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LEADING LESSONS

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Growing the Capacity of Assistant Principals

Instructional and distributed leadership

How to leverage student data

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LEADING LESSONS

Growing the Capacity of Assistant Principals

PRINCIPAL • Special Supplement

At the Root of Professional Excellence

Empowered by distributed leadership
and data use, assistant principals can help
advance student achievement

A principal "pipeline" is a powerful tool in fostering leadership capabilities among current staff. But the principal pipeline can not only help identify new candidates for leadership roles, it can also instill emerging school leaders with the confidence and expertise needed to improve student achievement and school performance.

As "Principal Pipelines: A Feasible, Affordable, and Effective Way for Districts to Improve Schools," a report commissioned by The Wallace Foundation, shows, schools that are able to implement comprehensive initiatives to grow and develop leadership capacity among assistant principals can outperform their peers in a cost-effective manner.
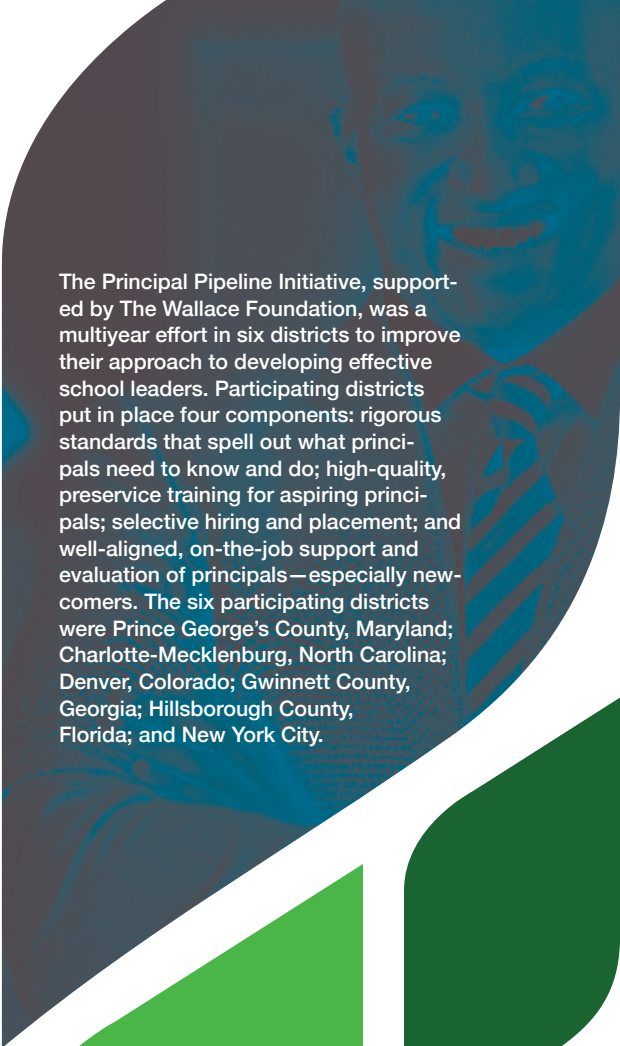
WHAT'S INSIDE

The following pages include wisdom from school leaders in districts participating in The Wallace Foundation's Principal Pipeline Initiative, leading consultants, and winners of NAESP's 2018–2019 National Outstanding Assistant Principals Award. Their comments are a testament to the power created when principals, assistant principals, and school leaders work together to elevate learning.

Distributed leadership makes a difference, the report says. When responsibility and decision-making are shared throughout schools and assistant principals and teacher leaders are defined as educators first, team cultures that encourage collaborative action and personal growth flourish.

Another thing that Pipeline schools had in common? They used data to drive instruction. While assistant principals sometimes say that their roles involve mostly managerial tasks or that schools lack strategies to drive improvement using data, these schools were able to steer instructional leadership supported by the evidence that data provides.

