NORMAL ISN’T WORKING

Principals are truly the catalyst for school change, as they touch every part of a school to create the conditions for improvement. Recent research proves the magnitude of principal impact: a principal in the top 75th percentile of effectiveness has the potential to elevate student achievement in reading and math by almost three months.¹ But because they have so many responsibilities — operations, instruction, culture, change manager — the job is grueling. And they often face obstacles that make their jobs harder, rather than helping them to be more effective.

It is no surprise, then, that principal turnover rates have been a growing cause for concern within education. The national average tenure of principals is only about four years in a school. In high-poverty schools, the turnover rate is about 20% yearly. Turnover is a critical issue not only because of the cost and time to districts to replace principals, but also the impact on student learning. On average, principal turnover has a negative effect on school performance. The negative impact is greatest when principals transfer to a different school or are promoted to a central administrator position, as these principals tend to be the more effective ones.²

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated inequities and challenges that were already present in our nation’s school system. Neighborhoods with higher percentages of people of color saw higher rates of COVID-19 deaths, and they had fewer resources to manage the long periods of at-home learning. Additionally, the pandemic added an overwhelming number of stressors and pressures on top of what was already an unsustainable job. Preliminary data from this past year shows that principals retired or resigned at double the pre-pandemic annual rate.³ This data is aligned with other job data indicating that people are leaving their jobs and changing careers at higher rates. But the pandemic also shined a

¹ How Principals Affect Students and Schools: A Systematic Synthesis of Two Decades of Research | The Wallace Foundation
² The Impacts of Principal Turnover - Brendan Bartanen, Jason A. Grissom, Laura K. Rogers, 2019
³ Summer 2021 COVID-19 Survey Results | American School District Panel
light on how interconnected we are; how the work of the education, health, and service industries matter greatly. And it pushed people to reexamine and reevaluate what we value: caring for each other and a balance between our work and home life.

This school year, principals are being asked to return their schools to “normal,” even though normal wasn’t working for students and teachers in our highest needs schools, and it wasn’t working for principals themselves. Burned out and restless from the pandemic, principals are reevaluating their role and questioning their longevity. As we recover from the pandemic and move forward, we have a chance to reimagine how we support leaders, making their jobs more human-centered and sustainable. And we have an opportunity to honestly put students first in our education system, giving them a diverse cadre of great leaders that reflects the demographics of our schools and is equipped with the tools and resources that set them up for success. We are calling on everyone, from families and community leaders to politicians and business leaders, to take action to interrupt the challenges happening in education and their resulting negative effect on leadership sustainability.

“The job of a principal was very demanding before COVID, and those demands have only increased because of the pandemic. To support school leaders effectively, districts and networks need to restructure from the current model to be reflective of current conditions. We can’t continue to pile more and more responsibilities on leaders and still expect them to execute at a high level in all areas of the job.”

— Erin Slack, former principal (UC-Donoghue, Chicago)
WHY PRINCIPALS LEAVE

Principals have a near-endless number of responsibilities. They oversee all school operations and finances, including managing budgeting, hiring and staffing issues, compliance paperwork, and building maintenance. They approve curriculum and coach and evaluate teachers. They foster relationships with students, parents, staff, and community members. They identify school successes and challenges and monitor improvement to ensure that goals are met. All while handling the big and small emergencies that arise each and every day.

Unsurprisingly, principals often leave the job after a few years, with the most common reason for leaving being “heavy workload.” Additional reasons include unresponsive, unsupportive districts, districts with no strategies to retain successful principals, inadequate support personnel to meet student needs, and support from central office that does not meet principal needs. Compensation is also a significant factor in principal turnover, as principals function as school “CEOs” with all of the demands and responsibilities that come with that role yet are underpaid compared to CEOs in other sectors.

