



Leaders for California's Schools

Susanna Loeb
Stanford University

Jon Valant
Stanford University

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Susanna Loeb is a Professor of Education at Stanford University, Director of the Institute for Research on Educational Policy and Practice, and a Co-Director at PACE. She specializes in the economics of education and the relationship between schools and federal, state, and local policies.

Jon Valant is a doctoral student in Administration and Policy Analysis at the Stanford University School of Education. His focus is K-12 education policy, particularly as it relates to the achievement gaps facing historically disadvantaged groups.

POLICY BRIEF

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For many of today's school principals, a day at the office includes the responsibilities of chief executive officer, human resources coordinator, instructional leader, disciplinarian, and more. A staff meeting to review assessment results might give way to an unexpected visit from an angry community member or a request from the district office to revise the school budget.

A nationwide trend toward output-based accountability, most notably through the federal No Child Left Behind Act, has increased the monitoring and consequences of school-level performance. School leaders are asked to perform increasingly challenging jobs under increasingly intense pressure.

As the job of the principal grows more complex and demanding, so, too, grows the importance of hiring, developing, and retaining outstanding principals. Recruitment efforts and incentives for entry must be strong enough to attract high-potential candidates. Leadership training and professional development programs must adequately prepare these individuals for their work. And the job itself must be rewarding and sustainable so that strong principals remain in the profession.

In California, this is often not the case. California principals are underpaid relative to their colleagues nationwide, and many report feeling overworked,

Executive Summary

There is every reason to believe that the role of the principal is increasing in importance. Positioned between policymakers and teachers, principals are critical actors in virtually any effort to improve the performance of schools and students. Reformers rely on principals to embrace, translate, and enforce their goals. In many ways, California's schools can only be as great as the individuals who lead them.

As the job of the principal grows more complex and demanding, so, too, grows the importance of hiring, developing, and retaining outstanding principals. Recruitment efforts and incentives for entry must be strong enough to attract high-potential candidates. Leadership training and professional development programs must adequately prepare these individuals for their work. And the job itself must be rewarding and sustainable so that strong principals remain in the profession.

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are underpaid relative to their colleagues nationwide, and many report feeling overworked, constrained by state policies, and doubtful that they will remain in the principalship until retirement. There is good reason for this: among the 50 states and the District of Columbia, California ranked 49th in the ratio of students to principals and assistants. Support staff are even more scarce in California schools. California ranks 50th in the number of students per counselor, and dead last in the number of students per librarian.

In this policy brief Susanna Loeb and Jon Valant present an overview of the current state of school leadership in California. They examine the challenges that California must overcome to recruit, hire, train, and retain strong and talented principals, with a particular focus on the limitations of current state and district policies. They also propose a set of actions that policymakers can take in order to ensure that great principals are providing leadership in all of California's schools.

constrained by state policies, and doubtful that they will remain in the principalship until retirement. Current policies are ill-suited to providing every California school with an outstanding principal, but there is considerable opportunity for improvement by way of thoughtful policy reform.

In this brief we provide an overview of the current state of school leadership in California. We examine the challenges that California must overcome to recruit, hire, train, and retain strong and talented principals, with a particular focus on the limitations of current state and district policies. We also propose a set of actions that policymakers can take in order to ensure that all of California's schools are led by great principals.

The Importance of High-Quality Leadership

The impact of principals on student achievement has been difficult for researchers to measure, given the challenge of disentangling the principal's impact from those of the school's other individuals and characteristics. The available evidence suggests that principal quality is an important determinant of student performance. Large-scale data on student achievement shows that there is variation in principal effectiveness. Schools are significantly higher achieving when they are led by certain principals rather than others (Branch, Hanushek, & Rivkin, 2009). While researchers have not clearly identified the characteristics of these effective leaders, one recent study of California elementary schools serving low-income

populations showed that the highest-performing schools were those with principals who actively managed the school improvement and reform process (Williams, Kirst, & Haertel, 2005). Case studies of highly effective schools have also identified strong leadership as an important element of success.

There is every reason to believe that the role of the principal is increasing in importance. Positioned between policymakers and teachers, principals are critical actors in virtually any school reform effort. Reform efforts rely on principals to embrace, translate, and enforce their goals. In many ways, California's schools can only be as great as the individuals who lead them.

Obstacles to Recruitment and Hiring

As the job of the principal is changing, so are the principals. Thousands of principals will reach retirement age soon. The turnover will be a challenge, but it also presents an opportunity to recruit, select, and train new principals to handle the demands of the modern school.