Distributed leadership helped the schools in the Principal Pipeline Initiative depersonalize the tough decisions and helped get everyone—principals, assistant principals, and teacher leaders alike—to work together collaboratively toward goals of improvement and overall excellence. Read on to find out how they did it, and you'll likely find a few strategies you and your team can use to do the same.

You'll find out how to share leadership among teams to solve problems, how to exercise and encourage autonomy within a framework for improvement, and how to mine data for insights into student and school progress. At the same time, you'll learn how to advance your personal and professional development while producing a powerful impact on your school.

The Principal Pipeline Initiative, supported by The Wallace Foundation, was a multiyear effort in six districts to improve their approach to developing effective school leaders. Participating districts put in place four components: rigorous standards that spell out what principals need to know and do; high-quality, preservice training for aspiring principals; selective hiring and placement; and well-aligned, on-the-job support and evaluation of principals—especially newcomers. The six participating districts were Prince George's County, Maryland; Charlotte-Mecklenburg, North Carolina; Denver, Colorado; Gwinnett County, Georgia; Hillsborough County, Florida; and New York City.

The Wallace Foundation

This special supplement is brought to you in partnership with The Wallace Foundation. For more school leadership resources, visit **www.wallacefoundation.org.**

Plant the Seeds of **Leadership**

An assistant principal's checklist to distributed and instructional leadership

Whether or not today's assistant principals aspire to become principals, they crave personal and professional growth. Assistant principals can progress to the next phase of their careers with the confidence and expertise needed to make an impact on student achievement and school performance if they can build effective leadership skills early on.

Distributed Leadership

To make a difference in school performance, assistant principals must share leadership throughout their buildings—encouraging innovation, welcoming ideas, and even bringing dissent to the table—while reaffirming their schools' shared goals. They create team cultures and encourage collaborative action.

1. BUILD TEAMS

The power of distributed leadership starts with strong teams and "a firm belief in collective advocacy," says one principal.

- In addition to assistant principals and lead teachers, teams should include instructional coaches, resource teachers, ESL specialists, guidance counselors, school psychologists, and social workers.
- Take leadership assignments that align with your interests.
- Be a team player: Reciprocate district assistance by helping principals, superintendents, and assistant superintendents with their priorities.

2. CULTIVATE STRONG PLCs

A professional learning community (PLC) helps peers reflect on challenges and successes, perhaps even inspiring one another to aim higher.

- Ensure that PLCs collaborate, have the resources needed, and communicate clearly so that systems are aligned.
- Designate grade-level peer coaches to support teammates in specific subjects.
- Recruit teachers with leadership potential to serve as grade-level instructional facilitators who liaise between classroom teachers and instructional coaches.
- Make sure PLC members share an understanding of the standards for consistency in instructional delivery.
- Adopt protocols to keep meetings on topic.

3. KNOW YOUR PEOPLE

"As a principal, it's great to know curriculum," says one principal, "but you have to know your people." Assistant principals must also keep their fingers on the pulse.

- Hire a diverse staff to mirror the student population and

broaden the range of ideas available.
- Build community by matching people of complementary strengths and weaknesses.
- Capitalize upon the staff's desire to achieve success.
- Model effective leadership by being present and engaged.

4. PUT THE VISION FIRST

Effective assistant principals keep every discussion and action grounded in common goals and shared understanding.

- Keep the school's mission or vision at the front of the decision-making process.
- When team members have conflicting opinions, drive consensus by keeping discussion focused on school goals, culture, and pillars.
- Once a year, collect feedback from every staff member and submit the

findings to leadership for review and adjustment. One principal gets suggestions on "everything from the color of the walls to how we do spelling."

5. TAKE ADVANTAGE OF AUTONOMY

Autonomy is something that instills confidence in aspiring leaders. But one's independent initiative must support the larger vision.

- Innovate within a framework of clearly defined expectations.
- Ensure your ideas can withstand scrutiny based on data.
- Take action knowing that you will be responsible for justifying actions through regular meetings, updates, and adjustments.
- Be honest about new directions and strategies, but refrain from expressing negative opinions that don't also propose solutions.

