

ADMIN & MANAGEMENT | LEADERSHIP

Here are the 5 P's of leadership succession planning

By Dr. Dana Godek and Michael Moore March 14, 2024



We were working in a district with about 200 schools a few years ago when the superintendent was concerned about his “leadership bench.” After considerable planning by principal supervisors, 40 potential principal vacancies were identified, most at under-resourced schools. The team reported to a large room with theater-style seating.

The superintendent said, “Let’s start with the highest priority school and get everyone assigned.” A principal supervisor replied, “I want to place Sebastian there. He speaks Spanish, is great with families and has already turned around two similar schools.” The chief of staff wrote Sebastian’s name on an index card and placed it under the school’s name.

Next school. A supervisor said, “Well, I saw Sebastian as the best leader for my school, but if he’s not available I’d go with Miranda.” By the time we got to the sixth school, we’d run out of names and the highest potential leaders were listed under two or three schools. A district with almost 200 schools and a reputation for leadership development had run out of leaders ready for promotion or for more challenging assignments.

Don’t let this happen to you.

Let’s talk about the importance of succession planning. We’ll focus on filling principal positions, but the strategies apply to all leadership positions. There are already plenty of good leaders in your schools; let’s get them into leadership positions.



Many states have encouraged districts to create competency-based leadership development pathways into assistant principal and principal roles, but these pathways are only as effective as the number of candidates who enter and complete them. Ensuring that you are always able to look to “the next person up” is an adaptive challenge, requiring both strategic thinking and culture change.

According to the [Wallace Foundation](#), the number of assistant principal positions increased by 83% between 1990-91 and 2015-16. Over the same period the number of schools with an AP position increased from one-third to one-half. You might assume that this increase would reduce concerns about the number of available leaders.

While no trend data is available, in our work we notice that assistant principals get promoted to the principal position more quickly and have less experience with typical principal responsibilities such as hiring and budgeting. This lack of experience has been causing districts to expand their new principal support and, in some cases, to retain less than effective principals. What's needed is more thoughtful succession planning.

5 P's of succession planning

Here are five strategies to increase the energy of leadership succession planning in your district.

Project. Use demographic and trend data to project future needs for every leadership role in the district. Update the projection semi-annually. Share top-line findings and needs with the Board, with preparation providers, union leaders, and other key stakeholders. Align your development programs, leadership training, and recruiting to these projections.

A few years ago, a large district with a long-standing and robust “Preparing New Principals” program asked us to project upcoming vacancies. We found that two-thirds of the needs in the next five years were going to be in secondary schools, but the program was almost entirely filled with elementary school assistant principals.

The district had a history of promoting high school assistant principal into middle school principalships and then promoting middle school principals to high school roles—but there wasn't a single high school assistant principal in the preparation program—a clear mismatch between supply and future demand.

Performance measures. Create a simple, results-focused success profile for each leadership role. Job descriptions are too unwieldy for this purpose and focus on qualifications rather than results. We prefer [one-page scorecards](#) for this purpose. Constantly benchmark your strongest performers currently in the role against the scorecard to get a visceral sense of what they accomplish and how.

One district describes the principal role as “the chief executive on the campus” and then defines specific outcomes all principals are expected to achieve such as “reading and math scores improve year over year.” That clarity provides a clear image of who could be tapped to become a school leader.

Promote. There is increasing awareness that the low esteem in which the public holds the teaching profession is a major contributing factor to the teacher shortage. A similar dynamic is slowing the principal pipeline. It's important to look at the work-life balance of principals,



per diem compensation comparability between teachers and administrators, and other working conditions.

Clearly state and actively promote your value proposition for leadership in the district: What's in it for them? What are the rewards? What are the opportunities?

Pursue. The core activity of succession planning is tapping those with the potential to become leaders. Every leader in your system should be continually scanning for leadership talent, using the scorecard you developed earlier.

If you're a senior leader, you should be continually asking who principals and more junior leaders are noticing and why. Role-play informal conversations with these potential leaders. Offer formal events to learn more about leadership pathways. Engage in personalized career management conversations and provide opportunities for job-shadowing.

Set aside time a couple of times a year—perhaps when vacancy projections are updated—to engage current leaders in conversations that capture the names of future leaders. Don't confuse potential with readiness and don't discount those who just express interest in leadership. There will be many chances to sort that out later. Right now, it's about widening the potential pool and keeping it fresh.

Plan. Finally, in addition to offering or supporting strong developmental pathways, pay attention to the rigor of your selection processes and the intentionality of your transition processes. You want to create a culture of upward mobility: high-potential educators across the system are encouraged to become leaders and once in their new role setup for success and well supported. Ideally, this includes some overlap between incoming and outgoing leaders, early engagement in next year's teacher hiring processes, and easy access to school information.

As educators, we're all about growth and development starting when students enter as 4- and 5-year-olds. Succession planning is a manifestation of that same passion. We hope that any and every educator in your district will be able to describe their strengths, growth areas, and what is next for them on their career trajectory. For many, that will be school leadership.

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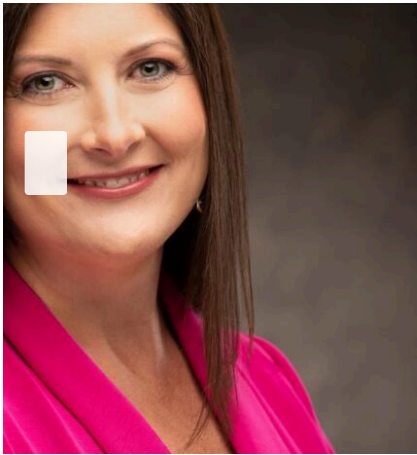
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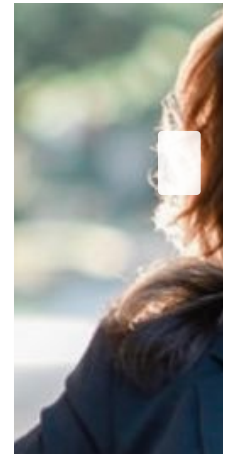
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