

Improving School Leadership Under ESSA:

Evidence-Based Options
for States & Districts

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The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) provides a broad range of opportunities for states and school districts to improve schools, particularly those that are struggling. The law provides a substantial amount of funding for improvement efforts, such as for improving teacher and school leader quality, as well as a great deal of flexibility in how the funds are spent.

States are now developing plans to comply with ESSA. These plans address a number of policies, including assessments, accountability systems, and interventions for low-performing schools. The U.S. Department of Education has issued regulations to guide state plans in certain areas, but in general, states have a great deal of discretion in designing their plans.

One area that ESSA supports is school leadership. ESSA includes a number of provisions that support state and district efforts to recruit, prepare, and develop highly capable school leaders. This represents a substantial expansion over previous versions of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, and appears to be based on a recognition that, while the cumulative effect of teacher quality is a critical component of effective schools, improving the quality of leadership may be one of the most cost-efficient and scalable methods of improving instruction and learning in K-12 schools. Competent and skillful teachers are necessary to improve classrooms; competent and skillful leaders can improve struggling schools and maintain highly effective schools.

While ESSA offers flexibility to states and districts, the statute also encourages school officials to adopt interventions that are evidence-based. The law sets out four categories, or tiers, of evidence states and districts can use in selecting programs. This paper describes those tiers and reports on principal-development programs that qualify as evidence-based.

The next step is up to states and districts. They need to review these findings, as well as their local context and needs, and come up with improvement strategies that will have the biggest impact

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Principal Quality: A Driver of Student Achievement

One of the most widely quoted findings from education research is the fact that teacher quality is the largest school-related factor in student achievement. Less well known, but equally robust, is the finding that principal quality is the second-largest factor in student achievement.¹ The effect is particularly strong in schools with the greatest needs.²

Unlike teachers, who affect individual students and classrooms, principals have a school-wide impact. Researchers have shown that effective principals attract and retain high-quality teachers³ and create professional work environments that facilitate effective teaching and learning.⁴ Studies have also found that high-quality principals have teachers who improve faster.⁵

Despite the evidence about the impact of principal quality on teaching and learning, school leaders have been largely ignored in public policy. As a recent report concludes, “The principal’s role has received consistently less attention relative to other topics... policymakers give much more attention to teachers and teacher-related issues than principals.”⁶ At the federal level, for example, programs for principals have been lumped in with programs for teachers, such as in the Supporting Effective Educator Development (SEED) program, rather than separated out as a unique focus of investments.

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ESSA—Increased Funding and Flexibility for Strengthening School Leadership

The passage of ESSA, however, made school leadership more prominent in federal policy. The law contains a number of provisions that offer support for the recruitment, preparation, and development of high-quality principals. These include:

Title I (Improving Basic Programs Operated by State and Local Educational Agencies) of ESSA authorizes approximately \$15.0 to \$16.2 billion per year (2017–2020) to states in formula funding to improve basic state and local education programs. School Improvement Funds, which replace School Improvement Grants

and which are used to support improvements in the lowest 5 percent of schools in performance, may be used to support activities to improve school leadership.

Title II, Part A (Supporting Effective Instruction), authorizes approximately \$2.3 billion per year (2017–2020) to states in formula funding to improve the quality of teachers, principals, or other school leaders. States may reserve up to 3 percent of their grants for activities designed to improve the principal pipeline, such as:

- improving principal certification (regular and alternative), evaluation, and support systems;
- preservice (principal preparation programs and academies);
- training or professional development on such topics as differentiating performance; evaluating teachers; cultural competency; instruction and student learning; postsecondary education for students; science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), career and technical education (CTE) instruction; and technology ;
- recruiting and retaining school leaders;
- induction and mentoring for early career principals; and
- differential pay for hard-to-fill positions.

Title II, Part B (National Activities), authorizes approximately \$469 to \$489 million per year (2017–2020) to states to award to districts. Districts may develop human-capital management systems that include performance-based incentives, such as bonuses for teachers or principals based on improved student achievement. These performance incentives can be used with both school leaders and teachers; before ESSA, the incentives only targeted teachers.

National activities also include competitive federal grants to support the development of effective educators, including school leaders, through nontraditional certification programs and evidence-based professional development, as well as support for efforts to improve the recruitment, preparation, placement, support, and retention of effective principals or other school leaders in high-need schools.

