

Who's Next?

Let's Stop Gambling on School Performance
and Plan for Principal Succession

SREB's
LEARNING-CENTERED
LEADERSHIP PROGRAM
Research & Evaluation

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Message from the Senior Vice President of SREB

Each year, one-fifth of the principals in our nation's public schools leave their jobs. Their departure creates more than 18,000 vacancies at the critical core of our K-12 education enterprise: school-level leadership.

Anyone with a basic understanding of how schools function today knows that these vacant positions must be filled without delay. But who is next? Who will ensure that each of these 18,000 schools moves toward higher levels of performance? And where will school districts find these people?

Decades of school leadership research make it clear that if we expect to create or sustain a high-performing school, we must choose a principal who has the strength of character, the knowledge about learning and the leadership savvy to thrive in what is arguably education's most challenging job. *It's not something we want to leave to the luck of the draw.*

Yet the unfortunate truth is that when these inevitable vacancies occur, many school district leaders are caught gambling that several highly qualified applicants will step forward, and they will be lucky enough to fill the position with the best candidate who happens to apply. And like other games of chance, the odds are stacked against the gamblers.

The Perpetual Crisis

Through programs like *High Schools That Work* and *Making Middle Grades Work*, the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) has partnered with hundreds of schools and districts since the mid-1980s. We can say unequivocally that it is highly unusual for a school district to accurately anticipate its principal vacancies — or to identify well in advance multiple internal candidates who are developed over a period of years so that they are ready for the job immediately when a vacancy occurs. This lack of foresight and planning is widespread, but its ramifications are most severe in challenged urban and rural school districts, where finding good principals often is a perpetual crisis.

Two changes must take place, high up in the leadership food chain, to address this chronic weakness in the American public school system: 1) State leaders have to decide that a steady and reliable supply of effective principals is crucial if we are going to make long-term improvement in education; and 2) school superintendents and school boards must accept that the old system of choosing school leaders — so often characterized by patronage and accommodation — is a huge barrier to improving schools. We need a much more objective, transparent process.

The Principals We Need

Our nation continues to field-test policies that we hope will guarantee every child an effective teacher in every classroom. Yet we mostly ignore, by our actions if not by our words, that the surest route to achieving this goal is for states and districts to focus on getting a highly qualified principal in every school — a person who knows curriculum and instruction, how to lead change, and how to engender the professional pride and persistence needed for a faculty to do the hard work of change.

We need principals who can take good schools and lead their teachers and students to excellence. We need principals who can take broken schools and help them find the path to good and then to great. School reform is a highly collaborative process — it does not work to cast the principal in the role of hero. But there is no doubt that effective principal leadership is an indispensable component of transformation.

Districts must hire principals. The only question is whether they will do it haphazardly or with foresight and planning. Not having a plan that provides a reliable source of effective leaders leaves a district reacting to events. Succession planning puts the district in charge of events and in charge of its future.

Planning for Principal Succession

In *Who's Next? Let's Stop Gambling on School Performance and Plan for Principal Succession*, SREB delineates critical actions that states, districts, universities and principals themselves should take as part of a systematic plan to address principal succession. None of this is

possible, though, until local school leaders commit to making highly successful schools their top priority and acknowledge that this priority requires a reliable pool of well-prepared principals-in-waiting.

We know that local school leadership creates a strong foundation for our public school system. At the same time, the need for effective principal leadership is too important to be left entirely to local circumstances. States share responsibility for public education, and state decision-makers must persuade and support local school districts to:

- Create a system for identifying leadership talent within their schools.
- Hold every principal accountable for developing promising educators in his or her school as future leaders.
- Expect school districts and state-certified university leadership programs to build a system that blends university course work with quality field-based experiences.
- Provide principals with the flexibility and coaching support they need to lead effectively once they assume their roles.

In essence, the state has to send a clear message — not only to schools but to parents and community leaders — that unless more attention is paid to the selection, development and support of principals, there is not much hope that we are going to move all of our schools to higher levels of performance.

Finding and Developing the Talent

Where do local school systems find the principals of tomorrow? In their classrooms. District leaders and school principals need to look for current classroom educators who have demonstrated that they are great teachers, who know effective instructional strategies and who have the knack for leading collaboratively. Before they enter formal preparation, these teachers should be challenged with real-school assignments that can reveal their interpersonal skills, their task persistence and whether they have the “burn” to improve schools for all groups of students.

Once they have been identified as potential principal candidates, these teacher-leaders enter a preparation program that combines theory, research-based knowledge and the opportunity to participate in a structured, field-based internship experience with mentors and coaches who help them acquire the knowledge and insights to lead high-performing schools. Traditionally, much of the preparation at this level has been consigned to university programs. But the issue of principal succession is too important for districts to simply expect the university to get it right. Districts have to accept responsibility to be equal partners with the university in preparing future principals. In an era when school budgets are extremely overstressed, district leaders may have to be especially creative to carve out the resources necessary to support a principal internship program. But internships are essential. Up to 80 percent of what principals learn about the job is learned on the job.

This kind of preparation for the principalship is not something that can be wrapped up in 18 months and stamped “certified.” It is a leadership development journey, first within the school and district, segueing into a formal master’s degree program that is blended with work-site learning, and evolving into a series of school-based leadership roles that eventually lead to flying solo in a full-fledged principal’s job. Even then, new principals will need strategic leadership coaching over several years to help them avoid mistakes that can derail careers, especially in our most challenging schools.

In rural, urban or suburban America, a school district without a principal succession plan that includes these key components is a district that will never achieve maximum student and school performance. It is as stark and simple as that.



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Introduction

“There is not a single documented case of a school turning around its pupil achievement trajectory in the absence of talented leadership.”

— *How Leadership Influences Student Learning*¹

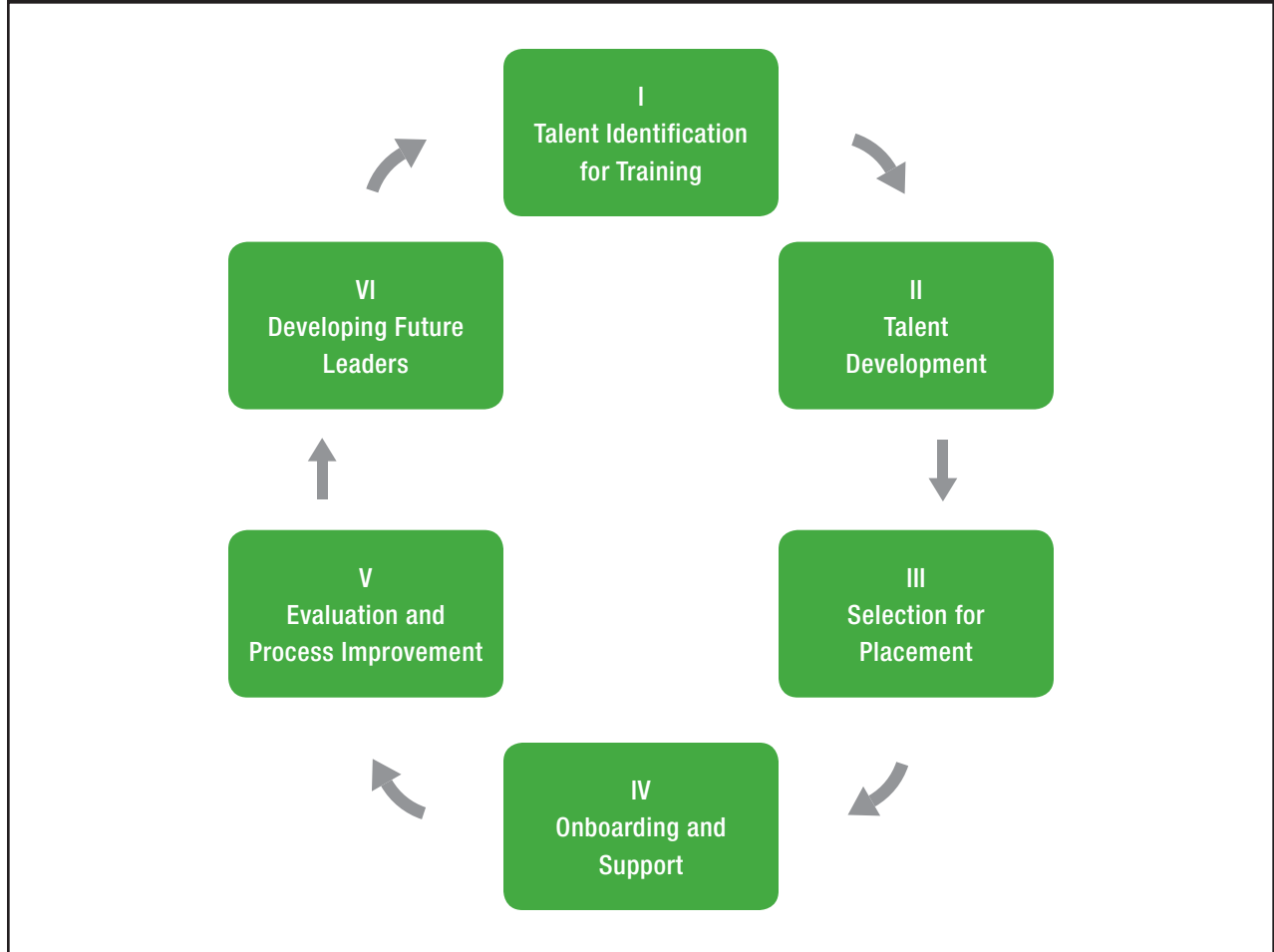
The future of public school performance demands that states and districts actively develop and seek strong principals. Instructional leadership is the critical element that is missing in efforts to improve America’s lowest-performing schools and in moving good schools to great schools. Turnover among principals currently is at an unsustainable level, and the quality of the pool of leaders available to step up in the next few years is suspect. **Better succession planning for school leaders offers a viable solution to these problems.**

Each year, about 20 percent of the nation’s 90,000 public school principals leave their jobs, leaving more than 18,000 schools with a new principal each fall.² Most of the time, the district office is assuming that several highly qualified applicants will step forward and the vacancy will be filled by the best candidate. **It is rare for a district to anticipate its vacancies accurately and to identify ahead of time multiple internal candidates who have been groomed and developed over several years so that they are ready for the job immediately.** It is even rarer in challenged urban and rural school districts, where finding good leaders often is a perpetual crisis.

This scenario *can* be different. States and districts can engage in succession planning for school leaders and know, with far more certainty than they do now, that they have the school leaders they will need in the coming years. Some districts and states — Providence, Rhode Island, and Delaware, for example — are leading the way in planning the succession of school leaders. Experts have studied the issue and given thought to how to approach succession planning for principals, and rich literature on the topic in the business sector offers ideas applicable to the school leadership succession problem.

The Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) sees succession planning for school leaders as a virtuous circle that begins with the identification of talented young educators and then continues over time with talent development and, eventually, the selection of school leaders. (See Figure 1.) Selected leaders need substantial, continuing support as they assume and grow into their responsibilities as school principals. At the end of the process, they are prepared to be successful principals. Even then, however, new principals remain very much involved in succession planning. One of the nonnegotiable responsibilities of their position is that they develop the leadership capacity and potential of their teachers, including developing some teachers as future school leaders.

**Figure 1:
SREB's Conceptual Framework for Succession Planning**



Critical Actions to Support Succession Planning

State Actions

States have defined the role of the principal in law and in policy, establishing criteria for licensure and stipulating the duties, responsibilities, authority, and even the salary of the position.³ But most states have done relatively little to promote orderly succession planning to ensure that these critical positions are consistently filled by quality leaders. Through development of standards, policies and the provision of technical assistance, states must assist school districts in developing a functioning system of succession planning that results in principals who can improve schools and student learning. States can take a number of actions to provide a better pipeline of qualified principals:

- Establish clear standards for school leadership that can guide in the selection of future principals — standards that look to the future and not just to the present and past.
- Ensure that school leadership standards and principal evaluation systems emphasize leaders' responsibilities to develop teacher-leaders and future school leaders.

