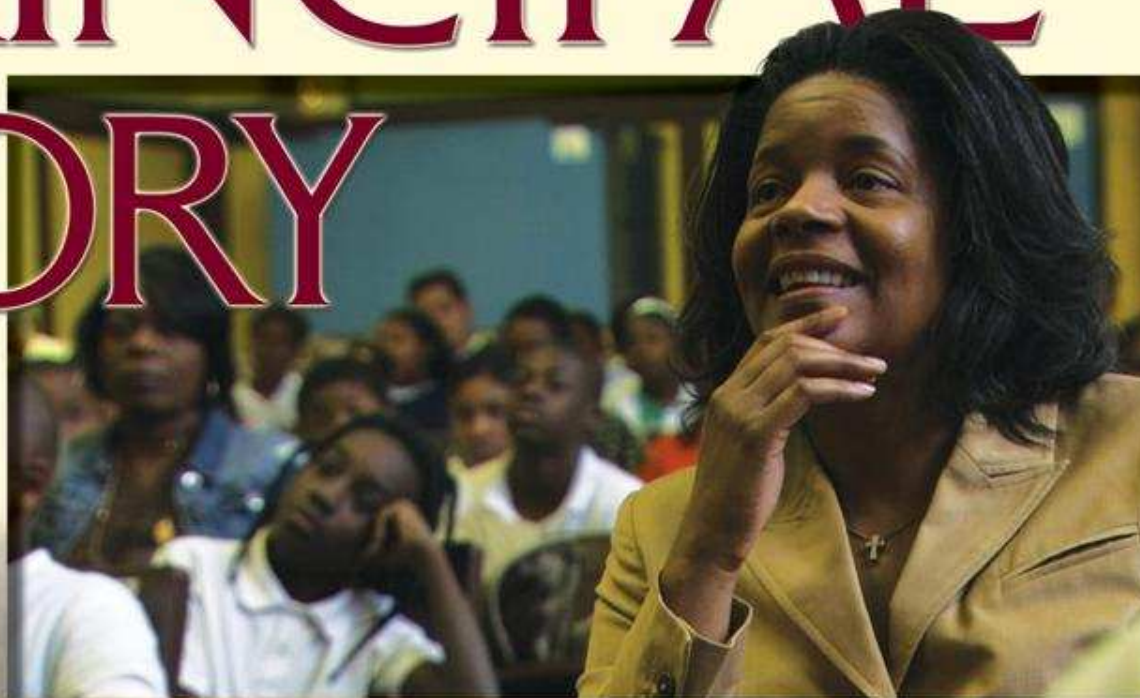





THE PRINCIPAL STORY

CONVERSATION GUIDE
Leadership Matters:
A Call to Action





THE PRINCIPAL STORY

LEADERSHIP MATTERS: A CALL TO ACTION

A Conversation Guide for Policymakers and District Leaders

“We have no good schools without good principals.” – Arne Duncan,
U.S. Secretary of Education; former CEO, Chicago Public Schools

This 12-minute video, *Leadership Matters: A Call to Action*, available on the accompanying DVD and [website](#), is part of a documentary film project on school principals and features commentary by ten education and policy experts (see page 17). Their comments deepen the understanding of the critical and changing role school leadership plays in raising student achievement. Their insights can encourage discussion about the actions that states, districts and leader preparation programs can take to ensure that school leaders are well trained and supported on the job.

This executive video for policymakers and district leaders includes scenes from **THE PRINCIPAL STORY**, an hour-long documentary that follows two school leaders – novice principal Tresa D. Dunbar of Henry H. Nash Elementary School in Chicago and veteran principal Kerry Purcell of Harvard Park Elementary School in Springfield, Illinois – through an intimate and emotional one-year journey. We witness their real-life challenges to improve teaching and learning amid the competing demands of managing staffs and engaging students and communities. Commissioned by The Wallace Foundation, the film was produced by Tod Lending and David Mrazek of Nomadic Pictures in Chicago and will be broadcast nationally as part of PBS’s P.O.V. series on September 15, 2009.