New Funding Requirements for ESSA — 'Evidence-Based Interventions'

While these provisions allow states and districts to take major steps toward improving school leadership, ESSA also makes clear that interventions a state or district uses must be evidence-based in most cases. The law defines “evidence-based” to mean “an activity, strategy, or intervention that demonstrates a statistically significant effect on improving student outcomes or other relevant outcomes based on—

- strong evidence from at least one well-designed and well-implemented experimental study (Tier I);
- moderate evidence from at least one well-designed and well-implemented quasi-experimental study (Tier II); or
- promising evidence from at least one well-designed and well-implemented correlational study with statistical controls for selection bias (Tier III).”

These three categories of evidence are required to be met by interventions funded under all Title I funding streams. Interventions outside of school improvement under Title I (for example, an intervention under Title II) must meet the same standards of evidence, at least for some components. These programs could also meet a fourth category, known as Tier IV, which qualify if they “demonstrate a rationale based on high-quality research findings or positive evaluation that such activity, strategy, or intervention is likely to improve student outcomes or other relevant outcomes.” In such cases, there must be “ongoing efforts to examine the effects of such activity, strategy, or intervention.”

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Shedding Light on ESSA Evidence Requirements and Qualifying Interventions

In an effort to provide guidance to districts and states, two organizations recently released reports that focus on the evidence supporting interventions that meet ESSA standards.

One [report](#), by the RAND Corporation with support from the Wallace Foundation,⁷ states that the evidentiary standards in the law are less stringent than those that applied to previous federal programs, such as the Investing in Innovation (i3) program. While noting that the language in the statute is somewhat vague and needs to be clarified, the report identifies several interventions that might be permissible under the criteria.

The review was based on an examination of 3,500 research articles, of which 128 were fully reviewed. The report examines studies that provide evidence about six types of school leadership activities:

Leader evaluation systems. These include processes, tools, and metrics designed to measure principals' strengths and needs, either for accountability or developmental purposes. The report found no research on evaluation systems that meets Tier I-III standards for impact on student outcomes or any other factors. However, the review found that a number of tools and processes are based on a strong theory of action and could meet the criteria for Tier IV. These include the Vanderbilt Assessment of Leadership in Education, Marzano School Leaders Evaluation Model, Principal's Instructional Management Rating Scale, and Comprehensive Assessment of Leadership for Learning.

Principal preparation programs. These include programs that involve classroom instruction and school-based internships and that lead to certification. The review identified two programs that have Tier II evidence showing an impact on important outcomes—New Leaders has shown evidence of an effect on student achievement, and the Texas Principal Excellence Program has shown an effect on principal competencies, though not on student achievement. Two Tier III studies have shown positive relationships between aspects of principal preparation programs and principal behaviors, teacher staffing, and achievement, the report found.

Strategic staff management. These include efforts to improve recruitment, placement in schools, and replacement of existing principals. The evidence for this is limited. Only one Tier III study of principal replacement was considered and it showed negative effects on student achievement and would not qualify as evidence-based under ESSA, the report notes.

Professional learning. These include professional development experiences such as workshops, mentoring, and coaching for practicing principals. Based on two Tier II studies that show a positive impact on student achievement, the National Institute for School Leadership's (NISL) Executive Development Program meets ESSA criteria for evidence.⁸ A Tier I study of McREL's Balanced Leadership Program shows no impact on student achievement, but a positive effect on staff turnover. There is Tier IV evidence for the Metropolitan ISD Principal Coaching Initiative, the Arkansas Leadership Academy's Master Principal Program, and coaching principals on Socratic questioning and reflective thinking.

Working conditions. These include incentives and opportunities to improve the effectiveness of school leaders. One set of initiatives includes steps to devolve authority over decisions such as staffing and curriculum to schools. Tier II studies show mixed results from this strategy. Another set includes efforts to provide bonuses and higher pay to high-quality principals. There is no Tier I-III evidence of the effectiveness of this strategy, but there is substantial Tier IV evidence of the theory behind it.

Comprehensive school-improvement models. These include whole-school redesign efforts that often include components to address school leadership. Two models have evidence of effectiveness: seven Tier I or Tier II studies of KIPP (the program as a whole; not just its leadership component) show positive outcomes on student achievement, and a Tier II study of the University of Virginia's School Turnaround Specialist Model shows positive outcomes on student achievement as well.

Identifying Studies of School Leadership Programs that Meet a Higher Standard

A separate [report](#), by the George W. Bush Institute,⁹ similarly examines the evidence behind programs to improve school leadership. The Bush Institute report examines programs in six dimensions: working environment, preparation, recruitment and selection, professional learning, performance evaluation, and compensation and incentives. The Institute had previously identified these dimensions as the components of what it calls Principal Talent Management.

