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Prepared By: Hoxie

Witness: Russ Romans, EdD., Faculty Member, The University of New Mexico; LeAnne Gandy, Leadership Development Program Coordinator, Cooperative Educational Services Language

School Leadership

Effective school leadership holds significant potential for enhancing student outcomes and fostering excellence within educational institutions, national research from the [RAND Corporation](#) and [Wallace Foundation](#) finds. A single high-quality leader in a school has the power to positively impact numerous teachers and students. Despite its demonstrated potential, enhancing the quality of school leadership faces challenges. One of the major obstacles is the limited information regarding school leadership workforce data. Further, efforts to improve school leadership through strong leadership pathways require both intensive planning and years of consistent implementation. For example, [analysis](#) of principal pipeline programs in six large school districts indicated a four-year period between initial implementation and seeing results.

However, it's crucial to recognize the hidden costs districts bear when they continuously have to replace school leaders. These costs are often overlooked, yet they can be substantial. The consequences of poor school leadership extend far beyond the immediate expenses of finding replacements. They encompass higher teacher turnover, a deteriorating school climate, and declining student achievement, which can be even more significant in the long run than the mere cost of appointing new school leaders.

Recognizing the importance of school and district leadership, the New Mexico Legislature appropriates funding to the Public Education Department (PED) to fund school leader professional development. In addition, the legislature created a School Leadership Institute, piloted principal residencies through a \$2 million public education reform fund appropriation, and, proposed legislation to develop a comprehensive plan to ensure a coherent statewide system of effective school principal preparation. Moving forward, lawmakers can build on this work to strengthen school leader recruitment, preparation, and retention efforts while recognizing consistent and long term investment will be key.

This policy brief provides an overview of why school leaders matter, research on best practices in training and support for principals, and updates on New Mexico-specific supports for school leaders, and next step recommendations.

Key Takeaways

Research finds replacing a below average principal with an above-average principal would result in an additional 2.9 months of math learning

Page 2

New Mexico has a School Leadership Institute established in statute to support the development of principals and superintendents.

Page 3

Principal evaluation is a key component of ensuring strong principals, the PED is currently undergoing a revamp of principal evaluation in New Mexico

Page 4

There is currently no distinction between principal and superintendent preparation.

Page 6

Why does school leadership matter?

School principals are responsible for the overall operation of schools. Although the principal position has been a primary component of school systems for nearly 200 years, the position has evolved over time. Analysts at the American Institutes for Research (AIR) report as the scope of public school participation increased and educational practices advanced, the principalship developed into its current recognized profession.

The Impact of School Leadership

School leadership has a powerful influence on school and student outcomes. Research has highlighted the crucial role of school leadership in influencing student success, second only to teaching. Effective principals have the power to create an environment that fosters learning and achievement, improve instruction on a school-wide level, analyze data to inform decision-making, nurture talent, and attract and retain effective teachers.

Research from the [Wallace Foundation](#) notes school leadership matters for a host of important school outcomes, including student achievement as measured by standardized tests. Across six studies of data with more than 22 thousand principals, researchers find the impact of replacing a below-average elementary school principal with an above-average elementary school principal would result in an additional 2.9 months of math learning and 2.7 months of reading learning each year for students in that school.

Numerous national studies, including analysis from the [National Conference of State Legislators](#), notes the importance of school leadership in shaping teacher working conditions. [Teacher working conditions](#) broadly refer to school-related factors that contribute to a teacher's professional experience, including administrative support, shared decision-making, opportunities for professional collaboration, and provision of resources for teaching and learning. Principals are a primary factor in shaping a teacher's professional experience; they can establish collaborative and trusting environments for teachers and positively impact school working conditions leading to better retention of teachers, particularly highly effective teachers.

Responsibilities of Effective School Leaders. National research consistently finds principals are most effective when equipped with strong instructional practices and can provide high-quality feedback to teachers. This view of the principalship — that it should center on instruction, not building management or other administrative matters — is one that has gained currency in recent years. The [Wallace Foundation](#) conducted a literature review of research on principal effectiveness finding five key responsibilities consequently arose.

1. Shaping a vision of academic success for all students based on high standards;
2. Creating a climate hospitable to education so safety, a cooperative spirit, and other foundations of fruitful interaction prevail;
3. Cultivating leadership in others so teachers and other adults assume their part in realizing the school vision;
4. Improving instruction to enable teachers to teach at their best and students to learn at their utmost; and
5. Managing people, data, and processes to foster school improvement.