- Support at least two years of mentoring for all new principals.
- Create provisional school leadership licensure options for persons enrolled in school principal preparation programs that provide them with opportunities to blend school-based learning with formal classroom studies.
- Support the professional development of current and future school leaders.
- Provide technical assistance to districts, especially those with dysfunctional schools, in creating succession plans.
- Encourage and assist small and rural districts in establishing consortia for succession planning and developing leadership talent pools.
- Establish a statewide pool of high-quality future school leaders.
- Develop tools to better predict who has the potential to succeed as a principal.
- Require teachers' and parents' involvement in hiring principals.
- Support School Administration Managers (SAMs) who can take on administrative duties, allowing principals to focus more time and effort on improving instruction.
- Encourage research into the *specific* reasons why principals run into difficulties — as well as research into solutions to avoid derailment.
- Facilitate partnerships between districts and universities and other training entities for the preparation of future school principals.

District Actions

Districts will hire principals. The only question is whether they will do it with or without planning ahead of time. **Not having a plan or a strong pool of leaders leaves a district reacting to events. Succession planning puts the district in charge of events and in charge of its future.** Districts that have systems in place to provide every school with a highly capable principal are more likely to graduate students prepared for college and careers. Districts can take a number of actions to ensure they have such systems to staff school leadership vacancies with well-prepared principals:

- Schedule time each year for the superintendent and key district leaders to focus on school leadership succession planning.
- Develop and maintain a list of “ready now,” “ready in one year,” and “ready in two to five years” internal candidates for future principal vacancies, with a goal of at least two “ready now” candidates for every anticipated vacancy.
- Carefully screen a pool of future school leaders and provide them with stretch assignments that will test their skills and broaden their horizons.
- Develop a system for aspiring leaders in official preparation programs to participate in a range of school-based learning experiences that are blended with classroom study.

- Collaborate with university-based preparation programs for school leaders so that course work has practical applications and aspiring leaders have opportunities to implement what they are learning.
- Support at least two years of mentoring for all new principals in the district.
- Hold each principal accountable for identifying and developing a member of the staff who could lead the school to a higher level of effectiveness.

Principal Actions

A teacher can reach 20 to 30 students in a class period. **A principal can impact the lives of anywhere from a few hundred to a few thousand students during a year.** If principals can take the following actions to develop their teachers, and help to train and prepare future principals, they will leave a legacy that will impact their entire community for years to come.

- Take responsibility for developing at least one person in the school who is ready to step up as principal.
- Use annual performance reviews to identify teachers with leadership potential, have conversations with those teachers to encourage them to pursue a career as a principal and create expanded leadership opportunities for them within the school.
- Identify the natural leaders in the building — the teachers to whom other teachers gravitate and from whom they take their lead — and give them opportunities to grow.
- Insist that assistant principals engage in and master all aspects of school leadership, with a particular focus on curriculum and instruction.
- Work with classroom teachers who are in school leadership training programs so that they have released time to complete a range of experiences through an internship.
- After developing their own proficiency and skills as principals, accept the role of formally mentoring novice and future school leaders.

This report is the result of a careful review of succession planning literature, conversations with expert informants, and observations SREB has made over the past two decades of working with more 3,000 high schools and middle grades schools. Its three main parts **set some guideposts to help state, district and school leaders see in a practical way what they can do to improve succession planning for principals.**

- Part 1: The Case for Succession Planning
- Part 2: Five Essential Conditions for Effective Succession Planning
- Part 3: A Conceptual Framework for Succession Planning

Part 1: The Case for Succession Planning

Educators' and policy-makers' understanding that school leadership matters is supported by a growing body of research that has measured the effects of leadership in a variety of ways. This research has not challenged the understanding that, among all school factors, the classroom teacher has the greatest effect on student learning; but school leadership now has been identified as second only to classroom teaching in its effect on student learning. Kenneth Leithwood and his colleagues have estimated that school leadership accounts for 5 percent to 7 percent of the differences in student learning and achievement between schools.⁴ **Moreover, teaching and school leadership are inextricably linked — it is neither teachers alone nor principals alone who improve schools, but teachers and principals working together.** In statewide surveys of teacher data for Arizona, Mississippi and Ohio, the Center for Teaching Quality found that school leadership was the top-rated factor when teachers considered their willingness to stay in a school.⁵ Strong school leadership is essential to attracting and retaining quality classroom teachers.

Harmful Effects of Principal Turnover

Just as strong principal leadership is positively correlated with student achievement, high principal turnover is connected with lower student achievement. A study of 80 schools and 2,570 teacher surveys found that the schools with the highest numbers of principals in the previous 10 years had the weakest school culture, the weakest classroom curricula and instruction, and the lowest student achievement. School culture appears to be a mechanism whereby principals affect student achievement, and rapid turnover of principals is related to a weak school culture.⁶ Constant turnover negates clarity and a sense of direction, erodes the trust of faculty, and gives school improvement efforts a stutter-step quality.

A change in school leadership is “one of the most significant events in the life of all schools,”⁷ yet most districts do not have a well-developed system for leadership succession.⁸ **Rather, districts engage in “hire and hope” practices of looking for the best candidate available when an opening occurs.** They follow what some private companies refer to as “test-tube development”: Put a principal in a test tube, turn up the heat, and see what you get. If you don't get what you want, get another principal, and heat up another test tube.⁹ In either the private, for-profit world or the world of public education, test-tube development is a poor practice.

The National Population of Principals

The average principal in 2007-2008 was 49 years old, had been a principal for 7.5 years, and had been the leader of his or her present school for 4.2 years.¹⁰ A Texas study of 16,500 principals found that elementary principals averaged the longest tenure, at five years. Middle grades principals averaged 4.5 years, and high school principals averaged the shortest tenure, at 3.5 years.¹¹ **In spite of this regular turnover, few districts have clear succession planning strategies that have resulted in deep pools of school leadership talent.** Furthermore, the problem is not limited to traditional public schools. A recent report on charter schools shows that 71 percent of charter principals plan to leave their schools within five years — yet only 53 percent of charters have made plans for succession, and investigators found that most of those plans were flimsy.¹²

The problem of filling principal vacancies is not about quantity. It is about quality.¹³ School districts need to identify, develop and successfully place *leaders of learning*, rather than finding “warm bodies” to plug holes.¹⁴ Indeed, states are licensing plenty of educators to fill these positions. For example, in the single year of 2004, Alabama graduated 743 potential school leaders to serve a state with only 1,500 schools.¹⁵ Since 2004, Alabama has taken significant steps to reduce its leadership preparation numbers so they will be more in line with its number of openings. The state also has taken steps to boost the selectivity and quality of its preparation systems. **However, too many states continue to produce unnecessary surpluses of poorly qualified school leadership candidates, rather than encouraging partnerships between districts and universities to create a new system based on producing fewer but better-prepared candidates to serve as school leaders.**

The problem of filling principal positions is also unevenly distributed, with urban and rural areas encountering much greater difficulty in finding quality school leaders.¹⁶ The uneven distribution of school leadership talent was made especially clear in a 2007 study in North Carolina that demonstrated Praxis™ and School Leaders Licensure Assessment scores, leadership ratings, tenure in the school and attendance at competitive undergraduate institutions were all lower for principals who led higher-poverty schools.¹⁷ **The challenge in education is to adopt succession strategies that can meet the leadership needs of all schools — including hard-to-staff schools.**

Planned and Unplanned Discontinuity

Leadership change can be either planned or unplanned, and it can result in either continuity or discontinuity. (See Figure 2.) **When things are working well, planned continuity can maintain a winning tradition. When a school is persistently failing and its leadership is making no progress, a deliberate break from the past — or planned discontinuity — is necessary.** Planned discontinuity also is necessary if a principal turns out to be a poor fit for a school.

Figure 2: The Four Quadrants of Succession		
	Continuity	Discontinuity
Planned (purposeful)	The school is successful, and succession strategies are adopted deliberately to maintain and build on success.	The school is struggling, and succession strategies are adopted to replace underperforming leaders and support new leadership that can turn the school around.
Unplanned (accidental/unintentional)	The school is struggling but, for lack of leadership alternatives, continues on a flat or declining glide path; or, by default, a change in leadership results in the cloning of the previous leader, and the school is locked in a culture of low expectations and low performance.	Unplanned leadership turnover results in unpredictable and perhaps traumatic changes in a school; it might be providential, but probably not. Because the process has been random, the results are likely to be random.

Adapted from: Hargreaves, Andy, and Dean Fink. *Sustainable Leadership*. Jossey-Bass, 2005.

Unplanned continuity is the best descriptor of the process of leadership change in many districts. In unplanned continuity, the school may not be performing well, but the district lacks a plan to change the trajectory through better leadership development and succession planning. Thus, principals who are not succeeding are allowed to continue leading schools. When vacancies occur, they are filled with convenient candidates who promise to continue doing what already has not worked. **Unplanned discontinuity** categorizes those cases where district leaders are taken by surprise by a principal's departure, and, having done nothing to prepare for the contingency, their response is simply to post a job announcement and hope for the best.

Planned discontinuity — the deliberate replacement or transfer of poorly performing or poorly placed principals — is one strategy for school improvement, but it cannot be the only strategy. While some cuts are undeniably necessary, voluntary and forced turnover among principals is already at roughly 20 percent. The planned removal of principals who are not succeeding and are unlikely to improve is made difficult by the lack of viable replacements.¹⁸ As Mark Atkinson, founder of Teachscape, said in discussing options to match the success of top-performing nations, “We can’t fire our way to Finland.”¹⁹

Districts need to develop principals over time. The succession planning literature for the private sector has challenged the notion that companies can succeed by *picking* winning leaders rather than *developing* them. In criticizing current corporate practices, Bower wrote: “Part of the problem is that we are increasingly picking leaders as if they are interchangeable parts to be discarded when they’re not performing well to make room for a new one purchased in the market.”²⁰ At Enron, in a process dubbed “rank and yank,” mid-level managers were systematically ranked on the basis of revenue generated and were fired “if they [didn’t] meet the highest standards, as if there [was] a line of better qualified candidates just waiting to get in the door.” The problem was not high expectations, but a culture that rewarded risk-taking, inflating successes, hiding failure, focusing on the short term and allowing ends to justify means. Ultimately, the company collapsed amid criminal investigations into its accounting practices.²¹

In terms of school principals, currently there is not “a line of better qualified candidates just waiting to get in the door” — at least not to become principals in the nation’s most challenged schools. One state leader told SREB that districts in his state had “gone to the bench” again and again in response to the pressure to get schools to meet the Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) criteria defined under the *No Child Left Behind Act*. He noted that at this point, many of the people left on the bench do not have the skill-set needed to succeed as principals and should probably stay on the bench. Without sustainable systems in place to develop new leaders and to support current principals, **the current desperate drive to improve schools by switching out leaders will lead to a downward spiral as the pool of legitimate and adequately prepared talent is tapped out.** Finding the future principals necessary to continue school success or to reverse failure will require proactive succession planning.

Advantages of Promoting from Within

Top-performing school districts tend to promote from within. For example, recent winners of the Broad Prize for Excellence in Urban Education hired less than 10 percent of their principals from outside the district. Long Beach Unified School District, California; Gwinnett County Public Schools, Georgia; Montgomery County Public Schools, Maryland;

and Aldine Independent School District, Texas, all are examples of award-winning, high-performing districts with track records of developing their own principals. Highly effective districts grow their own leaders, because these districts already commonly practice many of the keys to succession planning:²²

- Knowing your people
- Rewarding performance
- Distributing leadership
- Valuing professional development
- Cultivating professional learning communities
- Selecting and developing the right people
- Providing supportive working conditions

These are all things that most good districts do; thus, a well-run district that has never explicitly done succession planning will find that it has already laid much of the groundwork. In successful districts, planning for succession is “not an add-on program; it [is] part of the thread and fabric of the organization.”²³ Creating the capacity for succession planning and growing leaders from within contributes to the overall health of the organization because it focuses on recognizing and increasing the value of the people in the organization.

