong relationship with principals spending time on instructional leadership practices, particularly monitoring classroom instruction and engaging with teachers outside the classroom in order to improve instruction.<sup>27</sup>

When districts provide high-quality curriculum and assessments, they can ensure that curricula and instructional materials are horizontally and vertically aligned across the district, providing continuity of experience and learning when children move between schools within the district or advance from grade-to-grade. Common assessments also allow the district to recognize which teachers and schools are having success with sub-groups of students who have traditionally under-performed; common assessments making it possible to learn from these successes and to share their practices with other teachers and schools that have not yet succeeded in supporting similar populations.

The development of quality district curriculum also reduces redundancy of efforts by every school and allows for a central skilled team to be dedicated to this work. With aligned, high-quality content in place, school leaders can focus their time on supporting teachers in effectively implementing the curriculum instead of creating it. In the absence of such tools and resources, instructional leaders must focus valuable time and resources to create them in-house. For example, when districts do not provide curriculum and assessments aligned to state standards, many principals have found themselves leading teams of teachers in writing or adapting content or interim assessments. Developing content can require a large amount of time which reduces the leader’s ability to focus on successful implementation of the curriculum and strong instructional practices across classrooms.

Research also identifies robust district data systems as a key condition for effective school leadership.<sup>28</sup> Timely and reliable access to student, classroom, and school-level data enable principals to effectively analyze data to improve instruction. Central offices can support effective use of data by investing in data infrastructure, and new forms of data and evidence

25 Leithwood (2011).

26 Hansen, Ikemoto, Marsh, & Barney (2007).

27 Augustine et al. (2009).

28 Augustine et al. (2009); Leithwood (2011); Southern Regional Education Board (2010).

that can be used to inform improvements in teaching and learning. Most importantly, districts can develop the capacity of school-based and district staff to sort through and make meaning of large quantities of data to complete nuanced analyses.<sup>29</sup> In a study in which the relationship between school system conditions and effective leadership was examined in 10 states and 17 districts, the researchers found that timely access to reliable and useful data was positively related to time spent on instructional leadership practices.<sup>30</sup> Effective data systems also enable principals and teachers to track individual students and student subgroups; integrate and compare different types of data (such as attendance and test performance); disaggregate interim assessment data by standard, test item, classroom, and subgroup; and examine longitudinal trends over time. Such systems provide “on demand” access to a wide range of qualitative and quantitative data—not just student test scores—including data on attendance, course failure rates, and disciplinary actions.

## Goal Monitoring

Districts have systems for monitoring progress toward goals and expectations. High-quality and aligned plans are meaningless unless they are implemented effectively. District monitoring of implementation and effectiveness is therefore just as important as the identification of goals and strategies. Effective districts *set clear metrics and institute systems that allow them to collect the data and information to understand whether and how effectively a strategy is being implemented*. Districts can then use that information to make improvements or change course when necessary.

One typical reason why reforms fail is because districts spend more time on design of their plans and strategies than on implementation—often failing to set-aside sufficient resources for implementation. One district, for example, implemented a new learner-centered math curriculum but failed to monitor implementation or detect that its high school teachers, who had previously been using a teacher-directed approach in their classrooms, did not have the skill set to implement the learner-centered approach that was part of the new curriculum. The initiative lacked milestone measurements that would have allowed the district to understand that a mid-course correction was necessary and make changes accordingly. As a result of the poor implementation, the new research-based strategy actually had a statistically significant negative impact on student achievement.<sup>31</sup>

A variety of tools exist to help districts monitor and improve implementation. The Georgia Leadership Institute for School Improvement (GLISI) works with districts to develop balanced score cards to ensure alignment of goals and strategies. GLISI also provides districts with tools and protocols to continuously measure, monitor, and make course corrections to district strategies and initiatives.<sup>32</sup> Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools adopted data tools for all levels of the school system to understand their performance and the efficacy of their work. The expectation was for a data-driven culture to be instituted system-wide, with teachers, school leaders, and central office staff reviewing diverse data regularly to monitor progress. Though most data tools were first adopted only during the 2010-2011 school year, and overall training and adoption varied across the system, by the end of that school year, the district saw gains on multiple measures of student performance.

When a well-developed strategic plan is in place, all stakeholders in the district understand the vision of success and the pathway that the system will take to move towards that vision. They also have the structures, resources, and monitoring systems to successfully implement the plan. Successful execution, however, also requires a culture of collective responsibility, balanced autonomy, and continuous improvement, as described in the following section.

29 Knapp, Copland, Honig, Plecki, & Portin (2010).  
30 Augustine et al. (2009).  
31 Pane, McCaffrey, Steele, Ikemoto, & Slaughter (2010).  
32 Georgia Leadership Institute for School Improvement (2012).

## STRAND 2: CULTURE OF COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY, BALANCED AUTONOMY, AND CONTINUOUS LEARNING AND IMPROVEMENT

Principals can be more effective when there is a district-wide culture of joint responsibility for achieving shared student outcome goals. In effective districts, central office staff and school leaders collaborate and support one another to mutually achieve success. Central office staff works in service of schools and are responsible for providing quality services and developing the capacities of school leaders to implement their improvement plans.<sup>33</sup> Expectations, norms, and formal accountability structures hold central office staff accountable for supporting schools in addressing challenges that arise, including coordinating with other central office departments, to marshal the support that schools need.<sup>34</sup> At the same time, school improvement plans should include clear expectations for schools as they are held accountable for meeting those expectations. Schools and principals support district-wide priorities, goals, and initiatives, and demonstrate belief in the district vision. Responsibilities for successes and failures are co-owned—all players share a feeling of “we’re in this together, trying to achieve the same goals.”

Principals are more effective when central office staff and school leaders work together to differentiate district policies and improve them over time.