Each of these five responsibilities interacts with the other four. For example, researchers note it is difficult to shape the academic success of students if instructional methods are not improved. A multitude of studies, including research conducted at [Stanford University](#), finds principals in top-performing schools act as the “principal teacher” and foster communities of learning, collaboration, and feedback. To ensure principals are equipped to meet these responsibilities and cultivate working conditions that enable teachers to be effective and students to learn, it is important to consider policies that shape recruitment, preparation, in-service learning opportunities, and evaluation.

How do we recruit and train school leaders?

According to the [Economic Policy Institute](#), nearly 60 percent of a school’s influence on student achievement is attributable to teacher and principal effectiveness, and principals alone account for as much as 25 percent. Studies also indicate the effects of school leadership are considerably greater in [schools with low academic outcomes](#) and there are virtually no documented instances where struggling schools are turned around without an effective school leader. This is in large part due to the notion that high-quality principals recruit, develop, and retain talented teachers and remove less effective teachers. Consequently, preparing a pipeline of principals who can dramatically improve teacher and learning is essential to increasing student achievement.

Recruiting School Leaders

School district and charter school leaders can address challenges that arise in hiring and retaining strong school principals by working to manage the “pipeline” of incoming and novice school principals. Principal pipelines are district-wide systems for identifying, training, hiring, and supporting school leaders. The [Wallace Foundation](#) identified the key components of a strong principal pipeline include:

- Adopting standards of practice and performance to guide principal preparation, hiring, evaluation, and support;
- Delivering high-quality preservice preparation to high-potential candidates;
- Using selective hiring and placement to match principal candidates to schools; and
- Aligning on-the-job evaluation and support for novice principals, with an enlarged role for principal supervisors in instructional leadership.

Research indicates building robust principal pipelines takes time; one [study](#) of six large school districts that began cultivating a principal pipeline in 2011 and fully instituted principal pipeline standards and competencies by 2015 saw positive effects including:

- A pool of candidates with more in-depth knowledge of the effective school leadership;
- Newly appointed principals were able to lead more effectively;
- Principal predispositions were more easily identified; and
- Retention of high-quality principals improved.

Training School Leaders

A growing body of literature indicates high-quality principal *preparation* is associated with positive principal, teacher, and student outcomes ranging from principals’ feelings of preparedness and their engagement in more effective practices to strengthen teacher retention and improved student outcomes. The study titled "[Preparing School Leaders for a Changing World: Lessons From Exemplary Leadership Development Programs](#)"

According to NMAC 6.60.3.7, candidates for a New Mexico administrative license are required to complete a minimum 180 hour internship throughout one full school.

conducted in 2007 provided valuable insights into effective preservice and in-service training for principals. The study identified several common elements among exemplary programs, including authentic learning opportunities that applied knowledge in practical settings, a focus on leading instruction, developing people, fostering collaboration, and managing change. Additionally, these programs emphasized mentoring, coaching, feedback, and reflection to support growth, as well as cohort or networking structures to create a professional learning community.

Principal Preparation. According to national research, including a study conducted by the Learning Policy Institute, high-quality principal preparation and development programs can improve principal’s feelings of preparedness, teacher satisfaction, retention, and student achievement. The research finds high-quality principal learning programs have common elements:

- Rigorous recruitment;
- Close district-university partnerships;
- Cohort structure; and
- Focus on important content, including leading instruction, change management, developing people, shaping a positive school culture, and meeting the diverse needs of learners.

In New Mexico, six universities and the Cooperative Education Services offer educational leadership programs to prepare principals. Of the six universities, the University of New Mexico’s Alliance for Leading and Learning offers the clearest example of the close district-university partnership and cohort structure.

Principal Preparation Programs in New Mexico

Institution	Educational Leadership Program	FY23 Enrollment
New Mexico State University	Educational Leadership and Administration	50
University of New Mexico	Alliance for Leading and Learning	11
	POLLEN Program	10
	Online Program	15
Western New Mexico University	Educational Leadership	40
Eastern New Mexico University	Educational Administration	90
University of the Southwest	MSE Educational Leadership	9
New Mexico Highlands University	Education Leadership	52
Cooperative Educational Services	Administrator Leadership Development Program	115
Statewide Totals		392

Source: New Mexico Principal Working Group



Superintendent Preparation Superintendent preparation and training remains largely undefined in New Mexico. According to some national research, a superintendent should:

- Create a culture of continuous improvement to achieve the district’s vision, mission, and goals by creating a strategic plan consistent with the district’s core values;
- Understand how and when to use different strategies for improvement, including transformation, incremental, and adaptive approaches to district and school improvement;
- Know how to engage others in an ongoing process of evidence-based inquiry and strategic planning for continuous school improvement;
- Understand how to develop a strategic plan to achieve the vision;
- Evaluate a district’s strategic plan based on the effectiveness and changing expectations of student need.