An emphasis on growing leaders as a best practice is consistent with private sector management and succession planning literature. In his book *Good to Great*, Jim Collins observed that only 5 percent of his “great company” CEOs were external hires, whereas 30 percent of his comparison company CEOs were outsiders (who averaged half the tenure of the great company CEOs).²⁴ Joseph Bower looked at a larger sample: all CEO successions at Standard & Poor’s (S&P) index companies over several years. (See Table 1.) He found that companies that promoted from within outperformed the market by an average of 1.48 percent, while those hiring from outside the company underperformed against the index by an average of -0.28 percent; the median company with an outsider CEO underperformed at a level 3.09 percent below the market. He also found that most companies prefer to hire from within and are more likely to do so if the company is experiencing a period of success. Almost three-fourths of successors are insiders at companies that outperform the S&P 500. Conversely, only 60 percent of successors are insiders at companies that are doing worse than the index.

CEO hired from:	Average change in stock prices compared to overall S&P performance	Median change in stock prices compared to overall S&P performance	Number of Observations
Inside the company	+1.48%	-0.15%	1,214
Outside the company	-0.28%	-3.09%	600

Source: Bower, Joseph L. *The CEO Within: Why Inside-Outsiders Are the Key to Succession Planning*. Harvard Business School Press, 2007.

Bower cited research showing that when times are tough, corporate boards tend to discount the abilities of internal candidates and look outside to find a charismatic, “celebrity” CEO.²⁵ However, he found that “insiders outperformed outsiders in both cases [i.e., for above- and below-average companies], but especially when the company had had poor prior performance. In other words, the conventional logic that poor performance requires going outside is not justified by [these] data.” How do these findings translate to the matter of replacing leaders in persistently failing schools?

Are school systems approaching succession for school leaders in the wrong way when they repeatedly try to fix persistently failing schools by imposing leadership from the outside? It is relatively easy for top-performing school districts, like successful corporations, to groom their future leaders from within. **The real challenge is: How do district leaders create a system to find, develop and support principals in struggling schools and school systems?**

They may need to look within those schools to find the teacher-leaders with the talent, vision and zeal to create engaging learning environments and revolutionize school culture.

Part 2: Five Essential Conditions for Effective Succession Planning

Five conditions must be met if a district wishes to plan for the succession of its principals: (1) The district and school cultures must be based on a set of inter-related organizational values that can foster a succession planning mindset. (2) The superintendent must commit to leading the work. (3) Human Resources must facilitate the work. (4) The district must know what it wants in its leaders. (5) The state must have a policy framework that supports succession planning.

Organizational Values Support Succession Planning

Effective succession planning requires that districts and schools operate under a recommended set of interrelated values, some of which are drawn from the succession planning literature (especially Hargreaves and Fink), and others drawn from SREB's more than 20 years of work in school improvement.

Accountability

To find principals who can lead and improve student learning, a school system must be able to identify teachers who have demonstrated leadership capacity and are increasing academic achievement, intellectual development, social growth and responsible behavior for all groups of students. The identification of talented educators with a high potential to be future principals becomes an important incentive in making evaluations for all staff more open and honest; holding teachers accountable for academic, intellectual, behavioral and character development in students; differentiating between teachers who are excellent instructors and those who are not; and determining whether the high-performing teachers have demonstrated leadership with other teachers. **It is difficult for a principal to have a personal sense of accountability for student growth if he or she was never accountable as a teacher for the academic, intellectual, behavioral and character development of students.**

Applying successful business practices to education would require districts to hold principals accountable for developing future leaders and for creating an organizational structure that will enable them to grow.²⁶ The culture in the best businesses in the corporate world is that managers are accountable for meeting goals relating to revenue — and also for making sure that the goals are met by implementing best-in-the-field business practices that would build success for the long term. Public education often lacks this clarity in holding principals accountable for ensuring students are ready for the next step — on track to graduate from high school; prepared for college and careers; and prepared to be competent, productive and responsible adults — and for using best-in-the-field school and classroom practices.

Good succession planning will require districts to support principals in differentiating between weak and strong teachers and in developing growth plans for their weaker teachers. A successful school superintendent told the attendees of SREB's 2009 Annual Leadership Forum that when he became superintendent of another district in the state, he asked all of his principals to name their three best teachers and their three worst teachers. He then pulled out the evaluations for the teachers who had just been named and showed the principals that there was no way to

differentiate the good teachers from the poor teachers on the basis of their formal evaluations — the best teachers and worst teachers had the same marks. The district had never set a high expectation to differentiate between weak and strong teachers, prepared principals to make such judgments or provided valid evaluation tools. Nor were the principals expected to help weak teachers develop a growth plan for improvement.

Succession planning requires real evaluations identifying those teachers who have strong instructional skills — and those who have weak skills. Historically, there have been limited reasons for school leaders to bother differentiating the performance and potential of their teachers. Teacher salaries have been determined by length of service, education levels and collective bargaining agreements, with performance kept out of the equation in most cases. The organizational structure of American schools has been remarkably flat in comparison with almost any other organization, public or private — a failing that has impeded the ability of good teachers to provide leadership to weak teachers. Enrollment in traditional leadership preparation programs has largely been on the basis of self-selection.²⁷ In short, there have been virtually no reasons for evaluations to differentiate among classroom teachers. Consequently, a tradition has evolved whereby teachers expect and administrators indulge in unrealistic performance reviews for most teachers, enabling the good, the bad and the average to merge into an indistinguishable mass. **A system and culture of real evaluations and accountability are prerequisites for succession planning.**

Professionalism

Professionalism is about administrators and teachers taking pride in the continuous improvement of their knowledge and skills as educators and in the success of their students. **Professionals stay current with the education literature and are always seeking out new ideas to better themselves and their colleagues in order to advance the success of their students.** When this is the norm in a school's culture, teachers naturally begin to obtain the knowledge and skills that will enable them to aspire to become good leaders.

Instilling professionalism in a school is not always easy, and it requires much more than occasional book studies or stand-alone professional development events. Schools with demoralized faculty members, toxic cultures, and poor knowledge bases and skill sets need ongoing external help to develop a professional orientation and ethic for continuous personal and school improvement.

The practice of professional learning communities (PLCs) can raise the professionalism of the education field by providing opportunities for all members of a school to assume professional responsibility for collectively identifying and solving the problems of the school.²⁸ PLCs offer a framework for continuous learning and improvement that is monitored and led from within, based on members' intrinsic motivations to improve school and teaching practice, rather than on external licensure requirements and top-down authority. PLCs can become the breeding ground for future school leaders because they provide opportunities for the leadership and facilitation skills of certain teachers to become apparent. In order to function well, PLCs require teachers to become teacher-leaders, and leaders naturally emerge from PLC settings. But — importantly — **schools that begin with a weak culture will need a skilled principal and substantial external support if they are to develop vibrant PLCs.**

Another advantage of PLCs is that they create a common language for understanding and resolving problems of pedagogy, a deeper understanding of how to teach to grade-level standards, and a common vision of how to advance the intellectual growth, creativity and personal responsibility of all students. They allow for school administrators and teachers to develop and share a common and continuously growing body of knowledge about research-based practice that will improve student success.

Professionalism assumes that talent matters — that teachers are not interchangeable commodities²⁹ and that every teacher has a unique set of skills. This assumption then leads to three critical and interrelated conclusions: First, if teachers have unique skills, then school leaders should treat teachers as experts and draw on their skills to identify the root causes of existing problems and find solutions to them. Second, some teachers have more of the skills and characteristics that give them potential to become school leaders, and these teachers need to be identified and groomed early in their careers. Third, like any other talent, such as in music or athletics,³⁰ talent in education benefits from training, practice and coaching — it doesn't automatically improve just because another year has gone by.

Teamwork

Schools that rely more on teams to make and implement decisions are more likely to develop teachers who have team-building and team-leading skills. It is important to establish teamwork for at least three reasons:

1. Teams allow teacher-leaders to emerge and develop.
2. Teams provide training grounds for potential school principals.
3. Teams enable groups within the building to take ownership of problems and solutions.

The job of the principal has grown to the extent that it is impossible for one person to do on his or her own. As one of the interviewees for this report observed, “A principal cannot be effective without some teacher leadership within his or her own building.”³¹ Effective school principals know how to build and lead teams, and leadership preparation programs that are redesigning themselves to prepare principals as instructional leaders are placing greater emphasis on team-building. **A collaborative, team-based approach to solving school problems provides a fertile field for discovering and growing future principals.**

Trust

The identification and cultivation of teacher-leaders and future principals requires meaningful opportunities for teachers to take on leadership roles. **Practicing “distributed” leadership requires measured acts of trust on the part of a school principal, and it is distributed leadership that affords aspiring future principals the opportunity to spread their wings.**³² Principals must be willing to let their teachers try new things and to help them figure out what went wrong if their ideas fail. Distributed leadership also requires that teachers reciprocate with trust in their school leaders. Teachers who are concerned that they will not be supported by their principal are unlikely to accept responsibilities outside their own classroom. Researchers note: “Trust is an indispensable resource for [school improvement efforts].

Effective organizations depend and thrive on trust. . . . It improves organizations, increases achievement, and boosts energy and morale.”³³ Trust has a residual effect, as a principal whose only experiences have been in untrusting school environments will find it harder to lead a school with a leadership style based on trust.

Ownership

Successful districts take ownership of “growing their own” future leaders, rather than expecting to obtain ready-made leaders “off-the-shelf” from university programs or other districts. Highly effective districts, including many recipients and runners-up for the Broad Prize, have long-standing policies of growing their own leaders. For example, the Long Beach Unified School District in California has a history of growing its own administrators through professional development. Superintendent Chris Steinhauser, himself a product of the system, has said that is one of the reasons the district has an attrition rate of only 7 percent among new teachers.²⁴

Successful succession planning is dependent on a district culture that supports principals and teachers to take ownership of problems and causes. This will not occur in a school district that does not model and support a culture in which teachers are permitted and expected to work collaboratively to improve the school and implement solutions they help to define. **Rather, it requires the establishment of a district vision that principals and teachers can shape to fit the unique circumstances of their school.**

Principals are expected to take ownership of identifying and developing teachers who have the potential to become school leaders. The nation’s most successful companies understand that “a leader who doesn’t prepare for the future has flunked an important leadership test.”³⁵ One company identified as a leader in succession planning requires its managers annually to identify two or three of their direct reports who can effectively take their places if necessary. If they are not confident that they have any direct reports who could take their places, then it becomes a top priority to identify and develop possible replacements over the next year — not having internal candidates for replacement is not tolerated two years in a row. This type of expectation is unusual in education, especially in persistently low-performing schools.

Transparency

Effective succession planning requires that districts be transparent in the process they use in selecting principals and aspiring leaders and that the process be based on proven merit — not favoritism or political considerations.

Highly capable teachers need to know early in their careers — indeed, from the beginning of their careers — what they need to do to pursue a school leadership career path. This means informing leadership candidates about the characteristics programs seek, what districts expect from future leaders, the experiences they need and the skill sets they should develop. Their performance evaluations should give them a realistic idea of where they stand in meeting their career objectives if they intend to become a principal. Lack of transparency in these matters will lead to wasted efforts: unsuitable candidates hoping to become school leaders and candidates with high potential improving the wrong skills.

As well as being a matter of professional respect, transparency is about clarity of professional expectations.

Districts that are unclear about their succession strategies for school leaders may lack a common vision of what characteristics, skills and talents they want in their future leaders.

The Superintendent Leads Succession Planning

“Designing a leader/teacher pipeline is a strategic duty of the CEO. It is not a one-time task, and it cannot be assigned to functionaries or consultants. It is essential to the health of the company and it therefore must be a primary concern of the senior leader.”

— *The Cycle of Leadership: How Great Leaders Teach Their Companies to Win*³⁶

Superintendents need to be personally involved in succession planning because the stakes involved in providing effective instructional leadership in every school are simply too high for any superintendent to remain at a distance from identifying and developing internal talent.³⁷ Every superintendent needs to set aside time to focus deliberately on succession plans on an annual basis. In a large district with more than 100 schools, the superintendent does not need to personally discuss succession in regard to every school, but he or she does need to ensure that there is a plan for principal succession and that it is working as intended.

