



# Supporting Principals' Learning: Key Features of Effective Programs

Leib Sutcher, Anne Podolsky, and Danny Espinoza

Improving student achievement requires strong school leadership. In the wake of the Every Student Succeeds Act, many states are implementing education initiatives related to curriculum, instruction, accountability, and social and emotional learning, which all require substantial principal expertise. Principals also play a critical role in addressing widespread teacher shortages by creating school environments that attract and retain competent teachers. The most effective principals assume a range of responsibilities, including setting direction, developing people, redesigning the organization, and leading instruction.

There is a great deal for school leaders to learn in order to manage all of these responsibilities productively. Effective preparation and professional development programs enable principals to improve student and school outcomes. Research points to several key building blocks of such programs. These include:

## Organizational partnerships that support learning

1. **Close collaboration between programs and school districts.** High-quality programs partner with school districts in a mutually beneficial blend of research and practice.
2. **Purposeful and targeted recruitment.** High-quality programs recruit teachers with leadership potential to enter the principalship, ideally from the communities they plan to serve.

## Programs structured to support learning

1. **Cohorts of principal candidates.** High-quality preparation programs structure learning and courses to be carried out in collaboration amongst a small group of peers.
2. **Networks of practicing principals.** High-quality in-service learning utilizes professional learning communities where school leaders learn together on the job.

## Meaningful and authentic learning opportunities

1. **Problem-based learning opportunities.** High-quality programs use context-specific problems to connect coursework and practice to enrich candidates' skill development.
2. **Field-based internships and coaching by an expert.** High-quality programs support principals' development through internships and on-the-job coaching by strong and supportive leaders.

## Learning opportunities focused on what matters

1. **Strong focus on improving schoolwide instruction.** High-quality programs have curricula focused on instruction and school improvement.
2. **Attention to creating collegial organizations.** High-quality programs prepare educators to create environments where teachers, staff, and students engage in continual learning and improvement.
3. **Using data for change.** High-quality programs train educators to use data and collective inquiry to identify problems and address needs, in collaboration with staff, parents, and community organizations.

Financial investments in high-quality principal training yields substantial benefits in student achievement, as well as teacher quality and retention (see Figure 1). States can invest in high-quality principals by using federal funds in ESSA for teacher and school leader development in addition to state funds. By supporting effective preparation and development programs, policymakers can increase the odds that students are in schools led by well-prepared principals.

For the full report, go to [learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/supporting-principals-learning](https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/supporting-principals-learning).

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**Figure 1**  
**How High-Quality Principal Preparation and Development Pays Off**  
**for Students, Schools, and States**

