GETTING DOWN TO FACTS II

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The Development and Distribution of School Leadership in California

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About: The Getting Down to Facts project seeks to create a common evidence base for understanding the current state of California school systems and lay the foundation for substantive conversations about what education policies should be sustained and what might be improved to ensure increased opportunity and success for all students in California in the decades ahead. *Getting Down to Facts II* follows approximately a decade after the first Getting Down to Facts effort in 2007. This research brief is one of 19 that summarize 36 research studies that cover four main areas related to state education policy: student success, governance, personnel, and funding.

Stanford University

PACE Policy Analysis for California Education

This brief summarizes two *Getting Down to Facts II* technical reports on principals in California::

Assessing Equity in School Leadership in California
Jason A. Grissom and Brendan Bartanen, September 2018.

Learning to Lead: Understanding California's Learning System for School and District Leaders
Leib Sutcher, Anne Podolsky, Tara Kini, and Patrick M. Shields, September 2018.

These and all GDTFII studies can be found at www.gettingdowntofacts.com.

Introduction

There is a common theme around California education, and leadership development is no exception. The state used to have nationally recognized model programs of professional development for principals and superintendents, but many were defunded and dismantled during the recession, when California schools also cut their administrative staffs by 19%. Since then, the number of administrators has rebounded; but in 2016, the latest year data are available, California still ranked 47th out of all states in the number of pupils per administrator. On top of that, California principals, on average, have less experience and higher turnover rates than leaders in many other states.

Principals are central to successfully putting education reforms into action. California has taken formidable steps to improve teaching and learning for all students through the Common Core State Standards, the Next Generation Science Standards, a new accountability dashboard, and the Local Control Funding Formula. Yet, California has not made concurrent investments in professional development to ensure that leaders have the capacity to be successful in their jobs and in undertaking these statewide reforms. Numerous studies have found that students do better in schools led by experienced, high-quality principals. However, there aren't enough high-quality leaders to fill those positions and turnover is high, especially in schools with high concentrations of students in poverty, which tend to be led by less experienced principals.

Using new surveys and focus groups, and numerous data sets, these two reports provide an uncompromising look at the type of support and training educational leaders say they need to be successful in their jobs—and what they actually get. The studies examine research on the distribution of leaders across schools with different concentrations of traditionally marginalized students, consider the reasons for the high turnover rates, and discuss what the state, county offices of education, and districts can do to improve leadership preparation and professional development.

KEY FINDINGS

- The quality of school leaders affects student learning.
- Principals in high-poverty, low-achieving schools tend to be less experienced and have higher turnover rates than principals in wealthier, higher-achieving schools.
- School leaders are experiencing a variety of preparation and professional development opportunities, but these experiences are piecemeal and often do not include the most valuable elements of high-quality professional learning.
- The vast majority of principals report wanting more professional development.
- Leaders in rural school districts are less likely to receive coaching and professional development.
- Stronger state standards for administrator education programs show promising results.

Summary of Key Findings

The quality of school leaders affects student learning

Studies show that in schools with experienced and effective leaders, student achievement improves, including standardized test scores and graduation rates. Effective principals develop a vision for a strong learning environment that encourages teacher growth and retention and creates a culture of continuous improvement that supports collaboration and engaging lessons, provides adequate and targeted professional development, and establishes clear learning goals.

School and district leaders are expected to do more today than ever before to meet students' needs by supporting the whole child—academically, physically, social-emotionally—and preparing each student to become a responsible member of the community. That's a tall order in California, where one out of five students is an English learner and more than half qualify for free or reduced-price meals. As one California principal described it:

"I'm responsible for not just educating the child, but for teaching them how to cope and be resilient and overcome traumatic experiences, so that then they can access the instructional academic needs or meet these accomplished academic goals so that they can escape poverty."