CEOs of corporations recognized as exemplary for their succession planning spend up to one week each year personally reviewing the records of the top 100 or more people in the company, identifying the strengths and weaknesses of their leaders, and making sure that those with high potential are identified and given challenging assignments that will grow them to the next level.³⁸ **Superintendents need to make a similar investment in overseeing the top positions in their district — assistant superintendents, principals, assistant principals and teacher coaches — and plotting out the future of their organization in a way that ensures both excellence and consistency.** In Delaware, which has established a statewide pool of 100 aspiring leaders as part of its succession planning strategy, the state secretary of education personally presents the graduates of the aspiring leaders’ program with certificates recognizing their accomplishment.³⁹ **If school leadership is important and valued, district and state education leaders need to demonstrate that they are personally interested, invested and involved in ensuring its quality.**

Human Resources Owns and Facilitates the Succession Planning Process

“You actually have to designate somebody in the organization to be in charge of thinking about succession planning or it’s just not going to get done.”

— Ed Miley, Director of Leadership, Support and Development
Providence Public Schools, Rhode Island⁴⁰

As essential as it is that superintendents personally lead the district’s succession planning for school leaders, the fact that superintendents are busy individuals involved in every aspect of running the district is an inescapable reality. **Someone other than the superintendent must take ownership of facilitating the process and perhaps keeping and updating a merit-based list of the district’s assistant principals and teachers with high potential for advancement.** In most districts, this should be a task for Human Resources. **Engaging the Human Resources office in district succession planning gives it a strategic mission directly connected to improving teaching and**

learning throughout the district. In the corporate sector, Eli Lilly, another of Fulmer & Conger's seven private-sector leaders in succession planning, hosts a searchable talent management system on its company intranet that contains employees' resumes, experiences and career aspirations, all of which are updated annually.⁴¹ A school district following this example would be able to identify at any time every teacher in the system interested in becoming a school administrator, every teacher with superior performance reviews, and every teacher meeting both those criteria.

Districts Are Clear About Competencies for Leaders

The most progressive Human Resources managers now look beyond raw intelligence, which is a poor predictor of job success, to competencies — characteristics such as motivations, traits, aspects of self-image or social role, or bodies of knowledge. Using demonstrated competencies to identify talent provides several advantages:

- It sets clear expectations.
- It links development activities to clearly stated competencies and characteristics.
- It streamlines Human Resources activities so that performance evaluations are completely aligned with and supportive of succession planning.
- It motivates employees by providing them with clear direction for self-improvement.

Best-practice business organizations tend to have fewer core competencies in their models, not more.⁴³ For example, Dell identified five core competencies for entry-level leaders. (An example of how Dell's competencies might be adapted for use in identifying and developing school leaders can be found in Exhibits 1 and 2 on the following pages. Dell centers its evaluations around those competencies. There may not be one "best" set of competencies for a school district; the key is to articulate a concise set of competencies that match the district's vision for the leaders they need.

Companies that exemplify best practices in succession management are consistent in using the concept of competencies to sharpen their search for talented future leaders in four ways:⁴⁴

1. They focus on a small set of competencies.
2. They define specific behaviors for those competencies.
3. They employ a single set of competencies for assessment across job tiers.
4. They tend to use the same or similar readiness indicators: ready for promotion now; ready in one year; ready in two to five years.

**Exhibit 1:
High-Potential Competencies — Adapting the Strategic Leadership @ Dell Model to K-12 School Leadership**

Strategic Leadership @ Dell	Adapted for Principal	What It Includes	How It Is Evidenced in a Teacher Who May Be a Future Principal
<i>Strategic Agility</i>	Mental Agility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Innovative ■ Flexible ■ Decisive 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Quick learner ■ Always improving ■ Self-confident
<i>Customer Focus</i>	Student Focus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Constantly focused on students ■ Caring ■ Ensures all students are connected to adults ■ Sets and maintains high expectations ■ Focused on student achievement ■ Data savvy, using data to serve students well 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Has a passion for teaching and working with children ■ Builds relationships with students ■ Believes in students ■ Sets demanding but fair expectations for each student
<i>Business and Financial Acumen</i>	Pedagogical Judgment (and Administrative Competence)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Expertise in instruction, pedagogy, curriculum, assessment and standards ■ Able to improve classroom instruction through coaching ■ Broad technical competence in the business of education, including the legal, logistical and administrative aspects of running a school ■ Attention to detail 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Mastery of instruction in content area ■ Consistently engages students of different ages, genders and backgrounds to achieve at or above grade-level standards ■ Thinks beyond classroom walls, taking a big-picture view of the school
<i>Building Effective Teams</i>	Building Effective Teams	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Effective communicator and negotiator ■ Skilled listener ■ Creates synergy across the organization and a culture of collaboration in pursuit of common goals ■ Identifies and utilizes talent ■ Constantly builds capacity and skills in others ■ Recognizes when to take control and when to step back ■ Recognizes and appreciates the contributions of others ■ Successfully engages stakeholders ■ Appreciates diversity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Readily collaborates with other educators ■ Builds personal and professional networks with educators outside the school ■ Builds personal connections within the community ■ Gains the confidence of parents ■ Works effectively within teams, sometimes taking the lead ■ Celebrates accomplishments of others
<i>Motivating Others</i>	Motivating Others	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Creates and sells a vision ■ Gets the best out of people ■ Inspires confidence and hope ■ Effectively models best practices ■ Builds a culture of high expectations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Perceived by peers as a natural leader ■ Consistently demonstrates positive behaviors and beliefs ■ Consistently gets the best out of students

**Exhibit 2:
Comparing the High-Potential Competencies Adapted from Dell with the ISLLC Standards and 13 Critical Success Factors**

Strategic Leadership @ Dell	Adapted for Principal	Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) Standards for School Leaders*	13 Critical Success Factors**
<i>Strategic Agility</i>	Mental Agility	6. Understands, responds to, and influences the political, social, legal and cultural contexts	8. Initiates and manages change 10. Innovates 13. Stays abreast of effective practices
<i>Customer Focus</i>	Student Focus	2. Develops a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth	1. Focuses on student achievement 2. Develops a culture of high expectations 4. Creates a caring environment 5. Implements data-based improvement
<i>Business and Financial Acumen</i>	Pedagogical Judgment (and Administrative Competence)	3. Ensures effective management of the organization, operation, and resources for a safe, efficient and effective learning environment	3. Designs a standards-based instructional system 5. Implements data-based improvement 9. Provides professional development 11. Maximizes resources
<i>Building Effective Teams</i>	Building Effective Teams	2. Develops a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth 4. Collaborates with faculty and community members, responding to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilizing community resources 5. Acts with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical manner	6. Communicates 7. Involves parents 9. Provides professional development 12. Builds external support
<i>Motivating Others</i>	Motivating Others	1. Sets a widely shared vision for learning 6. Understands, responds to, and influences the political, social, legal and cultural contexts	6. Communicates 8. Initiates and manage change

* *Educational Leadership Policy Standards: ISLLC 2008*, Council of Chief State School Officers.

** *Preparing a New Breed of School Principals: It's Time for Action*. SREB, 2001.

Good State Leadership Standards Facilitate Talent Identification

State leadership standards can be enormously helpful in identifying teachers who might be future school leaders. A good set of standards can act as a reference and touchstone, offering guidance for leadership selection, preparation, professional learning and evaluation.⁴⁵ Well-written standards draw attention to the critical knowledge and skills necessary for successful leadership and provide prospective leaders and those asked to identify prospective leaders with a framework for matching the person to the role for which he or she is being considered.

In its most recent review of the leadership standards of states in its 16-state region, SREB has identified the standards of Alabama, Tennessee and West Virginia as exemplary.⁴⁶ Alabama's *Continuum for Instructional Leadership Development*, for example, provides descriptions of what a standard will look like in practice as it is evidenced by a lead teacher, a beginning principal, an experienced principal and a master principal. These descriptions can help to define expectations for a current teacher interested in becoming a principal.

State Policies Are Supportive of Succession Planning

Just as districts should encourage succession planning by requiring principals to identify potential leaders in their schools, **states must encourage succession planning by establishing an expectation that such planning will occur.** States can use a variety of strategies to promote succession planning in every district:

- Require districts to engage actively in succession planning either by developing and implementing their own succession plans or, in the case of smaller districts, by forming consortia with other districts to create pools of candidates.
- Periodically offer feedback to districts on the extent to which their succession plans are developed and functioning efficiently.
- Include the development of future leaders as a key criterion in state leadership standards and principal evaluation systems.
- Create officially recognized pipelines and pools of future leaders.

State support for succession planning is particularly necessary in situations where the state is investing heavily in school improvement. Placing a short-term, state-appointed leader in the school is not a long-term solution. Similarly, committing limited school improvement resources to schools that lack internal leadership capacity will not result in long-term improvements. Once the external coaches, consultants and experts have left, the school still will be left without the leadership to sustain any progress made. Instead of providing state-appointed leadership or improvement investments alone, states should couple investments with a concerted effort to improve succession planning. School improvement efforts should aim to help the school reach a point where it can stand on its own — and that will require a system that both develops a school leader with the ability to lead the school to higher levels and develops continued leadership capacity within the building.

Part 3: A Conceptual Framework for Succession Planning

Succession planning is a continuous six-step process that begins with talent identification and ends with successful principals who remain involved in succession planning. (See Figure 1, page 2.) In the introduction, the framework was broadly outlined. This section explains the framework in greater detail.

I. Talent Identification

“At the foundation of succession management is the definition and identification of talent — what it looks like, who has it, who needs to develop it, and how it can best be developed.”

— *Growing Your Company’s Leaders: How Great Organizations Use Succession Management to Sustain Competitive Advantage.*⁴⁷

Successful principals have leadership competencies that garner the respect and confidence of teachers. They have to be **intelligent, flexible, quick-thinking, decisive, resilient, good listeners, respectful of others and excellent communicators** with a capacity to disagree while having other people accept their reasoning. Many teachers who think they want to be principals are deficient in many of these critical areas and are therefore unlikely to succeed.

Exemplary leadership preparation programs around the country carefully select their participants to ensure they have the necessary competencies — or capacity to develop the competencies — to succeed in the program and in the principalship. The Principal Fellows program in Boston, for example, relies on written essays, observed activities and intensive interviews to narrow a field down from 100 applicants to eight to 12 Fellows each year.⁴⁸ New Leaders for New Schools accepts only 7 percent to 10 percent of its applicants each year.⁴⁹ A redesigned leadership preparation program at the University of Memphis accepted 16 candidates after 346 prospective school leaders attended information sessions announcing the program.⁵⁰ **A well-developed selection process with a combination of selection tools can eliminate individuals who do not have the necessary competencies.** Furthermore, a well-developed admission process will enhance the reputation and respect of the leadership development program and of school leaders within their schools and communities.

Some school districts are averse to the idea of identifying and grooming teachers with special potential to become future leaders because the practices are seen as reminiscent of exclusionary “old boys’ networks” that have not totally disappeared, rather than being based on demonstrated merit and perceived potential. This is one reason that a well-designed, transparent succession planning process is important. It provides a rationale for strategically allocating professional development opportunities and resources toward the development of future school leaders. Hyper-egalitarianism that does not recognize and value individual differences poses an obstacle to professional development that can allow educators to reach their full potential.

Better processes and tools are needed for predicting who is most likely to succeed as a principal. While a potential school leader has mastered the skills of a classroom teacher, the problems of a principal are bigger and more complex — and what a person accomplished as a teacher does not always indicate his or her true potential as a principal. In 2008, Malcolm Gladwell wrote an article for *The New Yorker* about the “quarterback problem” that NFL scouts face: Because the position is so complex and the NFL game is different from the college game, it is extremely difficult to predict a player’s potential to succeed as an NFL quarterback on the basis of watching that player in a college football game. What works for a college quarterback will not necessarily work for a professional. Gladwell was using the quarterback problem as an analogy for the difficulty of identifying what does and does not work in a teacher’s classroom instruction, but the analogy is even more apt in thinking about evaluating teachers to determine whether they might succeed as principals.

