PIPELINE TO SUCCESS

Why Principal Support & Development is Key to School Turnaround
Every now and then, Hollywood treats us with a movie spotlighting the challenges and changing landscape for an urban school principal. From Morgan Freeman’s riveting role as Joe Clark in Lean on Me to Olympia Dukakis’ emotional portrayal of a supportive principal who challenged a teacher to be all he could be for his students in Mr. Holland’s Opus, occasionally a dynamic school principal is the character who steals movie scenes and gives us inspired insight into what it takes to will and lead progress within a school.

‘Occasionally’ is the operative word both for Hollywood and mainstream dialogue on school improvement in Oklahoma.

While teacher quality, recruitment and retention challenges in Oklahoma have been well documented in recent years, less has been written on principal quality and the role school leadership plays in addressing issues plaguing student achievement. There is little doubt of the direct correlation between student achievement and a highly-effective teacher in every Oklahoma classroom. Yet there also is little doubt that effective and consistent site-based leadership directly impacts whether teacher recruitment, retention and development, and student achievement efforts ultimately are successful.

**Pipeline to Success** is the result of Stand for Children Oklahoma’s analysis of national research and best practices to address what has become another substantial challenge impacting student achievement in Oklahoma’s urban areas: principal recruitment, development, support, and retention.

Drawing on national research and highlighting challenges, progress and opportunities on principal quality work in Oklahoma City Public Schools, **Pipeline to Success** seeks to initiate public dialogue regarding principal quality in one of our state’s largest and most challenged school districts. Our aim is not to be critical of efforts currently underway in Oklahoma City to tackle principal quality. Our goal is for this report to be a catalyst in educating civic and business leaders on why this issue is one in which their collaborations with schools are valuable. It should also serve as a tool to educate the public on the integral role of the school principal in addressing the challenges impacting our teachers and students that concern all of us. These challenges range from discipline and efficient school operations, to teacher morale and proper implementation of standards and rigorous curriculum.

Our hope is this report builds more support statewide, particularly in Oklahoma City, for research-based methods to better attract individuals to this profession and to develop their capacity, effectiveness, and long-term contributions to lead and sustain positive change.

Sincerely,

Amber England
Executive Director

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School Principals are essential to student achievement and the overall success of teachers and are responsible for a variety of tasks and activities throughout a campus, district and community. From chief operating officer of their schools to supervising facilities management and developing the master calendar, their role extends beyond their primary responsibility of instructional leadership: coaching, modeling, evaluating and mentoring teachers. As well, principals are also expected to be civic leaders who participate in and facilitate community and parent engagement, while also setting a vision, and developing a positive culture within their schools that embodies and reflects the values of their communities. And, most importantly, principals are responsible for hundreds, if not thousands, of students’ daily wellbeing and education, implementing strategies for narrowing achievement gaps and creating schools where all students are supported and learn.

The research on principals is clear. School leaders account for about 25 percent of a school’s total impact on student learning.¹ Highly-effective principals have the ability to increase student knowledge by between two and seven months of additional learning per year, and this increase may be even larger in urban settings.² Beyond this, even the most seasoned researchers have found no documented cases of a troubled school being turned around without a thoughtful leader.³

Teachers also understand the importance of quality leadership and agree it directly impacts their classroom effectiveness. In national surveys, teachers have indicated (91 percent agree) that leadership is key to improving student achievement. Moreover, in a 2012 Scholastic National Teacher Survey, 96 percent of teachers said having quality leaders is necessary to retaining good teachers. Teacher recruitment challenges also are exacerbated in the absence of effective school leadership because even strong teachers will leave a school if they do not feel their principal provides them a supportive environment to succeed.⁴

While recruiting, selecting, developing, supporting and retaining effective principals is challenging for school districts, the rewards are great. Without a high quality principal, students are far less likely to have the necessary years of consistent effective teaching to foster their continued learning. This impacts their overall academic success.

Beyond the negative impact principal and teacher turnover has on student outcomes, it also has a significant, detrimental impact on school districts’ budgets. The National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future reports that replacing a teacher who leaves an urban school district costs nearly $9,000 to the district and $70,000 to the school.⁵ And, based on national research, a conservative estimate for the cost of hiring, onboarding, and developing a principal is $75,000 per principal. This means that increasing annual principal retention rates of all schools would result in more than improved academic achievement; it would also reap more than $163 million in savings annually for schools across the United States.⁶

1. Marzano, Waters, and McNulty, School Leadership that Works: From Research to Results, 2005
Many urban districts across the country have placed effective campus leadership at the top of the priority list for district improvement – and for good reason. A 2014 report by the School Leaders Network found that a quarter of the nation’s principals leave their schools every year. Urban principals were found to trade their positions at difficult-to-lead, higher-poverty schools for leadership positions in schools serving a more affluent population. How does this immense turnover affect the quality of education in urban cities?