Principals in high-poverty, low-achieving schools tend to be less experienced and have higher turnover rates than principals in wealthier, higher-achieving schools

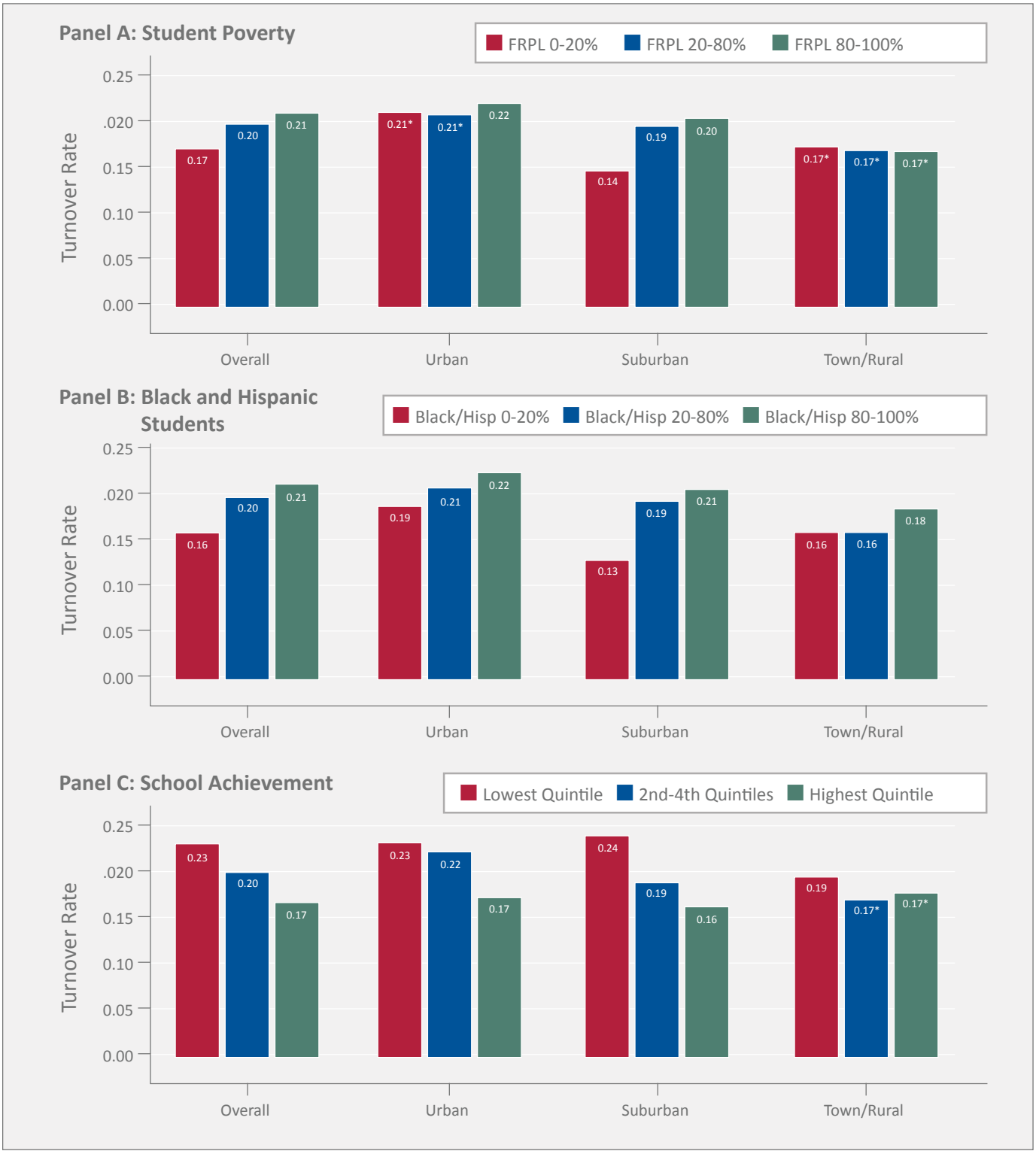
All schools need highly qualified, effective principals, but schools with the most challenges need them the most. However, high turnover puts many schools in a perpetual state of poor leadership. Typically, more experienced principals are more effective, but they don't stick around long enough at low-achieving, high-poverty schools to gain that experience. When they're replaced, it's likely with another inexperienced leader.