In a culture of collective responsibility, school leaders are trusted by the central office with discretion to implement policies and initiatives in ways that meet student needs while not compromising the initiative’s intent or essential components.<sup>35</sup> This autonomy is balanced with expectations that are clearly articulated, supported, and monitored to ensure that progress is being made toward achieving them. In the spirit of a partnership culture, school leaders are safe in telling central office staff—including their managers—when policies and initiatives need more support or are not working. When necessary to meet the needs of a particular school population, central office staff and school leaders collaborate to adapt policies and initiatives as needed for that population. In other cases, when similar feedback is received across multiple schools, the central office uses the feedback to improve the policy and the manner in which it is implemented.

Therefore, the district is a learning organization that actively seeks to understand the quality and impact of its reform initiatives, soliciting varied forms of feedback with the purpose of improving its approach.<sup>36</sup> The culture creates a safe environment for candid, open discussion of progress and results, placing a high priority on dialogue with stakeholders. Principals, in particular, have a perspective that is highly valued and actively sought. Mechanisms exist for soliciting input from principals, teachers, and students’ parents or guardians with a process for reviewing and deciding how to use the input to inform decision making and continuous improvement. In some cases, this improvement involves strengthening the implementation of current initiatives, and in other cases, it involves making significant tactical changes to address identified issues. When districts have a learning orientation, they are willing and able to do the hard work of changing systems, structures, and habits to achieve goals.

According to our expert advisors, this type of partnership culture rarely exists in most districts and it can be the most difficult condition to implement and maintain. The relationship between central office and schools is typically structured as either fully decentralized or completely centralized. In the decentralized structures, decision making is often relegated to the school-level and schools are given autonomy to make decisions about curriculum and resources that meet their needs. While this

33 Southern Regional Education Board (2010).  
34 Honig et al. (2010).  
35 Louis et al. (2010).  
36 Honig et al. (2010).

approach often limits instances of the district “getting in the way,” it also means that schools often do not have the systems, supports, and tools (as discussed in Strands 1 and 4) that enable effective and efficient school leadership. It also creates inefficient redundancy. In the centralized structures, the district retains decision making, which often brings much needed district-wide coherence—particularly in systems with high student and staff mobility. However, centralized systems often retain too much power at the top, imposing “one-size fits all” mandates on schools that disempower and preclude the principal from fully addressing the specific student population’s needs.

Three conditions are present in district cultures that promote mutually supportive partnerships between schools and central office staff:

- **Collective Responsibility.** District central offices and schools function as collaborative team members working towards the same goals;
- **Balanced Autonomy.** Principals have discretion to implement policies in ways that meet the needs of their students and schools balanced with the necessary tools, support, and oversight; and
- **Continuous Improvement.** District values organizational learning and continuous improvement.

### Collective Responsibility

District central offices and schools function as collaborative team members working towards the same goals. A system that truly supports effective school leadership at scale across a district is one in which *central offices and schools work together as a team in iterative processes to identify and implement strategies that meet the needs of individual schools*. Honig and colleagues stated the following in a seminal study on district reform:

Our findings reveal that central office transformation moves beyond old debates in education about whether schools or the central office should be driving reform and show that improving teaching and learning district-wide is a systems problem—a challenge that requires the participation of both central offices and schools in leadership roles to realize such outcomes.<sup>37</sup>

Building and sustaining a new district culture is more complicated than implementing a specific set of policies or checking off boxes on a to-do list. It requires a practice and values shift and a day-in-day-out commitment that starts at the top and infuses all aspects of the district’s practices and all team members. *District superintendents and leadership teams model a culture of partnership, shared ownership and responsibility and put in place norms and systems that embed this culture throughout the organization*. They hold all stakeholders accountable for the successes and failures of the district ensuring that schools are not the only ones held accountable for meeting district goals. They involve school leaders in the development of district strategies and ensure that all individuals in the district—including school and central office staff—understand how their work relates to district goals and feel a sense of personal responsibility to attain them. Effective districts develop networks among their schools to problem-solve together to address shared challenges.<sup>38</sup> They create an open, developmental culture of feedback and safety. Leaders, systems, and norms nurture the development and maintenance of this culture over time, so that it is consistent and distributed throughout the organization over personnel and other context shifts, and not dependent on individual leaders within the organization.

In a culture of collective ownership, the central office reframes the focus of its monitoring and oversight activities away from monitoring people for compliance and instead emphasizes supporting the implementation of programs and initiatives and their outcomes. To successfully make this shift, districts sometimes need to invest in professional development supports for

37 Honig et al. (2010).  
38 Katz, Earl, & Jaafar (2009).

central office staff to help them gain new skills and knowledge that would allow them to understand each school’s individual goals, context, and implementation challenges. Central offices have a customer service orientation to schools and district leadership holds central offices accountable for their role in supporting district goals. Top district leaders gather input from principals on the quality of central office service and support, and create action plans to address major areas for improvement. They can also set clear accountability structures and goals for central office teams that are visible to principals. For example, in Gwinnett County Public Schools, the central office team has specific responsiveness goals that are tracked and monitored.

Unfortunately, many districts—even districts that declare themselves learning organizations—have institutionalized norms and practices that reinforce a top-down compliance culture. Implementation follow-up is characterized by “gotcha” check-lists and accusations when initiatives are not implemented as intended. Implementation problems are presumed to be the fault of school-level lack of will, skill, or capacity as opposed to the fault of poorly conceived design, hasty rollout, or inadequate support. As such, the system lacks structures that allow schools to provide feedback to the central office, and instead, encourages schools to hide their efforts to address implementation challenges with adaptations or deliberate decisions not to implement faulty policies and initiatives.

