



State Level Efforts to Support School Leaders

Lauren Peisach and Sam Nicholson

Ensuring that every school has a strong leader is critical for student achievement. Estimating the impact of highly effective principals on student learning is [challenging](#) to pinpoint, but researchers agree that strong principals make a substantive and positive difference in student learning. Furthermore, the impact of a school leader is multiplied across the full school building — usually reaching hundreds of students each year.

Separate from the impacts on student learning, research demonstrates that school leaders are important decision makers who set the school culture in which educators work and teach. Having school leaders who can support their staff is an important [consideration](#) for teacher recruitment and retention. In the RAND Corporation's 2025 [State of the American Teacher](#) Survey, teachers were asked to rank their top sources of stress. Several of the sources of stress cited by teachers can be attributed directly to school leadership like:

- Seventeen percent of teachers surveyed said they're "lacking support from [a] school administrator."
- Twelve percent of teachers cited "limited voice in decision making at my school."
- Nineteen percent of teachers said they're "feeling like the goals and expectations of the school are unattainable."

Despite the need for effective leaders, some districts continue to face shortages in this crucial position. Though the rate of principals [leaving schools](#) declined to 8% for the 2023-24 school year from the high of 16%, the current rate remains higher than pre-COVID 19 pandemic attrition. This continued high attrition



Recruiting new, talented leaders to the field is an important strategy to ensure every school has access to highly effective principals who can drive student achievement for years to come.

Professional development for school leaders is an important tool policymakers can use to support and retain principals.

School leadership is an important policy area for driving student achievement, but it does not garner attention in the same way other issues do.

rate underlines the need for renewed attention from policymakers. [Research](#) from the Learning Policy Institute identified key factors that impact principal attrition, including inadequate preparation and professional development, poor working conditions, insufficient salaries, lack of decision-making authority and perceptions of accountability policies.

Although school leadership is an important need for quality schools, policies pertinent to school leadership have garnered less attention from state policymakers in recent years than other critical shortage areas. As a comparison, in 2025, states passed at least eight bills addressing school leadership compared to 152 bills related to teaching issues. While we have witnessed less attention to school leaders at the state level compared to other positions, there are examples of states who are working to improve in this area.

Below, we identify two main focus areas for states working on supporting their principal pipelines and effectiveness of school leaders — recruitment and professional development — and offer strategies to improve school leader recruitment and retention.

Recruitment Into the Profession

States have taken a variety of approaches to recruit highly qualified and effective school leaders, which often focus on schools experiencing shortages. Studies [show](#) that in the recent past, school principals have fewer years of experience than they used to. The average number of years of experience dropped from 10 years in 1988 to around seven years in 2016. This lack of experience is felt most acutely in highest-poverty schools where principals on average had fewer than six years of experience.

Some policies use financial incentives, such as salary supplements and bonuses, to attract experienced candidates and retain leaders. Others develop targeted recruitment programs that identify and prepare highly qualified educators to step into leadership roles by providing training directly, paying for the program costs or providing stipends to take on the new training and roles. These efforts help expand the pool of administrator candidates, and by supporting them in their early years of the role, it also works to retain them. Among those recruited are often assistant principals, instructional coaches and teachers in leadership roles. These efforts could help build a system where every school has access to effective, well-supported principals.

State Examples



Alabama: Created by [S.B. 300](#) (2023) and [S.B. 303](#) (2025), the Alabama Principal Leadership Development [Alabama Principal Leadership Development System](#) is a new initiative aimed at providing additional resources to schools that have difficulty recruiting and retaining school administrators, among other provisions. Principals who complete the program can earn salary supplements of up to \$10,000. If they are employed in a high-poverty or low-performing school, they can earn up to a \$5,000 additional supplement. There are also supplements available for assistant principals.



Arkansas: Principals who earn a master school principal designation from the Arkansas Leadership Academy's [Master Principal Program](#) and are employed as a school principal in an schools that are not meeting established levels of academic achievement are [eligible](#) for a bonus of \$25,000 a year for up to five years. Principals who earn a master school principal designation from the Arkansas Leadership Academy and are employed as a building-level principal in any other Arkansas public school district are eligible for a bonus of \$9,000 a year.



California: [S.B. 141](#) (2023) established the Diverse Education Leaders Pipeline Initiative program. It allocated \$10 million to train and retain diverse and culturally responsive school leaders. The [program](#) awards grants of up to \$30,000 per candidate to local education agencies that are supporting participants who are pursuing administrator credentials. The funds can be used for coaching, mentoring, and training administrator and administrator candidates as well as paying for administrator preparation program and credential costs.



Hawai'i: provides a [residency](#) for aspiring vice principal candidates. The Hawai'i Certification Institute for School Leaders Program allows participants who complete the program to earn an Initial School Administrator Certificate, which allows them to serve in a vice principal role. During the program, candidates take coursework, receive coaching to participate in professional development and complete an internship that allows them to gain experience serving as an administrator.



Illinois: The [Illinois School Leader Pipeline](#) Program supports the recruitment and development of aspiring principals across the state. Participants receive up to \$7,400 in tuition support, \$500 for professional development and 20 hours of mentoring from experienced school leaders.



Massachusetts: The [Aspiring Principal Fellowship](#) is a one-year program designed to grow a diverse pool of future principals. Fellows work under experienced mentor principals while completing leadership coursework and field-based learning. They complete professional development on instructional practices and other topics geared toward preparing fellows to be effective and culturally responsive school principals. Though not a licensure pathway, the program is aligned with the Massachusetts Professional Standards and Indicators for Administrative Leadership.