NOTES

Brainstorm ways the leadership team can spend less time on student discipline.

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List three instructional leadership opportunities that leadership may have overlooked.

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6. SOLVE PROBLEMS

We teach students to analyze situations and devise solutions. Assistant principals should apply the same approach.

- Take on specific problems with the goal of solving them with your team.
- Run with an idea. One leadership team wanted a "data den," for example, and worked with teachers to build it.
- Be open to all ideas while understanding that not all can be executed.

7. READY TEAMS FOR ACTION

Buy-in is the key to distributed leadership. If ideas are allowed to trickle down and bubble up, action plans will be infused with input from everyone.

- Push for strong, universally understood systems that give teams the confidence to address tasks swiftly and efficiently.

- Know when you've earned the team's trust and use it.
- Welcome initiative. When one school focused on literacy, a teacher spearheaded a complete revamp of spelling instruction.
- Avoid delays that dampen enthusiasm, abandoning approaches that don't work swiftly.

8. SHARE AND SHARE ALIKE

Under distributed leadership, assistant principals can show off their natural leadership instincts and encourage others to do the same.

- Share findings from your own professional development to open a window to the assistant principal's role.
- Listen and contribute feedback while allowing others to also drive discussions.
- Empower teacher leaders to devise improvement strategies.
- Encourage cross-curricular problem-solving by housing instructional coaches and other leaders in shared offices.
- Encourage a culture of information-sharing.

9. HELP OTHERS EXPLORE NEW LEADERSHIP ROLES.

Distributed leadership will help assistant principals explore their leadership styles and map their career paths while helping others grow.

- Access leadership training such as university programs or academies offered by the school district and share it with others.
- Learn the basics of running a

school, including budgeting, scheduling, and ordering.
- Give teachers responsibilities that reveal the world of administration.
- Position coaching as a strength-based model, not a punishment.

Instructional Leadership

"It's never too late for principals and assistant principals to learn how to be instructional leaders and work collaboratively," says collaborative leadership consultant Peter DeWitt. "Quite honestly, we don't have a choice anymore."

1. ACTIVATE YOUR SKILLS

Sharing instructional wisdom demands a structured, strategic approach that minimizes time spent on logistics and maximizes classroom connections.

- Help create a "funnel" that brings situations to the principal and assistant principals only when necessary.
- Conquer daily tasks and yearly goals by utilizing the strengths of each person.
- Run your own meetings and build your own teams.
- Request the resources you need to get results.

2. MAKE INSTRUCTIONAL CONNECTIONS

Dive into the instructional "deep end" with other staff.

- Monitor coaches' fidelity to overall school goals.
- Reserve time to provide instructional support.
- Liaise with educational partners and programs.

- Communicate constantly and transparently with families to instill confidence in your school.

3. LINK TO TEACHERS
To stay on top of classroom trends, create direct lines to teachers.

- Go to the same professional development sessions as teachers, who must see leaders "walking the walk," says one principal.
- Immerse yourself in the classroom atmosphere by using "modeling moments" as opportunities to work alongside teachers.
- Normalize the criteria used in classroom observations so teachers know the expectations they face.

4. CULTIVATE A LEADERSHIP MINDSET
As you develop your own career, keep an eye out for leadership abilities among all staff.

- Watch for those who express interest in assuming leadership roles, and convince others to cultivate hidden capabilities.

- Participate in big projects.
- Request the time needed for you, your coaches, and your teachers to activate lessons learned through professional development.
- Take the initiative to make rapid-response instructional changes.

5. PLAN, IMPLEMENT, ADJUST, REPEAT
Even high-achieving schools don't settle for the status quo. Every action step triggers review and reflection to address changing needs.

- Follow a circular pattern for effective implementation: Discuss, articulate, reflect, and evaluate what works. Repeat.
- Leverage classroom experience to create distinctive look-fors that measure progress toward goals.
- Use instructional learning walks to gauge progress toward goals.