### Balanced Autonomy

Principals have discretion to meet the needs of their schools balanced with the necessary tools, support, and oversight. Many leadership studies have found that *school effectiveness improves when principals have autonomy over decision making*.<sup>39</sup> The 2009 Wallace study of 17 districts found that authority over decision making was positively related to time spent on almost all of the instructional leadership practices and was most correlated with principals’ time spent on promoting staff professional development and motivating staff. It also had a positive relationship with appropriateness of time spent building a common vision, monitoring classroom instruction, and developing leadership staff.<sup>40</sup>

Other studies have found positive impact when autonomy initiatives focused decision-making rights on teaching and learning and provided on-going supports for building a school’s capacity for implementation.<sup>41</sup> Effective districts have found that some centralized structures can support schools by enabling principals to focus on instruction and to fully leverage autonomies. Examples of centralized structures could include common calendars, timing for interim assessments, professional development strands deeply connected to district strategies, and curriculum. However, effective districts are strategic in deciding which practices to centralize and ensure they are part of the shared agreements and goals described in Strand 1.

Based on a six-year study that involved 180 schools in 43 districts in nine states, Louis and colleagues recommended that districts recognize the varying needs of different school contexts and avoid one-size-fits all policies.<sup>42</sup> As districts select the few areas for consistency and centralization, there are some areas that the research and our expert convening indicate are best made at the school-level. In particular (as discussed in Strand 4), our expert advisors and researchers agree that school-level autonomy to make staffing decisions is absolutely critical.<sup>43</sup> In a paper that draws lessons from the private sector, Milanowski and Kimball (2008) write, “Principals are key players at three high leverage points for building an effective faculty: teacher and leadership team hiring, the tenure decision, and professional development. Districts need to make sure their policies support sound principal decision making at these points.”<sup>44</sup>

Despite the research-based need for school-level autonomy, principals are often required to implement practices and policies that were designed without their input, and which may not advance, or may even hinder their own school-level goals. Often, districts do not give principals clear opportunities to implement district policies in ways that make sense for their schools,

39 e.g., Adamowski, Therriault, & Caranna (2007); Augustine et al. (2009); Barber et al. (2010).  
40 Augustine et al. (2009).  
41 Honig & Rainey (2011).  
42 Louis et al. (2010).  
43 Adamowski et al. (2007).  
44 Milanowski & Kimball (2008).

forcing school leaders to try to succeed in spite of, rather than in coordination with, the district’s policies. When autonomies do exist, principals and central office staff are unclear about how to exercise these in practice.

In any system of significant autonomy, *effective districts provide tools, processes, and supports for principals to utilize decision-making authority effectively*.<sup>45</sup> Many systems have determined that autonomies should be earned based on past performance, instead effective districts give all principals autonomy and differentiate their level and types of support. These supports are particularly important and will likely be more intense for early tenure principals or those who have been identified as still developing. In Gwinnett County Public Schools, principal managers are organized as “brokers” of other central resources. They work closely with principals to identify specific supports needed from other central offices, and then they help make the request for that support, whether from curriculum and instruction or from human resources. In turn, the central office teams are accountable for timely and effective response to the needs identified by schools and principal managers. When a principal or school is brought to the superintendent as underperforming, the superintendent first asks the cabinet what supports have been provided to this leader and school, reinforcing the sense of accountability for providing school-level support. For example, as part of a broader set of district reforms, Baltimore City Schools adopted a new funding model, “Fair Student Funding,” which gave resources directly to schools to control and allocate as they saw fit rather than pushing specific resources out from the central office to schools. Principals had new authority to control the use of resources to meet the needs of their schools and students, but needed support to do so effectively. To this end, the district created budget guidance resources for principals. More significantly, they created a new structure in the district, a system of networks that would support the schools and help principals with operational aspects of their work—such as budget decisions—so that principals could remain focused on instructional responsibilities. These supports were considered helpful overall, though they could be further improved by ensuring that network staff are truly responsive to the principal’s needs, and by improving the availability of budgeting tools and guidance documents.

Without sufficient tools, processes, and support, autonomy can actually be detrimental to good decision making. For example, in a study of a New York City empowerment structure, which gave principals increased autonomy in a number of areas, Hemphill and Nauer found that while this empowerment structure allowed some principals to turn around failing schools, some principals—particularly new and inexperienced ones—struggled with the lack of guidance and support that accompanied increased independence.<sup>46</sup>

In a culture of shared ownership and responsibility, effective districts allow principals to adjust how and when strategies are implemented—including district priorities—if the principal can provide a strong rationale and data to demonstrate how their alternate proposal will serve students better. They support principals in making decisions that both meet the best interest of students and are aligned to the spirit and goals of the district. For example, a New Leaders’ principal assessed that a new curriculum would overwhelm her teachers. She and her regional superintendent developed a plan to delay full adoption of the balanced literacy model for one year, while slowly introducing instructional strategies used in the new curriculum. Initially, the school began implementing the writing portion of the new district curriculum, which incorporated many of the elements that teachers would later use to teach reading, such as mini-lessons. “It was enough that you have a new principal, a new superintendent, whole system reorganization, and now you’re telling them to learn a whole new way of teaching.”<sup>47</sup> Over time, the leader was able to develop the staff through on-going support that included outside coaching, peer consultancies with effective teachers, and frequent cycles of observation and feedback, readying the faculty for full adoption of the district initiative.

Principals are best positioned to make decisions that support their students’ learning and that develop the effectiveness of teachers. In a system of balanced autonomy, the central office partners with principals in a way that provides them with necessary supports and oversight to ensure that the school, teachers, and students are improving student achievement.

<sup>45</sup> For example, according to a study by The New Teacher Project (2008), the district central office provided important tools and processes to enable schools in making good decisions when New York City decentralized hiring to schools.

<sup>46</sup> Hemphill & Nauer (2010).

<sup>47</sup> New Leaders, 2011. [School case study]. Unpublished raw data.

Recognizing the need to enable decentralized decision making, some districts make the mistake of providing autonomy without support or oversight. While this often enables principals to make better decisions, it can also lead to poor decisions that conflict with and undermine district-wide initiatives, and in the worst cases, hinder student growth. These processes and systems enable central office and school leaders to work together to negotiate and identify optimal solutions.