Multi-Step Selection Process

Talent identification should begin early, well before formal selection into aspiring school leadership programs. Principals should informally identify teachers with high potential for leadership and provide them with opportunities and responsibilities that will help them grow. **Then, formal selection into an aspiring leaders program should involve multiple steps that result in selecting the best possible candidates.**

Application: Three years of successful, full-time teaching experience is a minimum requirement for applicants. Applications include cover letters explaining the applicant’s interest in becoming a school leader, a résumé and professional references.

Inventory of beliefs and behaviors: Applicants meeting minimum requirements based on their application materials are invited to complete a valid and reliable assessment of their beliefs and behaviors, shedding light on whether they have the right mindset to be successful school leaders.

Timed essays: Applicants who have shown that they appear to have the right beliefs are invited to complete a series of timed essays to demonstrate that they have skills and knowledge necessary for the job. Some of the essays involve data sets from real or hypothetical schools. These essays provide applicants with an opportunity to display their skills for logical analysis, problem solving and communicating a vision.

Team interview: The final step of the selection process is an interview with a selection committee that includes university faculty members, district leaders and at least one current principal. The interview includes a simulation of a classroom observation, using video from a real lesson, and scenarios that test the applicant’s persistence, repertoire of instructional strategies and core beliefs.

Throughout the selection process, the intent is to identify individuals with persistence, a positive outlook, strong oral and written communication skills, evidence of a capacity and desire to build and lead teams, and evidence that they can hold adults accountable.

Being a successful principal requires the skill set of a great teacher, plus something more. **Malcolm Gladwell has observed that candidates with high potential for success are not necessarily the smartest candidates or the highest-performing at their current level,⁵³ so the proper focus has to be on their observed potential to succeed**

at the next level. Delaware, which is a pacesetter in the area of succession planning, has found that success as a teacher does not necessarily translate into fitness for school leadership. Jackie Wilson, director of the Delaware Academy for School Leadership, noted, “We [tend to] think just because a person is a great teacher, that they could be a great principal. But what we’re learning is, being a great teacher should certainly be one of the components — but it takes a certain skill set to be a school leader. . . . Those [leadership] dispositions are extremely important.”⁵⁴

To help untangle this complexity, some districts are using the Haberman Education Foundation’s Star Administrator Questionnaire to pre-screen candidates for their potential to be successful school leaders, and other systems use the Gallup organization’s PrincipalInsight as a tool for talent identification.⁵⁵ These tools can help systems in identifying talent, but local leaders still need to assess candidates for key traits such as persistence, sense of mission and purpose, temperament, stamina and mental agility.

Talent Identification Begins Early in Teachers’ Careers

“People who are going to succeed and be real winners for you are not going to, all of a sudden, be winners for the first time. They’re going to bring with them a pattern of winning that’s been apparent . . . and if you can’t see it, beware.”

— Dick Brown, CEO of Electronic Data Systems⁴⁶

Potential future instructional leaders should demonstrate evidence of good teaching ability over an extended period of time. Having that record is dependent on the sophistication of the teacher-evaluation system. A school leadership researcher made this connection in an interview: **“Having a robust system for teacher evaluation is helpful because if those systems are in place, you can start to identify who your higher-performing teachers are. And you want principals to be and to have been excellent teachers.”**⁵⁷

In addition to instructional excellence as a criterion for identification, districts should look for teachers who demonstrate the inclination and a capacity to take on leadership roles, along with a passion akin to missionary zeal for enabling all groups of students to reach even higher levels of achievement. They should demonstrate not just persistence and stamina, but an even temperament and a strong internal motivation that will enable them to overcome the adversity that can come with school leadership jobs. It’s not so much about elitism as it is about having a strong drive to improve schools and student learning. District and school leaders need to do a better job of identifying the people who really want to become principals and who are motivated for the right reasons.

Effective succession planning must be founded on evaluating current and future principals on both what they accomplish and how they accomplish it. Schools need principals who can improve student outcomes, but it is also important to consider how they raise achievement and whether that matches the values the district wants in its educators. For example, a principal has not been an effective leader if he or she has led a school to make AYP by gaming the system, ignoring the high- and low-performing students to focus teaching resources only on the students who are achieving near the cutoff scores.

Two Stories of Succession Planning

Tony Washington was an experienced teacher in District A, a school system that had recently made a strategic decision to grow its own leaders. District A created an aspiring principals program (APP) to provide intensive training to promising future school leaders on the cusp of promotion. Several nearby universities offered school leadership programs. Until recently, the state's pay scales for teachers included substantial salary benefits for teachers with master's degrees, so the district had no shortage of candidates with educational leadership degrees. Yet it lacked educators with the skills necessary to lead a school. District A designed its program to work with the best of this pool of already licensed potential leaders to fill in the gaps and prepare them for promotion.

Tony was a successful teacher and, wanting to grow professionally, enrolled in a university leadership program and earned his degree within a couple of years with fairly minimal effort. Tony was a natural leader, assuming leadership roles in his community, but he was finding few opportunities for leadership within his school. When District A announced the launch of its APP, Tony eagerly applied. For one of the essays he had to write as part of the application process, he had to evaluate data for a school that had an abysmal graduation rate and offer suggestions for improving the school. By the time he finished the essay, he was not sure if he had hit on the right answers, but he was sure that something had to be done — and he was more sure than ever that he wanted to be a school administrator.

Tony had many qualities of a future school leader and was selected for the APP. During the selection process, he also found out what some of his weaknesses were and he made a point of strengthening his skills in those areas. Continuous improvement had always been one of his strengths.

(Continued on Page 27)

Valerie Greene was a new teacher in District B, but she had known since high school that she wanted to be a teacher. Her mother was a district administrator and a former principal, and she had long aspired to become a principal some day as well.

When she was hired to teach, Valerie indicated that she would like to be a school leader some day, and her principal kept an eye on her progress. Late in her first year in the school, Valerie's principal asked her to lead a professional development workshop. More opportunities followed, including a chance to serve on a district-wide planning team to create formative assessments for her content area. Valerie also stood out as a trusted leader. When her school introduced a new classroom walkthrough initiative that included administrators and teachers conducting classroom walkthroughs together, Valerie was chosen by her fellow teachers to be on the team, despite still being one of the youngest teachers in the school. In the middle of her third year as a teacher, her principal recommended that she apply to a school leadership preparation program.

Valerie was surprised to learn that in addition to the normal graduate school application, she had to complete a 90-minute interview with both university faculty and assistant superintendents from her district and a neighboring district. She was also surprised that most of the questions in the interview got beyond factual information to questions about how she would handle situations where there seemed to be no right answer. Valerie answered thoughtfully and honestly and was pleased when she was admitted to the program.

(Continued on Page 27)

II. Talent Development

Great skills are the result of practice, feedback, coaching and reflection. In his book *Outliers*, Malcolm Gladwell presented a number of examples of greatness being a result of effort and opportunity coming together.⁵⁸ **Unfortunately, most principals have had very little opportunity to practice before they take over their first schools and are therefore likely to have weak skills.**

Districts must provide greatly expanded on-the-job learning opportunities early in the careers of promising teachers so that they can develop the essential skills that will allow them to succeed as principals. Most of what they will need to know as a school leader will be learned on the job. Successful businesses operate from a premise that **roughly 80 percent of leadership development comes on the job and from life experience, and only 20 percent can be taught through formal education (an “80/20 rule”).**⁵⁹ Contrast this with the development of school leaders, where a university credential is the key to advancement, school and district administrators balk at letting teachers out of classrooms to gain leadership experience, and school leaders are typically promoted directly from the classroom to administrator positions. Future school leaders need opportunities to observe leadership in action, participate in making leadership decisions, and then practice leadership themselves under the supervision of an effective mentor or coach.⁶⁰

School districts must adopt the best practices of succession planning in the private sector by creating a *development-oriented* culture rather than a *replacement-orientation* culture. District leaders can “introduce a discipline into the organization that continually reminds everyone that leadership development and talent retention are critical priorities and every manager’s responsibility.”⁶¹ Both district and school leaders should routinely assign potential future leaders to “stretch assignments” — assignments outside of their daily routines that challenge them and stretch their horizons.

School improvement planning and curriculum alignment committees are some of the best opportunities schools and districts have for involving teachers in big-picture issues that leaders must think about. Schools and districts have a variety of options for encouraging distributed leadership:

- Teacher-leader programs offer a chance for teachers to develop their instructional expertise and explore leadership opportunities, without committing to leave the classroom.
- Literacy, numeracy and graduation coach positions can serve as leadership positions and “stretch assignments.”
- School and district instructional leadership teams offer teachers opportunities to take on responsibilities and leadership roles outside their classrooms and show school and district administrators what they can do.

Succession planning experts have observed that in the corporate sector and in the military, “organizations that care about developing their people move those people laterally, as well as vertically.” Future leaders who are expected to be given broad responsibilities are deliberately rotated through different positions in the organization so that they have had a variety of perspectives and experiences.⁶² Traditional staffing structures in K-12 schools, state licensing policies that enforce rigid classifications of jobs and a reluctance to invest in educators for whom a change in job often means

a change in employer all tend to stifle opportunities to provide stretch learning experiences. There are examples, however, of innovative policies and practices to escape these constrictions:

- Kingsport City Schools in Tennessee created a one-year position as an assistant to the principal, paid on a teacher salary schedule but with administrator responsibility and a leading role in improving instruction. Most current principals in Kingsport have had the opportunity to be an assistant to the principal.
- Harford County Public Schools in Maryland created a teacher-in-charge position in its elementary schools that shares the principal's load and offers opportunity for a potential future principal to practice real leadership.
- Tennessee added an Aspiring Instructional Leadership License. This permits official recognition of the authority and responsibilities of leaders-in-training who are in supervised school leadership positions.

The assistant principalship can provide an effective steppingstone to the full principalship. Recent research has found “evidence that experience as an assistant principal at the principal’s current school is associated with higher performance,”⁶³ and previous experience as an assistant principal at any school is associated with longer tenure as a principal.⁶⁴ The assistant principalship has been a stepping stone to the principalship in many school systems. However, the position is often underutilized, as many assistant principals are relegated to managing routine administrative functions and student discipline.

High schools derive the most benefit from assistant principalship steppingstones. At the secondary level, a future leader’s “off-Broadway tryout” is usually as an assistant principal, working under the eye of a more experienced principal. For elementary principals without that experience, the “tryout is right on Broadway, and the mistakes [they] make are still very hard to get past.”⁶⁵ Many districts also will use smaller and less complex middle grades schools as a training ground for high school leaders, using assistant principal and principal positions in middle grades schools as temporary assignments to get leaders ready for “more important” work in high schools. **This practice shortchanges middle grades schools, devaluing the serious and unique challenges of middle grades education, despite evidence from international testing that shows that the middle grades are where American students are losing academic ground.**

Succession Planning in Smaller Districts

In some respects, smaller districts have substantial advantages over large districts in terms of preparing talent. While they may lack economies of scale and the large professional development budgets of large urban districts, small districts are more likely to have the flexibility and nimbleness to move star educators into growth positions. Kingsport City Schools’ assistant-to-the-principal positions are an example of such flexibility. A small size tends to make innovation easier and reduces bureaucratic hurdles.

Partnering with universities, on the other hand, is more difficult for small districts that cannot fill a cohort of future leaders on their own — and small districts do not have the in-house resources to create their own aspiring leaders programs. Smaller districts can join with other small districts to create regional consortia that collectively have the resources to prepare future principals. This is an area where technical assistance from states can be critical.

What It Takes to Prepare School Leaders

University programs to prepare school leaders have a long record of low standards for admissions and a non-challenging curriculum that was better suited to preparing school managers than instructional leaders.⁶⁶ The past decade, however, has seen extraordinary expansion of policy-makers' and others' understanding of school leadership — why it is important, how it works and how it is developed — and increased attention to improving and supplementing these programs. There is now greater consensus around what is required in the preparation of quality school leaders:⁶⁷

- Course work that is rigorous and focused on instructional leadership
- Substantial internship or residency experiences
- Effective mentoring and coaching
- Cohort structures for all aspiring principals
- University-district partnerships

Substantial guided experiences across a number of roles are essential to preparing aspiring school leaders.