As a consequence, these schools are more likely to have novice principals. Fifty-three percent of principals in schools in the bottom 20% in student achievement are in their first three years on the job, compared to only 26% of principals in schools where student achievement is in the top 20%, according to a survey conducted for Stanford University by the RAND Corporation.

Turnover rates show a similar disparity. A principal in one of California's high-poverty urban schools is 50% more likely to leave than one in a low-poverty suburban school (see Figure 1, Panels A, B, and C on the following page). This is a nationwide problem and may result from lower job satisfaction and pay that does not sufficiently compensate principals for the challenges of leading high-needs schools. Salaries in high-poverty schools are about 10% lower—approximately $12,000 a year—than in higher-wealth schools.

California's overall principal turnover rate is higher than in many other states. In 2015-16, more than one in five principals left their schools, with about two-thirds of these leaving the profession or the state, and the other third moving to other schools and districts.

Figure 1: Principal Turnover by School Characteristics in California



Data: NCES Common Core of Data files; California Department of Education Certificated Staff Demographic Data.

*Proportions shown in the bar graphs are rounded to the nearest hundredth.

Note: FRPL stands for free and reduced-price lunch.

School leaders are experiencing a variety of preparation and professional development opportunities, but these experiences are piecemeal and often do not include the most valuable elements of high-quality professional learning

In recent years, California has taken significant action to improve the quality of principal preparation by raising licensing standards, including requirements for induction, and introducing an administrator performance assessment. The state has also made a modest investment in principals' professional learning, but it represents a fraction of what it once was.

California's education leaders experience elements of high-quality preparation and professional development, especially principals who have more recently completed preparation programs. However, those learning opportunities are piecemeal and often do not include the most valuable elements of quality learning experiences.

According to a Fall 2017 survey, more than half of California principals report that they have received some elements of high-quality preparation and professional development central to effective leadership, including learning opportunities related to instructional leadership, shaping teaching and learning conditions, and leading and managing school improvement. Principals who completed their preparation programs in the past five years—2013 or later—had significantly more training in areas considered essential for today's leaders, suggesting that recent efforts to raise standards by the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing may be having an effect on the quality of preparation (see Table 1).

Table 1: California Principals' Reports of Preparation and Professional Development Experiences

Preparation (All Completers): The proportion of California principals whose leadership preparation program emphasized the following to a *moderate or great extent.*

Preparation (Recent Completers): The proportion of California principals (who completed their program in 2013 or later) whose leadership preparation program emphasized the following to a *moderate or great extent.*

Professional Development: The proportion of California principals whose professional development in the last two years emphasized the following to a *moderate or great extent.*

Characteristic	Preparation (All Completers)	Preparation (Recent Completers)	Professional Development
Program Characteristics			
Problem-based learning approaches, such as action research or inquiry projects	69%	78%*	—
Field-based projects in which you applied ideas from your coursework to your experience in the field	76%	85%**	—
A student cohort – a defined group of individuals who began the program together and stayed together throughout their courses	73%	80%	—

