

Giving New Principals a Strong Start: What Works in Principal Induction

School leaders play a critical role in improving student learning.¹ They also have an increasingly complex job.² Principals today, particularly those new to the role, find themselves underprepared.³ In their first year on the job, new principals often describe feeling “lost,” “overwhelmed,” and “shell-shocked.”⁴ Much of that is due to lack of preparation for an extremely demanding position.

Researchers have found that most pre-service university and district training programs do not adequately develop principals for their roles as leaders of learning.⁵ And states and districts tend to overlook support for school leaders once they are in the seat.⁶ In fact, as of 2015-16, only 20 states required some form of professional support for new school principals.⁷

Without sufficient development programs, early-career principals are being set up for failure.

The first two years of a principal’s tenure are critical. Research tells us that this period determines whether principals develop confidence and competence as school leaders, or leave the position.⁸ In a study of new rural principals who had no access to an induction program, researchers found that after two years, 90 percent of them had moved to other positions or returned to teaching.⁹ In fact, half of new principals leave their school within their first three years.¹⁰ This does not bode well for students, as frequent principal turnover typically results in lower teacher retention and reduced student achievement gains, and is particularly harmful for high-poverty low-performing schools.¹¹ Turnover is also expensive. Each principal replacement costs districts an estimated \$75,000.¹²

Principals need high-quality, intentional support that meets their needs.¹³ Such support strengthens new principals’ performance and maximizes their retention. Our own review of the research literature and our experience in the field has identified **seven effective practices for the induction and onboarding of new principals.**

- 1 Deliver a high quality summer induction program prior to the first year of the principalship.** Summer training is essential for supporting principals as they prepare to open their doors to students and staff. We believe this should include a learning experience through which principals can apply role-playing, analysis and decision-making in an authentic way. Simulations are a powerful tool to help aspiring principals develop key skills and engage in hands-on work that mirrors real-life experience. Summer induction should also include a combination of “just-in-time” technical information (key policies, systems, timelines, etc.), introductions to the district-level people they can go to for help with various issues (HR, finance, etc.), and the development of a vision and entry plan for their new role.
- 2 Anchor program design and assessment in leadership performance standards.** Aligning program content and feedback to a set of research-based competencies allows leaders to demonstrate the skills, knowledge, and dispositions needed to be effective principals.^{14, 15}
- 3 Structure opportunities for collaboration and socialization.** Adults who are able to listen to and consider multiple perspectives are more likely to recognize and clarify their own beliefs and values, deepen discovery and inquiry, and develop critical perspectives.¹⁶ Collaborative learning structures, such as in cohorts or professional learning communities,¹⁷ allow school leaders to step outside of the isolating role of the principalship and instead develop skills in conflict resolution, teamwork, and cooperation.

4 Engage principals in authentic, experiential leadership experiences to enable principals to apply newly acquired knowledge and skills in a meaningful way.¹⁸ Internships and on-the-job coaching and mentoring provide novice principals with the opportunity to connect theory to practice under the guidance of a more experienced leader. Structuring learning in real, school-based situations allows principals to grapple with and gain knowledge from experiences that will be applicable in their principalship.

5 Deliver individual coaching or mentoring. Coaching can address a leader's specific challenges and provide opportunities to apply new knowledge and skills immediately.¹⁹ Research shows that principals receiving coaching or mentoring are more successful at their job than principals who receive any other type of professional development.²⁰ Principals who are coached are more likely to stay in their role than those who do not receive such support.²¹

6 Embed opportunities for problem-based learning. Job-embedded support gives principals the chance to examine real-world problems and solutions within their systems.²² Problem-based learning helps principals improve their problem-solving ability by teaching them to use prior knowledge to frame problems in a familiar way and help them to solidify a way of thinking.²³

7 Provide ongoing professional development and support. The need to reflect on and improve practice does not end after the early years as principal.²⁴ Principals need ongoing professional development to sustain and support them throughout their career.²⁵ Ongoing learning enables leaders to address adaptive challenges that are complex and often require changes in behavior and mindset to make change.²⁶

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