Experience working with individualized education plans, school improvement, attendance and discipline committees all can be key experiences; experience leading learning walks and providing appropriate feedback to teachers also is critical. As the dean of a college of education noted, “These folks have to perform when they get on the job, and the better that field experience is, the better they will be prepared when they become a principal or an assistant principal. So you have to make that experience a ... very substantive experience.”⁶⁸

Several states and districts have recognized the importance of substantive field experiences for aspiring school leaders. The New York City Leadership Academy includes a full-year residency to prepare its new leaders. The Mobile County and Baldwin County school districts in Alabama continue to support semester-long residencies, despite declining revenues in an economic downturn. East Tennessee State University has moved to a competency-based residency that requires documentation of experience and competency across 31 Critical (“must-experience”) and 33 Desirable (“nice-to-experience”) tasks aligned with the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) and state leadership standards. For example, tasks that a candidate must master to be considered “ready now” for a school leadership position include analyzing test data, opening and closing the school, conducting classroom walkthroughs, conducting safety audits, participating in the hiring and selection of teachers, working with teachers to improve their practice, preparing a school budget, preparing a master schedule and overseeing an IEP meeting.

The importance of practical field experiences means that aspiring leaders cannot be prepared by either universities or districts alone. Districts find that leaders coming out of university programs that have strong partnerships with districts are “better prepared and of better quality

Characteristics of Successful University-District Partnerships⁶⁹

- A shared vision of what effective school leadership looks like, with district leaders articulating and university leaders understanding what districts are looking for in a leader
- A free exchange of ideas, with both sides learning from the other
- Clearly defined roles and expectations for the selection and preparation of candidates
- Formal partnership agreements that are grounded on common understandings of the benefits for both partners, justifying their commitment of time and resources

than those from other programs.”⁶⁹ The partnerships include districts working closely with universities in selecting candidates for school leadership programs and in providing for school-based learning that is essential for aspiring leaders to be able to observe, participate and then lead.⁷⁰ This includes providing released time for aspiring leaders to complete quality internships. **State policies in some SREB states are attaching greater importance to university leaders working closely with school districts on leadership preparation. However, states can still do more to require and support real partnerships between districts and universities for the training of future principals.**

Coaching and mentoring also are essential to developing and then successfully onboarding new principals. Coaching helps in the development of particular skills and addressing weaknesses, while mentoring supports and guides the process of personal reflection that is essential to growth as a leader.⁷³ **The best mentors for aspiring and novice school leaders are successful current and former principals.** Even these good principals need to receive quality training in mentoring. Training provides a set of expectations for developing an effective mentoring relationship with the aspiring or recent school leader, rather than counting on the relationship to develop by happenstance. Mentoring delivers the best results when the mentors believe in their protégés enough to make a personal investment in their success and when the protégés trust that their mentors care about their growth and possess knowledge that will contribute to their growth.

Whereas mentoring is aimed at supporting aspiring or novice principals to grow in their role as leaders, coaching focuses on developing specific skills such as time management, relationship building, effective communication, building teams, using data to improve schools, and engaging faculty to take ownership of problems and solutions. Many aspiring and novice school leaders want guidance on specific critical tasks such as budgeting, preparing a master schedule, or conducting classroom reviews and providing feedback to teachers. Coaching should be used to give leaders the tools that they will need to succeed in specific tasks. **Keeping in mind the 80/20 rule, on-the-job mentoring and coaching should be reconceived as truly indispensable to leadership development, rather than just add-ons.**

Two Stories of Succession Planning *(continued)*

Tony Washington was recognized for his teaching ability and leadership potential and was accepted into the inaugural cohort of District A's APP. He and his peers in the cohort found that they had a lot of catching up to do; their university training did not have the depth or the rigor necessary to prepare them as school leaders. They joked about “drinking from a fire hose” as they covered school data analysis, literacy instruction, team building, guidance and advisement systems for students, and an intense workshop on school culture — all in the first semester of the program, while still continuing with their regular jobs.

The aspect of the program that benefited Tony the most was being able to work with a carefully selected mentor who was a successful principal in a neighboring school system. Tony had spent his entire teaching career in the same school, so he learned much from working with an experienced mentor who was in a different setting.

During the second semester of the program, Tony and his cohort were released from their regular assignments and each assigned to a school for a residency as an acting assistant principal. The intense work, the long nights and the lost weekends of the first semester began to make sense as Tony filled the shoes of an assistant principal, under the guidance of an experienced principal and with the help of his mentor. Cohort members continued to meet one night every week to reflect on their work and to learn new material, but most of their learning was happening on the job.

When Valerie Green entered her school leadership program at the university, she was surprised by how much she had already learned from her principal. Several of the books she was assigned to read during the first year had shown up in her box with a short note from her principal saying, “You might be interested in this.” She was also surprised to find that most of the class work was directly tied to projects in the student’s schools. Several of the seminars were led by local superintendents, including hers. It was interesting to her to hear their expectations of principals.

She was a bit disappointed to find that her own principal had been assigned to be her mentor, out of convenience. She was glad for him that he was receiving a stipend, but he had been informally mentoring her for several years at this point, and she'd already learned much of what he had to offer.

Her university program had arranged with her district that she would have 30 days of released time each year for internship activities, with guidelines for activities in which she should participate. By the time she finished the program, Valerie had done everything from planning the opening of school to setting the master schedule for the next school year.

III. Selection for Placement

“Great leaders develop those around them at a fast rate and in high numbers, so much so that the organization cannot absorb them soon enough. Stated differently, leaders who develop other leaders provide a farm system for other organizations. It may be frustrating to groom internal leaders only to have them leave early for other leadership positions, but in public schools, especially, helping to develop leadership for the system as a whole is an immediate form of legacy leaving.”

— *What's Worth Fighting for in the Principalship?*⁷⁴

Identify for a Pool, Select for a School

A successful district succession plan not only will identify aspiring school leaders for development and inclusion in a talent pool, but also will carefully select the right leader for each school. The best “square peg” will do no good if it is hammered into a “round hole.”

Companies with the best succession planning aim to have at least two good internal candidates for every vacancy. If a large school system that typically has 20 principal vacancies annually were to follow this model, it would need 40 “ready now” principals each year in its talent pool.

The best companies also require their division leaders to identify successors within their unit. Identifying successors in another division is unacceptable because that removes the necessity for leaders to develop their own people. Again, it is instructive to map this corporate practice in an education setting and imagine a district requiring all principals to identify one, two or three faculty members who would be able to fill their shoes *tomorrow*. If they cannot, it becomes their responsibility to rectify that. Many school districts have weak leadership talent pools — not because there are not enough talented people in education, but because leadership talent is poorly distributed across districts and schools and because succession practices in education are rudimentary and have not been a priority.

Select the Best Candidate for the Open Position

Eli Lilly’s definition of succession management is moving the right person into the right job for the right reasons. Involving teachers and parents in the selection and interview process for a new principal is a good strategy for achieving the right fit. This is least likely to happen in schools that are already struggling, but these schools are where it is most important. If a school is not succeeding in educating students and is in danger of a state takeover or closing, its teachers and parents should have a very clear interest in finding the right leadership to quickly improve the situation. Actively involving influential teachers and parents in the selection of a principal makes it more likely that they will be invested in the principal’s success and more willing to support the person they helped to select.

Selecting the best candidate for an open position assumes that districts have multiple good options available and may have to pass over talented individuals (and sometimes, the most talented individuals in the pool) in order to arrive at a best fit for a particular position. One expert interviewed related a concern of some districts that aspiring leaders who spend too long in a pool would be inclined to “jump ship,” and that districts might make the error of responding to this by disadvantageously forcing leaders into schools where they are not a good fit.⁷⁷ **Succession planning requires patience and a long-term view on the part of both individuals and organizations.**

Too often, when the district is stable and doing well, it tends to select principals who will maintain the status quo of a school, rather than select a principal from within a school who can lead the school to a higher level of effectiveness. When the district is unstable and under pressure to improve the quality of learning, one unsuccessful principal is rapidly replaced by another. Both strategies are oriented strongly toward discontinuity when the school might best benefit from selecting a principal developed within the school — through a purposeful succession plan — who could build on what has been achieved and lead the school to higher performance.⁷⁸ If a school is making progress, the last thing that should be done is to turn it over to an outsider who will take apart what has been working.

Maximizing the impact of a strategy of continuity for growth at each school will require the district to give up its power to appoint a new principal and embrace a new approach of developing a pool of candidates within the system who can provide continuity of leadership with eyes toward sustained improvement. District leaders may make the argument that teachers who already have a teacher-to-teacher relationship with other members of the faculty will have difficulty transitioning into a leadership role.⁷⁹ While not ignoring that concern, district leaders should carefully consider the leadership advantages of continuity, existing relationships and the understanding of context they might find in promoting from within a school — provided that the succession plan was crafted so that aspiring leaders experienced a range of leadership activities in other schools.

One interviewee identified school boards as a potential complicating factor. Some school boards like to have, and exercise, power in the selection of school principals, often basing a hiring decision on who the candidate knows rather than whether the candidate possesses the skills to address the long-term instructional improvement needed in the school. While politics can never be entirely removed from the matter of principal succession, a proactive succession planning process can result in more good candidates and better evidence upon which to base placement decisions.

Use Succession Planning to Get to Know Top Prospects

Aspiring principal programs offer an opportunity for district leaders to get to know and test out top prospects before placing them in a school, as well as an opportunity to convey the district’s precise expectations for its leaders. Successful superintendents make a point of personally teaching a class for aspiring principals for precisely this reason.⁸⁰ Several of the experts interviewed for this report offered their opinions that aspiring principal programs were worth the investment because they provide opportunities for identifying and correcting weaknesses that had not been immediately apparent. Selecting the wrong person can result in significant damage to the culture and morale of a school, and aspiring principal programs allow for greater scrutiny that can prevent bad placements.

Do Not Be Afraid to Create a Surplus of Good Leaders

Perhaps the greatest barrier to succession planning in public education is the fear that a district will develop a great candidate only to see that candidate take a position in another district. Delaware is a small state, with approximately 20 districts that compete with each other for resources, including talent. When Delaware adopted its goal of creating a statewide pool of 100 aspiring leaders, state leaders had to explicitly address the fears of superintendents “that even though you knew you were investing in these people and you hoped they would stay in your district, there was the greatest possibility that you may not have a position open for them when they were ready and that they might go to another district.”⁸¹ Succession planning requires trust that, ultimately, the payoff will be there, even if talent is developed and then leaves. When successful companies have top leaders who go on to become CEOs at other corporations, they do not shut down their training programs. Instead, they take pride in this indication that their practices are working.⁸²

Too much capacity is a sign that succession planning is working. The distribution of school leadership talent across the country is very unequal, so while some districts are in dire need of quality leadership, others are finding that changes in the economy and in pension plans are resulting in a leadership pipeline that is temporarily clogged, with fewer retirements and vacancies than expected.⁸³ Districts with quality pools of aspiring leaders awaiting placement should take steps to keep those leaders sharp, employ their talents, recognize their value, and use them as a special resource to solve school and district problems. States can also tap into their pool of developed leaders by working to provide placement and incentive opportunities in districts that have been unable to develop or attract quality principals.

Succession Planning in Smaller Districts

Small districts will have fewer schools and therefore fewer openings for school leaders, meaning that it may be less likely that the maturing of prospective candidates will perfectly coincide with openings. Unfortunate timing can therefore have a greater impact on a small district than a large one. Yet smaller districts also have some advantages. Educators in small districts often have close ties to the community, and teachers who are native to the area or have put down roots are likely to stay in the community if they have opportunities to grow. A state leader in Maryland noted that districts that make it clear that they are investing in aspiring leaders will often earn their loyalty and see them stay in the community even if they have other opportunities.

States can help smaller districts by supporting regional networks for succession planning — such as Delaware has done — with leadership pools large enough to meet the needs of all districts within the geographic area served. Regional education agencies can develop talent and also act as a clearinghouse to get that talent where it is most needed.