Systematic recruitment and hiring efforts will be central to maintaining a steady supply of strong leaders. Yet the state of the principalship in California is such that these recruitment efforts will be difficult without policy changes. Excessive workloads and relatively low principal-teacher pay differentials limit the appeal of the job, and the absence of a formal process for identifying and recruiting high-potential candidates compromises the state's hiring efforts.

Schools are understaffed and principals are overworked

California is among the largest employers of public school staff in the country. Yet the large number of school employees disguises the low number of school employees relative to the number of students. (See Figures 1-4.)

Consider the ratio of students to principals and assistant principals in the 2006-07 school year. Outside California, there were approximately 306 students for every principal or assistant principal. In California, there were 447 students for every principal or assistant principal. Of the 50 states and the District of Columbia, California ranked 49th in the ratio of students to principals and assistants, with only Illinois and Utah stretched more thinly.

The problem of low numbers of school administrators per student is exacerbated by low staffing levels for other positions across California schools. California ranked near the bottom in the number of teachers (49th), guidance counselors (50th), and librarians (51st) per student in 2006-07 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009). The result is a public school system in which principals are responsible for many more students than their counterparts in other states, with far fewer supporting staff members to turn to for help. This strain is evident in current principals' perception of their jobs. In a survey of principals, Linda Darling-Hammond and Stelios Orphanos (2007) found that California principals were significantly more likely to agree that their jobs carry "too many respon-

FIGURE 1 Number of Students Per Administrator, 2006-07

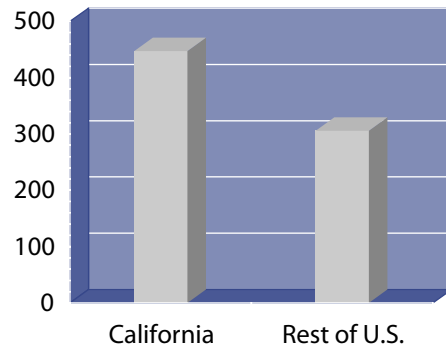


FIGURE 2 Number of Students Per Teacher, 2006-07

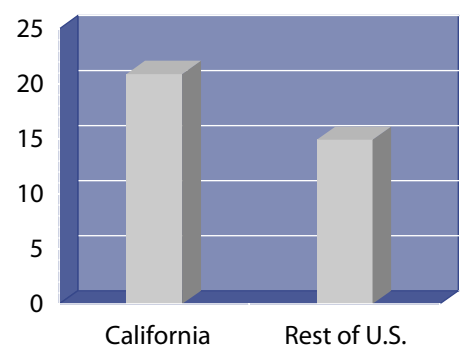


FIGURE 3 Number of Students Per Guidance Counselor, 2006-07

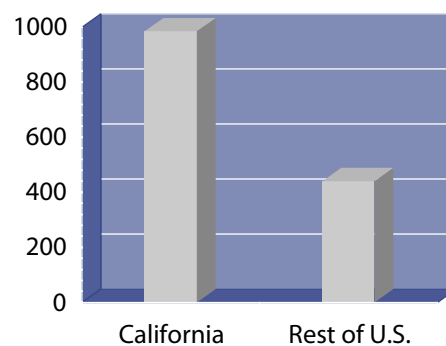
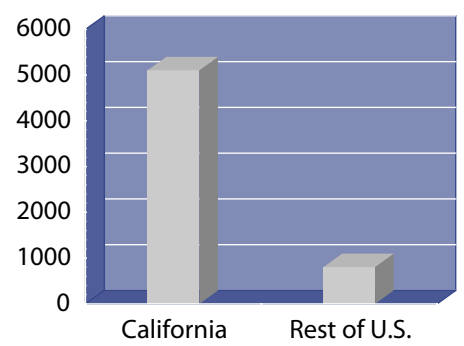


FIGURE 4 Number of Students Per Librarian, 2006-07



sibilities" than principals in any of the other seven states examined.

Current salaries fail to lure promising candidates from the classroom to the principal's office

The excessive demands of the principalship in California could discourage some strong candidates from applying. One way to mitigate the difficulty of attracting candidates to difficult jobs is through generous compensation, and California principals are reasonably well paid. The 2003-2004 Schools and Staffing Survey shows that the average annual salary for a public school principal in California is approximately \$89,900, ranking fourth among the 50 states and the District of Columbia. Adjusting for the state's relatively high

cost of living (using average wages for college-educated workers in the state), California ranks 15th nationally in average principal salary.

