

Principal Pipelines

What Are They and What Do They Cost?

Effective school leadership has tremendous potential to improve outcomes for students and promote excellence in schools. Indeed, a high-quality leader in just one school can potentially improve the performance of dozens of teachers and hundreds (even thousands) of students. However, despite their demonstrated potential, efforts to improve the quality of school leadership can be a tough sell for districts and states. In an era of serious resource constraints, states and districts often feel pressure to spend money directly on students or teachers. Limited information about the costs of initiatives targeting school leadership compounds these pressures and precludes districts from embarking on this work. But poor school leadership could also have a high cost. Often overlooked are the costs that districts bear when they have to repeatedly replace principals. Furthermore, the ongoing costs of poor leadership—for example, higher teacher turnover, worsening school climate conditions, and declines in student achievement—are less visible but arguably more significant than the cost of replacing school leaders.

The Study

A project funded by The Wallace Foundation is exploring whether school districts in the United States could improve school leadership through systematic improvements to a core set of activities related to the preparation, hiring, support, and management of school leaders. The Principal Pipeline Initiative, launched in 2011, defines four key components of a principal pipeline: (1) leadership standards that guide all pipeline activities; (2) preservice preparation opportunities for aspiring assistant principals (APs) and principals (including recruitment and selection into these opportunities); (3) selective hiring and placement; and (4) on-the-job induction, evaluation, and support—along with the development of capacity, culture, and infrastructure to sustain the work across components. The initiative specified broad categories of activities the districts were expected to undertake but, within those broad categories, granted districts substantial flexibility regarding the specific activities.

The current study examines the costs of a principal pipeline by first presenting a framework for understanding the potential elements of a comprehensive pipeline and then by examining the costs of individual elements and expenditures and resources for all combined pipeline activities based on

Key findings:

- Districts spent resources in five key areas related to principal pipelines: development of leader standards, preservice preparation for aspiring leaders, selective hiring, on-the-job support and evaluation, and systems of support to sustain the work across all areas.
- Districts spent about \$5.6 million each year, on average, on their principal pipelines, which translated to just 0.4 percent of all per pupil expenditures in the districts.
- On average, districts devoted small shares of total pipeline resources to leader standards and selective hiring and placement: around \$290 per principal and \$2,900 per principal each year, respectively.
- On average, districts devoted much larger shares of total pipeline resources to preservice activities and on-the-job support and evaluation: about \$9,400 per principal and \$14,000 per principal each year, respectively.
- Costs for district personnel time made up nearly half of spending devoted to all pipeline activities.

data from six large, urban school districts that participated in the initiative. This brief generally discusses annual costs on a per-principal basis, which were calculated simply by dividing the total cost by the number of principals in each district and then calculating the average annual per-principal cost across districts. These findings provide new information to states and districts about the cost of supporting school leaders.

Framework for Evaluating Principal Pipeline Costs

Researchers applied an “activity-based approach” for data gathering and analysis. Guided by this approach, they developed a list of activities that could be associated with principal pipelines, based on data regarding the costs of those activities within Wallace-funded pipeline districts. This list of activities guided the study’s data collection process and can serve as a practical

Principal Pipeline Activities

Component 1: LEADER STANDARDS

- Develop or revise leader standards and secure their approval.

Component 2: PRESERVICE PREPARATION

- Revise system of preservice recruitment, selection and preparation.
 - Develop internal, district-led preservice courses.^a
 - Develop external, program or university-based courses.^a
 - Develop screening and selection processes.^a
 - Prepare and train personnel to use new screening and selection processes.
- Recruit principal and AP candidates for preservice preparation.
- Screen and select candidates for preservice preparation.^a
- Deliver preservice preparation.
 - Deliver internal, district-led preparation.^a
 - Deliver external contractor- or partner-led preparation.^a
- Oversee quality of portfolio of preservice preparation programs.
 - Conduct Quality Measures review.^b
 - Oversee quality of preservice preparation (beyond Quality Measures).

Component 3: SELECTIVE HIRING AND PLACEMENT

- Revise system for principal recruiting, hiring, and placement (design processes and train personnel).
- Recruit principal and AP candidates.
- Screen, select and support candidate pool.^a
- Interview and hire school leaders.^a

Component 4: ON-THE-JOB EVALUATION AND SUPPORT

- Revise system for providing on-the-job support and evaluation for principals and APs.
 - Design new on-the-job support and induction processes and courses and provide personnel training.
 - Design new evaluation processes, including technology, and provide personnel training.
- Provide on-the-job support and induction for principals and APs.
 - Provide induction and first year on-the-job professional development.^a
 - Provide on-the-job professional development after the first year.^a
 - Provide schoolwide support via teams and networks.
 - Support implementation of School Administration Manager (SAM).^c
- Evaluate principals and APs.
 - Evaluate principals and APs aside from use of Vanderbilt Assessment of Leadership in Education (VAL-ED).^d
 - Evaluate principals using VAL-ED.
- Provide executive coaching and support to those who supervise and support principals.