Keep Selection Policies Flexible

Several of the experts interviewed for this report emphasized the extent to which selection must remain flexible and aspiring leader programs must not become a method of “ordaining” future leaders. Selection policies should not create a sense of entitlement among program participants or an expectation that they will be hired automatically after completing a program. Delaware has an official pool of 100 aspiring school leaders, and program leaders have on occasion removed candidates from the pool. At least once, an aspiring leader has been removed from the pool then shown a higher level of commitment and has been readmitted.⁸⁴ The Providence, Rhode Island, school district has a very active and selective aspiring leaders program, but it also runs a teacher-leaders program and sometimes steers candidates who have not made the aspiring leaders program into the teacher-leader program to give them a positive way to grow and contribute. The district has had candidates who did not make the cut for the aspiring leaders program but demonstrated growth and potential in the teacher-leader program and later became principals.⁸⁵

Carefully Consider Decisions to Transfer Principals

Districts sometimes will attempt to fix a struggling school by bringing in a successful principal from another school. Case studies of leadership succession in a variety of Canadian and American schools show that **the skills that led to a principal's previous success may not be applicable in another school, and therefore a transfer does not always work. Sometimes it clearly fails.**⁸⁶ Occasionally, as in the case of Kerry Purcell in the PBS documentary "The Principal Story," a poorly planned transfer initiated by a district can turn one vacancy into two.⁸⁷ For this reason, a succession planning guide developed by the Maryland State Department of Education recommends that districts formulate transfer policies, carefully considering in advance the circumstances and processes for transferring principals between schools. The Maryland guide recommends that districts carefully consider these questions:

- What is the process and rationale for the movement of school leaders?
- How can we encourage effective leaders to accept positions in challenging schools?
- When someone is moved from one key position to another, do we consider the impact on the culture at the school where we have created a vacancy?⁸⁸

Maryland's succession planning guide recommends that systems allow principals a no-fault option of requesting a transfer to another school if they do not feel that their skills and talents are a good match for their present school. Maryland suggests that a Succession Review Team consider transfers and promotions together and then submit a recommendation, with time allowed for the superintendent to discuss transfers with the principals and assistant principals before making final decisions. To ensure adequate transition time, Maryland recommends that all routine promotions and transfer decisions for the next school year be made no later than March 1.

Two Stories of Succession Planning (*continued*)

Tony Washington's first interview for an assistant principal position went well, and he was offered the job. He declined, however, because he did not think that he could fully support the principal's vision for improving the school. His second interview also went well, and he was surprised when he did not get a job offer. When he asked the reason why, he was told that he was a great candidate but the school had a specific weakness in literacy instruction and one of the other applicants was a better fit for that need. Tony ended up spending another year in the classroom. Because of his APP experience, the district asked him to participate on a committee to revise the district's teacher handbook.

When an assistant principal position opened at his own school, Tony did not apply, realizing that districts usually are averse to promoting a classroom teacher to an administrator position within the same school. The principal position had opened at the same time. When the district hired someone from another district as the principal, an assistant superintendent who knew Tony through the APP strongly recommended that he apply for the assistant principal position because he thought that Tony's skills would complement those of the new principal, his knowledge of the school and the district would be an asset and would provide some continuity, and his personality would mesh well with the new principal. Tony was selected for the job but had a big transition ahead as he went from classroom teacher to assistant principal.

Everything about Valerie Greene's background indicated that she was going to be a great principal. Her own principal had always considered her to be a star, she had impressed her superintendent when the superintendent guest-taught in her leadership preparation courses, and the faculty considered her to be the most outstanding student in her cohort.

It was not surprising, then, that she got a phone call from her superintendent a month before graduation asking her to be the next principal at Jackson Middle School. Valerie had always been a high school teacher, and all of her internship work had been at the high school. But she was confident that she could do the job — especially as Jackson was known to be one of the better schools in the district.

Valerie did not realize until she got to Jackson how big of a presence her predecessor had been at that school. Her predecessor had been the principal at Jackson for 12 years and had been loved by both teachers and parents. As she looked into the data, however, Valerie saw that Jackson had been coasting. Given the affluence of the community it served and the experience level of the teachers, it could have been doing much better, and the level of instruction Valerie saw was disappointing.

When Valerie tried to point this out to her faculty, she ran into the first real professional crisis of her career. Her faculty did not want to hear it, and soon she started to hear about parents complaining to the school board. It seemed that anything she tried to do that did not follow the path of her predecessor was questioned, and she felt like any comments she made were being misconstrued.

IV. Onboarding and Support

“One of the reasons that [novice principals] fail [is] ... they’re put into very difficult positions. One of the reasons the position is open and that no other principal with seniority has attempted to transfer into it or secure it is because it’s not a great position. So they go into positions with limited experience and into a place that probably has some significant problems.”

— Ed Miley, Director of Leadership, Support and Development,
Providence Public Schools, Rhode Island⁸⁹

One of the guiding principles of succession planning is to carefully consider the types and amount of support principals will need to succeed. The identification, development and selection of a new leader are only the first steps in succession planning — and all of that work can be undone in the absence of effective onboarding and supportive processes. Much of Ann Hart’s 1993 book, *Principal Succession: Establishing Leadership in Schools*, focused on the problem of onboarding and supporting new leaders.⁹⁰

Mentoring and coaching for new principals, which begins during talent development of aspiring principals, should continue for at least two years after the principal has been placed in a school, as part of a good onboarding process.⁹¹ One major urban school system, for example, had 22 principal coaches working with 213 new principals in 2008 as part of the onboarding process. Novice principals in that system received professional development five times a year and had a three-day induction program in the summer.⁹²

New principals often make recognizable and predictable mistakes that can derail their careers. School districts must identify these key errors and work proactively to provide immediate, tailored coaching to develop leaders’ skills and competencies to avoid derailment.

Succession Planning in Smaller Districts

District boundaries should not get in the way of providing new leaders with the support they need. Sometimes the best mentor for a new school leader will work for a neighboring district, and formal or informal agreements between districts can optimize mentor/protégé pairings regardless of district boundaries. Peer networking and support often will involve cross-district relationships, and those relationships can also be a resource for districts as ideas and solutions to problems are shared. Finally, small districts can benefit by collaborating on finding coaching solutions and shared professional development opportunities for their school leaders. What might not make sense for a single small district could work well for a group of districts pooling their resources.

The onboarding process used by a successful corporation has obvious implications for the support of first-year principals. The goal of an onboarding plan is to provide new leaders with a roadmap for their first year — based on the idea that they are not going to be able to accomplish everything in that first year, but they will have tools and support to set their priorities to accomplish the *most important* things. (See Exhibit 3 on the following page.)⁹³

**Exhibit 3:
Onboarding Plan for a New School Leader, Adapted from the Private Sector**

Expectations for Year One	Adapted for a New Principal
Lists of key relationships to build	If the principal is new to the school, the principal's predecessor or direct supervisor provides an annotated list of the most influential teachers in the building. In-person introductory meetings are arranged with all key support staff in the central office prior to the school year. The district arranges a reception honoring the new principal, inviting parents and local community members with an active interest in education. The principal's supervisor carefully monitors and supports his or her progress in developing critical relationships with the staff and the community.
Lists of key information to master	The district provides organized lists of key information regarding compliance issues and special dates (federal and state regulations; district policies and procedures; state and district standards and expectations for grade-level instruction and achievement; attendance, grading, testing and personnel policies; daily routines and logistics; building maintenance and safety plans), with a timeline for mastery. The key information to master would include the district strategic plan, how to request and receive special assistance from the district office, school budgeting and the use of discretionary funds. The new principal's supervisor frequently checks to ensure an accurate and timely understanding of key information, rather than assuming the new principal knows how to do what he or she has never done before.
Clear goals for the first 45 days, 90 days and year	<p>End of 45 days: Lesson planning expectations are understood by teachers and are being met. Student expectations (for both learning and discipline) are clear. The principal has selected a school leadership team, and it is meeting and already working on an agreed-upon set of priorities for the year. The principal has personally conducted at least one walkthrough of every teacher's classroom and provided feedback.</p> <p>End of 90 days: Student and teacher attendance rates are at 95 percent or are improving. Teacher professional development has a clear focus. Formative assessments for key subjects either are happening or are being planned and will be available soon. District walkthroughs see evidence of literacy standards and strategies being embedded in lesson plans and in the classroom to advance both literacy and subject-matter achievement in all classes (or other key practice identified as critical to this school's improvement and discussed in advance with the new principal). The principal has organized at least one focus team of teachers and others to take ownership of a major school problem having to do with improving student engagement in school. The focus team has been charged to identify the problem, its root cause, a set of desired student goals, and changes in school and classroom practices and the types of support needed to achieve the goal.</p> <p>End of the year: School climate results (teacher, parent and student perceptions) are positive or perhaps mixed if the principal has had to really change the culture of the school. Minimum targets on end-of-year assessments (set at the beginning of the year by the district, in consultation with the new principal) have been met. Teaching assignments and the master schedule for the next year are completed, and they prioritize student needs over adult desires. Hiring for teacher vacancies for the next year is under way and is on pace to have all vacancies filled at least 30 days prior to school start, and a plan is in place for orientation and training of new teachers. At least one major school improvement initiative has been planned for year two.</p>
Formative 360-degree feedback early in the first year	VAL-ED (or similar) evaluation in December of the first year, with a debrief and a conversation about guided professional reading, tailored coaching and possible adjustments for the remainder of the first year.
A peer networking plan and opportunities	Time for networking is included in monthly principals' meetings. Membership in professional organizations is encouraged. Attendance at one professional conference of principal's choice is supported.

Adapted from: Fulmer, Robert M., and Jay A. Conger. *Growing Your Company's Leaders: How Great Organizations Use Succession Management to Sustain Competitive Advantage*. AMACOM, 2004.

The onboarding and support of principals also must take into account what is expected of them. Many young educators with strong potential are comparing the work of the principalship with their goals for how they want their lives to be and saying, “No thanks.” Michael Fullan has observed, “It is hard to recruit the right people to a bad situation. As we say, ‘How are you going to keep them down on the farm once they have seen the farm?’ Or, ‘How are you even going to get them to see the farm once they know so much about it?’”⁹⁴

Recognizing that the work is difficult does not excuse states and districts from the obligation to do what they can to make it easier. States and districts need to carefully monitor the working conditions of school principals and provide new and experienced principals with tools and supports that allow them to succeed. The School Administration Manager (SAM) concept is one example of the innovative supports that are possible. In this model, a SAM (on a pay scale lower than most assistant principals) is added to the staff with the specific purpose of relieving the principal of operational and managerial duties and allowing the principal to focus on instructional leadership.⁹⁵

Districts also must be more focused about what they expect of the principal. **Current expectations for principals are overwhelming and must be reframed and prioritized.** Sally Zepeda’s summary of the expectations for today’s principals is apt: “The principal is expected to serve simultaneously as an instructional, organizational, strategic, and community/political leader, balancing the demands of staff, students, parents, taxpayers, and legislators. . . . Principals are expected to take a ‘the buck stops here’ stance to their schools’ outcomes while simultaneously working in a model of shared leadership.”⁹⁶

The principalship will have to evolve beyond its current configuration, and the young educators currently entering school leadership will necessarily have a voice in how it changes. **Succession planning must occur in the context of meeting future needs rather than being based on identifying, preparing and selecting people to do the job of the principal as it presently exists.**

Two Stories of Succession Planning (*continued*)

Tony Washington had become an assistant principal at a school where just a year before he had been a classroom teacher. There were, as might be expected, some difficulties in the transition, but his natural leadership skills and his ability to build and maintain relationships made it work. Even as Tony worked with a mentor to develop his abilities as an assistant principal, he was able to work with his school's new principal on an onboarding plan, helping him make important connections in the school and the community and helping him to avoid the potholes that a person new to the school and district could not know about. Tony learned from the new principal as well — new ideas about engaging students and creating programs of study that students could see as relevant to their lives and their futures.