Data from Tennessee shows that principals in high-poverty schools are less satisfied, on average, than principals in more affluent schools (57% versus 72%). This is likely due to the additional challenges that these principals must overcome. National survey data found that more than half of principals from high-poverty schools report that they have a lack of personnel to support students’ well-being, and almost half report unfair compensation, having to purchase supplies for their students, and lacking decision-making authority over their schools’ curriculum as challenges they are more likely to face than their peers at lower poverty schools. Furthermore, principals from city schools were most likely to report that the cost of professional development was an obstacle to their longevity in the role. Leaders of color often face distinct, added challenges to their sustainability in the role, as they are pressured to

4 Supporting a Strong, Stable Principal Workforce: What Matters and What Can Be Done
5 Survey Snapshot Principal Satisfaction
6 A Black School Leader Confronts Privilege and Power - ASCD
maintain the status quo over implementing change that would create more equitable school spaces.6

Despite the magnitude of the job and the disparities in additional obstacles, principals across the country work tirelessly for the students and families they serve. Now it’s our turn to come together for them. As a nation, we must invest significant dollars in ensuring that every school has an effective and supported leader. We must prioritize fairness in resource allocation so that principals in our highest needs schools aren’t faced with additional burdens and barriers to success. And just as we give teachers coaching so they can continue to grow, we must also give that to principals. They too need continuous, supportive coaching and a group of peers with whom to problem solve. The reasons impacting principal turnover are solvable, but only if we meet them head-on with an immediate and strategic response.

“"I love the hugs, high fives, and excited faces when kids, families, and teachers are thriving. But it’s hard to do this work with so many factors thrown at you every day that you know should and could be different and better (poverty, violence, racism, mental health issues, and mandates and compliance).”
— Principal Kim Kays (Erie Elementary, Chicago)

“"This is my 22nd year in education, and I’ve served in leadership for the past 13 or so years. I’m questioning my longevity because I feel like districts spend money in ways that do not directly impact or benefit students. I need highly effective teachers with experience and the right mindset, but instead the schools with the most needs such as mine have the teachers with the least experience.”
— Dr. Rasheedah Cooperwood Jemison (principal, Riverview K-8, Memphis)
INTERRUPT, REIMAGINE, RECONNECT: Prioritizing Principal Support and Retention

The job of a principal is already a challenging one with an immense array of responsibilities, but it is made even more challenging when federal, state, and local governments do not allocate resources equitably, and when education systems do not adequately prepare and support principals. Addressing the following underlying causes of principal turnover will contribute toward keeping promising leaders in the job longer, consequently positively impacting students.

What would make your job as a principal more sustainable?

Percentage of leaders selecting each area

- Additional support staff: 58%
- Distributed leadership and responsibilities: 53%
- Additional resources/school budget: 47%
- A more supportive district/network: 42%
- A constant professional learning community: 37%
- Greater decision-making authority: 26%
- More helpful support from my principal manager/coach: 26%
- Other: 26%
REIMAGINE: Intentionality in Distribution of School Roles and Succession Planning

First and foremost, we must reimagine the roles and responsibilities of leaders in various positions within a school, with the goal of making the job of principals more manageable and sustainable, and in turn, positively affecting school climate and student learning. Principals need a strong and supportive team around them that can share the load and keep the school on track, even if the principal is out of the building or leaves for another position. We must think differently about the specific roles, responsibilities, training, and support that leadership team members, assistant principals, and deans receive; identifying where there is overlap and where there should be differentiation.

Principals are both the CEO and the instructional leader of a school; they need a team around them that can manage operations, facilities, finance, and data/technology. They also need a team under them that can strengthen school culture and academics and support the teaching staff. In most schools, however, principals have no supporting cast at the Executive Leadership Team (ELT) level and must leverage their assistant principals (APs) or deans to help them get all the other jobs done. This blurs the lines of the true roles and responsibilities of APs and deans, who are trained as instructional or culture specialists and are then being delegated jobs for which they are not trained. In current school structures, APs are frequently given the task of handling “operations” tasks, such as scheduling fire drills, handling the overflowing toilet, or ensuring lunch is served hot and on time. When principals, APs, and deans are overwhelmed and pulled in all directions, their time and attention is drawn away from working with teachers, which results in lower teacher satisfaction, improvement, and retention.