According to expert speakers and research, we as a nation cannot get serious about school reform without strong leaders. They also argue that greater urgency must be brought to supporting effective leadership in order for such reforms to succeed in more than one school at a time. Instead, the speakers point out that, through deliberate and sustained action, policymakers can have a greater impact on improving teacher quality and student learning in the nation’s schools by focusing on leadership.

This conversation guide has been organized around five central themes: leadership matters, preparing principals effectively, providing ongoing support, using data effectively and improving leader assessment. It also includes questions to help intended audiences – state, district and local policymakers, university preparation program directors and others – more deeply investigate issues, strategies and actions that policymakers and educators can consider to strengthen school leadership.



1. Leadership Matters

“If America is going to remain competitive and successful, then we have got to take our education system to a new level. We won’t do that if we don’t get great leadership.” – Joel I. Klein, New York City Schools Chancellor

Schools need effective leaders to ensure that all students succeed. It is increasingly clear that the nation needs to better leverage policies and programs to produce leaders able to raise school and student performance.

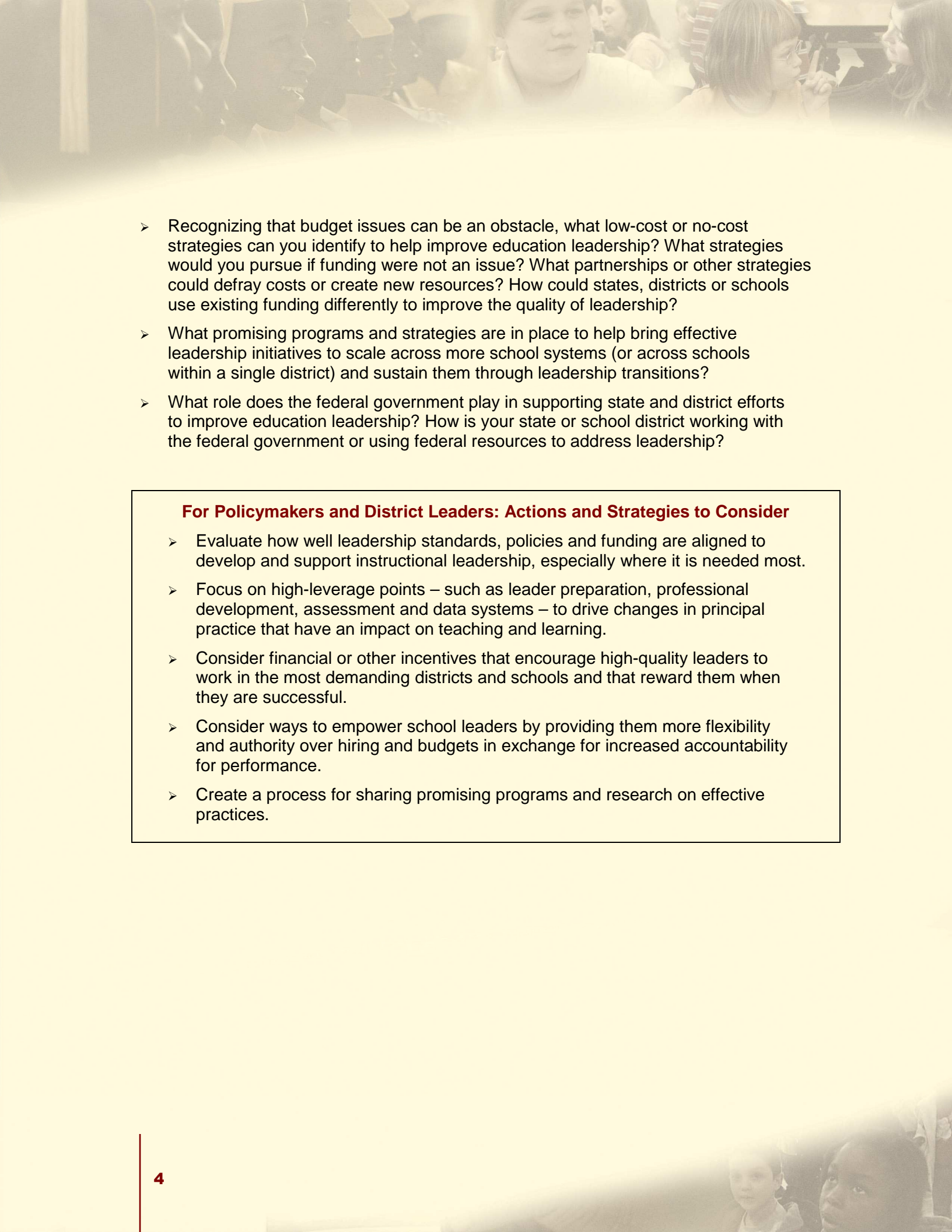
Research tells us that there are virtually no documented instances of troubled schools being turned around without intervention by a strong leader. Not only is leadership the catalyst that makes it possible for teachers to do their best, but it is also the main reason that teachers are attracted to and remain in challenging schools. As Kenneth Leithwood, professor at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto, found, “leadership effects are usually largest where and when they are needed most.”