### Continuous Improvement

District values organizational learning and continuous improvement. *Districts with collective responsibility actively seek to understand the quality and impact of all their reform initiatives and activities, soliciting, and analyzing varied forms of information*. Continuous learning requires district leaders to foster an environment where tough feedback can be given and used to change, adapt, or refine reform efforts. In a learning culture, stakeholders are accepted as skilled practitioners in their departments or functional areas. School leaders are recognized as experts in instruction and management, and their opinions and experience are given value and credence. Similarly, school leaders acknowledge the big picture lens that central office staff is able to see as they look across the system. This interplay of perspectives and knowledge is leveraged to strengthen initiatives and to openly address and fix reforms, structures, or initiatives that are ineffective. Over time, the system incentivizes continued authentic engagement and direct feedback by making mid-course corrections to support system-wide learning and improvement.

There is an expectation that all individuals within the community—students, teachers, and leaders at all levels—are constantly learning and growing over time. Data are collected at all levels—student, classroom, school, and district—to analyze performance and inform changes in instruction and operations approaches. Unfortunately, principals often have little to no meaningful input at any point in the decision-making process—before, during, or after implementation decisions have been made. School systems often roll out reforms but rarely perform site visits or otherwise collect data on how those reforms are working at the school and classroom-level. As a result, they are unaware when an initiative is not being implemented as intended, or when it conflicts with the needs or context of particular schools. This means that district staff is not in a position to make mid-course corrections, tailor the program more effectively, or provide the supports necessary for better implementation.

When there is a culture of collective responsibility, balanced autonomy, and continuous improvement, the school system has values and norms that allow schools and central offices to work together to implement the strategic plan, as described in Strand 1. This work is further enabled when the district provides effective management and support to the principals, as described in the next section.

## STRAND 3: EFFECTIVE MANAGEMENT AND SUPPORT FOR PRINCIPALS

As described earlier in this report, the roles and responsibilities of principals have changed in response to new demands on schools to prepare all students to be successful in college and in their careers. These new roles and responsibilities require strong skills in vision setting, culture building, talent management, and instructional leadership. Effective school districts help principals implement the new and demanding responsibilities with holistic performance management systems that systematically develop, support, motivate, and retain quality leadership talent. Effective performance management of principals is not simply a matter of creating a new principal evaluation system. Although evaluations designed to support principal development and assessment are critical components of effective principal performance management, effective

“My manager helps me define what the real work is and then helps me improve at doing the work,” a principal from Denver, Colorado.

management also includes managing them in ways that facilitate on-going learning to improve their practice over time. These systems begin with a clear vision of effective leadership focused on the key school leadership actions that enable principals to improve student achievement. The vision is codified in standards for effective leadership that outline expectations for principal performance and what excellence looks like in the principal’s role.

Effective districts set expectations for principals’ day-to-day work that are aligned to and reinforce effective leadership practices defined by the standards. By encouraging principals to focus on the things that matter, districts allow principals to use their time efficiently and they make the job feasible. The standards also form the basis for a developmental performance management cycle and are used to inform principal professional learning and to facilitate on-going conversations about practice and growth. Effective systems provide principals with ongoing supervision and support from highly-skilled principal managers who partner with principals to improve student achievement, provide support as a sounding board, and work to remove barriers to principals’ success. As one principal from Denver, Colorado, reflected, “My [principal] manager helps me define what the real work is and then helps me improve at doing the work.”<sup>48</sup> Principal managers redefine the role of principals to make the job more feasible, and thus, retain principals in their important roles to ensure student success. Principal managers map their observations to the standards and use the framework as the foundation for giving principals meaningful feedback and opportunities for development. School systems use these formative assessments to make real-time adjustment to professional learning opportunities offered so they can support improved performance and skills. Evaluations provide clear expectations and measure performance against these expectations. This approach necessitates staffing principal manager positions with individuals who have the knowledge, skills, and caseloads that enable them to effectively hire, develop, and evaluate principals. In short, designers of effective systems are thoughtful about the ways they structure, assess, develop, and support principals and have put in place the necessary systems, resources, and staffing to do this work well. These specific conditions for effective performance management include the following:

- **Principal Role Definition.** Principals’ roles have been defined in a way that is feasible within resource constraints and enables leaders to make teaching and learning a priority;
- **Principal Performance.** Principal standards are research-based and the evaluation process is fair, transparent, rigorous, and aligned to the standards;
- **Professional Learning.** Principal professional learning opportunities are on-going, high-quality, and focused on principals’ needs; and
- **Principal Managers.** Principal supervisors have the capacity and bandwidth to effectively manage and support principals.

### Principal Role Definition

Principal role has been defined in a way that is feasible within resource constraints and enables leaders to make teaching and learning a priority. Effective districts structure—or allow principals to structure—the principal role in ways that enable principals to strategically focus their time on the most important aspects of the job (such as instructional leadership) and in ways that make the job feasible and sustainable at scale—not just by a few superhero principals.

Currently, most principals do not think their job is achievable. In a New Leaders funded survey of 247 principals, RAND found that 72 percent of survey respondents agreed, “I lack the necessary resources, such as time and staff support, to accomplish all that is required to lead this school effectively.” As a result, principals reported that they were spreading their time so thinly across so many roles and tasks that they found themselves not doing any of them well enough.<sup>49</sup> This problem can become even more acute in charter schools, where principals often lack the administrative support of a district or CMO central office. These principals have more non-instructional leadership responsibilities—such as securing and managing facilities, recruiting students and teachers, and fundraising—than principals in traditional districts.<sup>50</sup> Not surprisingly, many principals burn out; research suggests principal turnover of 15 to 30 percent annually in school systems nationwide.<sup>51</sup>

*Effective districts enable principals to focus their time on the most important aspects of their job by limiting central office requests,* such as how often they require principals to leave their school buildings to attend meetings and the number and burden of day-to-day requests that central offices send to principals including: paperwork requirements, requests for input on district policies, unexpected visits from district officials, and last minute data requests.<sup>52</sup> One district conducted an analysis of principals’ email inboxes and found that principals were receiving significant numbers of disparate emails from central office every day. These requests can be particularly problematic when principals are given little time to respond because it causes them to abandon critical instructional leadership activities they are concurrently being asked to prioritize.