However, the primary source of California administrators is the state's teacher force, and in order to lure the most promising school leaders from the classroom to the principal's office, incentives must outweigh increased responsibilities. California teachers and principals have a more modest salary differential than their counterparts in many states. In the 2003-2004 school year, California principals earned an average 1.6 times the base salary of California teachers. This ranks 41st nationally and might not be enough to persuade many of our

higher-earning classroom leaders to pursue work as principals.

Furthermore, the conventional way to set pay for principals — using years of experience as the primary determinant — limits principals' incentives for exceptional performance. Although we lack clear evidence of the effects of performance-based pay for administrators, performance incentives could bring the goals of school leaders into better alignment with state and district policies and make the profession more appealing to high-potential candidates.

Currently, no formal procedure identifies or encourages promising candidates

Principal recruitment ideally involves more than setting incentives for entry and hoping that promising candidates emerge. High-potential candidates should be identified, encouraged to pursue the principalship, and provided with experiences that will be helpful should they assume school leadership roles. Unfortunately, principal recruitment is not nearly this systematic in California. (For an example of systematic principal recruitment and preparation, see Text Box 1.)

Much of the private sector has embraced the notion of succession management, whereby organizations actively identify and develop talent in order to create stability and continuity in leadership transitions. These organizations nurture talent from within. In the public sector, the identification process often is less deliberate (Lynn, 2001). This need not be the case with identifying future school leaders.

TEXT BOX 1: Long Beach Unified School District

When the Broad Foundation named the Long Beach Unified School District (LBUSD) a finalist for its prestigious 2009 Broad Prize for Urban Education, it cited LBUSD's hiring and development of effective principals as key "best practices" that can be emulated by other districts. LBUSD's leadership development plan has evolved over time, partly because of strategic improvements and partly because of budgetary changes. The plan now features four key components: Teacher Leadership, Aspiring Principals, Induction, and In-service.

LBUSD's "Teacher Leadership" component provides leadership training to some of the district's most promising teachers as part of a formal program. These teachers earn certificates by completing coursework related to leadership opportunities within their schools. Identified through a rigorous selection process that includes formal assessments, many of these teachers will later become administrators in the district.

In the "Aspiring Assistant Principals" phase promising leaders have the opportunity to try out administrative positions, while the "Aspiring Principals" component provides them with training specific to the work of LBUSD principals. Comprising mainly current assistant principals with Tier I or Tier II administrative credentials, "Aspiring Principals" training may include apprenticeships with successful principals or a summer institute designed to complement credentialing programs.

The "Induction" component targets administrators in their first few years leading LBUSD schools. New principals are matched with coaches who have experience in similar schools, who help to provide the tools their new colleagues will need to work through their daily challenges as school leaders.

The "In-service" component also targets current administrators, but it covers all LBUSD administrators and not just those in their first few years. It consists of an assortment of trainings, some mandatory and some voluntary, that are grounded in frequent reassessments of the needs of the district's principals and other school leaders. Additionally, the district partners with California State University-Dominguez Hills to offer a Tier II administrative credentialing program that caters to the needs of individual principals.

Taken together, this leadership development program enables the Long Beach Unified School District to identify talent from within its teaching force and to prepare these individuals for the challenges of leadership in LBUSD. It emphasizes critical points in a school leader's development—especially the first few years—while simultaneously recognizing that strong school leadership demands lifelong learning.

Although current principals intimately understand the demands of the principalship, are well acquainted with teachers who could become administrators, and are well-positioned to develop teachers' leadership abilities, they rarely play a formal role in the principal recruitment process. Many principals report that while they were teachers, they were tapped by administrators who saw them as potential school leaders. Lortie (2009), for example, found that 73 percent of a sample of suburban Chicago principals who had been promoted to the principalship from within the same district had been sponsored by a superior. Yet this process typically occurs without principals receiving training in how to recognize high-potential candidates or oversight to ensure fair opportunity to those interested in school leadership. A recent study of principal tapping in Florida revealed that principals tend to tap teachers who have more leadership experience and feel better equipped to take on the principalship, but they also tend to tap teachers who are male and share the principal's ethnicity (Loeb & Myung, 2009). There is reason to believe that principals are capable of identifying strong candidates for leadership roles, but formal training and oversight might better ensure that the teachers they identify meet the district's needs.

