

Policy Recommendation for
Getting From Facts to Policy: An Education Policy Convening
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Individuals/organization submitting this brief: The Association of California School Administrators, represented by:

- Michele Lawrence, Superintendent, Berkeley Unified School District
- Laura Preston, Advocate, Association of California School Administrators

Topic covered: The Impact of Leadership on Achievement

Main contact: Susan Davis, Communications Department, ACSA, 1029 L Street, Suite 500, Sacramento, CA; (916) 329-3819; sdavis@acsa.org

Brief Problem Statement

School leaders in California are advancing the dialogue about the true cost of educational excellence and are proactively offering recommendations for action. As representatives of the Association of California School Administrators, we agree that the evolution of our public education system depends on adequate, efficient, stable and ongoing funding to help students achieve the high academic standards we set for them. We also agree that specific improvements in four priority areas will lead to success for students.

Therefore, we believe it is essential for policy leaders to focus on the following priorities:

- Narrowing the achievement gap;
- Building capacity among teachers and administrators;
- Measuring results through reliable data on student achievement; and
- Providing adequate, stable and ongoing funding.

As the leaders of California's schools, our direct experience and knowledge lead us to support the following research findings and the policy changes that they demand.

Discussion of Policy Issues, Options, and Recommendations

Research has demonstrated a direct link between student achievement and administrative leadership. In fact, of the school factors known to impact student achievement, only the quality of classroom instruction has a slightly higher impact than the quality of leadership. Thus, the moral imperative to eliminate the disparities in achievement among various student groups increases the need for administrators, especially school principals, to become exemplary instructional leaders. However, since California currently ranks near the bottom in the number of administrators serving students, policies must be put in place that acknowledge the demands on school leaders and provide an infrastructure that increases their numbers, promotes their retention, and develops their instructional expertise and leadership.

The link between what school leaders do and student achievement has been the subject of an enormous amount of educational research. Hallinger and Heck (1998) summarized such research in a mega-study of the work related to principals' effectiveness, and concluded that "the general pattern of results drawn from this review support the belief that

principals exercise a measurable though indirect effect on school effectiveness and student achievement. . . . [This effect] is statistically significant, and, we assert, meaningful” (p. 186). A subsequent mega-study by Marzano, Waters and McNulty (2005) also summarizes rigorous research on the influence of school leaders on student achievement. The study led the authors to conclude: “A highly effective school leader can have a dramatic influence on the overall academic achievement of students” (p. 10). Their report cites several leadership responsibilities that are accompanied by associated practices that describe exactly what a principal must do to promote student achievement. These studies, as well as many others, provide clear evidence regarding the importance of specific skills, abilities, and behaviors that leaders must exhibit in order to be effective. Thus, a critical element for policy development must be to ensure that school leaders have the opportunities to expand their repertoire of skills and time to practice what they learn. Michael Fullan comments on this dilemma: “The irony is that as the change in expectations heightens, the *principalship* itself has become overloaded in a way that makes it impossible to fulfill the promise of widespread, sustained reform” (Fullan, 2007, p. 156). This perspective is affirmed in a study by Cooley and Shen (2003), in which they surveyed more than 4,000 secondary principals from across the nation. Cooley and Shen conclude:

Many principals find themselves mired in situations beyond their control that involve labor strife, students and parents with numerous social problems, and school violence. These complexities in schools and communities demand the amount of time that principals must spend on management areas just to ensure the school operates at acceptable levels at the expense of leadership initiatives (p. 20).

Given the strength of the research, it becomes imperative that funding and policy about administrative leadership must change in two fundamental ways to positively impact student achievement.

1. Restructuring of Working Conditions:

A restructuring of the current working conditions of administrators, especially school principals, to direct their daily focus and routines toward the improvement of teaching, learning, and curriculum development is essential.

The need to increase California’s administrator to student ratios is obvious from the data. However, models that provide classified school “manager” positions to manage and coordinate the many time-consuming day-to-day tasks, such as maintenance, grounds, facilities, materials ordering, security, etc., that are now done in many schools by a single certificated principal can free the time of the trained instructional leader to influence, supervise and evaluate instructional practices. The previous research citations acknowledge that time spent evaluating data, supporting teachers, and leading collaborative discussions aimed at pedagogical improvements will reap achievement benefits when done by a skilled and knowledgeable instructional leader. In parallel models with increased administrative allocations, central office administrators can provide opportunities to also mentor, develop and coach site principals, creating the organizational capacity for internal sustainability. Providing time for principals to hone their own skills by creating “principals in training” positions for novice or even seasoned principals can remove them from day-to-day

responsibilities while demanding increased aptitudes in those best practices used to attain robust student achievement. Such mentoring models rejuvenate the professional and promote leadership retention.