North Carolina: The [North Carolina Principal Fellows](#) Program is an initiative that partners with school districts to recruit and prepare aspiring principals — often emphasizing placement in under-resourced schools. Programs are funded through grants given to educator preparation programs who partner with school districts. Many graduates return to lead in their home regions, which helps build a [grow-your-own pipeline](#) of leadership across the state. own pipeline of leadership across the state.

North Carolina's Innovation in Leadership

North Carolina is pursuing a different path to school leadership and [reimagining](#) how principals and school structure function in a school building. In 2024, the state passed [S.B. 382](#), which reauthorized the Advanced Teaching Roles Program. This program innovates on the traditional school leadership structure by allowing teachers to take on leadership positions while continuing in their teaching roles in a reduced capacity. While this role is not explicitly an administrator, the teacher gains additional responsibility for supporting other classrooms and teachers. For these extra duties, they earn a salary supplement. These highly effective teachers assume accountability for additional students through new instructional models or by being a lead teacher accountable for the students in the classrooms of the teachers they support. The potential [benefit](#) of these structures is that they can take some of the administrative burden off of principals while supporting novice teachers. This also provides opportunities for advancement and leadership to experienced and effective teachers.

Principal Apprenticeships Are a Growing Pathway

Policymakers have worked to address [specific and persistent](#) teacher shortages through a variety of avenues to not only recruit but retain high-quality teachers. One model that has expanded in recent years to fill this need is [educator apprenticeships](#). In an educator apprenticeship model, the apprentice trains within the school while earning a salary, taking necessary coursework and gaining clinical experience toward licensure. This model has spread across the states quickly — going from three states with programs in 2022 to [45 states](#) in 2025.

Some states and districts are seeking to replicate the teacher apprenticeship model for school leaders. Similar to a teacher apprenticeship program, aspiring principals can gain school leadership experience working in their schools while working toward their licensure. Interest in this approach is growing as [Principal National Guideline Standards](#) are currently under review to establish a national competency-based apprenticeship framework for K-12 principals. So far, we have identified three states who have implemented or have begun implementing principal apprenticeship programs, including:

- **North Dakota.** The state established the first federally approved [registered principal apprenticeship](#) program in 2023. The program was awarded \$150,000 in Title II funds and covers all costs for participants while the districts pay for participants' salaries. The apprenticeship is open to current assistant principals, instructional coaches and special education teachers. Apprentices complete their clinical hours and take coursework to gain principal licensure.
- **Rhode Island.** The new Rhode Island Registered Apprenticeship Program for Principals launched in 2025. The state [appropriated \\$100,000](#) to help provide free tuition for five candidates who complete the apprenticeship and agree to a placement in their host district for three consecutive years. The apprentices will also participate in coaching, mentoring and professional development.
- **Virginia.** The state received \$510,000 in grants from the U.S. Department of Labor to provide funding for 37 participants in a [Principal Registered Apprenticeship Program](#). Apprentices will work with educator preparation programs to earn their master's degrees or licensure to become endorsed for an Administration and Supervision certificate by July 2027.

Support and Professional Development

Professional development opportunities are crucial across the school leader pipeline. It helps to grow novice leaders' skills and ensures they stay to become expert leaders. One crucial element of professional development for an early leader is an induction and mentoring program. [Induction programs](#) give new leaders access to mentoring, targeted coursework and opportunities to apply learning to the problems they face in their schools.

High-quality professional development is also essential for improving school leader practices, decision-making and sustaining [positive school cultures](#). Ongoing learning opportunities help leaders adapt to evolving student needs, and state action to provide such learning reflects that school leadership education is an ongoing, career-long process that requires broad support. Many states operate [academies](#) and statewide institutes that bring principals together in cohort-based learning environments. These programs pair novice leaders with experienced coaches and communities of practice.

State Examples



Colorado: [The Principal Leadership Institute](#) is a two-year, cohort-based program that supports school principals through coaching and professional learning. The institute offers First-Year Principal Supports, which help participants foster positive school relationships and cultures by providing them with targeted coaching, mentorship and networking opportunities.



Missouri: The [Leadership Development System](#) works to provide professional development across leadership competencies that align with the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders. The program has seen success with retaining principals. They found that for novice principals who participated in their [leadership competency continuum program](#), 98.5% moved into their second or third years. This compares to the national average where only 77% of first year principals return for their second year.



New Jersey: [S. 3933](#) (2025) establishes the School Supervisory Mentorship Pilot Program and appropriates \$500,000 for the pilot. This three-year pilot aims to strengthen the school leadership pipeline in school districts, charter schools and renaissance schools throughout the state by supporting and developing novice supervisors through a one-year mentoring cycle.



Tennessee: The [Tennessee Academy](#) for School Leaders includes induction for new principals and an academy for instructional supervisors. The offerings combine online modules, virtual sessions and in-person meetings to work on vision setting, effective instructional leadership, high-quality literacy instruction and the Tennessee Instructional Practice Guide. Completing the academy content gives leaders 14 credit hours and helps with advancement in administrative licensure.



Virginia: [H.B. 6001](#) (2024) appropriated \$826,000 over two years to continue a professional development program intended to increase the capacity of principals as school leaders in under-performing schools.

Final Thoughts

Because of the unique and impactful roles leadership positions play, supporting the school leader pipeline through recruitment and retention efforts is an effective tool in improving student achievement. Effective principals have been shown to set a successful school culture and drive student success. Through recruitment efforts, talented future leaders are identified and supported into leadership pathways. Robust professional development efforts ensure that principals are learning and growing in their leadership skills. Though state policymakers have traditionally paid less attention to school leaders when compared to teaching staff, turning attention to this important position can help support the overall K-12 learning ecosystem.



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