Limitations in Principal Development Programs

Providing all California schools with outstanding leaders requires not just hiring top-notch talent but also

nurturing that talent through strong principal development programs. It is unreasonable to expect that even high-potential candidates have the education and work experiences that would enable them to seamlessly assume school leadership roles.

California has a two-tiered administrative credentialing program. The first tier requires administrators to obtain a Preliminary Administrative Services Credential, valid for five years, by meeting the necessary pre-service requirements: a valid teaching or services credential, three years of full-time service in schools, a passing score on a basic skills test, and either completion of a state-approved training program or a passing score on the School Leaders Licensure Assessment. The second tier, which grants a Professional Clear Administrative Services Credential, requires administrators to possess a preliminary credential, verify at least two years of full-time administrative experience, and either complete a state-approved training program or pass an approved performance assessment.

Historically, California has been a leader in administrator development. Although the 2003 elimination of the California School Leadership Academy compromised this status, the foundation remains in place for an outstanding principal development program. Getting there, however, will require improvements to both pre-service training and ongoing professional development.

Pre-service training programs are uneven in quality

Upon reviewing research on leadership development, Davis, Darling-Hammond, LaPointe and Meyerson (2005) argued that there is widespread agreement on the features of successful programs. These features, common to both pre-service and in-service programs, include:

- research-based program content;
- coherent curriculum that connects goals, activities, and assessments;
- extended field-based internships under the eye of expert practitioners;
- problem-based learning methods that capture the complexity of real-world situations;
- collaborative, socially cohesive cohort groups;
- strong mentor-mentee relationships; and
- constructive relationships between university programs and school districts.

California took an important step toward promoting these features in its pre-service programs when it adopted six standards, known as the California Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (CPSEL), to define desirable administrator behaviors. By making these behaviors explicit, the state directed pre-service programs to align their curricula with these guidelines in order to maintain accreditation. Unfortunately, budget limitations have compromised the state's oversight efforts and allowed unevenness to persist in pre-service training programs.

Whereas some programs embrace the CPSEL and embody many of the key features of successful training, others settle for low admission and graduation standards, weak faculty, and poor programming (Darling-Hammond & Orphanos, 2007).

One particularly troubling problem with California pre-service programs is a scarcity of field-based internship opportunities. When Darling-Hammond and Orphanos (2007) surveyed a national sample of principals about their pre-service preparation, they found that 63 percent of principals nationwide had an internship component in their training program. Only 27 percent of California principals reported having such an experience. The California principals who interned through their pre-service program reported finding it valuable, but programs are not required by the state to provide these opportunities, and many of them elect not to do so. (For an example of a principal preparation program that emphasizes internship opportunities, see Text Box 2.)

In-service training often substitutes “random acts of professional development” for a more coherent, comprehensive program

When budget cuts led to the termination of the California School Leadership Academy (CSLA) in 2003, the state lost a highly regarded professional development program that was seen as a model for training instructional leaders (Peterson, 2002). Funded by the state for nearly 20 years, the CSLA came to offer intensive, high-quality in-service training through leadership

centers across the state. In the wake of the CSLA’s dissolution, state support for ongoing leadership training has come through California’s Principal Training Program (recently renamed the Administrator Training Program), which offers Local Educational Agencies partial funding to support state-approved training. The Principal Training Program was established under Assembly Bill 75 of 2001, which specified the content areas to be covered and required that training come via 80 hours of coursework and 80 hours of individualized practicum. Participation is voluntary for most California principals and can be used to obtain the Professional Clear Administrative Services Credential.

The Administrator Training Program has reached thousands of California administrators and generally has been regarded as successful in positively influencing their instructional leadership practices (California Department of Education, 2008; Neuhaus, 2004). It also has been criticized for its low dosage, one-size-fits-all coursework and limited value to middle- and late-career administrators (Darling-Hammond & Orphanos, 2007).

At 80 hours of instruction, the Administrator Training Program lacks the intensity and depth of the CSLA. With its focus on instructional content, little time is available for organizational management training. Additionally, although the state-mandated content has helped to ensure consistency and focus across training programs, it also has prevented administrators from pursuing the coursework most

**TEXT BOX 2:
New Leaders for New Schools**

New Leaders for New Schools (NLNS), a nonprofit organization founded in 2000, has developed a promising model for recruiting, training, and supporting urban school principals. Recruiting only those with teaching experience — but looking to both current and former teachers for leadership potential — NLNS has a rigorous admissions process that utilizes competency-based selection criteria.