6. RECAST PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT
Many resources are at your fingertips.

- Make time in the day for teachers to observe teammates who excel.

- Align peer classroom visits with lesson plans in areas where the observing teacher needs assistance.
- Schedule data analysis, mini-assessments, and coaching daily.
- Ask teams and teachers to share PD that addresses the areas of improvement being explored.
- Tap NAESP and state administrators' associations for leadership training, assistance, research, and grant-writing support. ⬮

Reflection Questions:

- Do my school's processes recognize the different learning styles of administrators, coaches, and teachers?

- Am I keeping teacher leaders at the forefront, remembering that classrooms change more and more each year?

- Am I tapping into all available active instructional leadership opportunities?

- Can I better capture professional development opportunities within my own school?

Data Sprouts
Success

Empower assistant principals with
experience in instructional leadership

By Elizabeth Duffrin

Using data to drive instruction and school improvement is recognized as an approach that can pay off in higher student achievement. Yet assistant principals in *Principal* magazine's readership identified learning to use data as a need that often goes unmet in their development as instructional leaders.

To gain insights on how to best use data and share instructional leadership, we turned to Prince George's County Public Schools in Maryland. The district participated in the Principal Pipeline Initiative, supported by The Wallace Foundation, and placed special emphasis on helping current and future leaders use data to drive school improvement.

Improving instructional leadership skills among assistant principals and teacher leaders was a priority. "As a principal, you can't do this job by yourself," says Charity Magruder, principal of Stephen Decatur Middle School. "The only way you can succeed is to empower others to improve their practice."

We asked principals and assistant principals from Prince George's County to elaborate on the strategies that they used to remove barriers to data use and make assistant principals and teacher leaders into skilled instructional leaders. Here's what they said:

1. EMPOWER TEAMS

The sheer volume of data that needs analyzing can be an obstacle, making a team approach necessary. Magruder has teacher leaders for each subject area and grade level conduct data dives during Thursday planning sessions. On Tuesdays, teams at each grade level share and critique lesson plans they created or modified using the results.

She and her two assistant principals divvy up meetings to support teachers as needed. "She really challenges us to be instructional leaders and not just managers," says assistant principal Marcellus Clement.

2. REHEARSE DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis can easily go astray due to misjudgments or misinterpretation. Before assistant principals work with teachers to analyze data, principals say it's important that they examine the data and model the conversations they want teachers to have.

"If I am the instructional leader, I have to get dirty first so I know where the pitfalls are and where the misconceptions

Three Barriers to School Data Use

School leaders face obstacles in making use of the information data provides, says Jason Grissom, associate professor at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee, who studies data use in K–12 education. These obstacles fall into three main categories, he says: "barriers to access, barriers to analysis, and barriers to action."

Educators first need access to timely and useful data from their district and their own data collection systems, he says. Then they need to know how to analyze the data and make meaning from it, plus take sufficient time to plot their next steps. Mindsets are important, too: Without faith in what the data tells them, educators are unlikely to use it to inform practice.

could be," says Chelsea Hill, principal of Adelphi Elementary School. Leadership should know "where you want the conversation to go. If you don't, teachers can walk away feeling it's a waste of time."

3. USE A DATA ANALYSIS PROTOCOL

A data analysis protocol provides step-by-step guidance for achieving insights that can be translated into action. In reviewing data with her leadership team, Hill begins with an "I Notice, I Wonder" protocol. A discussion about unit math assessments, for example, begins with "I notice" statements about trends in the data. Next come "I wonder" statements, such as, "I wonder how Ms. Jones tells children to break down a multistep problem."

The protocol grounds the discussion in fact and offers a chance to identify obstacles to student learning. "Sometimes we want to jump quickly to next steps," Hill says. "But that time to sit and notice can be the time when we have discoveries that lead to higher student achievement."