*Districts can also allow principals to strategically focus their time by improving the effectiveness of central office functions.* When central offices are responsive to school needs, as discussed in Strand 2, they are able to process requests quickly. Too often, principals find themselves spending many hours of time processing mundane requests like adding new teachers to the payroll or ordering light bulbs. Effective districts cut down time principals need to spend on mundane administrative tasks, thereby allowing them to focus on more critical leadership practices.

*Districts can also encourage and enable principals to distribute leadership to other staff in the school building.* When districts give principals the autonomy to determine the configuration of the leadership team, they can meet the unique needs of the school and complement their strengths. In some cases, principals may distribute some instructional leadership tasks and responsibilities to a broader leadership team, including teacher leaders. In other cases, the leader may delegate administrative and operational tasks to other staff in the school, such as a business manager or director of operations. Effective districts provide principals with structured guidance and support to help them distribute leadership in ways that make sense for their particular school. They also provide budget flexibility to enable principals to create teacher leadership roles.

Districts can also facilitate sustainable leadership roles by eliminating policies that preclude principals from utilizing teacher leaders and instructional coaches; for example from conducting teacher observations that can inform teacher evaluations. By allowing a broader set of leaders to take part in the evaluation process, districts can create significant new instructional leadership capacity at the school-level and allow teachers to be observed and receive feedback more frequently.

The National School Administration Manager Innovation Project (SAM), initially funded by The Wallace Foundation, provides a process to assist principals in evaluating how they spend their time and identifying ways to delegate administrative leadership responsibilities to other staff, enabling principals to spend an average of 27-55 more days on

<sup>49</sup> Ikemoto et al. (2009).

<sup>50</sup> Campbell & Gross (2008).

<sup>51</sup> Bételle et al. (2011).

<sup>52</sup> Jerald (2012).

instructional leadership each school year. Distributing leadership tasks to other staff also provides opportunities for teachers to grow professionally and cultivates the leadership pipeline. Some states participating in the SAM project treated the position as an official stepping-stone for future principals.<sup>53</sup> By allowing the leaders to customize aspects of their role based on personal expertise and school context and build a leadership team to distribute the broad range of work, the district enables the principals to be more effective, focused on the key work that only principals can do, and thus, have a more sustainable job.

### Principal Performance

Principal standards are research-based and the evaluation process is fair, transparent, rigorous, and aligned to the standards. Effective school systems that improve principal effectiveness have performance management systems that are built on a shared vision of the principalship that is described through high-quality, research-based principal performance standards. These standards then drive professional development, goal setting, and evaluation processes. Standards support principal development by providing a shared language for frank conversations about principal performance and growth. They give the leader guidance on where to focus and on what activities will have the greatest impact on student outcomes. Principal managers can use these standards as a tool to develop a shared understanding of principals' roles and what effective performance looks like and a starting point for conversations about performance. When school systems lack strong standards, the district, principals, and principal managers may have different expectations and may not have aligned leadership priorities. A lack of clear and consistent expectations can hinder frank and open conversations between principals and their managers regarding how principals should prioritize time and improve their practices. This type of confusion can lead to a system where people are all working to improve student achievement but without clarity of a common vision of practice and expectations.

Effective school systems also have formal evaluation systems that are fair, transparent, and rigorous. They are grounded in research-based standards, and assessments of principals that incorporate multiple sources of evidence related to student learning, principal actions, and teacher effectiveness. In a well-designed performance management system, assessment is embedded in an ongoing cycle, where standards and assessment are worked on throughout the year, making the summative evaluation feel like a culminating checkpoint to assess progress, rather than a one-time event. Evaluations also include opportunities for professional growth and learning and inform personnel decisions, including promotion, retention, placement, and compensation.<sup>54</sup>

When systems are not in place to effectively evaluate leaders, there is the risk that mediocre leaders will be left in a role unchecked for several years. Without clear standards and an accompanying evaluation system, districts lose the opportunity to create clear expectations for principal practices and outcomes. These system-wide standards and evaluations enable both principals and their managers across the system to have a shared understanding of focus, practice, and expectations.

### Professional Learning

Principal professional learning opportunities are on-going, high quality, and focused on principals' needs. Effective school systems provide professional learning models that are grounded in the belief that leadership skills can be developed and expanded through on-going, job-embedded opportunities for authentic practice, feedback, and follow-up.<sup>55</sup> It is believed that high-quality professional learning experiences simultaneously improve student learning outcomes, enhance district culture, and increase the effectiveness of individual leaders. Well-planned professional learning 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 district-wide. Unfortunately, district professional development for principals typically involves workshop-style meetings where one-size-fits-all content is delivered to principals who are patient and sit and listen. Although it sometimes provides opportunities for principals to describe their practices to peers, they rarely have opportunities to receive critical feedback.

When district leaders and principals develop a shared vision for how learning supports will drive improvements, they ensure that on-going learning and development remains a priority. Districts adapt topics to meet emerging needs and to course correct for structures that prove less effective in changing practices. They differentiate opportunities based on the school's context and the leader's experience, letting each leader customize their learning. For districts, this means creating a variety of overlapping structures that provide a net of support for leaders. Structures are typically developed and led by principal managers and may include one-on-one supports, communities of practice structures where similar schools and leaders learn with and from one another, and district-wide development sessions to introduce key initiatives and common practices used by all effective leaders (e.g., observation and feedback for teachers). The specific structures will vary, but the essential characteristic of effective districts is that they have intentionality in the choice of structures and topics and coordinate structures to create clear priorities and clear messages. Effective districts continually assess and improve the quality of principal support.<sup>56</sup>