Fuller *et al* (Fuller, Loeb, Arshan, Chen, & Yi, 2007), in a comprehensive report on how school principals acquire and deploy their fiscal and human resources, said, “Principals report spending a great deal of time managing facilities, supervising staff, dealing with discipline and security and student learning. They devote less time to professional development and curriculum supervision”(p. 22). The authors go on to conclude that “these findings . . . indicate that [California] principals may be occupied with more short-run issues at the expense of allocating the time to form a cohesive learning community” (p. 22).

It is our belief that much of this necessary work could be completed by a classified school manager or other administrator. A few school districts, such as Los Altos School District, have funded such a position for schools over a specific size. In Los Altos the number is 500 students. Los Altos School District, one of the highest achieving school districts in the state with a district base API of 949 in 2005, understands that its principals must be instructional leaders. Its large parcel tax and bond measure allow district funds to be used to support this school manager position. The school manager position allows the principal to spend much more time ensuring high quality instruction. Our schools serving the lowest achieving students rarely have the funds to support such a position. New monies should be set aside at a state level so that districts, at their discretion, can support the leadership of instruction by creating classified school managers to coordinate many of the everyday issues that must now be dealt with by the school principal.

The amount of time principals must spend on “short term” issues is unlikely to change as long as the number of California school and district leaders remains insufficient to accomplish the many tasks their work demands. Again, California ranks at the bottom of the state-to-state comparisons in terms of the ratio of administrators to students. If California’s school and district leaders are to reach their full potential in maximizing their role in increasing student achievement and closing the achievement gap, then there must be sufficient numbers of them and support for them to accomplish this task.

2. Broader Opportunities for Capacity Building:

Expanding local and statewide opportunities for directed professional growth for prospective and current administrators that will enhance their instructional effectiveness and leadership skills.

In addition to having the sufficient numbers of school and district administrators to do the work of increasing student achievement, it is of equal importance for those leaders to have the knowledge, skills, and dispositions required to maximize their effectiveness. Unfortunately, again California ranks at or near the bottom of the 50 states when we examine state-level support for increasing the capacity of school administrators.

According to the National Association of Elementary School Principals (Ferrandino, 2007), 22 states currently have legislated support for leadership coaching, with many mandating a coaching-based induction program for new principals. Supporting this observation, Darling Hammond and Orphanos (2007) reported, “Many states are introducing requirements for full-time administrative internships under the direct supervision of veteran principals as part of their overhaul of administrator preparation. ... A

number of states have developed innovative funding streams for administrator internships that address issues of both supply and quality” (p. 43). They also noted, “Whereas other states we examined have funded ongoing leadership academies, and several have launched mentoring/coaching models to support principals ... the only direct state funding for leadership development in California currently is training provided by AB 75” (p. 48). They state that while AB 75 has certainly been helpful, “criticisms are directed at the brevity and one-size-fits-all nature of the training and the fact that it generally does not include direct mentoring or coaching of principals.” In California, reauthorization of AB 75 as AB 430 provided coaching as an alternative to satisfy the practicum required by the legislation, but offered no structure and no funding for this vitally needed program to build the leadership capacity of California’s principals.

Additionally, Darling Hammond and Orphanos noted that:

- 37 percent of California principals say they received in-service training at no cost, compared to 57 percent of principals nationally (p. 20).
- California principals were much less likely than their counterparts nationally to have had an internship as part of their training experience (27 percent vs. 63 percent) (p. 43).

Assuring that school leaders have the skills and knowledge required to fully serve California’s students requires more than hope. Darling Hammond and Orphanos point out that “[o]ne often-neglected role of state agencies is the dissemination of information about best practices through research and publication. ... The state could, in partnership with stakeholder organizations like the Association of California School Administrators, support the dissemination of best practices by collecting and disseminating evidence about successful program designs from its program reviews and from research, and supporting challenge grants to programs to plant specific, needed practices in programs” (p. 52).