If the data is complicated, Maryam Thomas, principal of Ernest Everett Just Middle School, launches analysis with observations about how the data is organized: What is the graph or chart about? What's on the X axis and Y axis? While it sounds simple, she says, it prevents misunderstandings that result in unusable observations. Comfort with data varies widely, she adds, so "a standardized approach is critical."

4. EXAMINE STUDENT WORK

Student work is a rich source of data for use in finding out where students struggle. At Adelphi, teacher leaders lead planning meetings; each brings a sample assignment from a student who excelled, a sample assignment performed at the proficient level, and one from a student who struggled. "You're examining the task and the student performance and giving feedback to the teacher," Hill says.

Adelphi assistant principal Leslie Nash-Ruffin says that supporting these meetings has been the most valuable part of her development as an instructional leader. The conversation in which teachers engage while thinking through challenges "is really powerful," she says.

5. OVERCOME TEACHERS' FEAR OF DATA ANALYSIS

Resistance to what the data might reveal is a barrier to improved instruction. Disappointing numbers "can feel like an attack," says Hill. She urges teachers to view data impersonally, as a tool. "The data is your compass," she tells them. "If your compass is telling you to go north and you go south, you're not going to get the results you're looking for."

Wanda Williams, principal of Oxon Hill Elementary School, says she gets teachers' buy-in by having them set their own goals for student growth on district assessments. If a teacher sets a goal too low, she gently probes to find out why. Williams can then offer her advice and follow up with classroom observation and coaching.

What barriers to discussing data do teachers at our school face?

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In his assistant principal role at Stephen Decatur, Clement reduces resistance to observational classroom data by inviting teacher feedback: "If a teacher says to me, 'I don't agree with that,' I say, 'tell me why.' I always like to hear what teachers are thinking."

6. USE OBSERVATION TO IMPROVE TEACHING

During the first two weeks of school at Ernest Everett Just, Thomas and her assistant principals visit classrooms together and calibrate their feedback to offer consistent expectations to teachers throughout the year. "We have to assess teachers rigorously because that's the only way to get to the type of learning experiences that will move the needle on achievement," she says.

To be effective, feedback must be consistent and delivered with respect. Thomas leads with praise, identifies small improvements teachers can make quickly, and asks questions that provoke deeper thought. Approach teachers as "more of a thought partner than a supervisor," she says. "It's not just, 'Hey, take this feedback,' but 'Try this strategy.'"

When it's time for evaluations, objective evidence makes difficult discussions more productive. "The challenges [to ratings] were based on emotions," Thomas says.

7. COMMUNICATE DATA TO STUDENTS AND PARENTS

Parents can better support school goals for student achievement when they understand the data. After the first quarterly district assessments each fall, Oxon Hill Elementary hosts a Data Night where parents learn to interpret their children's results. Teachers at each grade level then lead workshops with activities parents can use at home to reinforce needed skills.

At Melwood Elementary, teachers assess student work with rubrics that provide clear feedback, and students use similar devices to assess their own work and that of their peers, too. "A check and a smiley face—that means nothing," says principal Andrew Dalton. "Children learn more in an environment where they take ownership of their learning, and they can only take ownership if they understand what they are supposed to learn."

8. CELEBRATE SUCCESSES

Analyzing data to improve practice is hard work. "You can turn people off if you don't celebrate the small successes," says Williams. She scoured Oxon Hill's attendance and standardized test score data last year and handed out achievement certificates to teachers at a celebratory event. "I tried to find something good in the data [for] each and every grade level," she says. "You've got to make [data] fun. You've got to make people want to look at it."

Elizabeth Duffrin is a freelance education writer in Chicago.

Key Considerations:

- Build links between leadership and data teams.
- Include support services personnel in data teams.
- Create frameworks for reviewing quantitative data objectively.
- Apply data results to advise use of resources and finances.

arvest Data
nsights

9 steps to take in using data to cultivate school transformation

Assistant principals can mine data for insights into school and student progress, and can use those insights to create action plans and lead school transformation. Alongside principals and teachers, you can build data capabilities to access the objective, fact-based keys to unlocking student growth and school improvement.