SYSTEMS AND CAPACITY FOR SUPPORTING THE PIPELINE COMPONENTS

- Revise the overall principal pipeline.
- Develop and disseminate communication about the Principal Pipeline Initiative.
- Develop and maintain Leader Tracking System.
- Oversee implementation of pipeline (quality assurance).

NOTES

^a Separate activities for principals and assistant principals.

^b Quality Measures is a tool that the Education Development Center developed, with support from The Wallace Foundation, to improve partnerships between school districts and principal preservice providers.

^c SAM is a daily PD set of practices designed to help leaders increase time spent on instructional-leadership activities and reflect on impact and next steps. The National SAM Innovation Project developed it with support from The Wallace Foundation.

^d The Vanderbilt Assessment of Leadership in Education is a principal-evaluation tool for assessing principal behaviors. Vanderbilt University developed it with support from The Wallace Foundation.

resource to other districts by helping them identify what pieces of principal pipelines are already in place in their district and what additional activities they might consider undertaking.

Leader Standards

Districts developed and used leader standards as a tool to guide pipeline work; many considered the development of such standards as a “quick win.” In addition, these activities came with a relatively small price tag:

- On average, districts devoted a small share of total pipeline resources to leader standards amounting to about \$290 per principal or a little less than \$0.50 per pupil.
- Leader standards work was a continuous endeavor; districts devoted resources to leader standards in each year of the initiative.

- More than 80 percent of the costs of leader standards efforts reflected costs for personnel time to develop and refine the standards.
- A district’s starting point on leader standards, rather than district size, appears to influence total district spending on leader standards.

Preservice Preparation

Previous research noted that the time between the start of principal preservice and placement as a principal in a district participating in the initiative ranged from three to ten years, suggesting that it will take time to fully assess the implications of enhanced preservice preparation. In the current study, the authors found wide variation across districts in the resources devoted to these efforts:

- On average, districts devoted a substantial share of total pipeline resources to preservice, amounting to about \$9,400 per principal or \$13 per pupil.
- A little more than three-quarters of all costs for the preservice component were devoted to the delivery of preservice preparation.
- The large differences in districts' approaches to supporting preservice are reflected in wide variation in spending for preservice across districts.
- Stipends provided to those participating in principal residencies that were part of some preservice programs represented a large portion of the costs for those programs.

Selective Hiring and Placement

All participating districts undertook efforts to make hiring and placement processes more systematic, rooted in leader standards, and guided by objective data. These efforts, like leader standards efforts, had a relatively low cost associated with them:

- On average, districts devoted a small share of total pipeline resources to selective hiring and placement: about \$2,900 per principal or \$4 per pupil.
- Nearly half of the resources devoted to hiring and placement during the initiative were investments in revisions to hiring systems.
- Compared with other pipeline categories, the range of costs for hiring and placement across districts was narrow; much of the variation stemmed from differences in resources devoted to system improvements.

On-the-Job Support and Evaluation

All participating districts took measures to improve principal supervision, and several districts expanded access to principal and AP coaching and mentoring, although districts differed in the mix of school leader supports they provided, as well as the intensity and duration of those supports:

- On average, districts devoted nearly half (47 percent) of total pipeline resources to on-the-job support and evaluation, amounting to about \$14,000 per principal or \$19 per pupil.
- The vast majority of these resources were for on-the-job support for principals and APs: Districts devoted nearly \$11,000 per principal to these activities.
- Main costs for on-the-job support included coaching and mentoring, principal supervision, the SAM process (daily set of professional development practices designed to help leaders increase time spent on instructional-leadership activities), costs for consultants, and materials and supplies necessary for delivering ongoing PD for school leaders.

Systems of Support

Participating districts also devoted staff and other resources to activities that cut across the four initiative components, including efforts to revise the principal pipeline, oversight of pipeline activity implementation, development and maintenance of data systems to aid in hiring and supporting school leaders (Leader Tracking Systems or LTSs), and communication about the pipeline.

- The development and maintenance of LTSs was the largest contributor to costs for systems of support, at almost \$2,000 per principal each year, on average.
- Spending on the LTSs over the course of the initiative was not related to any metric of district size.
- All districts invested at least some resources and expenditures in communications about the initiative, and most hired consultants or others to help them plan communication strategies and messaging about initiative efforts.