Selected “Residents” participate in an intensive summer training program and then partner with a school for a paid year-long residency that sees them working as a member of the school leadership team while honing school leadership skills alongside a successful urban principal. Concurrent journal reflections, support from NLNS staff, and the development of a personal portfolio help to fuse Residents’ academic and site-based work.

NLNS participants maintain relationships with the organization beyond their residency year. NLNS offers job search assistance and formal coaching during participants’ first year on the job. At the same time, peer networking opportunities enable these new principals to share experiences, ideas, and support with one another.

relevant to their individual needs. Administrators bring very different experiences to their in-service training programs, and they face very different professional challenges. As it is structured, the Administrator Training Program offers few opportunities for participants to target their own training needs.

Unlike the many states that require principals to participate in training programs throughout their professional careers, California's requirements are minimal for administrators who have obtained a clear credential in their first few years. Ongoing professional development opportunities come through a diverse assortment of workshops, conferences, and courses provided by various organizations. With participation in these programs largely optional and often expensive, principals' ongoing training can be haphazard and incomplete. Concerns such as these led Linda Darling-Hammond to warn that administrators often experience "random acts of professional development and workshops, not tightly linked to instruction" (Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning, 2009, p. 8).

Challenges to Retaining High-Quality Principals

Even talented, well trained principals only can benefit students if they remain in the profession over time. Here, too, there are ominous signs for California schools. When Darling-Hammond and Orphanos (2007) surveyed principals nationwide, they found that 67 percent plan to remain in the principalship until

they retire. In California, in contrast, only 48 percent plan to stay until retirement. This includes a mere 22 percent of California's secondary school principals, compared to 56 percent of secondary school principals across the country.

Many of the obstacles to recruiting and hiring principals in California also are obstacles to retaining them. Principals are responsible for a wide range of job tasks and school outcomes, and low staffing coupled with relatively low principal-teacher salary differentials may lead principals to question whether to remain on the job. Another obstacle to retention is the sense among many principals, stronger in California than in other states, that they lack the autonomy to fully execute their jobs. These obstacles to retention are especially problematic in schools with large proportions of poor, minority, and low-achieving students, as these schools are under the greatest pressure for improvement and arguably would benefit the most from stability in their leadership.

California principals desire greater autonomy

Although California principals say they have local support for their work, they also desire greater autonomy. Fuller, Loeb, Arshan, Chen, and Yi (2007) found that California principals generally perceive district offices and school site councils as helpful in pursuing instructional improvement. But they also found that principals desire greater flexibility in making personnel decisions and allocating resources within their schools. When

asked about the changes that would be needed to support student learning, both elementary and high school principals selected "more freedom to fire teachers" as the most promising possible change. Many principals also identified increased funding, greater flexibility in allocating resources, earlier knowledge of the budget, additional professional development, and less paperwork as important. Although principals identified the ability to dismiss teachers as their most desired change, most indicated that they would be unlikely to dismiss more than one or two teachers. This may suggest that principals desire this flexibility more as a means of obtaining greater influence than as a means of actually removing teachers.

In fact, Fuller et al (2007) argue that the desire for greater flexibility in dismissing tenured teachers aligns with a desire for autonomy more generally, as California principals were typically willing to forgo additional resources in favor of increased autonomy. This extends to spending categorical funds. The desire for greater flexibility is understandable, as limited flexibility in an era of school-level accountability may leave principals in a position where they are held accountable for outcomes they cannot control.

High-needs schools face greater leadership attrition challenges and lack incentives for principals to stay

As demanding as the principalship can be in any California school, the stresses of the job are multiplied for those working in disadvantaged

communities. These schools are expected to perform despite extraordinary social obstacles, and their principals face challenges unfamiliar to principals in less-challenging schools. A recent study of principals' employment preferences found that public school principals in Florida were more likely to depart if their schools had high proportions of low-income, minority, or low-achieving students (Horng, Kalogrides, & Loeb, 2009). Principals in these schools are more likely to stop working as principals in the district and more likely to transfer to different schools. Those who transfer tend to go to schools with fewer low-income, minority, and low-achieving children.