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Characteristic	Preparation (All Completers)	Preparation (Recent Completers)	Professional Development
Instructional Leadership			
Instructional leadership focused on how to develop students' higher order thinking skills	54%	73%***	69%
Instructional leadership focused on raising schoolwide achievement on standardized tests	56%	74%***	71%
Select effective curriculum strategies and materials	49%	58%	59%
Lead instruction that supports implementation of new California state standards	47%	64%***	76%
Leading and Managing School improvement			
Use student and school data to inform continuous school improvement	64%	80%***	75%
Lead a schoolwide change process to improve student achievement	69%	85%***	72%
Engage in self-improvement and your own continuous learning	71%	87%***	70%
Shaping Teaching and Learning Conditions			
Create collegial and collaborative work environments	71%	83%**	57%
Work with the school community, parents, educators, and other stakeholders	73%	86%**	51%
Lead schools that support students from diverse ethnic, racial, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds	70%	82%**	62%
Lead schools that support students' social and emotional development	53%	69%***	61%
Develop systems that meet children's needs and support their development in terms of physical and mental health	47%	61%**	51%
Create a school environment that develops personally and socially responsible young people and uses discipline for restorative purposes	48%	70%***	57%
Redesign a school's organization and structure to support deeper learning for teachers and students	63%	72%	54%
Developing People			
Design professional learning opportunities for teachers and other staff	57%	65%	50%
Help teachers improve through a cycle of observation and feedback	64%	78%***	56%
Recruit and retain teachers and other staff	38%	40%	30%
Manage school operations efficiently	63%	60%	42%
Invest resources to support improvements in school performance	51%	60%	37%
Meeting the Needs of All Learners			
Meet the needs of English learners	54%	68%**	67%
Meet the needs of students with disabilities	53%	75%***	56%
Equitably serve all children	62%	79%***	68%

Data: Learning Policy Institute, Survey of Principals, 2017.

Note: Statistical differences denoted by *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, and * p<0.1 reference statistically significant comparisons between principals who reported completing their preparation since at least 2013 and principals who completed their program before 2013 (this column is not included in the table).

Although many principals have experienced individual elements of high-quality preparation and professional development, very few California principals have experienced the full complement of programmatic elements associated with developing strong principals. These elements include: 1. Partnerships between districts and programs, 2. Cohorts and networks for collegial learning, 3. Applied learning, and 4. A focus on instruction, organization, and using data for change. However, only 5% of California principals reported that they experienced the suite of research-based elements of effective learning for leaders to a moderate or great extent in their preparation programs, and just over 10% of principals reported the same regrading their professional development.