District Personnel Time

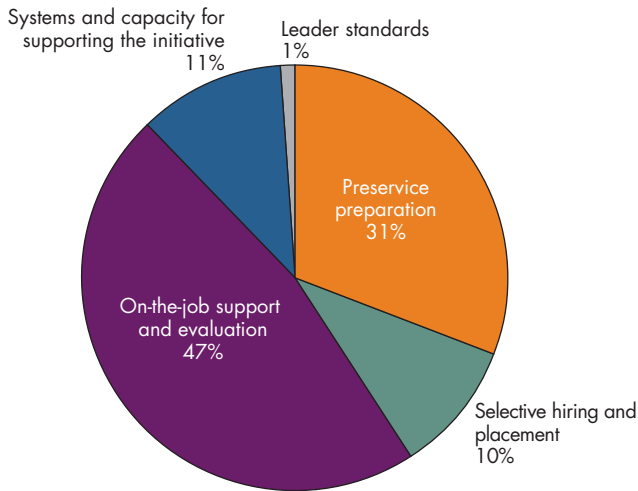
The cost for district personnel time made up nearly half, or about 44 percent, of spending devoted to all pipeline activities. District personnel time accounted for a particularly large portion of total costs for two pipeline categories: development of leader standards and hiring and placement activities. Furthermore, there were clear opportunity costs associated with the time district personnel spent on principal pipeline activities. For example, a principal who is pulled out of her school for a day to screen school leader candidates is not in the school building supporting teachers and students. The concept of opportunity cost also applies to the time of central office personnel. Costs associated with central district personnel time were highest for on-the-job evaluation and support activities. Principal supervisors, as well as other district personnel, contributed to these evaluation and support activities.

Districts that wish to invest further in their principal pipelines might need to be particularly strategic in how they reconfigure district personnel time and assign district staff to work on principal pipeline activities.

Costs of the Principal Pipeline Initiative

Combining all the principal pipeline categories and looking across all years of the initiative, districts spent about \$5.6 million each year, on average, which translated to a little more than \$31,000 per principal or \$42 per pupil per year. For all of these districts, pipeline costs represented just a small fraction of total expenditures in each year (0.4 percent). A little less than half of the principal pipeline spending (or about \$14,000 per principal) is devoted to on-the-job support and evaluation of principals and APs (see the figure).

Percentage of Total Principal Pipeline Resources and Expenditures Devoted to Each Major Category, School Years 2011–2012 Through 2014–2015



NOTES: We based the percentages on our estimates of total principal pipeline resources and expenditures for school years 2011–2012 through 2014–2015 for the five Principal Pipeline Initiative districts for which we had data for all categories of pipeline activities (i.e., excludes New York City).

Districts spent much more on the preservice and on-the-job support and evaluation categories of the principal pipeline (about \$9,400 per principal and \$14,000 per principal, respectively) than on other categories, and the range of costs of those activities across districts—and, in particular, the range of preservice costs—was much larger than the ranges for the other pipeline categories. The higher cost and large range for preservice and on-the-job support costs reflected the very different strategies and preservice programs that districts pursued. In contrast, the cost of the leader standards component was particularly small, at only \$290 per principal or about \$90,300 annually.

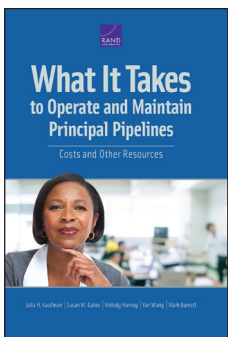
It is important to note that the districts participating in the initiative were all relatively large districts. Lessons learned from evaluations of their spending might not all be relevant

for smaller districts; nevertheless, all districts can use information from this study to reflect on the most useful activities that could support a robust principal pipeline in their context.

Conclusions

The list of principal pipeline activities that the authors identified provides a robust framework for districts interested in such an approach to school leadership development and management. Although districts might not have the resources or interest to engage in all principal pipeline activities highlighted in the cost study, the activity list can help districts reflect on the activities and foci that make sense in their own context. As noted above, certain pipeline components, such as the creation of leadership standards, cost relatively little to implement, and many in the participating districts saw them as an easy and quick way to strengthen the pipeline. Other elements of the pipeline—for example, preservice and on-the-job support—took up a much larger share of principal pipeline resources, and those costs also varied widely across the participating districts. Although it is premature to consider whether that variation points to cost-effective practices for preservice and on-the-job support, it appears clear that cost variation is influenced by the way in which districts configure their pipelines, the share of the full cost of certain activities that the district funded, the activities it chose to emphasize during the initiative, and the characteristics of the district context, such as the depth of a district’s pool of principal candidates.

By offering estimates of resources and expenditures for individual principal pipeline activities, this study’s findings provide important input for districts that are considering improvements to activities within their own principal pipelines. Coupled with information that will be generated by a future study of the initiative’s effects, these estimates will aid districts in making strategic choices about investments to improve and strengthen their principal pipelines.



This brief describes work done in RAND Education and documented in *What It Takes to Operate and Maintain Principal Pipelines: Costs and Other Resources*, by Julia H. Kaufman, Susan M. Gates, Melody Harvey, Yan Wang, and Mark Barrett, RR-2078-WF, 2017 (available at www.rand.org/t/RR2078). To view this brief online, visit www.rand.org/t/RB9971. The RAND Corporation is a research organization that develops solutions to public policy challenges to help make communities throughout the world safer and more secure, healthier and more prosperous. RAND is nonprofit, nonpartisan, and committed to the public interest. RAND’s publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. RAND® is a registered trademark. © RAND 2017

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