Fortunately, school leadership is no longer taking a back seat in school reform debates. Principals must be instructional leaders, who understand instruction and can develop the capacities of teachers and schools to improve educational outcomes for all students. The question is no longer whether leadership really matters, but how to train, place and support leaders to be effective, especially in struggling districts and schools. One important step has been the expansion of learning-based leadership standards. All 50 states have adopted the ISLLC (Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium) standards or some version of standards as a uniform foundation for leadership policy.

While this momentum is promising, it is not enough. Developing effective leaders for all schools will require policymakers to make leadership a priority. As the world gets smaller and demands on students increase, strengthening school leadership to raise student achievement and close achievement gaps is crucial.

Conversation Questions

- In the video, Education Trust President Kati Haycock emphasizes that policymakers can’t afford *not* to focus on education leadership. As you reflect on your state or school district, how do you rate your focus on school leadership versus other areas, such as teachers, curricula and facilities? What evidence is there that leadership is a priority? If it is not, what would it take to make leadership a priority at the state level and in every district in the state?
- Teaching and leadership are often treated as separate and competing issues in policies, programs and priorities at all levels of education. How is your state, district or preparation program making the link between education leaders and how their work influences teachers and student outcomes? What strategies would help strengthen that connection?

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- Recognizing that budget issues can be an obstacle, what low-cost or no-cost strategies can you identify to help improve education leadership? What strategies would you pursue if funding were not an issue? What partnerships or other strategies could defray costs or create new resources? How could states, districts or schools use existing funding differently to improve the quality of leadership?
 - What promising programs and strategies are in place to help bring effective leadership initiatives to scale across more school systems (or across schools within a single district) and sustain them through leadership transitions?
 - What role does the federal government play in supporting state and district efforts to improve education leadership? How is your state or school district working with the federal government or using federal resources to address leadership?

For Policymakers and District Leaders: Actions and Strategies to Consider

- Evaluate how well leadership standards, policies and funding are aligned to develop and support instructional leadership, especially where it is needed most.
- Focus on high-leverage points – such as leader preparation, professional development, assessment and data systems – to drive changes in principal practice that have an impact on teaching and learning.
- Consider financial or other incentives that encourage high-quality leaders to work in the most demanding districts and schools and that reward them when they are successful.
- Consider ways to empower school leaders by providing them more flexibility and authority over hiring and budgets in exchange for increased accountability for performance.
- Create a process for sharing promising programs and research on effective practices.



2. Preparing Principals Effectively

“There are direct responsibilities that states have to support leadership development. Every state must step back and evaluate the kind of support – or the lack of support – they’ve given.” – Gene Wilhoit, Executive Director, Council of Chief State School Officers

“In most states, there is no leadership development system in place,” according to Gene Wilhoit. Yet districts rely on leadership training programs to produce principals able to improve instruction and learning. In particular, high-poverty districts and schools have real problems attracting enough principals with the skills and expertise to raise student achievement.