There is now considerable evidence that most principals prefer working in schools facing fewer social challenges. Therefore, one might expect that principals in more challenging schools would earn higher salaries in return for the greater demands of the job. In California, this is not the case. Using data from the 1999-2000 Schools and Staffing Survey, Fuller et al (2007) found that principals working in California schools with relatively high proportions of low-income students earn approximately \$7,000 less per year than principals working with low proportions of low-income students. This is true despite there being few differences in administrative experience between the groups. Thus, the most challenging principal jobs in California are often the least well compensated, compelling principals to avoid or exit the schools most in need of their services and stability.

The Policymaker's Opportunity: Solvable Problems and the Route to Improvement

No matter how California chooses to shape and reshape its schools in the coming years, its ability to provide every student with an outstanding education will be constrained by its ability to provide every school with outstanding leadership. School leadership begins in the principal's office. Current policies inadequately promote the recruitment and hiring of promising candidates, the development of those candidates into exceptional school leaders, and the retention of those leaders in the schools that need them most. These problems are solvable, however, and many of these solutions can be facilitated by thoughtful policy reform from Sacramento. State policymakers can help to increase the effectiveness of the next generation of school administrators and by doing so, improve the performance of the schools that they will lead.

The challenges described above may be addressed through several distinct policy changes. Some relate to making the principalship more desirable and sustainable, while others relate to improving recruitment, selection, initial training, and in-service development opportunities.

In order to make the principalship more desirable for would-be principals and sustainable for those already serving, the working conditions facing today's principals must improve. The principalship is complicated and

demanding — perhaps too much so to support high-quality leadership in the state's roughly 10,000 public schools. Adding to the urgency of policy reform, this complexity is likely to grow as principals are given greater control over school budgets and other decisions and increasingly held responsible for their students' learning. There are a number of ways in which policymakers can improve working conditions and make the principalship more desirable and sustainable:

- Raise staffing levels in administrative and support positions so that California principals are not responsible for extraordinarily large numbers of students with few adults in the building to turn to for help.
- Increase compensation, particularly for highly effective school leaders, to encourage promising candidates to enter and remain in the profession and to better align principals' incentives with shared goals.
- Create incentives for working in high-needs schools to reverse the problem that principals are better compensated in high-income areas than low-income areas and to stem the flow of principals out of the schools that need them most.
- Make principals more autonomous, particularly in their options for dealing with underperforming teachers, so that the push toward greater school-level accountability is accompanied by principals having the tools they need to lead their schools.
- Promote the recruitment of promising candidates, partly by formalizing the tapping process through which

current administrators identify and encourage teachers with exceptional leadership abilities to pursue administrative positions.

In order to improve pre-service and in-service leadership training programs, policymakers should:

- Encourage new pre-service and in-service programs that are in keeping with current knowledge of best practices. Internship programs, for example, should be part of any training curriculum, as they expose trainees to real-world challenges under the watchful eye of expert practitioners.
- Strengthen state oversight of training programs, using program reviews and performance assessments for principal licensure to promote higher, more consistent program quality.
- Learn from the state's experiences with past and present leadership training programs. New programs might be designed in ways more conducive to evaluation.
- Rebuild the infrastructure for high-quality, ongoing professional development. Options might include developing networks of principals, developing and disseminating information on best practices, and restoring funding to the California School Leadership Academy, remnants of which are still active.

By acting upon these recommendations, the state likely will find that “the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.” In other words, many of these proposals complement one

another such that comprehensive reform will generate benefits that could not come from any individual policy change. Consider, for example, the effect of simultaneously improving leadership training programs and increasing principal autonomy. While each reform would yield important benefits on its own, the interaction of the two would provide principals with increased authority while making them better equipped to use it to their students' benefit.

The need to increase the number of adults in California schools runs up against well-founded concerns about using scarce resources outside the classroom. The burdens that school administrators in California now bear are exceptionally heavy, however, and thus may have a direct, negative impact on the work of teachers and the performance of students. In California, therefore, it may be necessary to spend more in order to ensure that principals are able to provide the leadership and support that their schools need.

California's ability to recruit, train, and retain outstanding principals will be central to school reform efforts for many years to come. Current state policies have critical shortcomings, but a strong foundation is in place, and all of these shortcomings can be solved through thoughtful policy reform.

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Policy Analysis for California Education
University of California
3653 Tolman Hall
Berkeley, CA 94720
<http://pace.berkeley.edu>

Stanford University
520 Galvez Mall, 5th Floor
Stanford, CA 94305

University of Southern California
Waite Phillips Hall
3470 Trousdale Parkway
Los Angeles, CA 90089

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