Assistant principals and deans are key players in supporting a principal’s vision for school change, helping them to create the culture and instill practices and systems that translate into ongoing gains in student achievement and an equitable school environment. Their role is crucial to giving teachers the help they need to improve their instruction and create classrooms that are conducive to learning. If we want APs and deans to be equipped to step into the principal role one day, they need experience in the highest leverage areas of the principalship, such as instruction, data analysis, strategic planning, people management, and communication with families and boards. We recommend that one or two ELT-level positions be created within each school that complement the principal position (i.e., an Operations Manager or Facilities Manager), which would permit the principal and APs to focus on instruction and school culture. Districts should leverage a staffing analysis to create and allocate staffing positions, prioritizing schools that severely lack principal support.
INTERRUPT: Needs-based Resource Allocation

Research has long shown that resources are not allocated equitably across schools, both in terms of funding and staffing. In many states and districts, schools with the most needs do not get the budget and personnel necessary to provide for their students’ well-being and academic achievement.

Adequate funding is a necessary component of an education system’s success. When we spend money for students to be in safe, functional classrooms with smaller class sizes, support services, and exposure to a broad range of subjects and extracurriculars, they perform better. In many states, high-poverty districts get less funding than more affluent districts, leaving them far below the “adequacy” level for funding. In Illinois, for example, the highest-poverty districts are about 20% below the adequate funding level. High-poverty districts also face an inequitable distribution of teachers, with higher percentages of less qualified (uncredentialed) teachers and higher rates of unfilled positions. The pandemic has only exacerbated the teacher shortages that were present across the country. Our nation’s education sector is seeing large percentages of principals and teachers leave the field altogether, creating shortages within schools and districts.

High needs schools also grapple with a lack of support staff to help students process trauma and provide critical support for their academic and social-emotional well-being. “Research links student-to-school-counselor ratios that meet the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) recommendation in high-poverty schools to better academic outcomes for students, such as improved attendance, fewer disciplinary incidents, and higher graduation rates.” The ASCA recommends a ratio of 250 students per counselor, yet the current average rate across schools is 464 to 1. About 8 million children do not have access to a counselor at all. Our highest needs schools need access to more support staff for children, not less.

We ask a lot of principals but put them at a disadvantage when we don’t give them the necessary resources to successfully run their schools, which then negatively impacts students. States and districts should fully fund and equitably resource their schools according to a data-driven needs-based assessment.
REIMAGINE: Creating a Pipeline of Leaders that Reflect Our Country’s Demographics

The teaching and leadership representation in our nation’s schools should be reflective of the students that are in them. Over the past two decades, the changing demographics of educators has not kept pace with the changing demographics of students. Currently, slightly less than half of public school students identify as White, yet more than three-fourths of public school teachers and principals identify as White. We must do more to increase interest and opportunities for young people of color to enter the teaching profession and step into leadership positions.

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**COE - Racial/Ethnic Enrollment in Public Schools**

878% 11% 9% 2%

79% 7% 9% 5%

47% 15% 27% 11%

**White** | **Black** | **Hispanic** | **All Other Races/Ethnicities**
At the teacher level, not enough young people of color are entering the profession, and once they are there, they leave at higher rates than their peers. There is still work to do to create a school culture where educators of color feel welcomed, included, and valued. Furthermore, teachers of color often aren’t identified for advancement opportunities within their school, or they may face financial barriers to completing administrative certification courses and exams. States and districts should prioritize initiatives targeted toward getting more leaders of color into principal roles and creating conditions that lead to their retention. Principals of color bring unique strengths to the position through their perspective on academic programs and curriculum, their understanding of community members who share their racial/ethnic background, and their place as a person of color that students can look up to in a position of authority. They also are more likely to retain teachers of color in their schools and tap teachers of color to consider leadership positions, thereby strengthening the diversity of the principal pipeline. But because leaders of color operate within White supremacy political and socio-economic systems, they sometimes run into obstacles or push back from district or network leaders, board members, or even community members when it comes to implementing changes that could disrupt the status quo. Even with their expertise and experience, there is a level of trust they are not afforded when it comes to making choices that they know are right for their students. As we continue to strengthen advancement opportunities for educators of color, we must also commit to giving them the necessary decision-making power that should come with having a leadership role.