### Principal Managers

Principal supervisors have the capacity and bandwidth to effectively manage and support principals. As the research suggests, district staff who manage principals play a critical, but often overlooked, role in creating the conditions for effective leadership. Research by McKinsey and Company found that the world's best school systems build leadership capacity by focusing on the middle-tier system leaders who oversee groups of schools but not entire systems. In these systems, principal managers are not authoritarian compliance monitors but partners who work with principals to set goals and support them to overcome challenges and achieve those goals for the academic success of students. They also support principals' professional growth by managing clusters of schools to facilitate lateral learning between principals who would otherwise be isolated in their buildings, and by identifying or providing coaching or other forms of professional development linked to individual principals' needs.<sup>57</sup> In the United States, however, principal manager roles have traditionally focused on monitoring principals as opposed to developing them. Using principal managers to drive school improvement as they do in higher academic school performing nations will require districts to do two things: get the right people in the right positions and structure the positions so that principals can focus on the most critical tasks for success.<sup>58</sup> Only when both conditions are in place can principal managers effectively manage principals through the full performance management cycle of setting expectations, defining roles, providing coaching, and other support for professional growth and evaluating their performance.

*Effective districts hire individuals into the principal manager role that understand and share the district's research-based vision of effective leadership*, including the importance of instructional leadership, talent management, and culture building skills. Ideally, principal managers are former principals who were themselves successful in implementing these practices and strong developers of adults, enabling them to assess principal practices and provide useful feedback. However, because principal manager roles have traditionally focused on monitoring and compliance as opposed to developing principals, selection for these manager roles has not always prioritized the ability to develop or coach principals as instructional leaders. As a result, some individuals currently in these roles—whether or not they have past experience as principals—may lack instructional leadership expertise or lack the skills to coach or develop principals.

53 Turnbull, Erikson, & Sinclair (2011).

54 For more details on effective principal evaluation systems, see New Leaders Principal Evaluation Handbook available at: <http://www.newleaders.org/newsreports/publications/principal-evaluation-handbook/>.

55 Jerald (2012).

56 In addition to the tools included with this report, a toolkit for assessing principal supports is available from the University of Washington's Center for Educational Leadership available at: <http://www.k-12leadership.org/leading-for-effective-teaching>.

57 Barber, Whelan, & Clark (2010).

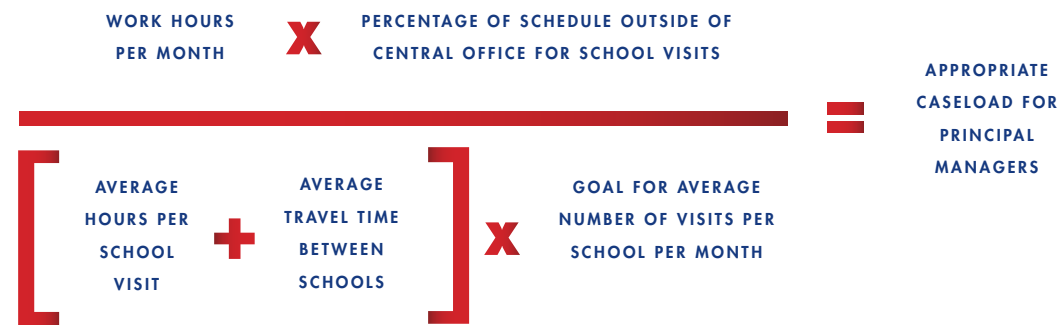
58 Honig (2012); Honig et al. (2010).

*Effective districts are redefining the principal manager role into one that is focused on improving principals' ability to be instructional leaders.* To fill this new role, districts are hiring individuals who have skills related to setting and monitoring principal goals, facilitating group networks and communities of practice, coaching, providing feedback on leadership practices, and evaluating principals as well as those who understand the critical practices of effective school leadership. In the best case, principal managers are closely matched with the leaders they are coaching based on the expertise of the former and the needs of the latter.

Greater clarity and guidance on the role of principal managers is a helpful first step, but it must be accompanied with access to opportunities for professional growth. Unfortunately, many principal manager positions are filled by individuals who were not successful principals. Even when some were excellent principals, they often were not automatically good at managing other principals. They often need to develop skills that are new and different from the skills they used as a principal. The typical principal manager has been in his or her position for two years or less—and districts rarely provide them with training and support.<sup>59</sup>

*Effective districts assign principal managers with caseloads that are low enough that managers can effectively implement the full performance management cycle with each principal,* providing enough time to check-in weekly with each principal, including time to review data with principals and observe them and provide feedback. A recent study of principal supervisors in six urban districts found that principal managers oversee an average of 24 schools each.<sup>60</sup> With caseloads this large and little to no support staff, principal managers typically do not have sufficient time to visit schools frequently enough to deeply understand the strengths and weaknesses of their principals and the specific needs of the schools they oversee—let alone provide individualized support for principal development and problem solving. Meredith Honig, a national expert on principal managers at the University of Washington, typically recommends smaller caseloads of six principals to enable principal managers to provide the levels of support necessary to better support each principal's professional growth as shown in Figure 2,<sup>61</sup> and refers to this new type of principal managers as Instructional Leadership Directors.<sup>62</sup>

Figure 2: Recommended Formula for Principal Manager Caseload



When principals are effectively managed and supported, they have the clear direction from their managers—as well as opportunities to improve their leadership practices—that enable them to effectively lead implementation of the strategic plan described in Strand 1. Since school leaders influence improvements in student learning primarily by influencing improvements in teacher effectiveness, they also are enabled when they have systems and policies to effectively manage talent at the school-level, as described in the following section.

