

How Maryland Policymakers Are Working Together to Improve School Principal Quality

Executive Summary

Many states have recently devoted significant attention to improving the quality of teaching and school leadership. Changes to teacher and principal evaluations as well as modifications to policy and regulation supporting preparation, professional development and tenure privileges are hallmarks of state education reform. Yet most states have not seen corresponding improvements in student outcomes. One hypothesis is that the limited focus on school principal training, development and support has led to limited capacity among school leaders—a challenge that hinders success in improving teacher quality. Without excellent leaders at the helms of schools, states cannot hope to see change at scale. This paper highlights the successful efforts of one state, **Maryland**, to strategically select and train its most promising future leaders in order to prepare them for the leadership responsibilities associated with leading schools that have increased expectations for all students.

Under the leadership of the governor’s office, and with support from the legislature and the State Board of Education, Maryland’s Department of Education created a principal talent development program that annually prepares nearly 50 new leaders for its 24 public school districts. The program relies upon the existing talent in the state, including current and former principals, as well as some state resources, to connect promising principals with veteran principals through a structured learning and networking experience. The program helps to solve a decades-old challenge by building a pool of qualified candidates who are ready to lead schools. Through this project, Maryland has effectively constructed a pipeline for promising candidates out of experiences and support systems that most candidates need before they can become effective in their new roles.

Introduction

Research is clear that principals are one of the most important school-based factors supporting successful teaching and learning.¹ Most states have spent the past several years working to improve the effectiveness of their teachers and only tangentially focusing on school principals as a lever for school improvement at scale. This is due primarily to overwhelming research that emerged in the early 2000s about the role of teachers in improving individual student outcomes, particularly for low-performing students, and because of federal priorities in the No Child Left Behind Act and Race to the Top (RTTT).² Research on the importance of school principals in advancing student learning is similarly persuasive. Effective principals serve as leaders of high-quality instruction and as managers of the people and culture of schools. Principals are also a more accessible group for state leaders; there are far fewer principals than teachers, and each principal can affect the instructional quality of many teachers, which in turn can better serve more students.³ Furthermore, principals are responsible for setting the vision of a school. Effective principals can mean the difference between good teachers staying in their classrooms and improving student outcomes and good teachers exiting for other opportunities.

Some states have recently turned their attention to boosting the “principal pipeline”—the set of systems that influence aspiring and current school leaders at the state and local school district levels, including: evidence-based leadership standards, preparation, licensure, hiring and placement, evaluation and support, and school and district working conditions. When states become more intentional about their principal pipelines, they tap into the promise of principals as agents of positive change.

The improved principal pipeline is designed to attract, cultivate, prepare, support and retain effective school leaders who are prepared to meet school, local and state performance expectations.⁴

This case study features **Maryland**'s efforts to improve principal effectiveness at scale by strengthening its principal pipeline.⁵ The governor's office, the office of the state superintendent of education and other state and district entities have worked together to generate a coherent set of strategies to improve the way the state and its districts recruit, train, develop, evaluate and support school principals. The case study highlights each of those efforts and closes with several lessons learned from Maryland that other states may want to consider for improving principal effectiveness at scale.

Maryland's Education Context

Maryland's K-12 public school system, with nearly 850,000 students enrolled in 2015, typically ranks near the top among public education systems nationwide in *Education Week's* annual "Quality Counts" survey.⁶ The state has 24 public school districts.⁷ The districts are diverse and highly autonomous. For example, teacher and principal salaries are negotiated yearly between local school districts and educator unions.⁸

The education governance structure in Maryland consists of the State Board of Education, the state superintendent of schools and the state department of education. The state superintendent, hired by the Maryland State Board of Education, oversees the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) and executes policy and enforces regulations adopted by the State board, which is appointed by the governor. Maryland's State Board of Education has general oversight of the state department of education and is the voice of the public in its role as policymaker for Maryland's public schools, public libraries and vocational rehabilitation services.

In 2010, Maryland received a \$250 million Round 2 RTTT grant.⁹ In preparation for the grant proposal, then Governor Martin O'Malley convened a RTTT steering committee and shepherded the passage of the state's

Education Reform Act of 2010.¹⁰ The Act positioned the state well for RTTT funding eligibility and established legislative guidelines designed to meet requirements for addressing teacher and principal evaluation through the state's RTTT-funded efforts. Twenty-two of the state's 24 districts agreed to participate in the policies and programs established in the application.