9 If You Listen, We Will Stay - The Education Trust
10 Research from the Chicago Pipeline Partners Council
11 School leadership: An untapped opportunity to draw young people of color into teaching
12 Want more diverse teachers in more places? Start with diverse principals
13 Fundamentals, Core Concepts, System of White Supremacy and White Privilege
14 A Black School Leader Confronts Privilege and Power - ASCD
Principals come into the role with varying levels of perceived preparedness and differing strengths and areas of growth based on their leadership trajectory. Some feel most confident in setting up systems and analyzing data, others feel most confident in their instructional coaching skills, and others their ability to foster productive relationships. Principal preparation programs do not give principals all of the expertise and key competency development they need for the job; they need ongoing coaching and peer support within their own school context. Research suggests that professional learning improves principals’ efficacy and longevity in the job. Even though 40% of principals say their training left them unprepared to work with our highest need students, there are few national leadership development programs that work directly with leaders serving the highest needs communities. Almost all principals have indicated in national surveys that they desire additional professional development. We need to expand the number of high-quality programs in leadership development — for principals and leadership team members — so they can grow their skillsets and competencies and maximize their impact on their school and their students.

“I believe it is an honor and privilege to be in a position to influence the lives of people positively. I love to see others win! That is what I like most about being a principal. What I like the least is feeling that every step in the right direction is hard won.”
— Principal Melinda Jean-Baptiste
(Acero Idar, Chicago)
At Accelerate Institute, we provide targeted programming and coaching to principals and rising school leaders in a variety of ways. To reverse any dysfunction present among adult staff in a leader’s school, we teach strategies to build trust, candor, transparency, and productive communication. To drive improvement, leaders learn how to set big organizational goals paired with measurable checks on progress with an eye toward equity. And we push for rigorous instruction to be provided to all students, furthering their opportunities to achieve rather than curtailing them. Learning is anchored by our Framework, which outlines what high-quality schools and leaders embody and is used to guide the improvement of the school and the leader. Our model of leadership development gives leaders practical, day-to-day strategies to improve their individual leadership practice by looking at their school system as a whole and through an equity lens. It is more than just teaching skills; it’s about reflecting on policies, systems, and adult mindsets and how they impact student social and emotional well-being and their academic outcomes. The learning from our programming is grounded in a cohort experience, which gives leaders the opportunity to problem-solve with peers from across the country.

Leaders work on their individual development with specific action steps in the Transformational Leadership Building Blocks (TLBBs), the nine core competencies needed to execute lasting change within their schools. Leaders can work on these competencies within their individual school and community contexts and lift up some when specific scenarios arise. For example, during the 2020-21 school year, many leaders in our program had to lean into the “resilience” TLBB more than in other years because balancing the effects of the pandemic on their schools and themselves took an enormous toll.

**Transformational Leadership Building Blocks**

- GET IT
- STRATEGIC THINKING & PLANNING
- INSTRUCTION
- RELATIONSHIP BUILDING
- RESILIENCE
- COMMUNICATION
- PROFESSIONALISM
- COACHABILITY
- CONFIDENCE
To get a better understanding of the areas where principals felt they needed on-the-job growth, we went directly to principals and former principals to hear their insights on leadership development:

### BUILDING COMPETENCIES ON THE JOB

#### Focusing on the right things

Principals have so much they are juggling that if they make everything a priority, they will get caught up in day-to-day actions and lose sight of what’s most important. Principal Lindsey Girard (CICS – Loomis Longwood K-5, Chicago), recalls that in her first few years as principal, she spent all of her time “putting out fires” — spinning her wheels to solve every problem that arose, big or small. She had to grow her Strategic Thinking & Planning skills, finding a process for focusing on the highest levers for school change and learning how to “stop, develop goals, make a plan, work the plan, check to see if it’s working, and make adjustments.” As we outlined in Hyper Focus: How to Transform Schools, 80/20 strategic plans keep principals focused on their top priorities so they can meet their goals. Principals must be able to create systems and structures, implement effective strategies for team decision-making and prioritization, and scaffold the necessary steps to achieve goals.