Margaret Wheatley noted in *Leadership and the New Science* (1992) that the role of leadership has changed, as it now requires more of a focus on marshalling, focusing, and developing energy, information, and relationships. Garmston and Wellman (1999) remind us that the current system and ways of running schools produce the current results, and they call upon new educational leaders to build professional learning communities to release the energy and resources trapped by existing organizational patterns, traditions, and cultures. Embedded in these new school communities must be shared values, a collective focus on learning, professional collaboration, deprivatized practice, and reflective data-driven dialogue centered on student learning and instructional practice.

Building and maintaining this type of educational environment calls for new skills in California’s principals. Today’s principal must continue to be an effective operational manager and instructional leader, but must also assume the roles of visionary/culture leader, learning leader, collaborative leader, and situational leader. He or she must engage in systems thinking and must demonstrate the ability to both understand and guide complex processes of learning assessment and evaluation, change, and group development. Systems, change, shared values, collaboration, and data-driven dialogue all revolve around people, relationships, and communication.

Clearly, the capacity for this type of leadership cannot be fully developed by reading books or by attending workshops, trainings, or graduate classes. Certainly, principals need a foundational understanding of best practices, but true leadership is not about administering programs or installing and managing new structures. Today, effective school leadership must be centered on making connections between people, practice, and student learning;

building trust; and effectively exerting influence to change and improve the way educators work with one another in the service of children and for the sake of learning. This type of leadership can only be developed through on-site, of-the-moment, reality-based, on-the-job experience with real people and their unique sets of resources, challenges, background histories, and cultures. Preparation for and processing of these experiences is greatly enhanced if guided, shared, and reflected upon with a highly qualified, trained, and certified leadership coach. Research demonstrates that principals who receive coaching not only “are more engaged in instructional leadership, they actually are spending more time on instructional issues and are addressing them with more skill than unsupported principals” (Bloom, 2003).

The development of professional networks or purposeful learning communities is seen as a key ingredient of school improvement. Elmore (2007) has observed that “the network model is designed to provide a setting where school leaders can work together in a structured way on issues of instructional practice that are directly relevant to their work, developing their understanding and skill around practices of improvement” (p. 22). Fullan (2007) has pointed out that “the starting point for working toward a solution [for maximizing student learning] is the sobering realization that it cannot be done *unless each and every teacher is learning every day*. Personal learning in a collective enterprise is the *sine qua non* of large-scale success” (p. 153). **Leading the collaboration of these networks or professional learning communities is a talent requiring time, specific skills, and tremendous knowledge. Developing the capacity of school and district leaders in the art and science of leading such networks is essential to sustain school reform.**

Therefore, in order to increase the capacity and opportunities for California’s students to be served by the best leaders, new policies are required which would:

- Provide funding for a well managed coaching program to serve not only new principals and district leaders who are new, but also principals and district leaders who are new in their positions—particularly those leaders assigned to the schools and districts with the lowest achieving students.
- Provide incentives for the most capable school leaders to serve in the highest-need schools and district.
- Establish partnerships for the dissemination of best practices related to improving student learning.
- Encourage the development of purposeful learning communities of adults as well as students in and across schools and districts.

Summary of Research/Evidence Supporting Recommendations

Research (Marzano et al., 2005), (Hallinger & Heck, 1998), (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004) has made it clear that leadership has a profound influence on student learning. The increasing emphasis on instructional leadership (Fullan, 2007) has heightened the expectations for California’s school administrators. Unfortunately, these increased demands of leadership come at a time when California is at the bottom in the number of school and district leaders available to do this work. The ratio of school administrators to students must be lowered in order for California’s administrators to shift from what has been termed “management” (Cooley & Shen, 2003) to “leadership.”

Furthermore, California ranks near the bottom in state support for programs whose goal is to increase the capacity of school and district leaders (Darling Hammond & Orphanos, 2007). In particular, two approaches are recommended for increasing the knowledge and skills of those who lead our schools. One, to provide skilled coaches to support on-site, reality-based professional learning experiences. The other is to create programs in which leaders can develop the unique skills required to create purposeful learning communities in which teachers and administrators, as well as students, are learning every day. Expert practitioners and researchers (Elmore, 2007), (Fullan, 2005), (Garmston & Wellman, 1999) remind us that leading such communities requires time, specific skills, and tremendous knowledge, and that such networks are essential if school reform is to be sustained. The needs of California's children are vast. Providing both the number of leaders as well as increasing their capacity to meet those needs must be in the forefront of California's educational policies.

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