Valerie Greene had been in an unexpectedly difficult situation. She had lost the trust of many of her teachers as she came into Jackson Middle School and pointed out that instruction was not where it could or should be. But her superintendent had been following her progress for a number of years and was confident that she was the right person for the job. He backed her up and provided political cover for her when some members of the board questioned her ability.

Valerie's former principal remained in close contact with her, providing advice on rebuilding relationships and rebuilding the culture at Jackson. Valerie began to build trust with some of the teachers and she started to create a professional learning community, slowly, around a nucleus of the best and most forward-thinking of her teachers, with support from the district's professional learning coordinator. Soon they were getting results, and Valerie let them share those results with the rest of the faculty. By the end of the year, more than half of her faculty had come around to adopting her main ideas for improving instruction.

V. Evaluation — of Both School Leaders and Succession Planning Processes — and Process Improvement

Evaluate School Leaders

Providing accurate feedback to school leadership preparation programs and districts requires quality assessments of the strengths and weaknesses of the school leaders produced by those programs.⁹⁷ Just as an effective succession planning strategy is reliant on clear standards for school leaders, the ability to evaluate the success and the value of succession planning is dependent on a well-developed capacity to measure whether school leaders meet those standards. **Proper planning to meet a district's future leadership needs requires an accurate identification of its good principals and its principals in need of serious improvement or replacement.**

School leaders need the information provided by high-quality evaluations as much as their districts do. Over the long term, their professional growth and their decisions about professional learning and the prioritization of their work should be informed by accurate evaluations of their practice. In the short term, school leaders need formative assessments that enable them to make mid-course corrections in their leadership, just as students or teachers need such assessments to improve learning or instruction.⁹⁸

Evaluations should be closely aligned with state leadership standards but also take into account specific annual goals that a principal has discussed with his or her supervisor. Evaluations should be multi-pronged, including at a minimum:

- teacher feedback linked to priorities established by the principal and his or her supervisor.
- measurable school data benchmarked to first-year goals.
- student surveys in fall and spring regarding their perceptions of school and classroom experiences.
- an improvement plan for the next year.

SREB states such as Delaware, North Carolina, South Carolina and Tennessee have made a concerted effort to improve their statewide principal evaluation systems in the past decade. There are also a number of commercially available principal evaluation tools that have been evaluated for validity and reliability and can be used to provide formative and developmental feedback to school leaders.⁹⁹

Evaluate and Revise the Succession Planning Process

States, school districts and universities should engage in continuous evaluation and improvement of succession planning processes, programs and tools. This includes obtaining feedback from aspiring and placed leaders on the effectiveness of their preparation and the alignment between the preparatory curriculum (including field and mentoring support), the school leadership skills they use and the challenges they have faced. Aspiring and new leaders should have opportunities to provide meaningful feedback on the mentoring and other supports they receive. Districts need to continuously evaluate and improve their efforts to provide on-the-job training for current and future school leaders; if districts are not getting the leaders they need, they need to own parts of that problem and see where they can make changes. As schools change and the role of the principal evolves, preparation must adapt to meet the needs of those transitioning into school leadership so that they are better prepared for success.

Succession Planning in Smaller Districts

If a small district is working with other neighboring districts and a local university or universities, it should clearly communicate to its partners its succession planning objectives and conduct periodic evaluations of the partnership to ensure that its needs are being met. Because of the political nature of such a partnership, the superintendent should take the lead in evaluating the benefits of the partnership and negotiating desirable changes. Consortia of districts working together in succession planning should consider periodically engaging a third party to conduct a formal evaluation.

The pool of prepared — yet untapped — aspiring leaders occasionally should be surveyed to determine what differentiates successful candidates from those who are passed over. If the difference is found in skills that are lacking in some candidates, those skills can be strengthened. If it is traits and dispositions that prevent some candidates from advancing, pre-screening tools might be honed to better identify candidates with those weaknesses. University-based school leadership programs should work actively with district leaders to modify programs so that the available candidates in the pipeline align with district needs.

States should establish data systems that permit longitudinal tracking of the careers of principals. Such systems will help to identify early-career indicators that may predict success as a principal. Data sets that connect university transcripts, teacher and administrator licensure test results, teacher and administrator evaluation results, and student achievement and value-added data would permit states to identify quickly and accurately what works and what can be improved. Backward-mapping the careers of today’s successful principals may unearth common elements in their stories and clues that will lead to better preparation of tomorrow’s principals.

Two Stories of Succession Planning (*continued*)

Ninety days into the school year, Tony Washington met with his principal for a formative evaluation. Tony’s mentor from the district had provided input for this meeting but was not directly involved. Together, they reviewed his responsibilities, changing some of them to better match talents with tasks. His principal also gave Tony a charge to lead the planning for the creation of a ninth-grade academy for the following school year and asked him to start thinking about the team that he would like to work on it.

The APP also sought feedback from Tony on his preparation. His primary recommendation was that the APP find a way to provide more leadership opportunities for early-career teachers. He also suggested that the district make greater efforts to work with university leadership preparation programs to make their training both more relevant and more rigorous. He and the members of his cohort had felt that they were poorly prepared when they began their work with the APP.

Valerie Greene’s district had adopted the VAL-ED 360° principal evaluation instrument, and all new administrators had an evaluation mid-way through their first year. Her ratings from her teachers were low, but this did not come as a surprise to her or her supervisors, as she had been reading the situation correctly and had discussed the situation with her supervisors. They took the scores as a baseline and began working from there to see improvement; and, sure enough, improvement came with time.

Her district and her university also sought feedback from Valerie on her preparation for school leadership. Valerie offered two suggestions, based on her experiences: that mentor principals be purposely assigned, rather than assigned based on convenience, and that internship experiences expose future leaders to multiple grade levels (elementary, middle and high school) and multiple school settings.

VI. New Leaders Developing Future Leaders

“The current trend toward emphasizing principals’ instructional leadership role recognizes the need to prioritize principal effort toward activities that more directly affect student achievement. To this needs to be added an emphasis on managing the school’s human capital. But this cannot be done by just adding more responsibilities to an already overloaded role.”

— *Strategic Management of Human Capital in Public Education*⁸⁹

The circle of succession planning is completed when principals take the lead in developing their eventual successors. The principal’s job of talent development is under-recognized and under-developed. In the intense focus on principals as instructional leaders, their critical role in creating school structures that will allow teachers to grow as instructional leaders is not receiving the proper focus. A principal’s own effectiveness is determined, in part, by how he or she encourages professional growth among staff members.¹⁰¹

Principals are responsible for managing “human capital” for their schools and will play a key role in raising the talent level of all the adults in the school.¹⁰² An accomplished principal will create leadership opportunities for faculty, recognize success, plan for turnover, develop a recruitment message to attract the right candidates to the school, select staff who share the school’s vision, induct and support new teachers, provide high-quality professional development tailored to the needs of the school and use a balanced teacher evaluation system to help each teacher become more effective.

Most principal evaluations do not place enough emphasis on the principal’s role in developing the adults in the school. Test scores, discipline referrals, promotion rates, student and teacher attendance rates, and parent and teacher feedback tend to be the main inputs into principal evaluations. All of these indicators are focused on the immediate past, the present and the near future, not on the long-term growth needs of the school and its faculty. Principals are putting themselves on the line when they release their best teachers from the classroom for opportunities to develop as future leaders. Principals are more likely to be recognized when students score highly on Advanced Placement exams than when their teachers are hired as assistant principals in other schools. In short, **the way K-12 education currently defines the work of principals tends to actively discourage their investment of time in succession planning for the future.**

Alabama is leading the way in requiring that school leaders take responsibility for developing the skills and capacities of their teachers. Standard 3 of Alabama’s Standards for Instructional Leaders is “Human Resources Development,” which includes these key indicators:

- 3-1.** Knowledge to set high expectations and standards for the performance of all teachers and staff
- 3-2.** Ability to coach staff and teachers on the evaluation of student performances
- 3-3.** Ability to work collaboratively with teachers to plan for individual professional development
- 3-4.** Ability to use a variety of supervisory models to improve teaching and learning
- 3-5.** Ability to apply adult learning strategies to professional development
- 3-8.** Ability to establish mentor programs to orient new teachers and provide ongoing coaching and other forms of support for veteran staff

- 3-9. Ability to manage, monitor, and evaluate a program of continuous professional development tied to student learning and other school goals
- 3-11. Ability to provide high-quality professional development activities to ensure that teachers have skills to engage all students in active learning
- 3-13. Ability to create a community of learners among faculty and staff
- 3-15. Ability to foster development of aspiring leaders, including teacher-leaders

Additional indicators contained within other strands of Alabama’s standards establish the expectations that school principals create leadership teams and practice distributed and shared leadership within their buildings, providing members of their faculty with opportunities to practice instructional leadership.

Districts and states should do more to recognize and celebrate the work of principals who serve as successful role models and mentors for a younger generation of leaders. Contributing to the successful development of new school leaders should be an indicator for and an expectation of accomplished principals. Tiered licensure and performance pay systems should consider the extent to which a principal is creating a positive legacy in the number and quality of future leaders he or she has formally or informally mentored over the years.

For several years, Finland has been outperforming the rest of the world on international comparisons of student achievement. Among the lessons that Michael Fullan has drawn from his study of the practices and culture of education in Finland is this:

*“You can’t just start with the principal. As the success in Finland demonstrates ... it starts with a foundational bedrock of quality teachers across the board. Then you can spawn leaders developing other leaders, pipelines of potential future leaders learning leadership in the settings in which they work. And only then will incentives and opportunities to take up the principalship be attractive to teacher leaders.”*¹⁰³

It is time to consider what we — states, districts and schools — are doing to create spawning grounds for future school leaders. Today’s teachers are tomorrow’s principals. We must all commit ourselves to making sure that they are ready to lead.

Two Stories of Succession Planning (*continued*)

Tony Washington remembered his days as a teacher and how frustrated he had been in his inability to lead in any meaningful way. He set about changing that in his new leadership role, spotting people he thought had talent, giving them opportunities for meaningful contributions, soliciting their opinions, encouraging their aspirations and challenging them to constantly better themselves. Tony saw himself as a teacher of teachers and began to judge himself by the professional growth of the teachers with whom he worked.

The APP also made a point to bring Tony and other members of his cohort who had been placed as school leaders back to talk with the current cohort about their experiences, how the APP had prepared them, what they found to be most important, and what they had felt they were least prepared to do.

Valerie Greene realized that her first principal had provided her with some great opportunities along the way, and she did the same when she became a principal. She worked hard to cultivate a professional learning community in her school. She began to bring teachers along with her on learning walks and to debrief on what they had seen, encouraging them to share their own insights into what was and was not working in the school and in individual classrooms. As she did this, she slowly began to share her vision for the school with the teachers; and as they began to better understand that vision, they became more supportive of her leadership and began to work her vision into the culture of the school.

Valerie had a veteran teaching force in her school. She began to rely on one of the teachers in particular, even having that teacher fill in for her when she had to leave the building for district meetings. The teacher really loved the classroom, but Valerie began to show the teacher that school administrators are still educators. They still get to work with students, curriculum and instruction, but they have a bigger canvas on which to paint. After a rocky start, Valerie Green has grown into her own at Jackson Middle School. But if she was not there, there would still be someone who could step in and continue the work.

Summary

States and districts that want to have good schools in the future need to engage in succession planning for principals now. The work of principals is complex and highly challenging, and learning the skills to succeed as a principal takes time. The skills of a classroom teacher are important to a principal, but the work of a principal encompasses many tasks that lie beyond the experiences to which teachers are typically exposed. Creating school and district cultures that grow future leaders requires fundamentally rethinking the roles of educators and the nature of leadership in a school system and in school buildings.

It is a certainty that roughly 18,000 principals will be hired every year in the years to come. The only question remaining is: Will they be the right people with the right preparation? The six steps of SREB's conceptual framework for succession planning — identifying and then developing talent, selecting the right leaders and carefully onboarding them, evaluating leaders and processes, and immediately using new leaders to grow future leaders — offer a logical and sustainable plan states and districts can implement to ensure they have the right principals for the job.

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