The Principalship in Maryland

Across Maryland's 24 school districts, there are 1,476 schools led by a school principal and, in many cases, one or more assistant principals. In February 2017, the State Board of Education adopted the Professional Standards for Education Leaders (PSEL). These standards are designed to guide school leadership efforts, including training, evaluation and support.¹¹ Regulation 13A.12.04.04 articulates the requirements for someone to become a principal in Maryland, including a master's degree, three years of teaching, selected coursework related to school leadership and completion of a practicum or internship experience.¹² In addition, a candidate for the principalship must present evidence of a qualifying score as established by the State Board of Education on its School Leaders Licensure Assessment.¹³

In Maryland, candidates for school principal may self-select into a management track after completing all requirements identified in Regulation 13A.12.04.04.¹⁴ Many school districts and states have not been intentional about identifying leadership skills early in an educator's career, matching skill sets and competencies with positions (for example, teaching roles versus leading or managing roles) or providing effective incentives and pathways into school leadership positions.¹⁵

Both the Maryland Higher Education Commission and the Maryland State Department of Education must approve educator preparation programs in Maryland.¹⁶ Program approval processes are conducted every seven years by MSDE staff and individuals contracted from the national accrediting body, the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation.¹⁷ Maryland statutes require colleges and universities with an enrollment of 2,000 or more full-time students to become nationally accredited, which is

considered in program approval processes.¹⁸ Colleges and universities with an enrollment of less than 2,000 students may choose whether to seek national accreditation. There are 15 principal preparation programs in Maryland, 12 of which are nationally accredited.¹⁹

Administrator preparation programs in Maryland's institutions of higher education are preparing to transition to align content with the state's recently adopted PSEL standards, which will require a greater focus on the relationship of school leadership work to student learning. State and district administrators have found that many principals receive adequate content-knowledge training in their pre-service program but that they do not fully understand how to put leadership into practice. Interviewees were clear that, while there are several quality pre-service training programs for principals in the state, leader candidates still need an enormous amount of development and support before they can take on the role of principal.

Principal effectiveness improvement is a key strategy for addressing school, teacher and student outcomes in Maryland. The state is continuing to work on developing a pool of job-ready principals with the right kinds of skills, experience and expertise to fill leadership positions. Furthermore, continued turnover of school principals and low student performance, particularly in urban areas, have inspired a deeper commitment by the state to building a stronger cadre of principal candidates.²⁰ One interviewee at MSDE highlighted the importance of remaining focused on student learning: "The state has always had good principals in its schools who are doing innovative things, but if there are no student learning results or principals are not explicitly talking about equitable student learning opportunities and outcomes for all kids, then they are not the right fit."

How Maryland Has Elevated Principal Effectiveness

Maryland's department of education has long recognized the importance of the school principal. Efforts throughout the 2000s laid the groundwork

for the state's RTTT proposal. In its application, the state committed to continue its work on school leadership through strategies such as redesigning and strengthening the state's models for preparation, development, retention and evaluation of principals. Since that time, the focus on school leadership has been sustained through a coordinated effort of the governor's office, the Maryland State Department of Education, the legislature and the Maryland State Board of Education.

The Role of the Governor's Office

Governors oversee the education system and its connections to the workforce. As chief executive, the governor has the power to influence governance of education and to ensure a coherent, responsive system supports students' progression. Governors can leverage both formal and informal authority to achieve the changes they wish to see. Their formal authority, for example, includes making appointments, allocating funding in the budget and pushing for legislative and regulatory changes. Informal authority includes use of the bully pulpit to frame the issue and propose solutions as well as to convene key constituencies to build a strong coalition. The governor of Maryland provides leadership on modifications to regulation related to funding and delivery of education services and has a broad range of appointive powers. For example, the governor appoints all members of the State Board of Education and the board appoints the State Superintendent of Schools. This gives the governor significant input into who serves as the superintendent.²¹

Over the past several years, the governor's office has exercised authority in a variety of ways to advance the quality of school leadership, including:

- **Public support.** In 2009, the governor's office, along with education officials across the state, commissioned the Maryland Teaching, Empowering, Leading and Learning Initiative (TELL) survey. Results of this survey have been used widely to inform initiatives.²² The survey gathered information from 43,000 Maryland educators about their teaching conditions in

order to examine whether supportive school environments are in place that can improve teacher effectiveness and student success. Almost 800 Maryland principals responded to questions about not only the teaching conditions in their schools but also the supports they receive from their districts.²³ Additionally, to signal his support and leadership, Governor O'Malley attended and spoke at one of the state's first leadership academy meetings. Interviewees suggested that the principal academies and principal pipeline work would not be as "powerful" or "long-lasting" without the involvement of the governor's office.

- **Agenda setting.** Interviewees cited the governor's interest in building the capacity of local school districts as a key principle of reform. The governor's office has traditionally partnered with MSDE in capacity-building efforts for Local Educational Agencies (LEAs), particularly on school leadership. The governor's office set the goal of improving the principal pipeline and ensured that important leaders across the state understood, agreed on and worked toward the same goal. MSDE took responsibility for developing the proposal and the set of activities to meet the goal.
- **Convening.** The governor's office convened the Governor's Council for Educator Effectiveness, which was charged with designing and piloting the state's new educator evaluation models. The president of the Maryland State Education Association and the State Superintendent of Schools served as co-chairs, reinforcing the collaborative nature of the work.

The Role of the Maryland State Department of Education

MSDE has worked hand-in hand with the governor's office to improve principal effectiveness. Although MSDE is charged with implementing state-level policy, it does not directly manage school and district operations.

Nonetheless, the state education agency recognizes that a statewide strategy to bolster the pool of qualified candidates for the school principalship directly invests in change managers across districts and schools. To that end, MSDE works to implement creative ways to build a pool of talented and diverse principal candidates.²⁴

The State Superintendent of Schools has established the Office of Leadership Development and School Improvement to provide targeted support to Maryland's lowest-performing schools and to foster the growth of effective leaders.²⁵ The office provides in-school professional learning experiences to future and current school leaders that focus on the skills and knowledge required to be successful in the principalship. This shared leadership structure within the school building aims to lessen the burdens of principal displacement and re-assignment. The flagship programs in the Office of Leadership Development and School Improvement are the Aspiring Leaders Institute and the Governor's Promising Principals Academy. Both programs provide intensive yearlong training with job-embedded professional learning experiences that are designed to support local school systems in strengthening the leadership pipeline.

The Aspiring Leaders Institute prepares teacher leaders at low-performing schools to become assistant principals through a yearlong turnaround leadership project that focuses on developing and implementing solutions to a problem of practice at their school. Institute fellows work closely with leadership coaches, principals and their district's turnaround director to ensure continuity in expectations and alignment with school improvement plans. Fellows participate in professional learning communities with members of their cohort, participate in state- and district-level learning experiences and are members of their school leadership team. Upon completion of the program, fellows are well positioned to become a turnaround assistant principal.

The Promising Principals Academy—developed as a joint project of the governor's office and MSDE—

prepares current assistant principals to become principals. Superintendents in each of the state's 24 school districts select two of the best and brightest assistant principals to participate. The yearlong academy is designed to build school leaders' capacity with implementing several critical school improvement initiatives—from implementing Maryland's College and Career Ready Standards to conducting meaningful educator evaluations—that rely heavily on managerial and instructional leadership to succeed. Participants also receive training on interviewing for a principal position, managing budgets, addressing ethical issues and engaging the media. Each cohort of promising principals is paired with a former principal who serves as a coach. Between training sessions, principal candidates work online to complete targeted learning experiences and participate in a community of practice under the guidance of their coaches. Upon successful completion of the program, participants are prepared to enter the principalship. The state uses funds from its operating budget and grants to subsidize the academy.

Building off the success of the Aspiring Leaders Institute and Promising Principals Academy, MSDE has established a new leadership program: the Priority Leaders Program. The program is designed to support principals of low-performing schools in implementing evidence-based strategies to improve student performance and teacher effectiveness. The academy is a key component of Maryland's Consolidated Every Student Succeeds Act plan to improve low-performing schools and will be piloted during the 2018-2019 school year.