Supporting School Leadership

Professional learning for school leaders is an essential component ensuring a strong workforce. Distinguishing between the professional learning needs of teachers, principals, and district leaders is essential though not often accomplished in current structures. Research commissioned by the [School Superintendents Association](#) (AASA) found professional learning for principals should focus on the application of learning, take a systems approach, utilize a community of practice structure, and address instructional gaps informed by data. AASA noted principals are unlikely to receive these supports in school districts because professional learning spaces are often focused solely on teacher learning and are led by principals. Professional learning opportunities for district leaders are equally important and often even less accessible.

Statewide In-Service Training for School Leaders. In New Mexico, the [Public Education Department](#) (PED) provides year-long professional learning for principals and teachers through four different programs made available to school leaders serving in a New Mexico public school. These include:

- **Rise:** a two-year program designed to build the competencies of school leaders to assess school needs and establish annual plans to drive effective transformation strategies including data-driven instruction, school culture of achievement, and feedback cycles. Over 400 school leaders have participated since 2014.
- **Thrive:** a one-year program designed to support school leaders and instructional coaches to develop the essential instructional skills and competencies necessary to address the needs of New Mexico’s diverse student population. Approximately 200 principals and instructional coaches participated since 2021.
- **Lead:** a one-year program to provide early-career principals with practice information that will support them in their role as school leaders. Approximately 70 early career principals have participated since 2021.
- **SOAR:** A 2022-2023 school year pilot program for superintendents to help identify district-wide areas of strength and opportunities for improvement.

School Leadership Institute

During the 2010 legislative session, lawmakers created the School Leadership Institute to provide a comprehensive and cohesive framework for preparing, mentoring, and providing professional development for principals and superintendents in public schools. Section 21-1-44 NMSA 1978 establishes the institute shall offer the following programs:

- Licensure preparation for aspiring principals;
- Mentoring for new principals and other public school leaders;
- Intensive support for principals at schools in need of improvement;
- Professional development for aspiring superintendents; and
- Mentoring for new superintendents.

The School Leadership Institute is administratively attached to the Higher Education Department and requires HED to provide administrative services for the institute. In FY10, the Legislature appropriated \$200 thousand from the General Fund and the Wallace Foundation provided an additional \$210 thousand to establish the School Leadership Institute at the University of New Mexico. However, it appears the institution has not received additional state funding since the original appropriation and is no longer active. When originally founded, the School Leadership Institute received national praise for its innovative approach to principal and superintendent recruitment and retention.

note since 2015, many states have steadily weakened their principal evaluation system requirements. Researchers note concern that quality of principals nationally continues to vary and significantly affects student achievement and school climate. New Mexico is working on reforming the principal evaluation system. In 2021, PED convened the New Mexico Principal Evaluation Task Force to review and, if necessary, recommend changes to the Highly Objective Uniform Statewide Standard of Evaluation for Principals and Assistant Principals, the current principal evaluation system developed in 2010. After examining relevant research and policy, the Task Force made the following four recommendations:

- **Purpose of the New Mexico principal evaluation system:** Emphasize leadership growth and development;
- **System components and processes:** Include supervisor-principal conferences, observations and feedback, professional learning, and staff and community input;
- **System inputs and evidence:** Allow for local adaptation, while retaining some core evaluation aspects across the New Mexico's diverse education system; and
- **Support for implementation:** Require professional learning for principals and principal supervisors, and a centralized data system for capturing implementation fidelity and impact.

The New Mexico Legislature invests in school leader in-service training. During the 2023 legislative session, lawmakers included a \$5 million recurring appropriation to PED to fund school leader professional development. This represents a \$2.5 million increase over the FY23 appropriation, which will allow the department to provide training to additional school and district leaders.

Evaluating School Leaders.

National research indicates, similar to teacher evaluation, the strongest principal evaluation systems are comprised of multiple measures. Just as observing teachers gives valuable insight into their classroom practices and provides an opportunity to give targeted feedback, observations of principals by their supervisors can yield similarly rich information. Observations can be helpful in part because principals' effectiveness in organizational management and instructional planning is related to positive student and teacher outcomes.