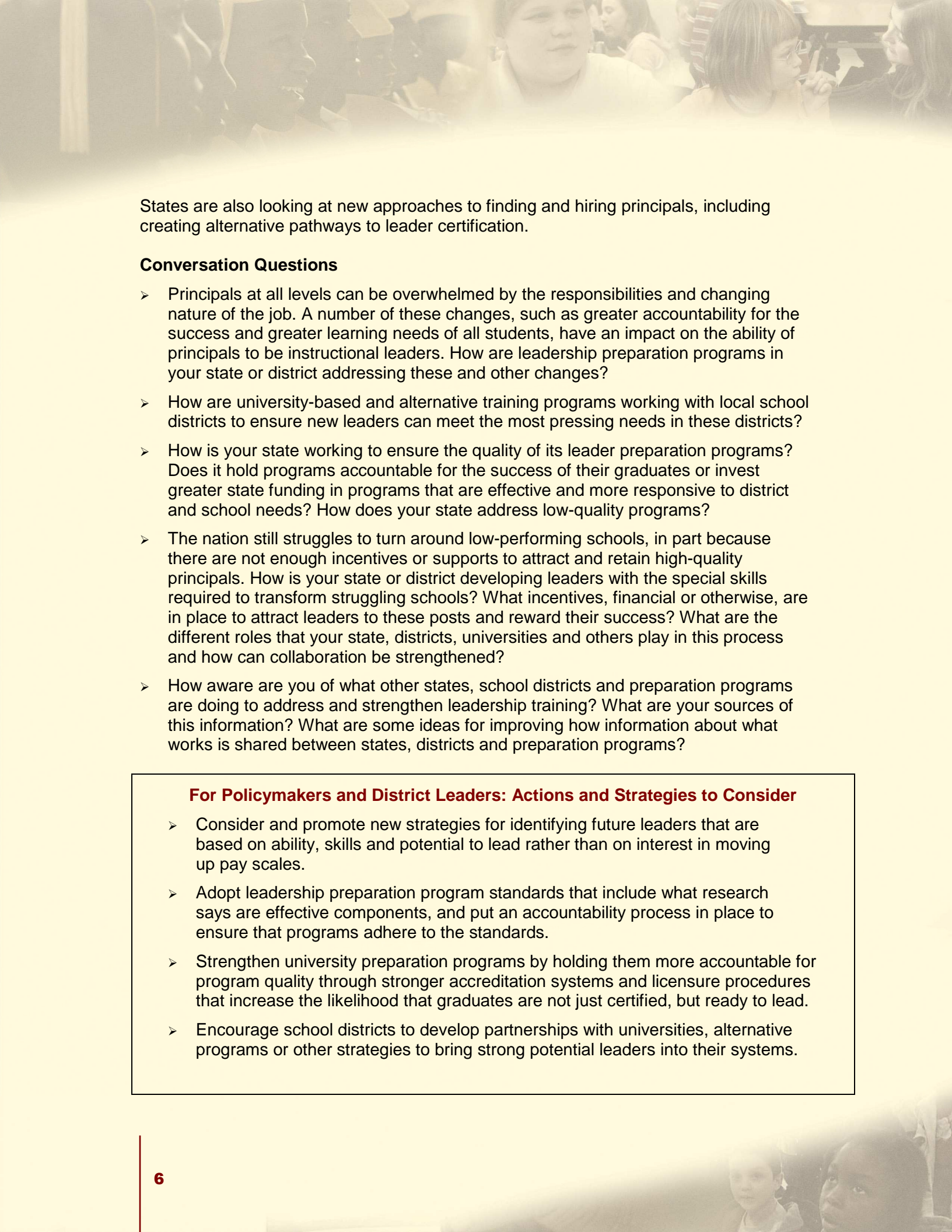
Preparation must catch up to the real-world demands facing today’s principals. Added to the traditional responsibilities of managing buildings and resolving crises are providing instructional leadership, improving teaching practice and raising student achievement. To be effective, school leaders must be able to set directions for their schools, develop the people around them and organize both their teams and their own time around a shared vision of effective teaching and learning.

Research tells us that effective preparation programs – those that produce principals ready to handle the challenges of the 21st century – should emphasize curricula focused on instructional leadership and school improvement, active and student-centered learning experiences that integrate theory and practice, formalized mentoring and vigorous internships. Linda Darling-Hammond, the Charles E. Ducommun Professor of Education at Stanford University, finds that districts with high-quality leader preparation do not rely on self-selected applicants, but are purposeful in seeking recruits and developing them.