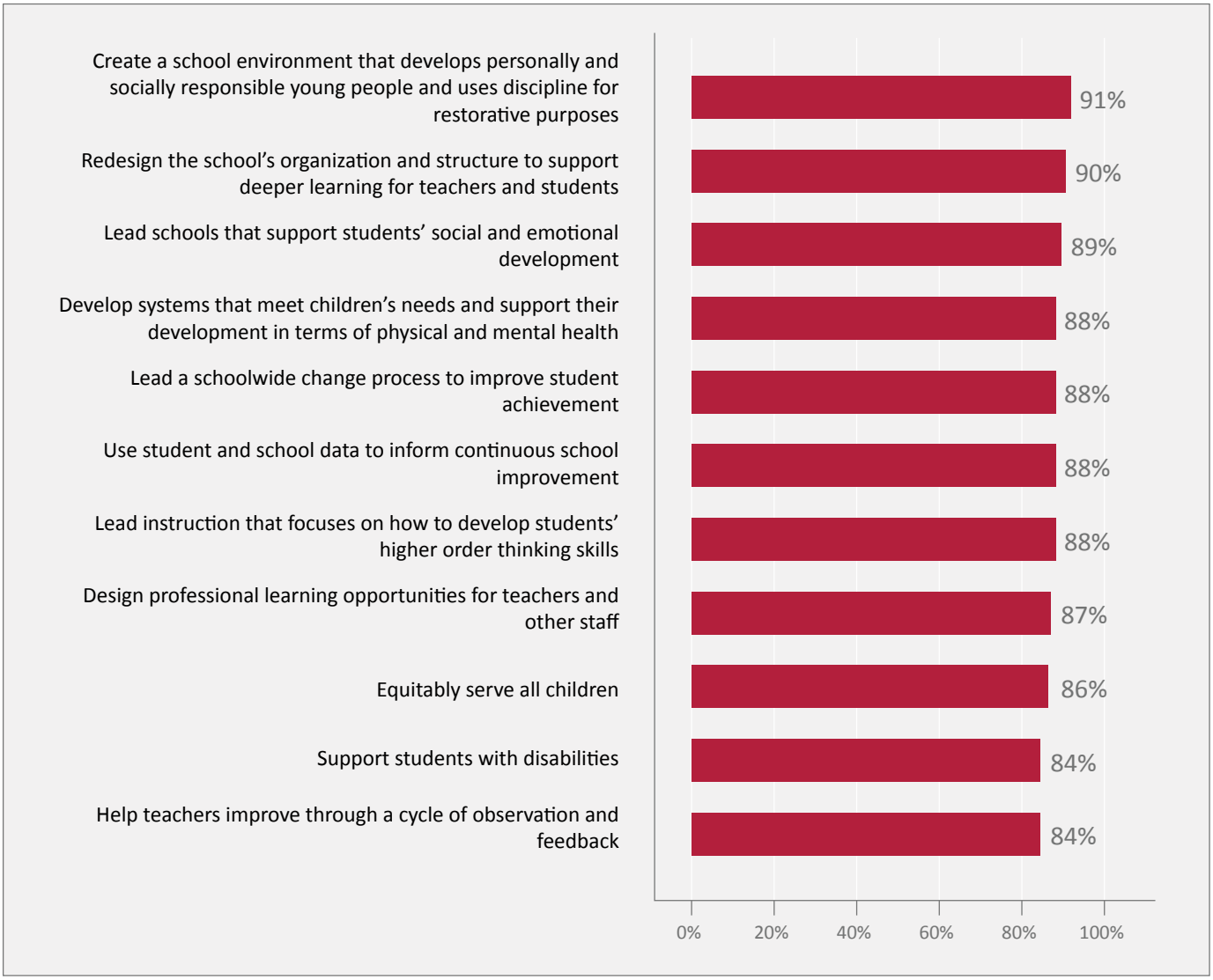
The professional development topics in which principals report feeling most prepared include using data for change, creating collegial work environments, and leading instruction for the new Common Core State Standards, with roughly 55% of principals reporting their professional development prepared them well or very well. Despite these strengths, this research suggests that approximately half of California principals do not feel well prepared in these areas. Additionally, some of the most helpful types of professional development according to principals—peer observation, coaching, and mentoring—are also some of the least available, especially in rural areas.

Although many principals report access to various professional learning topics, this evidence suggests California still has a long way to go in ensuring principals are supported to succeed. As California thinks about targeting professional development to school leaders, the state should consider aligning the content and structure of professional learning opportunities to the identified needs of California's school leaders, with an emphasis on a comprehensive collection of supports and a focus on peer-to-peer interactions, networks, and mentoring.

The vast majority of principals report wanting more professional development

It's clear that California's principals want more professional development. In response to new standards and expectations, principals are looking for support beyond management and basic academics. Nearly all (98%) of the state's principals say that they would like to receive more professional development, including principals who already report feeling well prepared. Specifically, about 90% of principals (see Figure 2 on following page) want more learning related to restorative justice; redesigning a school's organization and structure to support deeper learning; and supporting the whole child—academically, physically, and socially. Principals in schools serving higher proportions of low-income students and students of color are more likely to report wanting professional development.

Figure 2: Proportion of California Principals Who Report Wanting More Professional Development, by Topic



Data: Learning Policy Institute, Survey of California Principals, 2017.

Leaders in rural school districts are less likely to receive coaching and professional development

Nearly a third of California's school districts are located in rural areas and, in part due to that remoteness, their school leaders receive significantly less professional development support than their peers in urban and suburban parts of the state. Half of rural principals report that they participate in principal networks, compared with 74% of urban school leaders. Just 26% of rural principals said they received coaching compared with 41% of urban principals, and rural leaders are half as likely to have the opportunity to visit with other principals to share information on practices that work.

