

A New Leader, New School Leadership Support?

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In less than two months, one of the most historic presidential elections in recent history will take place in this country. It is our sincere wish that no matter who the victor, the dire situation involving the growing shortage of qualified school principals and professional development funds will get due attention from the next administration. In 2001, researchers estimated that by 2011, more than 40% of the nation's principals will have retired, leaving districts scrambling to find quality leaders for schools that are already struggling to keep up with the growing demands for high student achievement—demands that are often made without the support of necessary resources to make success possible.

Presently, we are finding that these predictions are holding true as districts nationwide report they are desperate to find suitable replacements for aging school leaders. A 1998 survey commissioned by our organizations found that the problem is widespread, with districts in rural, suburban and urban areas all reporting they are facing shortages. Traditionally, assistant principals and teachers have stepped up to the plate, ready and willing to fill the shoes of a former principal. Now, in the face of an ever increasing amount of responsibility placed on the shoulders of school leaders, many assistant principals and teachers are foregoing the opportunity to take over the top spot. This is a problem that could more easily be solved with sufficient professional development for current and future school leaders.

If more federal funds were dedicated to recruiting and improving the training of potential school leaders, we might all be enjoying a robust number of principal candidates, instead of wringing our hands in fear of the impending crisis. The next administration must place a renewed focus on school leadership if we hope to ensure that every child receives a high quality education. Currently, only 3% (about \$87 million) of Title II [Teacher and Principal Training and Recruiting Fund] funds are being used for professional development for principals. We believe that it would take at least \$100 million to even begin to offer proper professional development specifically designed for school leaders.

Many districts are so desperate to fill vacant principal slots they are forced to hire individuals with little or no experience in school

administration. In many instances, this leads to an extremely high turnover rate and the unfortunate reality that schools are not receiving the leadership they need and deserve. Ensuring that professional development programs and resources are available not only helps retain new leaders with talent and potential; it increases their effectiveness in leading the learning in their schools. This in turn, enhances the appeal of the principalship to those considering school leadership as a profession.

Professional development programs give principals the tools needed to use data effectively, lead schools with populations of diverse learners, implement school wide literacy and numeracy initiatives and prepare students to meet challenging content standards. Every principal should have access to programs that develop capacity in leading these areas, but unfortunately many districts simply do not have the funds to offer them. Learning is a continuous process for the students—it should be for school leaders as well. How can we expect fledgling principals to instill the thirst for knowledge in their students if they are unable to evolve and grow due to a lack of funds?

Some schools are lucky to have an assistant principal—an individual who has worked beside the principal, day after day, gaining a unique perspective on how best to conduct the business of leading a school. Despite this, for an assistant principal to make a smooth transition into the principal role, he or she needs continued professional development opportunities to ensure that students and teachers are being led by a confident and knowledgeable leader.

We wholeheartedly support the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards in its efforts to develop a voluntary national certification program for school principals. The proposed program would encourage and support the professional growth of administrators, and it would clarify the skills, knowledge and achievements that set highly qualified and minimally qualified principals apart. Our organizations are eagerly awaiting the development and implementation of this program.

We urge both presidential candidates to give the matter of school leadership due diligence as they prepare themselves to take over the position of the most important job in the nation.