According to the Center for Public Education, it takes approximately five years for a principal to fully impact a school’s performance. This includes assembling an effective teaching staff that is aligned with the principal’s vision and implementing the appropriate policies and practices to turn a school around. Progress certainly can be made each year, but long-term principal retention is crucial to optimizing turnaround goals and keeping a school on track for providing all children attending that school with a quality education. However, principal tenure is between three and four years nationally and this number is no doubt influenced by the fact that 50 percent of new principals quit during their third year in the role.

These statistics have a direct impact on student achievement and are worse when the focus is on urban schools, low-performing schools, and schools serving disadvantaged students. For example, in Miami Dade County Public Schools, principal tenure in the lowest performing schools averages 2.5 years, while principal tenure at Miami’s higher performing schools is 5.1 years.

Oklahoma City Public Schools (OKCPS) has 55 elementary school principals, seven middle school principals and 12 high school principals. Additionally, the district has 31 assistant elementary school principals, 18 assistant middle school principals and 28 assistant high school principals.

According to an open records request fulfilled by OKCPS at the request of Stand for Children Oklahoma, principal turnover has been a problem at the district for years and continues to be a major challenge to school improvement efforts. Our research found:

1. From 1993 to 2014, OKCPS had more than 16 principal changes per year.
2. At its peak during the 2011-2012 school year, the district had 27 school leadership changes.
3. The district often has 15-20 principal changes throughout a year for various reasons including transfers, resignations, and terminations.

7. CHURN: The High Cost of Principal Turnover, School Leaders Network, 2014
9. CHURN: The High Cost of Principal Turnover, School Leaders Network, 2014
10. Center for Public Education, Loeb, Keliogrides and Hong 2010
4. Principal turnover costs the district an estimated $1.2 million per year (according to national statistics finding that average turnover costs per principal is $75,000 because of the cost of hiring, onboarding and providing professional development to a new principal).

5. In the last 20 years, OKCPS has had an average annual turnover rate of 22 percent, or roughly 1 out of every 5 schools every year being led by a new principal.

The issue can be more dramatic for individual schools with many experiencing long term, consistent principal turnover. For example, Webster Middle School located in south Oklahoma City has had 12 principals since 1995. It’s important to remember that research clearly indicates that a lack of consistency at both the school and district level negatively impacts teacher recruitment and effectiveness and thus student achievement. This is because often-changing school leadership results in:

Recent work in the district to better support principals and empower them to be instructional leaders is a positive sign the current administration and board of education understand and value the role of the principal in increasing outcomes for Oklahoma City students. In particular, the strategic decision to re-organize the district’s central office and the inclusion of instructional leadership directors into the staffing model is proven work that other urban districts have used as effective school turnaround levers.
• Student and teacher morale drop.
• Lack of consistency in program and curriculum implementation.
• Lack of consistency with school discipline problems, which can plague student achievement and result in higher dropout rates.
• Exacerbated difficulty in recruiting and retaining excellent teachers.

**NOT ALL PRINCIPAL TURNOVER SHOULD BE CONSIDERED “NEGATIVE”**

It is important to note that while principal turnover does have a negative impact on a district, not all turnover is negative. It’s to be expected when districts begin to focus on improving principal quality and development. Many times at the start of principal quality initiatives, districts begin to get a much clearer picture of building-level leadership and discover that a change of leadership might be necessary. In this case, principal turnover should be considered a positive step forward.

**OKLAHOMA CITY’S DISCIPLINE ISSUE AND THE RELATIONSHIP TO PRINCIPAL QUALITY**

School discipline issues in OKCPS have drawn widespread media attention and likely have a strong association to the lack of consistency in principal support, development, recruitment, and retention that has plagued OKCPS during the past decade. The district should be commended for the swift action it has taken to craft a new proposed discipline policy that incor-
porates best practices for reducing school discipline issues by allowing principals to empower teachers. However, as previously stated, principals are responsible for setting the vision for a school and leading a campus toward a positive school culture. An effective principal, supported by best in class student expectation policies (Safe and Civil Schools) and procedures at the central office level, has the ability to dramatically reduce the school discipline issues that detract from student learning. A laser focus on this issue specifically by site leadership at each OKCPS should see dramatic improvements in the number of students being suspended and dropping out of school.

GWINNETT COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS: A CASE STUDY IN EFFECTIVE SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

There are districts across the country that OKCPS can look to as models of success when it comes to ensuring a great principal leads, and chooses to remain long-term at every school. From Chicago Public Schools and Gwinnett County Public Schools in Georgia, to Long Beach Unified School District and Denver Public Schools, districts across the country have placed a strategic priority on principals, yielding impressive results.