59 New Leaders, 2012. [Principal manager interviews]. Unpublished raw data.

60 Corcoran, Casserly, Price-Baugh, Walston, Hall, & Simon (2013).

61 Jerald (2012).

62 Honig et al. (2010).

## STRAND 4: SYSTEMS AND POLICIES TO EFFECTIVELY MANAGE TALENT AT THE SCHOOL-LEVEL

Researchers have found that one of the most critical ways in which principals impact student learning is by hiring, placing, developing, retaining, and managing talent to improve teacher effectiveness in the schools they lead.<sup>63</sup> Yet, principals often lack the authority, tools, and systems they need to conduct this role effectively. District and state policies sometimes limit leaders' abilities to manage human capital on school campuses. These limits include the inability to place teachers in the positions where they will be most effective, to retain effective teachers, or to remove consistently ineffective teachers. Collective bargaining agreements often protect the most senior teachers regardless of their effectiveness and require leaders to hire teachers that they did not select and have no opportunity to reject.

Principals can be more effective when they have systems and policies in place to manage talent in the schools they lead. According to our expert researchers and practitioners work group, the most important, yet most commonly lacking condition for principal effectiveness, is the authority of principals to create appropriate staffing models for their school, including the ability to hire, promote, and dismiss teachers, school leaders, and other school-based staff. Districts support principal effectiveness by eliminating barriers and creating systems and tools, such as effective human resource and teacher performance management systems—including effective evaluation systems—that enable principals to effectively manage teachers and school staff. One example of this system-level support is the recent work in Houston Independent School District (HISD). Over the past three years, HISD has implemented significant reforms in human capital management. Its focus has been to create policies that support principals in their work to improve teacher effectiveness. The district implemented a new teacher evaluation system to raise expectations for teacher quality and give principals new tools for assessing teacher quality. In addition, the district created new data systems and reports around human capital for every school, allowing principals to review the current status of every staff member in terms of tenure, evaluation results, areas for growth, certifications, and other information necessary to support effective staff planning. Principal managers review these reports with their principals a few times a year to identify strategies and next steps for specific staff members, and to plan ahead for human capital and staffing supports needed from the central office for the school. Supportive districts provide teachers with access to high-quality professional learning opportunities that align with school and district goals and with teachers' specific needs and areas for growth. They also redesign human resource departments to serve as strategic partners, working to identify and recruit talent, and creating a district-wide pipeline of effective teachers, teacher leaders, and other leadership personnel.

The key conditions that enable principals to effectively manage school-level talent include the following:

- **Staffing Decisions.** Principals have authority to hire, reassign, or dismiss school-based staff;
- **Teacher Performance.** Teacher performance is assessed through a transparent, fair, rigorous process, according to research-based standards and including student outcomes; and
- **Human Resource Systems.** Human resource systems enable schools to attract, hire, and retain top-quality candidates at all levels.

63 New Leaders (2012).

## Staffing Decisions

Principals have authority to hire, reassign, or dismiss school-based staff. Researchers have found that frequently principals lack sufficient discretion over staffing decisions and this condition is correlated with weaker student achievement results.<sup>64</sup> Several common district policies constrain principals from selecting the teachers who best match the needs of their school.<sup>65</sup> For example, some collective bargaining agreements allow teachers to choose their school and grade/subject placements based on seniority, giving principals little or no say over which teachers work in their schools. It is also very common for districts to move a teacher who has been “excessed”—meaning that the position has been eliminated due to program, enrollment, or budget shifts—and place that teacher in another position or school without input from that school’s principal. These “forced placements” occur without consideration of the school’s needs, the teacher’s strengths and weaknesses, or the fit between the teacher and school. These quality-blind policies undermine principals’ ability to maximize teacher effectiveness, as evidenced by one example of a New Leader principal who was forced to “excess” two National Board Certified first-grade teachers with a track record of high performance while replacing them with two veteran fifth-grade teachers with a history of poor performance and no experience teaching first grade.<sup>66</sup>

*Districts should eliminate rules and regulations that require schools to accept excess teachers, and instead institute “mutual consent” hiring systems<sup>67</sup> where both the principal and the teacher must agree to any placement.* In these systems, school vacancies are posted and all teachers in the system who seek particular positions must apply to the school for the job. The principal then selects a candidate from the pool of applicants. Teachers are also free to accept or reject an offered position without risk of missing other placements if they reject the first one they are offered. In a study of mutual consent hiring in New York City, researchers found that mutual consent policies provide fair and equal access to vacancies for teachers, do not disadvantage high-poverty schools, and result in positions that teachers find satisfying and that they plan to keep.<sup>68</sup>

*Principals also need the authority to hire and to staff their leadership teams.* As mentioned in Strand 3, leadership teams are key supports to the leader and provide essential capacity, but they also are supports who keep the school vision, mission and goals in focus for teachers. The leadership team also balances the skills of the principal, so that no one person has to have strong skills in all aspects of school leadership. Because of their central role in the school, they must share the leader’s vision and be able to effectively implement it throughout the school. Currently, however, many school districts make central decisions about assistant principal assignments or have policies that make it difficult for principals to select their own assistant principals. Many systems also staff instructional coaching roles centrally and assign them to schools.

## Teacher Performance

Teacher performance is assessed through a transparent, fair, rigorous process, according to research-based standards and including student outcomes. Once principals have selected teachers and other staff to work in their schools, they need to develop and manage these staff members over time. Effective school leaders act as coaches, developers, and ultimately evaluators of teachers. To effectively manage talent, principals need authority to recognize, reward, and retain effective teachers, and to develop improvement and intervention plans for those identified as underperforming, while having the authority to dismiss those whose performance has not improved after corrective support.

*Districts can support leaders by providing quality teacher standards that outline the expectations for effective instruction.* When standards are well developed, they can be the basis for meaningful conversations about performance; they serve as guideposts for teachers and principals in setting specific growth goals, tracking progress, and framing constructive feedback. Districts have a role to play in creating or adopting standards and then building common understanding of them across the district. The standards become the common language of effective practice that leaders can use in both their formative and evaluative conversations with instructional staff.

