

School Leadership

Use this advocacy guide to push your state and district leaders to improve the preparation, hiring, and support of high-quality principals who can lead school improvement efforts.

What do we know?

- **Leadership matters.** Strong school leaders are key to [improving student achievement](#) and are a main factor in determining whether effective [teachers stay at a school](#). Moreover, talented school leaders have the [greatest impact in the highest-needs schools](#).
- **The role of principals is underappreciated in the education field.** Too often, principals are still thought of as middle managers, primarily responsible for building operation and compliance.
- **Principals play a key role in [shaping the conditions for high-quality teaching and learning](#).** For example, they can:
 - Build a culture of academic success for all students
 - Create working conditions that make effective teachers want to come to and stay at a school
 - Cultivate leadership in others
 - Improve classroom instruction
 - Establish the systems – such as teacher hiring and support and creation of master schedules that allow time for teacher collaboration – that are critical for improvement
- **Turning around chronically low-performing Comprehensive Support and Improvement (CSI) schools** may require [additional leadership competencies](#) beyond those needed for continuing improvement efforts or maintaining performance. There is also evidence that schools are more likely to **close achievement gaps if they [have a leader who is explicitly focused on equity](#)**.
- **State and district leaders have the power and responsibility to improve the way principals are prepared, recruited, and supported.** Doing so is critical to improving both the lowest-performing (CSI) schools and schools that are underperforming for any student group (TSI).

Advocacy guide roadmap

This advocacy guide focuses on what state and district leaders can do to improve principal preparation, recruitment and support, especially for chronically low-performing schools (Comprehensive Support and Improvement, or CSI), or schools that consistently underperform for a group of students (Targeted Support and Improvement, or TSI). It suggests:

- **Key questions to ask** state and district leaders — and what to look for, and watch out for, in the answers
- Ways that advocates can **use ESSA** to push states and districts to focus on school leadership
- **Examples** of states and districts that are rising to the challenge
- **Additional resources** for advocates to learn more

KEY QUESTIONS TO ASK ABOUT ANY SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT INTERVENTION

1. What interventions have state or district leaders tried in the past and what were the results?
2. Why do state or district leaders think the proposed intervention will work?
3. How will state or district leaders plan for and implement the intervention?
4. How will state or district leaders know if this approach is working?
5. What will state or district leaders do if it doesn't work, and when?

► QUESTIONS TO ASK YOUR *state leaders*

Right now, many states have far more individuals certified as principals than actual principal positions, yet district leaders struggle to find strong principal candidates, especially for high-need schools. State leaders can play an [important role](#) in developing a pipeline of effective principals who are prepared to lead improvement efforts. State leaders can also establish specific criteria for principals to lead schools identified for comprehensive or targeted improvement.

1. Have state leaders established research-based standards for principal preparation and principal residency programs? How do state leaders know whether preparation and residency programs are meeting those standards?

Look for:

- State leaders to show that standards for principal preparation and residency programs are [based in research](#), aligned to standards for principals, and reflect the skills necessary to [improve achievement in CSI](#) and TSI schools
- State leaders to demonstrate that principal preparation and residency programs have to meet these standards in order to maintain accreditation.
- State tracking systems that measure the effectiveness of principal preparation and residency program graduates — including how many actually become principals, whether they meet the state’s quality standards, and their subsequent success in improving outcomes for all groups of students

Watch out for:

- Standards for principal preparation that aren’t research-based
- No consequences for failing to meet standards
- No way of tracking effectiveness of programs and graduates

2. How do state leaders know whether principals are meeting research-based standards?

Look for:

- Professional standards for principals that are grounded in current [research](#) and reflect the skills necessary to [improve achievement in CSI](#) and TSI schools
- State monitoring systems that show whether principals are meeting these standards, such as a principal evaluation system that includes surveys of teachers and measures of student progress

Watch out for:

- Principal standards that aren’t research-based
- No systematic way of tracking data on principal quality

3. What criteria do principals have to meet in order to lead the lowest performing (CSI) schools or schools that are consistently underperforming for a group of students (TSI)? How do state leaders know whether principals are meeting these criteria?

Look for:

- State-established criteria that principals of CSI and TSI schools have to meet:
 - CSI criteria includes having a track record of leading substantial improvement in similarly challenging schools, or completing a principal preparation program with a track record of producing graduates leading such improvement
 - TSI criteria includes having a track record of substantially improving achievement for historically underserved groups of students, ideally in similar schools.
- State leaders to explain how they know whether principals meet these criteria, including specific data they examine (e.g., academic progress for individual groups of students; principal evaluation results; and results of parent, student, and teacher surveys).

Watch out for:

- No clear criteria for principals of CSI and TSI schools or inability to explain how the state measures whether principals meet criteria
- State leaders don’t consider student achievement when determining if principals meet criteria

▶ QUESTIONS TO ASK *district leaders*

District leaders are responsible for hiring and assigning principals who are a good fit for each of their schools. They are also responsible for evaluating principals and supporting them in developing their organizational and instructional leadership skills.