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### Key competencies where principals felt they needed growth

*Percentage of leaders selecting each area*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Competency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gets It</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-awareness to own development of cultural competence while providing appropriate opportunities for staff to develop cultural responsiveness.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Strategic Thinking &amp; Planning</td>
<td>65%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Leveraging goals and priorities while creating strong systems, structures, and processes within the school that are efficient and effective.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Instruction</td>
<td>55%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Expertise in grade level/content areas to guide the direction of teams; executing effective coaching and professional development systems that improve the skills of others.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Relationship Building</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operating with candor and transparency to build trust and loyalty; leveraging strengths and emotional intelligence.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resilience</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persevering through challenges with a focus on the original goal; problem-solving based on what is within locus of control.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>40%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Effectively communicating to a wide variety of audiences (parents, students, staff, etc.) in person and in writing.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Professionalism &amp; Coachability</td>
<td>35%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Exercising sound judgment, self-control, and self-discipline while effectively prioritizing tasks and meeting deadlines; exhibiting self-awareness and openness to discuss own strengths and weaknesses and implementing action steps that lead to growth.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidence</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standing up for beliefs and staying focused on the non-negotiables, even when receiving pushback.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
I loved being an instructional leader! It’s the reason why I got into the work. To be able to dig deep, analyze student habits, and work to go after something always felt like a good use of time and a tool to success.”
— Monique Gayles, former principal and current ELA Instructional Leadership Coach at Achievement First Accelerate ELA Navigator

(TLBB: Strategic Thinking & Planning). Principals also need development using data to assess processes, accurately diagnose problems and identify root causes, and course correct based on the data. For Principal Whitney McIntosh (Young Women’s Leadership Academy, Las Vegas), creating, rolling out, and monitoring systems is incredibly valuable when she is able to witness those systems working and elevating student growth.

Shifting adult behaviors

In order to effectively lead a school, principals must understand the unique challenges and complexities facing their specific school community (TLBB: Gets It). They crystallize the vision and aspirations of the school, setting the expectation that all children, with the right supports, can learn and meet college- and career-ready standards. This includes identifying the cultural competence levels in staff members and providing appropriate opportunities for staff to develop cultural responsiveness. Principal Shadell Purefoy (Freedom Preparatory Charter School, Memphis) recognizes that as a school leader, she has the greatest impact on students through her instructional vision and feedback to teachers. When she hears excuses from teachers or doesn’t perceive them to have the same passion she did when she was in the classroom, it causes her to question how long she can continue to last in the principal role. Principals can benefit from development in how to guide teachers who need a shift in mindset, who are not giving students access to challenging work because they don’t believe that students can be successful at grade-level work. More importantly, though, principals must focus on shifting teacher behaviors, since a shift in mindset may not be possible to achieve with every member of staff. For Principal Kelly Smith (Acero Soto High School, Chicago), addressing teacher mindset came through clearly determining and articulating what she was unapologetically committed to. Her vision then informed every decision that she made, including her hiring process. Some teachers left because they were not bought in, and she was able to make new hires that were. Rather than lose years of valuable time with students, Kelly focused on hiring an aligned team and neutralizing those who were blocking her vision of high expectations.
Improving instruction across all grade levels and content areas

Principals are responsible for ensuring that teachers are moving students toward proficiency in grade-level standards. They evaluate and coach teachers themselves, or they oversee the coaches that are working with teachers to improve their practice. This requires principals to have a clear understanding of the learning standards and how the scope and sequence guide teacher planning and student assessment (TLBB: Instruction). Principals must also possess expertise in various grade level and content areas to guide the direction of teams and accurately identify levels of teaching proficiency and the highest levers to move instruction while executing effective coaching and professional development systems. While many principals were previously teachers themselves, they often don’t come into the principalship with expertise in all grade spans or content areas.