For example, Gwinnett County Public Schools has seen 46 of the 49 newly trained principals stay in their schools since their training program began in 2007. In addition, they implemented greater professional development, increased principal autonomy and rooted their principals in accountability. To accomplish all of these things, they established and attained three main goals:

- Make School Leadership a Core Component of the District Strategy
- Create the District Conditions that Enable Effective School Leadership
- Build a Complete Pipeline to Prepare and Support Effective School Leaders

This work has resulted in notable student achievement gains in Gwinnett County schools and its students earning higher scores on Georgia state exams in math and science.

*The full case study on Gwinnett County can be found [here](#).

CALL TO ACTION

Stand for Children applauds OKCPS board members, Superintendent Rob Neu, and Associate Superintendent Aurora Lora for their work this past year in identifying areas for improvement and working to restructure the central office for optimum outcomes in student performance. This work has included a focus on better supporting principals. In particular, the reorganization has resulted in the adoption of a new support structure for principals throughout the district by the hiring of Instructional Leadership Directors (ILDs), which is a proven model for increasing principal quality and is being used by other urban districts across the nation.
Additionally, there is little doubt the Great Commitment and the strategic planning process were an important piece of a larger challenge to ensure that every child in Oklahoma City receives a quality education.

Now we call on the district to strengthen its ongoing efforts by implementing a comprehensive plan aimed at principal recruitment, development, support, and retention. This plan should include the following:

- Develop performance metrics to measure and evaluate progress on principal recruitment, development, support, and retention, including an annual progress report on each of the points below.
- Provide continued support for principals with professional development, coaching and meaningful feedback based on data provided through an improved principal evaluation process.
- Development of a principal pipeline training initiative that resemble those adopted by such districts as Denver Public Schools and Gwinnett County, and work with philanthropic and community partners to secure funding for the principal pipeline training initiative.
- Ensure clear and concise discipline alignment processes.
- Provide principals freedom from duplicative administrative tasks and empower principals to be instructional leaders.
- Financial commitment from OKCPS Board of Education to recruit, develop, support, and retain quality principals.
- Inclusion of progress on principal support and development strategies as a component of the annual evaluation of the school superintendent.

Finally, Stand for Children Oklahoma encourages OKCPS to use this report as a catalyst to highlight recent changes geared to better support principals as part of the adoption of the strategic plan. The plan should highlight the estimated impact the newly adopted ILD model will have on student achievement and what it will mean in regard to professional development of principals, preparing and supporting aspiring principals, and restructuring daily operations to allow principals to be the instructional leaders in their buildings. At the end of five years, the goal for OKCPS should be a decrease in principal turnover, retention of high-performing principals, and a majority of sitting principals initiating from the internal pipeline developed by the district.
CONCLUSION

The *Pipeline to Success* report reminds readers of the difficult job modern school principals face today—especially those leading the most challenged schools in our state and across the nation. Such leaders require unique skillsets, some that are highly comparable to those found in successful private sector leadership and some that are developed and applied to the unique responsibilities, rewards and challenges encountered in the profession of public education instructional leadership. Individuals may possess inherent talent, knowledge or skills that give them the aptitude for leadership. But more often than not, and in any profession, true leaders – those who can achieve and sustain positive change – are developed, not born. There has never been a more critical time for true school leaders to be developed and supported than there is now. The future of Oklahoma City’s children depends on it.

We admire the men and women who choose this noble calling and applaud the Oklahoma City Public Schools for undertaking the important work to put in place a structure within the district to better support and develop these professionals. *Pipeline to Success* gives Oklahoma City the research-based blueprint for strengthening its ongoing efforts. The recent reorganization of Oklahoma City’s central administration office and application of the ILD model is designed to create a more empowered support structure for principals, and it should be viewed as a courageous step forward. The second step must be implementation of a comprehensive principal development pipeline in order to deepen the leadership bench within the district. This will ensure the men and women who choose to lead in Oklahoma City Public Schools are effective, confident and committed to their school’s long-term student success as they enhance their knowledge, skills, and application of their craft.

No school district, including an urban district like Oklahoma City can afford for its best and brightest leaders to choose to lead elsewhere or to succumb to burnout because they have not been empowered with the knowledge and skills to succeed or been given systematic support for the myriad of difficult, mission-critical responsibilities given to them. Just as having an effective teacher leading every classroom in Oklahoma City is key to student achievement, so is having an effective, confident and inspiring leader at the helm of every school. To be certain, there is hard work to be done and work that will require board of education, community, philanthropic, and business support. Yet effective teachers in every classroom and effective leaders at the helm of every school are, indeed, Oklahoma City Public Schools’ *Pipeline to Success*. 