

RAND: 'Principal pipelines' to develop leaders may be affordable way to improve schools

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'Principal Pipelines' to Develop School Leaders May Be Affordable Way to Improve Schools, RAND Corporation Finds

Improving [school](#) leadership by better selecting, training and evaluating principals can be an affordable option for school districts that aim to reduce turnover and improve schools, according to a new report by the nonprofit, nonpartisan RAND Corporation.

The first-of-its kind study examined how six large urban school districts are investing in their leaders through a concept called "principal pipelines." The idea is to help school districts develop a better preparation, hiring, evaluation and support system for principals to ensure they are effective. The Wallace Foundation funded the initiative.

While states and school districts are grappling with a shortage of highly effective principals for all schools, there has been little information about what level of resources would be required to do so.

RAND's report fills this gap. Researchers found that developing a pipeline to improve school leadership has been affordable for the six districts, which spent 0.4 percent of their annual budgets to better the quality of school leaders.

"Districts can likely prioritize developing better principals with the

resources they have now," said Susan Gates, one of the lead researchers on the report. "Our research found the main expense of this effort was the salaries of district staff members who helped screen, support and evaluate principals—activities that most districts are already doing, just not in a strategic way."

The study found that the districts spent about \$5.6 million annually (about \$31,000 per principal) on the leadership initiative during the four years examined. Nearly half (44 percent) of that consisted of district staff salaries for the staff's time on the effort. To put these estimates in context, the RAND study found the per-pupil [costs](#) work out to \$42, compared with \$608 that U.S. school districts spend on school administration, \$477 on transportation and \$447 on food services.

Other expenses of the new program included preparing new principals, then coaching and evaluating them and providing professional development. Most of this funding was not new grant funds provided by Wallace but drawn from existing school district funds that were reallocated from other uses.

"Our research found that principal pipelines are not a big-ticket item for these school districts," said Julia Kaufman, the other lead researcher. "School districts can look at our research and consider the likely costs for various activities intended to improve leadership."

Researchers found that districts spent relatively little to develop and revise job standards for principals, and then hire them—\$292 per principal and \$2,894 per principal, respectively.

The Wallace Foundation launched the Principal Pipeline Initiative in 2011 to determine if large urban [school districts](#) could build pipelines and whether stronger pipelines would improve schools and raise student achievement districtwide. It initially awarded grant funding of \$7.5

million to \$12.5 million to each district to cover part of the costs of setting up the pipelines. Districts were given additional funding of \$430,000 to \$1 million each to strengthen the skills of principals and supervisors.

Those districts were Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools in North Carolina, Denver Public Schools in Colorado, Gwinnett County Public Schools in Georgia, Hillsborough County Public Schools in Florida, the New York City Department of Education and Prince George's County Public Schools in Maryland.

Other authors of the report, "[What it Takes to Operate and Maintain Principal Pipelines: Costs and Other Resources](#)," are Melody Harvey, Yan Wang and Mark Barrett.

This report breaks down the various costs of better selecting, training and evaluating principals and provides average estimates based on costs from all six districts. It does not address the impact on student learning and other outcomes. RAND expects to publish a second research report in December 2018 examining those issues.

"This study is significant because it provides [district](#) leaders with clear and useful information that they haven't had before on the costs of building a principal [pipeline](#)," said Elizabeth Ty Wilde, senior research and evaluation officer at Wallace. "Its findings show that districts can make progress on key aspects of building principal pipelines aimed at developing effective leaders, and can cover a large percentage of those costs with existing funds."

"The RAND study and other recent studies contain important lessons for all districts that want effective principals leading their schools," added Jody Spiro, director of education leadership at Wallace. "Previous studies show that building principal pipelines have the potential to

reduce unwanted turnover for both teachers and [principals](#). The RAND study now shows that pipelines are affordable as well."

Provided by RAND Corporation

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