Given all we know, it is unacceptable that many university preparation programs fall short of providing schools the leaders they need. Often, the high cost of quality programs is cited as a barrier. However, Darling-Hammond points out that while an effective preparation program requires significant resources, “on a per-student basis, it represents a modest investment in a substantially more successful start for the principal, teachers and students in the school.”

There is evidence that the field is moving toward better principal preparation. More universities are working together and with districts to ensure that graduates of leadership preparation programs have skills that are aligned with local needs and to utilize more recent research to guide the reform efforts of these programs. Some states are now also holding preparation programs more accountable.

Furthermore, non-traditional methods for preparing new leaders are more common, giving aspiring leaders new training options. Kyla L. Wahlstrom, director of the Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement at the University of Minnesota, describes how districts can “grow their own leaders” by developing programs to identify, train and support teachers to become principals. For example, Atlanta created the Superintendent’s Academy for Building Leaders in Education (SABLE) and New York City created the NYC Leadership Academy. Neither program is university based.



States are also looking at new approaches to finding and hiring principals, including creating alternative pathways to leader certification.

Conversation Questions

- Principals at all levels can be overwhelmed by the responsibilities and changing nature of the job. A number of these changes, such as greater accountability for the success and greater learning needs of all students, have an impact on the ability of principals to be instructional leaders. How are leadership preparation programs in your state or district addressing these and other changes?
- How are university-based and alternative training programs working with local school districts to ensure new leaders can meet the most pressing needs in these districts?
- How is your state working to ensure the quality of its leader preparation programs? Does it hold programs accountable for the success of their graduates or invest greater state funding in programs that are effective and more responsive to district and school needs? How does your state address low-quality programs?
- The nation still struggles to turn around low-performing schools, in part because there are not enough incentives or supports to attract and retain high-quality principals. How is your state or district developing leaders with the special skills required to transform struggling schools? What incentives, financial or otherwise, are in place to attract leaders to these posts and reward their success? What are the different roles that your state, districts, universities and others play in this process and how can collaboration be strengthened?
- How aware are you of what other states, school districts and preparation programs are doing to address and strengthen leadership training? What are your sources of this information? What are some ideas for improving how information about what works is shared between states, districts and preparation programs?

For Policymakers and District Leaders: Actions and Strategies to Consider

- Consider and promote new strategies for identifying future leaders that are based on ability, skills and potential to lead rather than on interest in moving up pay scales.
- Adopt leadership preparation program standards that include what research says are effective components, and put an accountability process in place to ensure that programs adhere to the standards.
- Strengthen university preparation programs by holding them more accountable for program quality through stronger accreditation systems and licensure procedures that increase the likelihood that graduates are not just certified, but ready to lead.
- Encourage school districts to develop partnerships with universities, alternative programs or other strategies to bring strong potential leaders into their systems.



3. Providing Ongoing Support

“It’s not just about training when we talk about the success of principals. It’s also ongoing support for them.” – Susan Castillo, State Superintendent of Public Instruction, Oregon Department of Education

New research and understanding have helped the field recognize that leadership training should not end when principals are hired. It should continue with high-quality mentoring for new principals and with professional development for all principals to promote career-long growth in line with the evolving needs of schools and districts. Unfortunately, too many principals struggle, fail or leave the profession because they lack enough support to succeed.

For new principals, high-quality mentoring can help them make the transition into new roles. Research suggests that effective mentoring programs for new principals have the following elements: (1) carefully selected and well-trained mentors; (2) experiences that last for at least a year, ideally two or more; (3) support by state and local funding that ensures mentors receive quality training and appropriate stipends; and (4) primary focus on fostering effective instructional leaders.

To help mentors move from an unfocused “buddy system” to a more systematic, learning-centered conversation, instruments such as the Wallace-developed Leadership Performance Planning Worksheet (LPPW) may be appropriate. The LPPW is being used in more than 960 schools in seven states to structure dialogue between mentors and new principals around core instructional leadership behaviors and to record progress. “While it’s always good to have a buddy, that is insufficient support for someone beginning, or even continuing in, a principalship,” says mentoring expert Susan Villani in *The Wallace Foundation Perspective, Getting Principal Mentoring Right: Lessons from the Field*.