1. BUILD THE DATA TEAM
A strong data team allows scrutiny of data from varying perspectives.

■ Data teams include principals, assistant principals, instructional coaches, and a teacher leader from each grade. Include student services personnel to address non-academic issues such as attendance.
■ Turn leadership teams into data teams. Over the summer, review state assessments and devise skeleton improvement plans. Then, the instructional leadership team can formulate next steps.

2. COLLECT THE DATA

The million-dollar question: In a world groaning with data, how do you know which provides a true snapshot of the school and its students?

- Use evidence to measure and understand the impact of leadership actions.
- Don't be afraid to collect the wrong evidence; if it doesn't work, try something new.
- Take advantage of programs' utilization data. One team discovered that a reading program wasn't being used efficiently, and brought in a company representative for training.
- Consider qualitative data. Qualitative data comes from efforts such as interim assessments, formative assessments, and student writing assignments.
- Review quantitative data to yield insights. Numbers-based, quantitative data informs instructional planning and day-to-day tasks.

3. CHOOSE STUDENT DATA

Choosing data to scrutinize for student growth can be "messy and muddy," in the words of one principal. When life gives you mud, make mud pies.

- Start the school year with the freshest data on hand—often the latest state assessments. Then, revisit the previous year's data to check for gains and find out what's needed to make gains in the current year.
- Think in tiers: Break the data down by standard and grade level, and hand it off to PLCs to drill down

Data analysis is a useful pursuit when the numbers inform viable action plans.

for students who don't master the standards. Use those findings to plan interventions.

■ Don't overlook data from high-performing students or those at basic proficiency. They can be encouraged to grow and develop goals.

4. ANALYZE STUDENT DATA

Extracting meaning from numbers can be a point of frustration, but data can be shaped to tell a story.

■ Align state test data with school-based achievement data. Then, look for outliers among students to determine whether in-house assessments missed something.

■ Align data findings with standards and curriculum to make sure the concepts teachers are presenting actually result in student knowledge.

■ Look at data dives not as searching for numbers, but as mining for explanations.

■ At interim assessment time, review test data by the standards taught. What depth of knowledge was the assessment measuring? Identify plans of action for the weakest standards.

■ Track data over time and across grade levels to determine whether, for instance, a second-grade intervention shows positive results at fourth grade.

5. USE DATA FOR TEACHER GROWTH

Data can also guide teacher professional development and coaching.

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List three ways you can build the confidence of administrators and teachers to analyze data.

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- Review multiple years of data to reveal trends to address with individual teachers.
- Analyze individual student growth to reveal gaps in teacher effectiveness.
- When having difficult discussions with teachers, reflect on the meaning of the numbers for students. If only four students achieve proficiency out of 23, ask the teacher to consider the factors that kept the other 19 behind.
- Have teachers review grade-level data to find areas where a cross-curricular approach might help close achievement gaps.
- Keep data relevant by giving teachers opportunities to share items demonstrating their tracking methods.

6. EMPOWER TEACHERS TO USE DATA

The rubber hits the road when data helps raise student achievement.

- Enlist teacher leaders to design protocols for monitoring and utilizing data. When asked to serve as leaders in math and ELA inquiry, two teachers at one school took ownership of data inquiry in a way that is now a model for other schools.
- Perform regular data dives to train and refresh teachers on everyday data utilization. Remind them where to find data and how to use it to impact instruction.

7. USE DATA AS A RESOURCE GUIDE

Data analysis is a useful pursuit when the numbers inform viable action plans and help assistant principals target limited resources.

- Reflect and decide where the greatest area of need is and what resources will be required. Plan activities to address the need, create actionable steps toward implementation, and evaluate impact using evidence.
- Distribute resources to the areas of greatest need by tiering teachers based on data showing classroom progress and building plans for those who need additional assistance.
- Empower teachers to write their own mini-assessments based on data findings and unpack standards to reveal what students need to know and when.