Support Relationships with Local Educational Agencies

MSDE has focused on enhancing school leadership through changes in its structure and practices, including: internal organization, collaboration with other education agencies and the governor's office and development of support relationships with local school districts. MSDE has worked to become a "connector," following the philosophy that the state should be learning from districts and districts should be learning from one another. For

example, representatives from the divisions within MSDE who work on school principal issues meet monthly to align resources, discuss strategies to effectively support LEAs and monitor progress toward reaching statewide goals. To improve school leadership at scale, such support and promulgation of new models are critical.

MSDE was not always a trusted partner of LEAs. Some school district personnel viewed the state with suspicion or as a compliance and enforcement entity. MSDE has revised its approach to better address the needs of districts. This allows the state to provide customized, targeted support to districts, which is a shift from a one-size-fits-all approach sometimes used in the past. Staff in the support and school leadership offices at MSDE worked to effectively connect with district-level staff and build trust in MSDE initiatives. One interviewee mentioned State Education Agency (SEA) staff spent more than a year of frequent interaction with Baltimore City Schools leaders to engage them in MSDE school leadership efforts. Leaders in Prince George's County required a formal letter of support outlining the details of the new relationship with MSDE—including assurance that the relationship would not be focused solely on compliance. Today, MSDE staff supports school districts across the state. Furthermore, through RTTT, the state developed a state-level educator evaluation system and framework but let school districts design many of the elements of the evaluation system to align with local context. Ensuring school district compliance with state and federal law is still an important component of MSDE's work, but the state has shifted away from focusing solely on process compliance to results and outcomes for students and educators.

Some interviewees suggested that MSDE is able to do this work because it manages only 24 school districts—unlike other states that may have hundreds of LEAs. For example, one high-level administrator at MSDE holds monthly meetings with all local superintendents in order to build relationships, discuss data and support local implementation of reform efforts. These monthly meetings are also a mechanism for gathering the views of district superintendents on the skills and expertise

that need to be developed in principals and principal candidates. Interviewees from the state and districts suggested that the communication process between the state and school districts, while imperfect, is robust. However, some interviewees suggested they could benefit from more forums to share best practices.

The Role of the Maryland Legislature

The Maryland General Assembly is responsible for considering and enacting legislation on education reform initiatives and appropriating funding for the state's education programs. Maryland's leaders have used legislation as a tool for encouraging the improvement of school principal effectiveness in two primary ways: supporting the development and implementation of leadership academies and fellowship programs, and increasing the requirements of the principal evaluation system. Much of this legislative activity occurred in preparation for and response to the state's Race to the Top application and award.

H.B. 995 (2005) established a statewide Principal Fellowship and Leadership Development program.²⁶ A similar program had been piloted in Baltimore as a result of Chapter 545 of H.B. 2002, which required the State Department of Education and the Baltimore City Public School System to design a principal development initiative.²⁷ The legislation required MSDE to develop criteria for the selection of fellows and receiving schools. In 2010, S.B. 140 appropriated \$100,000 to the Academy of Leadership and \$1,494,001 to MSDE's Division of Leadership Development.²⁸ The nearly \$1.5 million allocated in S.B. 140 for MSDE reflected the state's commitment to offering high-quality leadership development and support programs to promising candidates for school principalship.

The Role of the Maryland State Board of Education

The Maryland State Board of Education sets the state's education policies and standards for pre-kindergarten through high school and for Maryland's public libraries, juvenile services education and vocational

rehabilitation services. The board passes regulations imbued with the force of law and is empowered to interpret the meaning and intent of the law. It also reviews and approves three annual budgets—the Maryland State Department of Education headquarters budget, the state aid to local education budget and state-aided institutions budget—before the governor approves them and the General Assembly enacts them through appropriations.

The Maryland State Board of Education has supported school leadership through regulatory actions, including:

- In 2010, the board approved the state's Race to the Top application and the policies linked to it, including educator evaluation changes that are linked to student data;
- In 2011, the board approved a rule requiring Principal Induction Programs for all local districts to be in place by September 2014; and
- In 2012, the board approved rules and regulations pertaining to principal evaluations, which must include and be linked to student growth in addition to the Maryland Instructional Leadership Framework.