Principals can also be supported through strategies that allow them to devote more time to instruction. One response is a program developed by the Jefferson County (KY) Public Schools that helps principals measure and reorient how they spend their time. It also creates a new position alongside the principal to take on some administrative duties. That effort has grown into the School Administration Manager (SAM) Project, a Wallace-supported effort that is now in nine states.

The importance of ongoing professional development for principals has been recognized and codified in state standards in recent years. According to the National Association of State Boards of Education, about half of the states set minimum professional development requirements for renewing a principal’s license. Fourteen states have tiered licensure systems in which candidates receive an initial certificate, typically with limited renewal options, and then move to full professional certification with additional coursework, evaluation and/or other designated professional experiences.



Conversation Questions

- How are first-year principals supported in your state or district? How does your state help districts provide adequate support and mentoring for new principals?
- What type of professional development and/or support do principals in your state receive beyond their first few years? How does support vary by district, state and need? What can be done to ensure that principals receive this support throughout their careers?
- How does your state or district evaluate the effectiveness of the professional development that is provided?
- How does your leader licensure system reinforce the need for ongoing professional development?
- Chris Koch, state superintendent of the Illinois State Board of Education, says principals should make “regular, periodic visits to the classroom, review lesson plans and get engaged and involved in instruction.” To what extent does professional development for school leaders in your state, district or university program focus on instruction and learning? Where are the gaps in professional learning for principals?

For Policymakers and District Leaders: Actions and Strategies to Consider

- Review how new principals are supported. Evaluate the role mentors could play and if current mentoring programs contain the elements that improve the mentoring experience, including high-quality training of mentors.
- Evaluate whether state and district funding of professional development is sufficient for supporting strategic and effective development at all stages of a leader’s career.
- Ensure licensure encourages continuous learning and a focus on improving principals’ ability to enhance the quality of teaching and learning.
- Identify and encourage opportunities for effective principals to develop the next generation of leaders through mentoring opportunities, leading learning communities and providing on-the-ground expertise to leadership programs.
- Review how principals are recognized and supported throughout their careers, taking into consideration incentives – such as master principal designations or increased pay – that encourage professional advancement and service in challenging schools.



4. Improving Leader Assessment

“A lot of states [and] a lot of policies don’t address the state of fair and equitable evaluation of a principal’s work.” – *Kyla Wahlstrom, Director, Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement, University of Minnesota*

Many states struggle with lack of alignment between how principals are trained, how their jobs are defined, what the job actually entails and how principals are assessed on the job. In many states and districts across the country, the evaluation of principals is simply a task to be checked off. It is not viewed as it should be – a strategy for giving feedback to principals that can be used to improve their effectiveness as instructional leaders.

Leader assessment systems are an important part of the web of policies, practices and incentives that must be built to support the nation’s principals. When used to enhance performance as well as to ensure accountability, assessments can be driving factors in helping leaders develop the behaviors and skills that improve learning for all students. While assessment systems alone are not a silver bullet for the challenges facing our education system, they are a key part of the support that school leaders need.

Assessing school leaders is not a new idea. Research concludes, however, that most assessments are not as focused on student learning as they should be, nor are they effective in gathering reliable facts about whether a leader’s behaviors promote the learning agendas of schools and districts. A recent Vanderbilt University study found that there is a “paucity of technically sound tools for assessing and monitoring leadership performance.”

Research and best practice models suggest that high-quality assessments: (1) measure what they are designed to measure; (2) are consistently applied and tested for fairness; (3) regard assessment as an ongoing process for professional growth, not just a “tool” or an isolated event; (4) use the best available evidence, often from multiple sources; (5) reinforce the organization’s core goals; (6) provide actionable feedback on what matters most; and (7) help build a culture of continuous improvement. These characteristics, however, are seldom reflected in state leadership policies or district-level evaluations.

An example of a new assessment that is among the first designed to reflect these characteristics is the Vanderbilt Assessment of Leadership in Education (VAL-ED). Unlike most other existing assessments, VAL-ED rests on a solid research base and is focused on behaviors associated with learning-centered leadership. It is also one of the first “360-degree” assessments in education and includes observations of the principal, his or her supervisor and the teachers in the school.