8. LEVERAGE DATA WALLS

It might look like little more than a colorful array of sticky notes or spreadsheet entries, but an effectively managed data wall can be a dynamic tool for school improvement.

- A physical data wall with moveable elements is a valuable tool for teachers who are visual and tactile learners.
- Employ data walls to spark conversations—and perhaps healthy competition—among teachers.
- Electronic data walls allow assistant principals to answer parent questions without consulting teachers first. Coaches can use them to target teacher supports.

9. DISSEMINATE THE DATA

Data belongs to the school community, and it can be wielded for powerful effect.

- Work with the school community to develop dissemination practices. Create a consensus on the information they want to see and how it's shared.
- Share data with individual students and set goals within the lens of a growth mindset (e.g., "It's not that you can't do something. You just haven't done it yet.")
- Share data sets (with individual findings redacted) with parent leaders and groups to build an understanding of school progress and goals.
- Put data in the school newsletter and consider creating a "State of the School" document to inform parents about the progress made.
- Incorporate data into communications with potential community partners, soliciting support by sharing school successes, goals, and needs.
- Celebrate the gains and successes the data reveals.

NOTES

What processes are in place empowering PLCs to act on data findings?

Reflection Questions:
- Have I looked closely enough within my school talent to tap those who can enhance our data analysis and utilization capabilities?
- Am I using the right data for the right reasons? Can I justify the purpose for scrutinizing each strand of data brought to my teams?
- Am I matching and overlaying data sets to find the mismatches or alignments that tell a story?
- How well am I training and refreshing my teachers on finding data, analyzing it, and using the results to adjust classroom practices?

Talking points to strengthen
the assistant principal's role
in the principal pipeline

Encourage New

Too often, assistant principals say they are slotted into management and discipline roles, shrinking the time and opportunities available for building leadership skills. And yet, better school leadership equals better student outcomes. Research reveals why assistant principals should be groomed for leadership, and how it's done. Use these research-based talking points to make the case for strengthening professional learning experiences for aspiring and assistant principals.

MAKING THE CASE

- Well-designed, district-run principal preparation programs groom high-potential assistant principals for principal assignments of their own.
- Properly trained assistant principals perform at higher levels. Faculty have a better instructional experience, and students have a better educational experience.
- Schools with newly placed principals from principal pipelines—often including former assistant principals—outperform comparison schools in reading and math.
- When Broward County (Florida) Public Schools implemented an initiative that included mentorship for assistant principals tailored to their years of experience, the number of schools rated D or F plummeted from about 40 to eight.
- Better-prepared principals stay on the job longer even in high-need urban and rural schools. Longevity boosts student achievement.
- Graduates of exemplary leadership development programs feel "significantly better prepared for instructional leadership and management of school improvement."

THE KEYS TO LEADERSHIP

- A leader tracking system creates fact-based profiles of the skills, experience, and ratings of assistant principals, allowing data-driven decisions that place the right people in the right jobs.
- The hallmarks of strong training programs for assistant principals aspiring to be principals are rigorous selection of participants; a coherent, instruction-focused curriculum; fully paid internships; peer networks that

provide support after training ends; capable instructors and coaches with extensive real-world experience; and that tracks graduates' on-the-job performance and identifies training weaknesses.
- Assistant principals enrolled in pathways to principalships can test various aspects of the job. Examples include residencies that embed assistant principals with expert principals for a year and collaborations with university partners.
- Strategic design can strengthen programs that prepare teachers for assistant principal positions. Hillsborough County Public Schools focused its Assistant Principal Induction Program on the leadership competencies specifically needed by assistant principals.
- Three foundational tenets apply to collaborative leadership systems among principals and assistant principals: Shape and share the same core beliefs, prioritize teacher feedback, and emphasize that everyone—principals, assistant principals, and teachers—should always be learning.

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