More Work to be Done

Although Maryland's focus on principal quality through the coordination of governance entities has been successful, much work remains. Several interviewees suggested that induction and support for new principals continue to need improvement. Principals across the state still leave their posts at a rate considered too high for sustaining culture and student learning results. Many interviewees said that while the state needs more and better data on why principals leave, they hypothesize that the root cause is insufficient professional support for principals, particularly in low-performing schools.

Principal preparation programs across the state are still not adequately preparing enough candidates for many aspects of school leadership — in part because institutional preparation programs have not kept pace

with the changing role of the principal. However, Maryland's adoption of the PSEL standards provides an opportunity to improve alignment of content and practice. Deficiencies in existing pre-service preparation programs partially explain the need for MSDE's Office of Leadership Development and School Improvement to provide professional learning experiences for aspiring and current school leaders. Several LEAs also offer leadership preparation programs designed to help them build a bench of administrators who are prepared to meet their unique needs. Prince George's County, for example, has an assistant principal induction program that prepares novice administrators for the principalship. Furthermore, LEA recruitment and state licensure processes are not ideal due to an insufficient candidate pool and high turnover in some locations, which puts a burden on the hiring process.

While strong, communication between MSDE and the state's LEAs needs further improvement. Each year, WestEd, a national research and service delivery organization, conducts surveys, focus groups and discussions with key constituencies on behalf of MSDE. Data from a recent survey of 17,000 district faculty and staff members revealed that information from the SEA often does not filter down to teachers and principals. The state is now focused on improving mechanisms for moving information from the state to the district to the school building level. Larger districts are challenged by their magnitude to ensure school-based representatives are included in communications simply because there are so many schools and staff.

Maryland expended its RTTT grant to establish a foundation to support teacher and principal effectiveness. The state is pursuing other funding sources to continue to grow programs that focus on effective teachers and leaders. For example, the state received funding from the Southern Regional Education Board to design a teacher and principal evaluation system, which it implemented during the 2013-2014 school year. These funds have supported research analysis, which has allowed MSDE to make

data-driven decisions that improve professional learning experiences for leadership development.

Lessons Learned

Maryland's leaders identified numerous lessons to bolster the state's principal pipeline that they are applying to future efforts and from which other states may learn:

- **School leadership matters.** A key finding from a 2004 study established that school leadership is essential to student learning.²⁹ In a review of the evidence base, researchers found that school leadership is second only to teaching among school-based factors in its effects on student achievement. What's more, leadership's impact is greatest in low-performing schools, where many of the most disadvantaged children are educated. This reinforces the importance of leadership in school improvement. The 2004 study concluded that there were "virtually no documented instances of troubled schools being turned around without intervention by a powerful leader."
- **State leadership matters.** The governance structure in Maryland has improved the coordination of efforts between the governor's office and the chief state school officer. That arrangement makes it more likely that the person who holds the position will work with the office of the governor to advance education policy. In Maryland, joint efforts to align policy objectives and to maintain a consistent course of action led to better availability of high-quality training experiences for principal candidates.
- **Leadership reform needs to be integrated into a larger, comprehensive education agenda.** Isolated efforts to improve leadership policies will only go so far. States must embed school leadership efforts into a more comprehensive education agenda that includes strong student standards, effective teachers and targeted incentives for improvement that are driven by a functional accountability system.