Statewide Principal Evaluation. Many national analysts, including researchers at the [National Council on Teacher Quality](#),

During spring of the 2023-2024 school year, PED will pilot the new evaluation system built on the task force recommendations and aligned with the five essentials for school leadership, which the department aligned to New Mexico’s principal standards. LESC staff will evaluate how these principles align with both researched backed practices and the preparation principals are receiving at their preparation institutions.

The Five Essentials for School Leadership

Organization Advancement	Strategically managing personnel, financial, technology, and other organizational resources for continuous improvement
Instructional Core	Ensuring curriculum, instruction and assessment are rigorous, aligned, engaging, equitable, research-based, and calibrated to student interests, heritages, and needs.
Talent	Maintaining systems for identifying, developing, and retaining a diverse educator workforce.
Culture and Safety	Creating a safe, positive culture aimed at improving professional and educational experiences.
Personal Integrity	Ethics, responsibilities and other observable, personal leadership characteristics common all principals

Source: The 5 Essentials Practices align with the New Mexico’s principal standards, NMPED

Pandemic Impacts

During the 2020-2021 school year, AIR, in collaboration with the National Association of Elementary School Principals, began a study of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on school principals. AIR found principals experienced changes in their work responsibilities as a result of the pandemic. Principals report the numbers of working did not change drastically from pre-pandemic levels, their professional responsibilities and the distribution of responsibilities were different. Through the study, principals highlighted two emerging areas of work that they believed were not adequately covered in preparation or current principal in-service supports:

- **Crisis Management Skills:** principals noted the need for improved crisis management training and integration with community emergency response plans to better prepare for future crises; and
- **Social Media and Communications Management:** principals recognized the growing significance of social media and communications management in their daily responsibilities.

During the June 2022 interim hearing, members of the LESC heard from school leaders who echoed the concerns elevated by this AIR study, noting the need for expanded support so principals are able to adequately address the changing needs of the schools they lead.

Next Steps

Long term and continuous investments in school leadership is key to building on existing strengths and improving the health of the overall health of New Mexico’s education system. Over the interim, LESC staff will continue to research how the legislature can support school leaders and improve the quality of recruitment, preparation, and retention efforts related to school leadership.

Principal Pipeline Principal pipelines, or the systematic process of developing and retaining leaders who can positively impact student achievement and school success, will require the work of state-level policy makers, district-level implementers, and institutes of high-education to work collectively. This is because principal pipelines are a systems approach to improving school leadership. The creation of a holistic principal pipeline will require policy to consider district recruitment efforts, setting principal standards, ensure principal preparation programs are high-quality, fund selective hiring and placement processes, implement a consistent and high-caliber principal evaluation system. To improve principal pipelines, lawmakers should consider addressing funding targeted recruitment strategies, set rigorous leadership standards, establish a timely principal workforce data monitoring system, and provide strong in-service professional learning opportunities for school leaders.

Relevant Budget Line Items:	Relevant Policy Considerations:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Principal Recruiter Position 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Legislature could consider funding a principal recruiter positions to oversee the implementation of leadership standards in principal recruitment and selection practices.

School Leader Preparation The Legislature allocated \$2 million in FY24 to support the implementation of principal residencies pilots across the state, aligned with research on the importance of the internship component of principal preparation. Lawmakers should monitor this investment and continue to grow the principal residency program. In addition to residencies, lawmakers should consider working in partnership with principal preparation program leaders to set high-quality standards for principal preparation programs.

In-Service Professional Learning The Legislature allocated \$5 million to support school leadership professional learning programs provided by the Public Education Department. Currently, PED provides professional learning programs to school leaders including a new program focused on superintendent development. As the state continues to invest in school leader professional learning, LESC staff could partner with PED to understand if PED could expand these school leader professional learning opportunities to include pre-service learning for school leaders and increase the reach of these professional learning opportunities to include district leadership.

Implementation of Principal Evaluation Principal evaluation to improve and inform school leadership work is a key component of a strong principal pipeline system. PED is piloting the new principal evaluation system during the 2023-2024 school year. This evaluation system is based on New Mexico’s principal standards, another component of an effective principal pipeline system. LESC staff should monitor the piloting of this evaluation system and craft recommendations based on the training needs to ensure effective implementation moving forward.