Conversation Questions

- Are leaders in your state or district assessed against leadership standards and effective practice criteria that prioritize improvement in teaching and learning? If not, what steps could be taken to align standards and leader evaluation with effective practice?
- What type of feedback do principals receive after being assessed? Are the results of the assessments used to guide or inform professional development?
- How are principal evaluations used to provide licensing institutions with feedback on the performance of their graduates to promote continuous improvement of preparation programs?

For Policymakers and District Leaders: Actions and Strategies to Consider

- Ensure that assessment of education leaders is based on standards, aligned with effective practice and focused on improving teaching and learning.
- Use an assessment system that collects data on student performance and other indicators to better connect leaders' practice to student learning and achievement.
- Ensure that the assessment system provides principals with meaningful feedback that informs their professional development.
- Include information on school leadership when reporting on state, district and school performance.

A background image showing a group of diverse students in a classroom setting, some looking towards the camera and others engaged in conversation.

5. Using Data Effectively

“Every decision we make in this building is around data.” – Kerry Purcell, Principal, Harvard Park Elementary School, Springfield, Illinois

As states and districts work to build a culture of accountability in education in response to federal priorities and requirements, principals are now expected to use data to guide decisions about instruction. While more data on student performance are available than ever, too often states and districts fail to deliver usable data to principals in a timely manner. Even when data are delivered on time, principals can drown in information and be unsure of how to use it to inform instruction or teacher professional development.

As a result, schools, teachers and students are not getting the full benefit of these data. In its report *Buried Treasure: Developing a Management Guide From Mountains of School Data*, the University of Washington’s Center on Reinventing Public Education put it this way: “There is probably treasure in there somewhere, but, buried as it is in mountains of ill-understood data, it is hard to discern the shape or potential value of these gems.”

At the same time, data-informed decisionmaking is only partly about data, according to *Data-Informed Leadership in Education*, a report by the University of Washington’s Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy. The report adds that data by themselves are not evidence of anything until educators bring concepts, criteria and interpretive frames of reference to make sense of the data. Absent these elements, flooding leadership practice with data is unlikely to bring about much improvement and even could get in the way.

Principals should be given training and support to collect their own data and help teachers do the same by modeling effective practice. For example, Harvard Park Elementary School Principal Kerry Purcell noted that attendance rates and test scores had improved dramatically in her six years at the school. Kerry, however, did not wait for data to come from her state or district to make decisions about school improvement. Instead, the school takes steps to create its own data, including a monthly test of the number of words students can read per minute.

The use of value-added analysis is gaining traction with states and districts. Through this statistical method, educators are better able to measure the impact that schools make on students’ rates of academic progress from year to year. Battelle for Kids, a nonprofit education service organization, finds that value-added analysis puts building administrators in a better position to measure the impact of educational practices, curricula, instructional methods and professional development. Most importantly, perhaps, it allows leaders to make data-informed decisions about where to focus resources to help students perform at higher levels.



Conversation Questions

- Does your state or district have a sufficient data system? If so, what kinds of data does your state or district make available to principals?
- Are data timely enough and adequate for leaders to use in making decisions to improve instruction? Do school, district and state leaders have the data they need to make the appropriate decisions that have the greatest impact on the quality of teaching and learning?
- What expectations does your state or district have for how principals use data? How are these expectations communicated, and how well are they understood by principals and reinforced by preparation programs? How can these expectations be made more explicit, shared and supported?
- What are the different kinds of data used in your state, district or school to improve instruction? Do you see much use of value-added analysis to measure student progress? How are data used to improve instruction and help school leaders have a positive impact on teaching?
- How does your state, district or preparation program give leaders the skills and support they need to develop and use school-level data? How are principals prepared to help teachers use all levels of data effectively? How are they prepared to use data to tell a story and engage their communities?

For Policymakers and District Leaders: Actions and Strategies to Consider

- Ensure that state and district leadership standards describe expectations for how principals should use data to drive decisions around instruction.
- Invest in and build robust infrastructures that provide user-friendly data in a timely fashion and take into consideration how school leaders will use the data to shape and improve instruction and learning.
- Work with local leadership preparation programs to ensure that curricula address how principals can use data to strengthen instruction and improve professional development.
- Provide district and school leaders with ongoing training and support in data use, including ways to support teachers in collecting and using data.
- Develop systems for using data to increase accountability of the entire public education system for students and educators, and use these data systems to identify what works and share the lessons learned.