It can be helpful for them to leverage staff members that bring their own complementary expertise so there is a well-rounded leadership team within the school. Or they simply may need resources and tools to help them better track teacher performance and improvement. Principal Latasha Geverola (Oscar DePriest Elementary, Chicago) enjoys being in classrooms watching children learn about the world and themselves while working to develop teachers around strengthening their practice. As a principal, she already had a solid understanding of impactful instruction, but felt that she needed concrete tools to assist her with monitoring the instruction across the building. Her on-the-job professional development gave her the sample tools she needed to bring her instructional expertise to the next level.

“I loved my staff and working with my kids and families so much. The best part of being a principal was the people I got to be around every day.” — Owen Ricciardi, former principal and current Director of Teacher Leadership at Mastery Charter Schools
Building relationships and managing adult conflict

Education is a people-centered field, so a principal’s success in the role is dependent on positive relationships with everyone in the school community. Principals must develop an environment for staff to build strong relationships with one another and take intentional steps to build trust and loyalty with the entire staff, students, and families (TLBB: Relationship Building). By working on assuming the best, seeking to understand, and leading with empathy, Ricciardi has grown the most as a leader in engaging colleagues and parents with patience and consistency. Those adjustments to his day-to-day interactions led to improved relationships, even with the stress of the pandemic affecting everyone in unexpected ways.

But conflicts and misunderstandings inevitably do arise, and principals must learn and improve their skills in managing and anticipating them. To do so, they must practice exercising sound judgment, self-control, and self-discipline while displaying emotional constancy, particularly under high stress and in emotionally charged situations (TLBB: Professionalism). They must leverage consistent and clear communication, grounded in the school’s purpose and goals, while incorporating candor and transparency (TLBB: Communication). They must also have a strong voice and demonstrate a balance of confidence and humility, admitting mistakes while maintaining focus (TLBB: Confidence).

As a new leader, Principal Amy Hopkins (LEARN 10 Charter School, North Chicago) realized that she had a lot of self-doubt and lacked confidence in her position. She pushed herself to reach out to her peers and coaches when she needed help, even if she wasn’t sure what help she specifically needed; resulting in greater trust in her own instincts. Principal Kawika Chun (Equitas Academy Charter School EQ5, Los Angeles) also improved his confidence through help from his peers and mentors. In advance of challenging conversations, he practices with others to prepare and receive feedback so that he is able to articulate himself more clearly and candidly.
“Relentlessness of the role”

Principals can never truly comprehend how demanding the job is until they are in it. They have to use effective stress coping mechanisms while persevering through challenges and problem-solving based on what is within their locus of control (TLBB: Resilience). It can also help to be willing to reflect on their self and their work and exhibit vulnerability when talking about areas of growth, challenges, and failures (TLBB: Coachability). But most of all, principals need support, encouragement, and effective solutions to make their role more manageable. And if assistant principals are to take on some of the duties of the principal role, they need additional training to be effective in that supporting role so principals are able to truly delegate.

Although Principal Elizabeth Jamison-Dunn (Catalyst Circle Rock Charter School, Chicago) can see the positive difference she is making with her students, school, and community, she struggles trying to maintain a work/life balance while doing her job well. At times she feels the principalship is unrelenting and overwhelming, often sacrificing self-care or time with family in order to make sure the school is continuously improving. For Principal Anoli Patel (Bright Star Stella Academy, Los Angeles) the toll of the job on her body, mind, and spirit causes her to sometimes question her longevity in the role. “Just because most of us are overachievers who will get the job done, and can get the job done, doesn’t mean our insides are just as strong. We might be showing that we are strong, calm, not phased, and have everything together on the outside, but we are all human and get affected and impacted, sometimes in detrimental ways.”

