

Principal Preparation Matters

How Leadership Development Affects Student Achievement

Facing a crisis in leadership—marked by high turnover, difficulties replacing principals, and a perceived lack of skills among many principals—some public school districts in the United States have looked beyond the traditional sources of principal candidates. New Leaders was launched in 2000 to provide a pool of high-performing school leaders to urban schools through an alternative route. This non-profit's innovative program involves active recruitment, rigorous selection, and residency-based principal preparation paired with ongoing support and uses a responsive partnership approach with participating school districts. As of January 2014, 667 individuals prepared and endorsed by New Leaders had assumed principalships in traditional or charter schools in ten partner districts across the nation.

In 2006, New Leaders contracted with RAND to conduct an independent evaluation of its principal-preparation program. The analysis included all principals who have been prepared by New Leaders since the inception of the program, comparing outcomes of their students and outcomes of similar students in other, comparable schools in the same districts. The centerpiece of the evaluation is a rigorous analysis of the effect that New Leaders principals have on student outcomes.

Findings

Effective Leadership Improves Student Achievement

Successful school leadership can play a key role in supporting teaching and learning; with effective preparation, principals can positively affect student achievement. RAND researchers found that students at New Leaders-led schools experienced larger achievement gains than those at schools headed by non-New Leaders principals. At the lower grade levels, spending at least three years in a school with a New Leaders principal translated to achievement gains of 0.7 to 1.3 percentile points for a typical student. At the high school level, students in schools where the New Leaders principal had three or more years of experience saw gains in reading achievement of about 3 percentile points. This means that a student in the middle (50th percentile) of the test score distribution would move up to the 51.3st or 53rd percentile, respectively.

Key findings:

- Successful school leadership can play a key role in supporting teaching and learning, and, with effective preparation, principals can positively affect student achievement.
- Although New Leaders showed a positive impact on student performance, effects varied considerably across the program's districts.
- Among the elements that reflect a constructive context for leadership, New Leaders participants were, on average, more likely than non-New Leaders principals with similar years of experience to remain in their schools for three or more years.
- Lessons from the New Leaders program can guide decisionmakers considering partnerships with New Leaders or other providers of training and support for principals.

Program Effects Vary, with No Clear Patterns

Although New Leaders showed a modestly positive impact on student performance, effects varied considerably across districts. The availability of similar leadership training from alternative sources may have played a role in muting estimates of program effects in some districts. For example, in Chicago and New York, effects were small and not statistically significant; aspiring leaders in both districts have access to other programs similar to those offered by New Leaders.

Although certain school conditions were associated with student achievement gains at the school level—e.g., higher teacher capacity corresponded with gains in reading and greater instructional leadership time corresponded with gains in mathematics—most differences in school-level achievement gains cannot be explained by practices or conditions that researchers were able to measure.

Creating a Context for Leadership

Several elements reflect a constructive context for leadership. For example, New Leaders participants were, on average, more likely to remain in their schools for three or more years, compared with non-New Leaders principals with similar years of experience. Prior research suggests that principals have a more positive effect on student achievement the longer they stay at a particular school.¹

Districts that implement innovative and supportive policies enabling leadership success can influence all their principals, not just New Leaders participants. In some districts, New Leaders played a role in efforts to develop or revise leadership standards, principal-selection criteria, principal evaluation, and principal support. Many New Leaders principals moved into roles in which they supervise principals, giving them further influence over principal quality and performance.

When looking at the cost-benefit of any principal-preparation program, district decisionmakers should take into account that resources spent on individual principal preparation can drive change throughout the district through the spillover effect described above.

Looking Ahead

In 2012 and 2013, all partner districts reported that the partnership had benefited their districts, and they remained

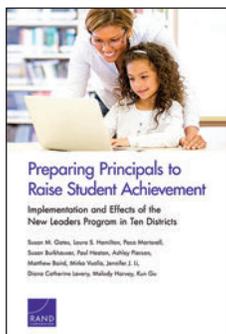


Image via Andres Rodriguez/Fotolia.

committed to continuing the partnerships in some form. Lessons from the New Leaders program can guide decisionmakers considering partnerships with New Leaders or other providers of training and support for principals:

- Principal preservice training is just one ingredient of a successful principalship. Districts must provide principals with the tools and flexibility they need to improve student achievement, including resources that enable them to staff their schools with highly effective teachers.
- Evaluation of cross-district leadership programs should document implementation differences over time, to explore impact separately by district, in addition to analyzing aggregate findings.
- Further research is needed to explore how principals' working conditions contribute to student success.

¹ Tara Bêteille, Demetra Kalogrides, and Susanna Loeb, "Stepping Stones: Principal Career Paths and School Outcomes," *Social Science Research*, Vol. 41, No. 4, July 2012, pp. 904–919; Ashley Miller, "Principal Turnover and Student Achievement," *Economics of Education Review*, Vol. 36, October 2013, pp. 60–72; Stuart Buck, "Disparities in Principal Effectiveness," paper presented at Association for Public Policy Analysis and Management fall research conference, Baltimore, Md., November 10, 2012. As of April 23, 2014: <https://appam.confex.com/appam/2012/webprogram/Paper2199.html>; Damon Clark, Paco Martorell, and Jonah Rockoff, *School Principals and School Performance*, National Center for Analysis of Longitudinal Data in Education Research, Working Paper 38, December 2009. As of April 23, 2014: http://www0.gsb.columbia.edu/faculty/jrockoff/cmr_principals_calder_WP38.pdf



This brief describes work done for RAND Education documented in *Preparing Principals to Raise Student Achievement: Implementation and Effects of the New Leaders Program in Ten Districts*, by Susan M. Gates, Laura S. Hamilton, Paco Martorell, Susan Burkhauser, Paul Heaton, Ashley Pierson, Matthew Baird, Mirka Vuollo, Jennifer J. Li, Diana Catherine Lavery, Melody Harvey, and Kun Gu, RR-507-NL (available at http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR507.html), 2014. The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit research institution that helps improve policy and decisionmaking through research and analysis. RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. RAND® is a registered trademark. © RAND 2014

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