1. How do district leaders ensure that principal candidates meet the needs of schools in the district?

Look for:

- District leaders to partner with principal preparation program(s) to ensure candidates receive the preparation they need to meet schools' needs. District leaders can also exert consumer power over preparation programs by refusing to hire graduates from programs that do not prepare principals to lead improvement in their schools
- District leaders to have a thoughtful internal principal pipeline, including a [system](#) to track imminent vacancies and identify who within the district is ready and available for school leadership. And district leaders [purposefully use assistant principal positions](#) to develop principal candidates' skills, including instructional leadership

Watch out for:

- District has no system for using data to make informed decisions about recruiting and hiring principals
- Assistant principals are expected to function primarily as disciplinarians

2. How will district leaders identify the right principal for each CSI and TSI school?

Look for:

- District leaders to require principals of CSI and TSI schools to have a track record of leading improvement, and the district's definition of "track record of success" is at least as strong as the state's
- When a school is identified for CSI or TSI, district leaders to consider whether current leadership is the right match for the school
- District to have a differentiated profile and selection process for school leaders going into the most challenging schools and can name specific criteria it uses in candidate selection

Watch out for:

- District promotes people to principal only because of longevity
- District does not review leadership quality when school is identified for CSI or TSI

3. How do district leaders support principals in the lowest-performing schools and schools that are consistently underperforming for any group of students?

Look for:

- Principals to be supported by [principal supervisors](#) or coaches who have a reasonable case load, are well matched to schools, are equipped to support the individual needs of the principals they oversee, and are held accountable for the support they provide
- District leaders to give principals of CSI and TSI schools the flexibility to hire their own staff (no forced placement) and "first dibs" in hiring
- District leaders to give leaders of CSI and TSI schools flexibility to use people, time, and money to maximize the execution of their improvement plans AND to give support in utilizing this flexibility strategically. The district can give specific examples of flexibility and support it provides
- District leaders to be responsive to school leaders' requests (e.g., facilities requests) and judicious of demands it places on principals' time for district-wide initiatives so that principals can focus on improving instruction in their buildings. The district can provide specific examples of this

Watch out for:

- Principal supervisors with large caseloads (> 10)
- Forced transfers of teachers
- Little or no support for principals in hiring or in making decisions about how to best use people, time, and money
- Principals to be required to devote extensive time to district mandates

Districts and states that are rising to the challenge

- Until recently, [tens of thousands of educators](#) in **Illinois** held principal credentials, although the state had fewer than 500 annual principal vacancies. Despite this, districts struggled to find strong candidates, especially for high-need schools. By 2014, the state legislature [de-certified all principal preparation programs](#) and only recertified those that met standards shown to help in preparing principals to lead school improvement: selective admission, district recommendation, a cohort model, a residency, and ongoing coaching and support after placement. Today, Illinois has 26 programs that produce 700 candidates annually, the majority of whom become principals and assistant principals within a few years.
- **Six large districts** (Charlotte-Mecklenburg, N.C.; Denver, Colo.; Gwinnett County, Ga.; Hillsborough County, Fla.; New York City, N.Y.; and Prince George's County, Md.) **have developed principal pipelines** to build a complete system from recruitment, training, and development to hiring, support, and evaluation. Although this [work was initially grant-funded](#), leaders in these districts found that the cost of developing a coherent pipeline was not much more than the cost of the process they had previously employed.

How can advocates use the Every Student Succeeds Act to urge states and districts to focus on school leadership?

- **Improvement plans:** Advocates can pressure districts to ensure that a review of principal pipeline, hiring, and support is a key part of school improvement planning.

If, after a number of years, efforts do not lead to improved outcomes in CSI or TSI schools, the state (for CSI) or district (for TSI) must take **additional action**. This is another opportunity for advocates to call for a review of leadership quality. If improvement efforts haven't worked, it may be time to consider a leadership change.

- **State and district Title I plans:** To receive Title I dollars, state ESSA plans and district Title I plans have to describe how states and districts, respectively, will ensure that low-income students and students of color have equitable access to strong teachers. Since leadership is a key driver of where teachers choose to work and stay, advocates can use this requirement to push states and districts to address principal preparation, hiring, and support.
- **Funding:** School improvement funds as well as Title II formula funds can be used to support efforts to improve school leadership. Under ESSA, districts must engage stakeholders when determining their applications for these funds. This is an opportunity for advocates to urge district leaders to use Title I and II dollars to implement evidence-based strategies to hire and support strong school leaders. Additionally, advocates can rally state leaders to use the 3 percent of Title II dollars they can use for state activities to support evidence-based activities to strengthen the principal pipeline.

Additional resources

Extraordinary Districts In Ed Trust's new podcast, writer-in-residence Karin Chenoweth visits ordinary school districts that are getting extraordinary results for low-income students and students of color.

The Principal Pipeline In a new six-episode podcast series, the Wallace Foundation features principals, district and state leaders, and university officials who've developed strong principal pipelines.

Schools that Succeed: How Educators Marshal the Power of Systems for Improvement Author Karin Chenoweth describes how leaders of once low-performing schools reorganize systems to prioritize teaching and learning that result in improved outcomes.

Getting it Done: Leading Success in Unexpected Schools From both a research and journalistic perspective, authors describe in striking detail what leaders of successful high-need schools have done to promote and sustain student achievement.

ESSA TITLE II-A: Preparing, Training, and Recruiting High-Quality Teachers, Principals, and Other School Leaders

Chiefs for Change offers examples of how state and district leaders might consider using Title II dollars to improve school leadership.