





# GOING, GOING, GONE?

Research suggests  
principal pipelines  
may help more  
leaders to stay

BY MARK TONER

**A**s principal of Whitehall High School, Hannah Nieskens has overseen dramatic improvements in student achievement and discipline during her four years at the rural Montana school. “The job we do [as principals] has real impact on students,” she said at the 2019 National Principals Conference in July. At the same time, “There are some real hurdles to overcome to keep people in this job and recruit people to this position,” she noted.

While much attention has been paid to teacher turnover over the past few decades, the numbers of principals leaving their schools—or the profession altogether—are equally staggering.

Almost 1 in every 5 principals leave their schools each year, according to data released by the U.S. Department of Education in 2018. In 2016–17, the average tenure of a principal in the same school building was four years. More than one-third (35 percent) of principals had been at their school for less than two years. On the other end of the spectrum, 11 percent had been at the same school for at least a decade. Research also suggests that principals at middle level and high schools are less likely to stay in the same building for long periods of time.

Schools in lower-income communities are more likely to see principal turnover, with retention rates nearly

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6 percent lower than in schools in more affluent areas. “The root of the problem, however, may be the school characteristics—such as low levels of resources, less competitive salaries, and problematic working conditions—that are often concurrent with student disadvantage,” states *Understanding and Addressing Principal Turnover: A Review of the Research*, a research brief published earlier this year by NASSP and the Learning Policy Institute (LPI).

Principal turnover is costly. On average, districts spend \$75,000 to replace a principal, according to The Wallace Foundation. The impact on schools facing continual leadership transitions, however, can be more significant. “You’ve got to reboot those schools every time that happens,” said LPI President and CEO Linda Darling-Hammond during a session at the 2019 National Principals Conference.

Research has long affirmed the impact of school leaders on student achievement. However, several studies conducted in Texas, North Carolina, and urban school districts across the country suggest that the opposite is

also true—that there’s a clear relation between principal turnover and lower student test scores. That impact also appears to be amplified in high-poverty, low-achieving schools, according to the NASSP/LPI brief.

However, new research shows that the turnover issue can be understood, addressed, and most importantly, improved. A six-year, \$85 million effort by The Wallace Foundation to build principal pipelines in six school districts shows that improving training and support for school leaders is relatively inexpensive and has a real-world impact that goes beyond continuity to promote measurable gains in student achievement.

“We found no other comprehensive districtwide initiatives with demonstrated positive effects of this magnitude on achievement,” say the authors of “Principal Pipelines: A Feasible, Affordable, and Effective Way for Districts to Improve Schools,” a RAND research report on the principal pipeline initiative.

### Why Principals Leave

Principals leave their jobs for many reasons, but a yearlong intensive

## RESOURCES

For more information on principal turnover, check out the following:

- Understanding and Addressing Principal Turnover Research (NASSP/LPI)—[www.nassp.org/turnover](http://www.nassp.org/turnover)
- Building Ranks™ (NASSP)—[www.nassp.org/buildingranks](http://www.nassp.org/buildingranks)
- Principal Pipelines (The Wallace Foundation)—[www.wallacefoundation.org/principalpipeline](http://www.wallacefoundation.org/principalpipeline)

research project undertaken by NASSP and LPI identified five of the primary factors. Aside from retirement and dismissal, they are:

### 1. Inadequate preparation and professional development.

Research has shown that high-quality preparation programs, access to in-service training, mentoring and coaching, and collaboration between professional learning programs and school districts are all associated with higher retention levels.

**2. Poor working conditions.** Access to support, the complexity of the job, the amount of time needed to complete all needed activities, relationships with colleagues, parents, and students, and the disciplinary climate all play significant roles.

**3. Insufficient salaries.** Salaries often are not competitive and contribute to higher rates of principal departure.

### 4. Lack of decision-making authority.

Principals are less likely to leave their positions when they have greater control of their environment and the ability to make decisions across a range of issues, including spending, teacher hiring and evaluation, and student discipline.

**5. High-stakes accountability.** Policies can create disincentives for principals to remain in low-performing schools.

Some of these factors, including salaries and accountability policies, are longstanding issues that are highly complex and heavily dependent on policy and funding at the state and national levels. NASSP and LPI are continuing to survey principals and develop recommendations for how policymakers can support these kinds of systemic changes, findings that will be shared in two additional research briefs scheduled for publication in 2020. But other factors involve levers that

districts—and in some cases, individual leaders—can act upon.