“I think we often look up, but we also need to look below — a challenge I see for principals in my role now is when we promote people into leadership who aren’t the principal (i.e. department lead, grade level lead, instructional lead) without the right training, and then everyone is “surprised” when transitioning from teacher to leader isn’t an innate talent. This creates situations where principals (who themselves may need training in how to train leaders) are trying to fill multiple roles beyond their own and the leadership system breaks down. If we better support all leaders in the school, we make being a principal more sustainable.”

— Jessica Harrell, former principal and current Director of High School Math and Science at BRICK Education Network
Many APs and deans eventually become principals themselves, yet few to no dollars tend to be allocated for their development until they are ready to transition into that role. By being more intentional about succession planning and incorporating them into school improvement plans, schools can build their own pipeline to the principalship while delineating authentic roles and responsibilities at the assistant principal level. Successful and thoughtful succession planning is based on a school’s strengths and areas of growth, incorporates everyone’s responsibilities, and is linked to clearly defined leadership standards and competencies that are needed for the next phase of improvement. Districts and networks can support succession planning by creating development opportunities for emerging leaders.

**STRONG AND SUPPORTIVE DISTRICTS AND NETWORKS CAN REIMAGINE PRINCIPAL SUSTAINABILITY**

Districts and networks hold many of the keys to reimagining the principal role and removing barriers to sustainability. “Effective superintendents and district leaders establish the systems and structures that allow principals to be successful…Districts can play a powerful role in building the knowledge and expertise of school leaders. This is different from the traditional role districts have played, which is largely treating principals as middle managers who exist to carry out district directives.”

Strong and supportive districts and networks provide a clear mission and vision while fostering a culture of trust and transparency. They implement progress monitoring and course correction feedback loops that drive improvement, while seeing themselves as partners in the work with school leaders. On top of that, they support and develop principals and emerging leaders, giving them the tools and assistance to help them grow into more effective leaders, and in turn, positively impacting teachers and students.

In addition to the advocacy role that districts and networks can play in fighting for fully-funded schools, they can also facilitate needs-based allocation of staffing and resources for the schools in their pool. Leaders can benefit from support in removing poor-fit teachers and being assigned more credentialed teachers. Districts and networks can also help facilitate community partnerships that provide students with necessary wraparound services. Finally, they can provide streamlined assistance with finance, operations, and technology that goes beyond compliance requirements and moves school operations to high effectiveness while reducing principal paperwork burden.
Most importantly, districts and networks need to be willing to ask the hard questions about their practices and be honest about the current relationship with schools and the effectiveness of the systems and structures that are in place. Are they truly doing enough to support principals and provide an environment where the role is sustainable and good leaders stay? What questions should they be asking and seeking input on so they can begin the process of interrupting and reimagining the relationship between principals and district leadership? The starting place for change is an honest assessment of the current status and a plan to interrupt the systems in place. **Districts and networks can prioritize principal support and retention by:**

- Instituting distributive leadership and succession planning for every school so that there is a strong and supportive team around every principal
- Employing needs-based funding, staffing, and resource allocation that leads to equity across schools
- Creating a pipeline of leaders that reflects our country’s public school demographics and welcomes, includes, and values the experiences and expertise of leaders of color
- Offering continuous professional learning for school leaders that helps them grow through the day-to-day challenges of the job

**What will it take to achieve a significant shift in principal sustainability data ten years from now?**

It will take more than band-aid supports and tweaks to a broken education system. Our students depend on us retaining our best school leaders and training the next generation of great leaders. We all need to be willing to do the hard work of overhauling the entire system if we are going to achieve that goal. This means letting go of systems that have been in place for years but have proven to be ineffective. Reimagining solutions from policy, to funding, to systems and structures of support are necessary if we truly want to interrupt the inequities that fester in the education sector because of the lack of principal sustainability. Reconnecting with communities and creating school ecosystems where students can thrive is not possible without disruption, and if we continue on the pathway of band-aid support within education, the data will continue to look this way in ten years. The time is now to make vital changes.