Stronger state standards for administrator education programs show promising results

Ever since California adopted the Common Core State Standards, the state has been strengthening standards for administrator preparation programs to better align with Common Core. During the past six years, the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing (CTC) has focused more attention on instructional leadership, support for teacher development, social-emotional and academic learning, restorative justice practices, and student/family supports. The CTC also boosted standards for clinical preparation and developed a new administrator performance assessment that considers their ability to evaluate teaching practice, to offer productive feedback and developmental support, and to use data to plan school improvement. Recent completers were also more likely to receive an internship of sufficient duration and frequency—one of the most valuable learning experiences.

California is the only state that allows people to earn an administrative credential by passing a test without having completed an administrator preparation program. In 2011, the state replaced the old, multiple-choice test with the California Preliminary Administrative Credential Examination (CPACE). This exam is directly aligned to California's standards and includes an actual performance assessment, which means that candidates for an administrative credential must demonstrate some skills for the job in order to pass the test. Candidates who earn their administrative credential by completing an administrator preparation program must also now pass an administrator performance assessment requirement that will take full effect in 2019-20. In addition, all principals must receive induction support after they take a job. Fewer candidates are currently entering the principalship through the test-only route, and more are receiving the deeper training that is now required.

Although this research cannot identify causality, strong results from recent program completers suggest these revisions (described above in Table 1), are having the desired effect.

Conclusion

The central role that school leaders play in student success makes it essential that California and its school districts increase the overall quality of school leadership and ensure that high-quality, effective principals get into the schools that need them most. Yet, although principals experience a variety of preparation and professional development, it remains piecemeal. And nearly all leaders report that they want more support for their learning, particularly on how to address the needs of the whole child.

Findings from these reports also suggest that incentives could be used to recruit and keep qualified principals in high-needs schools, such as increasing their salaries and providing supports through coaching, mentoring, and principal networks. Similarly, the state should identify how to provide more high-quality professional development for rural principals and explore ways to connect them with other principals, such as through virtual networks.

Fortunately, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) provides federal funds that can be leveraged to support the development of school leaders, and California's ESSA plan indicates that the state plans to take advantage of those funds, estimated at $6.5 million. Additionally, ESSA requires states to set aside 7% of their Title I funds—about $120 million in California—to improve low-performing schools using evidence-based strategies. This research could help identify pressing needs and promising approaches on how best to support school leaders from different geographic regions, school contexts, and experience levels.

Moving forward, it will be important to align data collection systems so researchers can evaluate the most effective leadership training to fit the specific needs of schools based on where they're located, student characteristics, and economic factors. Currently, data systems in California cannot support this important analysis. Better data are also necessary to provide finer-grained analyses that look for patterns and trends indicating whether a change is successful and, if so, what are the specific elements that make it work. With this information, California could develop pipelines of qualified school and district leaders and create internships or residency programs that let principal candidates learn in an actual school setting under the guidance of an experienced school leader.

There are many models to guide California through this process. Other states have shown that investing in high-quality school leadership development is a cost-effective way of improving student outcomes.

DATA SOURCES

- American Institutes for Research (AIR) and Association of California School Administrators (ACSA) survey of California principals, commissioned by the Learning Policy Institute.
- California Commission on Teacher Credentialing.
- California Department of Education.
- Common Core of Data files via the National Center for Education Statistics.
- Focus groups with some California superintendents, principals, and former principals.
- RAND Survey of the American School Leader Panel, conducted for Stanford University. California is oversampled in this nationally representative panel of K-12 principals who have agreed to participate in surveys several times each school year.

Lead Author Biographies

Jason A. Grissom is an associate professor of public policy and education and (by courtesy) of political science at Vanderbilt University's Peabody College of Education and Human Development. He is also faculty director of the Tennessee Education Research Alliance. His research focuses on how school and district leaders affect teacher and student outcomes.

Leib Sutcher has been a research associate at the Learning Policy Institute, where he is a member of the Educator Quality Team. He is currently enrolled in UCLA's Teacher Education Program and continues to consult for the Institute.