- **A “tight-loose” accountability system can improve school leadership.** All levels of the Maryland education system are held to high performance standards — but they also have a great deal of flexibility in the processes they use to meet those goals. For example, the principalship looks a bit different from school to school. Accordingly, districts need room to innovate in order to staff their schools with leaders who are best able to serve their students and communities.
- **A state agency that models efficiency improves coordination and responsiveness.** MSDE has consolidated divisions and holds cross-division coordination meetings to ensure that all efforts focused on shared issues, such as principal effectiveness, are coordinated and more responsive to the districts’ needs. LEAs report that this approach makes interacting with the SEA more transparent, and that they now receive more valuable assistance from the SEA. Maryland has only 24 school districts, which enables bringing all districts leaders together on a regular basis. States that have many more districts might consider using a regional approach to accomplish better two-way communication and collaboration.
- **State-level support for LEAs improves principal quality statewide.** Many state-level actors, including SEAs and governors, provide support to LEAs to improve principal quality. The Maryland State Board of Education, the Maryland legislature and MSDE all play critical roles in supporting school leadership. The board has used regulatory actions to support the state’s school leadership work, while the legislature has enacted bills that support school leadership programs and strengthen principal evaluation requirements. MSDE built relationships with school district leaders, and as a result, district leaders now typically welcome MSDE’s involvement in the development of policy and practice as well as its assistance in finding solutions to challenges and designing systems and processes that improve districts’ talent management practice.³⁰
- **LEA involvement is critical to enhancing leadership principal pipelines.** MSDE takes direct responsibility for promulgating and communicating policy and for providing clear examples and supports to districts. The SEA has worked to engage and empower local leaders to support the work of school leadership and to be ambassadors for the policies and initiatives in their districts. District superintendents have significant autonomy and voice, both at the state and local levels, across Maryland.
- **Sustainability through transitions can boost school leadership improvement efforts.** More than \$4 million in RTTT funds helped establish the Breakthrough Center at MSDE, which was charged with providing support to Maryland’s lowest-performing Title I public schools. RTTT funds were also used to develop and implement programs aimed at improving teacher and principal effectiveness. The RTTT funding eventually ended, which coincided with a gubernatorial transition, and the state was faced with a multitude of funding and prioritization questions. Through this period of transition, the state made the preservation of the Aspiring Leaders Institute and the Governor’s Promising Principals Academy a priority. The Office of Leadership Development and School Improvement replaced the Breakthrough Center in 2017 to provide customized support for the growth of effective leaders and school improvement efforts. Through the Office of Leadership Development and School Improvement, MSDE has worked to ensure that these programs — vital to strengthening the leadership pipeline in Maryland — will endure.

School Leadership in Prince George's County

Prince George's County Public Schools (PGCPS) is located near Washington, D.C., and is the second-largest school district in Maryland with a student enrollment around 128,000.³¹ The district has about 9,000 teachers and nearly 500 school leaders, including principals and assistant principals. Student performance in the district is historically lower than in most other districts across the state. A key tactic the district is using to improve teaching and learning is leveraging the role of the school leader through targeted improvements to its principal pipeline.

In 2010, Maryland was awarded a Race to the Top (RTTT) grant. PGCPS was one of the state's participating RTTT districts and included in its local-level RTTT plan a variety of leadership training and development programs for aspiring and new principals. In August 2011, PGCPS, along with five other school districts, was awarded a multimillion-dollar grant from the Wallace Foundation to participate in its Principal Pipeline Initiative (PPI) to develop, hire and support new principals.³² Then, in November 2011, PGCPS received a \$250,000 grant from the Freddie Mac Foundation to provide additional support for the principal pipeline work. At the time, the district superintendent, William R. Hite, Jr., said, "We are investing in this work because we believe expanding the capacity of our instructional leaders will directly improve the quality of teaching and increase student achievement."³³

As a result of the commitment from the district to improve the principal pipeline and the resources to support the effort, PGCPS has embarked over the past few years on several strategies, including:

- Participation in the state's teacher evaluation pilot program. PGCPS worked with the state to allow the state framework to inform the district's final teacher evaluation model but also developed and is implementing a model that is unique for the PGCPS context;
- Development of new leadership standards that drive all components of the principal pipeline, including evaluation and professional development; and
- Use of a variety of recruitment and training programs, including a partnership with the National Institute for School Leadership that focuses on current assistant principals as aspiring leaders and a partnership with Bowie State University for principal preparation.

Results from these efforts are still emerging. A Wallace-commissioned independent evaluation of PPI has focused on implementation of the principal pipeline components, demonstrating that districts can make progress. When they do, both the district and novice principals benefit.³⁴ An effects study of the initiative by RAND will be published in 2018. A cost analysis, also conducted by RAND, will appear in summer 2017.

Interviewees from PGCPS suggested that communication and support from the state, including the Maryland State Department of Education and the governor's office, have been important to the progress of their work. Leadership and agenda-setting from the governor's office facilitated local buy-in and support of the district's pipeline work as well as a focus on and attention to setting up outcomes-based systems.

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