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Contributions to this guide have been made by four national policy organizations, which, along with The Wallace Foundation, have been working together and with states and districts across the country to develop and promote effective education leadership policies and programs. Please feel free to contact any of these organizations for additional information or resources:

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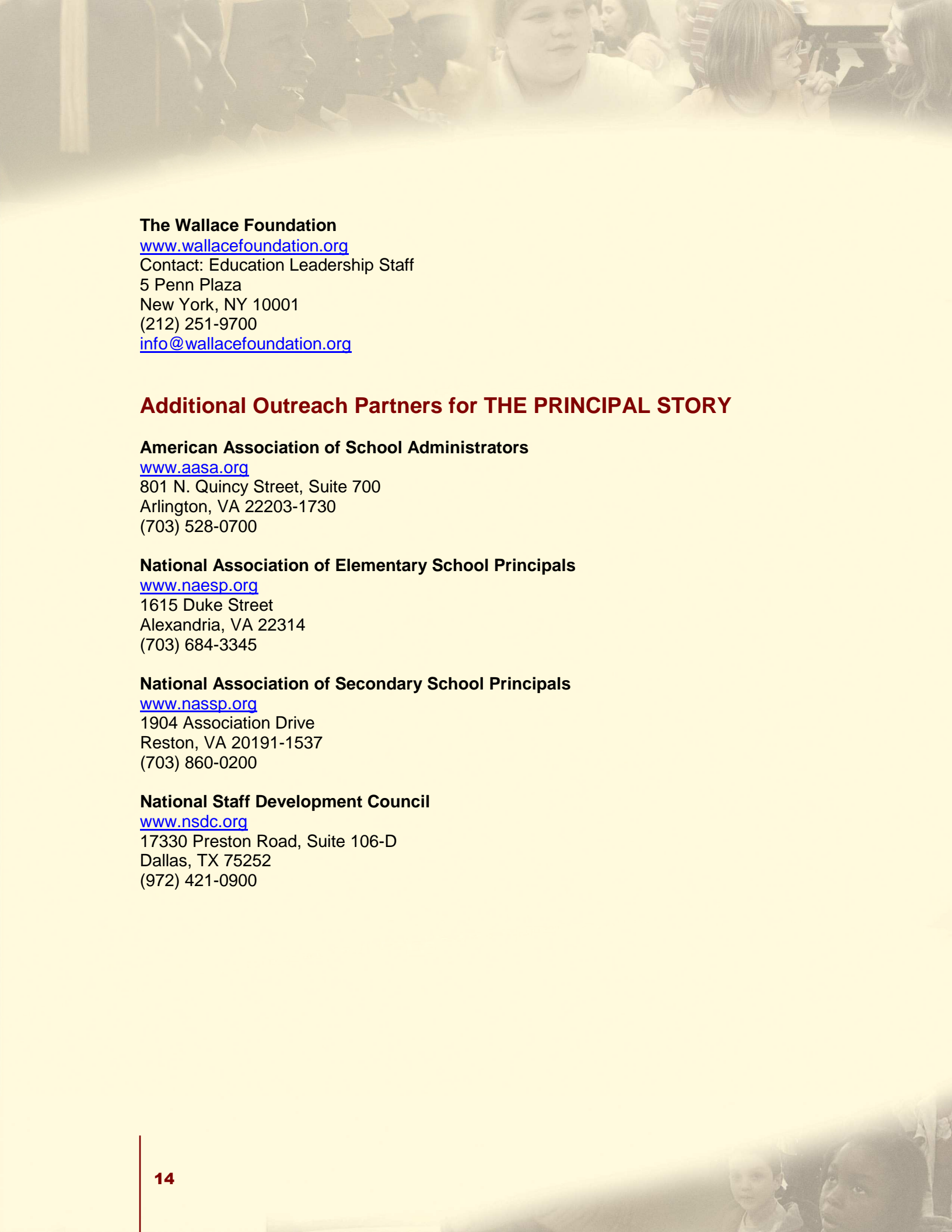
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Unless otherwise noted, all references can be accessed for free on The Wallace Foundation's Knowledge Center at www.wallacefoundation.org.

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