The NASSP/LPI research suggests that principals who are better prepared—with greater educational experience and advanced degrees, but also with greater ongoing in-service opportunities and other professional supports—are less likely to leave their schools. In Chicago, for example, a 2018 engagement survey of current principals found that “access to quality professional learning that meets my specific needs” was, after funding and compliance issues, the most significant factor that would encourage school leaders to stay in their roles longer.

“Better-prepared principals, including those who have had internships or mentors, are less stressed and stay longer, even if they are in high-need schools,” the NASSP/LPI research brief says.

The research findings also show that principals’ views of their working



relationships, including climate and the level of autonomy, have an impact on retention. Interestingly, the findings suggest that principals seen as effective by teachers and their supervisors are less likely to leave—unless they are promoted. “Both findings suggest the importance of supporting principals in building their capacity to do the complex work required in their schools,” the brief states.

### Building Capacity

Over the past decade, leadership standards and frameworks have increasingly recognized the growing complexity of the principal’s role.

“The world in which schools operate today is very different from the one of just a few years ago—and all signs point to more change ahead,” states the introduction to the 2015 Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL). To that end, the most recent iteration of PSEL standards incorporated a much broader range of change management, instructional, and cultural responsibilities principals need to be successful in all schools—those that are high performing, those in need of transformational change, and all those in between.

These changing standards and expectations are beginning to influence preparation programs, ongoing professional learning,

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and principal evaluation. NASSP’s Building Ranks™ framework, which is aligned with the PSEL and other leadership standards, reflects another important component of principal leadership. Building Ranks shows that by attending to a wide range of leadership dimensions in two key areas—Building Culture and Leading Learning—school leaders contribute to a supportive environment “where learning is at the center of what everyone does—the students as well as the adults who support their students’ learning through their own professional goals and aspirations.”

Supporting adults within a learning community contributes to student learning in powerful ways. But it also may have an impact on the school’s overall ability to retain educators. “Some research suggests that when teaching and learning conditions are more favorable, both teachers and principals are more likely to stay,” the NASSP/LPI brief states.

The Building Ranks framework is designed to inform a broad range of professional learning models, including preparation programs and formal

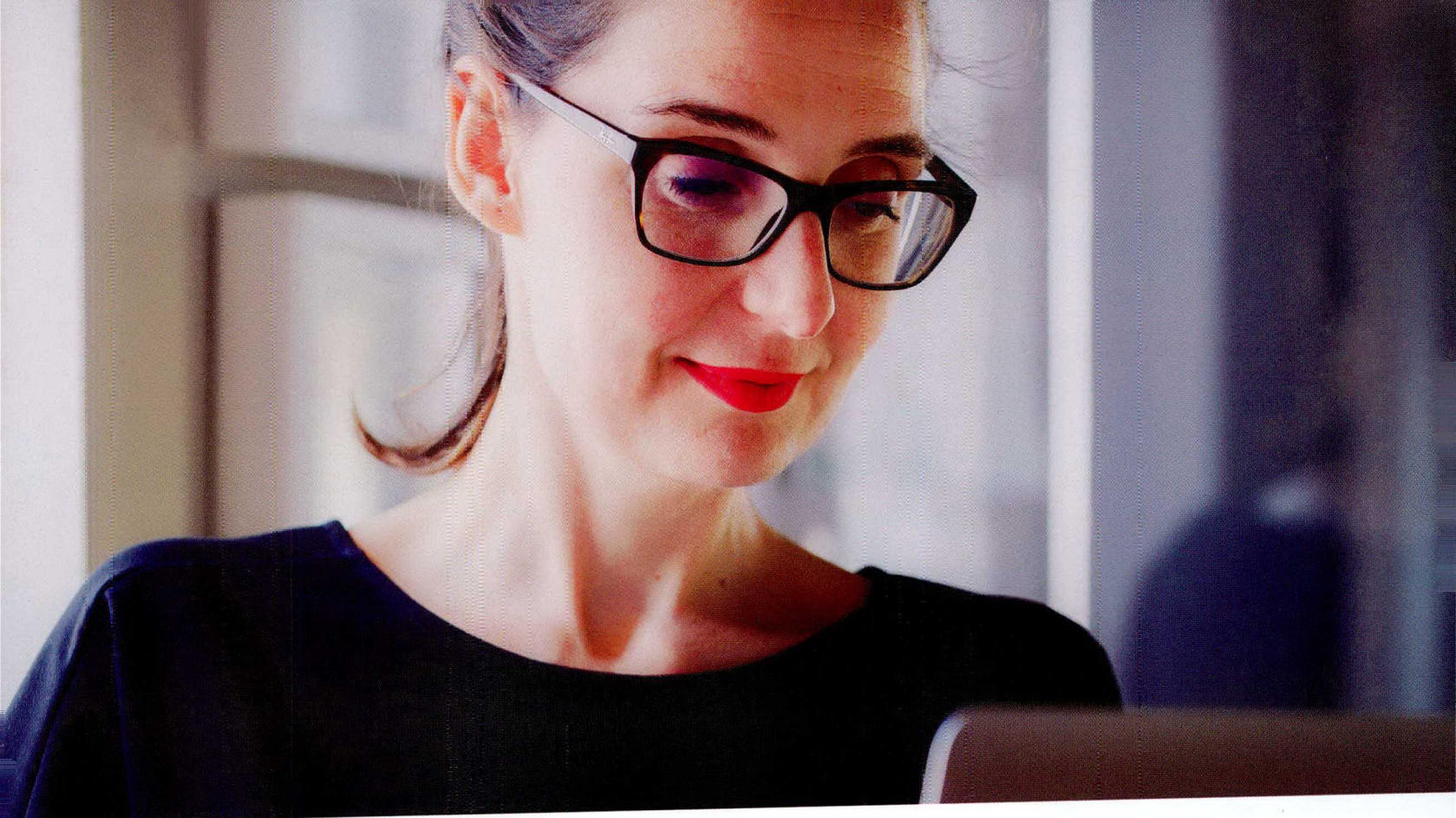
structures for principal coaching and mentoring. But principals also can use the framework as an ongoing tool for reflection and professional growth individually, with groups of peer principals, or with other members of their school leadership teams.