The review was based on an examination of research to look for evidence of two outcomes: student achievement and principal retention. The criteria for the research are narrower than those used by the RAND Corporation and those considered acceptable by ESSA. The Bush review examined only those studies that meet the standards of the federal What Works Clearinghouse (WWC), which places a strong emphasis on studies involving randomized controlled trials, but also recognizes the value of quasi-experimental studies. That is, the Bush Institute review reports on studies that would meet Tier I or Tier II, standards under ESSA.

Because few studies in education meet those criteria, the Bush Institute review is limited. Of 251 studies identified in the six dimensions of Principal Talent Management, the reviewers found only 11 eligible for inclusion in WWC standards review, and two of

Of the six studies that met WWC standards, only two showed positive effects on student achievement: the National Institute for School Leadership's (NISL) Executive Development Program and the Teacher Incentive Fund's pay-for performance program.

these studies evaluated the same intervention. The review included the most recent of the two studies, which incorporated the findings of the earlier study. Of the 10 studies reviewed, only 6 met WWC standards.

Of the six studies that met WWC standards, only two showed positive effects on student achievement: the National Institute for School Leadership's (NISL) Executive Development Program¹⁰ and the Teacher Incentive Fund's pay-for performance program.¹¹ The evaluation of NISL found improvements in English language arts and mathematics performance in Pennsylvania students, and the TIF evaluation found evidence of improved ELA performance.

The Bush Institute found that, in two of its six dimensions of Principal Talent Management—recruitment and selection and performance evaluation—no studies were eligible for review. The findings from the review of the other four dimensions are as follows:

The [Bush] review was based on an examination of research to look for evidence of two outcomes: student achievement and principal retention.

Principal working environment. No study found evidence that improving principals' working conditions improved student achievement or principal retention. One study reviewed, of the Strategic Staffing Initiative, an effort to reassign highly effective principals and teachers to high-needs schools, failed to meet WWC standards.

Principal preparation. Two studies, one by the Bush Institute of four programs, and one of the New York City Leadership Academy's Aspiring Principals Program, met WWC standards, although with reservations. However, the studies found no discernable impact on student achievement or principal retention.

Principal professional learning. The review found three studies that met WWC standards, one of the McREL Balanced Leadership Professional Development Program, which met the standards without reservations, and two of the NISL Executive Development Program, which met the standards with reservations. As noted above, the studies of the NISL program found that it had an impact on student achievement. The study of the McREL program found no effect on student learning.

Principal compensation and incentives. One study met WWC standards without reservations. As noted above, a study of the Teacher Incentive Fund found positive effects on student achievement in ELA. A second study, of Denver Public Schools' Professional Compensation System for Administrators (Principal ProComp), failed to meet WWC standards.

Table I: Interventions Meeting ESSA Evidence Requirements

Category	Program	RAND	GWB Inst.
<i>Principal Preparation Programs</i>	Texas Principal Excellence	✓	
	New Leaders	✓	
	Select principal-preparation programs	✓	
	Select principal-preparation program practices	✓	
	NYC Leadership Academy's Aspiring Principals Program		✓
	Four principal preparation programs selected by Bush Institute		✓
<i>Professional Learning</i>	McREL Balanced Leadership Program	✓	✓
	NISL Executive Development Program	✓	✓
<i>School Improvement Models</i>	KIPP	✓	
	UVA School Turnaround Specialist	✓	
<i>Staff Management</i>	Principal replacement	✓	
<i>Compensation and Incentives</i>	Teacher Incentive Fund Pay-for-performance bonuses		✓
<i>Working Conditions</i>	Principal Autonomy	✓	

✓ Study met standards or criteria (RAND: Tier I-III; GWB Inst.: What Works Clearinghouse)

✓ Study also showed positive impact on student achievement

The Next Steps for States and Districts

Districts and states would do well to consult these reports to develop strategic initiatives to improve student achievement by raising the level of school leader quality.

The RAND and Bush Institute reviews show that states and districts have some options in identifying evidence-based interventions to support school leadership under ESSA. Those options are limited, however, both because the research base is slim and many well-designed studies have failed to find evidence of an impact of the interventions on student achievement or principal quality. Districts and states would do well to consult these reports, as well as additional research that might be forthcoming, to develop strategic initiatives to improve student achievement by raising the level of school leader quality.

In doing so, districts and states need to consider their own needs and contexts. Smaller districts with limited budgets might consider targeted efforts aimed at select principals or potential principals. Larger districts might consider larger-scale efforts that are affordable and sustainable, particularly train-the-trainer models that build local capacity for improvement.

The opportunities ESSA provides are substantial. By taking advantage of them and choosing evidence-based interventions, districts and states can make long strides toward improving learning for all students.

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Notes

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