

Report Summary: Do Principals Have an Impossible Job?

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The principal's job is often called the loneliest in K-12 education, but it's just as fitting to call it the toughest.

Hours are long. Demands come from every direction: the central office, teachers, students, parents, and the community. And no one else in a school has the same responsibilities.

Managing buses, budgets, and buildings is still central to the job, but the current generation of principals—and the generation that will succeed them—also must oversee colliding rollouts of some of the most dramatic shifts in public schooling in more than a decade: more rigorous academic standards, new assessments, and retooled teacher-evaluation systems.

That principals' time is so often strained by day-to-day requirements of the job while they are held responsible for the success of myriad new initiatives makes their main mission—to be their schools' instructional leaders and chief architects of a positive school climate—all the more challenging.

So who would want the job? And who is cut out to do it successfully, year in and year out? In this special report, we examine how some educators and policymakers are tackling these critical issues. In a small but growing number of school districts and states, deliberate efforts are under way to create and sustain a strong corps of principals who can be the kind of political, managerial, and instructional leaders the profession now demands.

We start in Denver, where district leaders over time have been building and refining a [“principal pipeline,”](#) starting with specific preparation requirements for aspiring school leaders and ending with proactive succession planning for when vacancies occur.

[In Maryland](#), state education officials have undertaken an obvious though rarely used strategy: tapping districts' most promising assistant principals and preparing them through coaching and peer support to take the helm of schools.

[Professional development for school leaders](#)—especially for those who are midcareer principals or veterans—remains perennially overshadowed by the need for ongoing teacher training. That situation persists despite a growing body of research showing that principals who receive high-quality on-the-job career development are more likely to stay on the job.

The role of principal supervisors—the people who manage principals and have typically been charged with enforcing rules and regulations—is [undergoing a major makeover](#), meanwhile, in

a handful of districts where leaders see that job as an important piece of their overall strategy to support principals and improve student achievement.

The KIPP charter school network puts its aspiring principals through a [yearlong training fellowship](#) alongside their peers—a model it has created to help address high burnout rates and turnover in its school leadership.

Finally, we look at how [teacher-leaders remain a powerful yet vastly underutilized tool](#) for spreading the complex and competing demands on principals across a team of educators in school buildings.