64 Ikemoto et al. (2009).

65 Plecki, Alejano, Knapp, & Lochmiller (2006).

66 New Leaders, 2010. [School case study]. Unpublished raw data.

67 Daly, Keeling, Grainger, & Grundies (2008).

68 Daly et al. (2008).

*Districts can support effective management of talent by instituting common and holistic evaluation systems that assess teachers’ performance against the standards* through high-quality observations of teacher practice and student outcome data to assess student progress. Effective evaluation models help leaders to focus their coaching and developmental supports. Teachers and principals use the teacher effectiveness standards to assess teachers’ current practice; they then work together to identify growth goals that match the teacher’s individual areas of growth with the needs of their students. Those goals become the playbook that the principal and other school leaders use when coaching that teacher. Throughout the year, the evaluation system prompts moments of formal reflection that contribute to the summative evaluation.

Districts have a role to play in designing and implementing high quality evaluation systems. District support is especially effective when assessment tools are accompanied by on-going supports such as training for observers, high-quality research-based rubrics or other observation tools that focus on key components of effective instructional practice and guidance on finding time to conduct observations.

Unfortunately, district policies and practices too often unintentionally undermine rather than support principals in managing, developing, and retaining talent. For example, in one district that was rolling out a new state-developed teacher evaluation system, the district required that each classroom visit last at least 15 minutes. This district-determined guideline was used later by the union to file a grievance against any principal who stayed in a classroom longer than 15 minutes, citing their presence as a form of harassment.<sup>69</sup>

When, over the course of the year, teachers fail to improve after receiving feedback and professional development, principals need fair, efficient, and timely processes that allow them to remove teachers within a reasonable timeframe (no longer than one school year) and without onerous process requirements. Too many districts have overly complicated multi-step and time-consuming dismissal policies for underperforming teachers that require more than one school year. Principals also need authority over hiring and dismissal of non-teaching staff such as custodians, administrative assistants, or security guards whose interactions with students and adults can have a significant impact on school culture and teacher working conditions.

## Human Resource Systems

Human resource systems enable schools to attract, hire, and retain top-quality candidates at all levels. Giving principals autonomy over staffing decisions does not mean leaving them entirely to their own devices in recruiting, hiring, and developing teachers. Principals can use their autonomy most effectively when the *district human resources department functions as a strategic partner that works to create high-quality applicant pools and provides efficient systems to enable timely hiring.* This means that, “district HR departments need to move from a transaction processing focus to become active partners with principals in more strategic human capital management.”<sup>70</sup> To do this, human resources departments work with principals to identify their schools’ specific human capital needs. HR is proactive in building a pool of high-quality candidates with a variety of specialties and certifications. For example, when a position in the chemistry department is open, HR can partner with school leaders to assess the school’s needs and match them with effective candidates. They also can provide school leaders with rubrics and interview guides to help principals to effectively interview, even providing them training on tools to increase interviewing skills. HR can help to change district policies by removing barriers that prevent schools from hiring talented staff, including modifying inefficient hiring timelines and limitations on hiring outside the district. Principals and schools that engage in these types of practices are more likely to be able to find and successfully hire high-quality candidates that match the school’s philosophy and needs.<sup>71</sup>

69 New Leaders, 2011. [Principal focus group]. Unpublished raw data.

70 Odden (2011).

71 New Leaders (2012).



At the most basic level, human resource systems recruit a high-quality pool of applicants for new positions and establish timely hiring processes so that principals are able to make hiring decisions early enough to attract the most promising candidates.<sup>72</sup> Doing so is likely to require significant changes in some district human resource offices to streamline recruitment and hiring process, adopt electronic application and screening systems, and develop new pipelines for hard-to-staff teaching areas.<sup>73</sup> The more strategic human resources departments actively provide data and tools to help principals effectively hire and manage staff. For example, the Houston Independent School District’s human resource department created comprehensive reports of human capital information that summarized data on teachers’ effectiveness ratings, identified areas for improvement, and highlighted teachers who were up for tenure. These reports were shared directly with schools at multiple points throughout the year. HR leaders and staff ensure that budgeting and staffing practices are aligned to help principals determine staffing needs to recruit and fill positions with the best possible candidates.

Unfortunately, district human resource offices typically are not strategic partners. They often lack the staff capacity to help recruit candidates. Their hiring processes create burdensome paperwork or processes that slow down rather than speed up the hiring process, causing schools to lose strong candidates to other school systems that are more efficient. This is especially true in urban districts that are often in most need of the best teachers.<sup>74</sup> On the other hand, when principals have systems and policies to effectively manage talent at the school-level, they are enabled to lead improvements in teacher effectiveness that can result in improvements for student outcomes.

72 Levin & Quinn (2003).  
73 Odden (2011).  
74 Levin & Quinn (2003).

## CONCLUSION

Even as they prioritize leadership, districts should also recognize that they cannot depend on “superhero” principals to drive radical improvement without district support. Even the best leaders cannot achieve their potential in systems that do not support them—or, even worse, act as barriers to their success.

Districts bear the primary responsibility for creating the conditions that enable leaders to be effective. Facilitating effective school leadership at scale will require a deep cultural shift in many districts to create a climate of shared ownership, trust, and mutual accountability in which central office and school-level leaders see one another as partners in meeting students’ needs. School boards and superintendents cannot impose this culture by fiat. However, there are concrete steps district leaders can take to foster this culture and inculcate it into the structures, norms, policies, and practices of their districts. In addition, districts should put in place specific tangible supports, resources, and policies to support principals and other school leaders in their work.

When these conditions are in place, principals can focus on their most critical work as instructional leaders—creating a strong school culture, developing teacher talent, and driving instructional improvement. Rather than managing numerous mundane details, principals can provide laser-like focus on supporting instruction and enabling teachers to do what needs to be done to generate dramatically better student-learning outcomes. With the right resources and support to make the job sustainable, they are able to produce these results year in and year out—not just for a limited period of time. When principals are given the conditions that allow them to carry out this work, the schools they lead can transform children’s lives.

Accompanying this description of effective conditions is the *Great Principals at Scale Toolkit* that will help districts assess the current status of their effectiveness, and identify priority areas and actions that they can put in place to create conditions that allow school leaders to be effective.

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