Professional learning networks (PLNs) are emerging as one of the strongest forms of peer support for building leaders. Nieskens, a 2019 Principal of the Year finalist, relies heavily on her PLN because of the rural nature of her state, she said during the conference. So does Hector Espinoza, whose own path to the principalship spans four decades, beginning as an instructional aide.

Now principal of Eastlake High School in Chula Vista, CA, Espinoza was clear about the importance of professional networks and support. “I have no problem picking up the phone,” he said.

### Pipelines That Work

Like teachers, principals are most likely to leave the profession in the first few years of their career. That’s why building pipelines that strategically prepare, hire, and support new principals has emerged as a powerful strategy for



districts seeking to improve leadership capacity.

New research on a six-year initiative sponsored by The Wallace Foundation affirms the idea that building principal pipelines is a realistic—and highly effective—strategy. The six-year Principal Pipeline Initiative focused on six school districts: Charlotte-Mecklenburg, NC; Denver; Gwinnett County, GA; Hillsborough County, FL; New York City; and Prince George's County, MD. Each outlined leader standards, created preservice preparation opportunities for school leaders, changed hiring and placement practices, and developed on-the-job induction, evaluation, and support programs.

The RAND evaluation of the initiative found that the pipelines were feasible, affordable, and effective. Each participating district was able to create and scale pipeline activities. On average, districts spent \$42 per student on pipeline activities—less


than 0.5 percent of their overall budget. And the pipeline programs succeeded in supporting new leaders and stemming turnover.

New principals in participating districts were 5.8 percent more likely to stay in the schools for two years and nearly 8 percent more likely to stay for at least three years than their counterparts in districts without the pipelines, according to the RAND research. And the impact on student learning affirms both the value of the pipeline programs and the overall importance of school leaders on achievement.

Within the six participating districts, RAND found statistically significant differences in student reading and math achievement between schools whose principals were part of the pipeline initiative and those that were not in the same states. In fact, on average, they differed by more than 6 percentile points in reading and nearly 3 percentile points in math three years

after the new school leaders were hired through the pipeline programs, with some variation within and among individual districts.

The pipeline initiative also affirms the idea that building leadership capacity within a district helps all principals lead. "All principals in the district benefited," Jody Spiro, the director of The Wallace Foundation's education leadership program, told *Education Week* earlier this year.

"They benefited from having clear leader standards. They benefited from these more rigorous hiring procedures, from being better matched to their schools, from having evaluation systems that the research tells us the principals perceived as fair and useful. It became bigger than ... a 'training program' for principals. It became a whole system approach." 

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