

Pipelines as Lifelines

"Pipelines are energy lifelines, making almost every daily activity possible. Pipelines play a huge role in everyday lives and are essential to the nation's industries."

This language comes from Pipeline 101, a website devoted to explaining the "what," "why," and "how" of pipelines that supply energy and fuel to brick and mortar structures. But the message is also apt for principal pipelines. Just as the former networks of pipelines underpin the water, gas, and telephone utilities we count on, so do principal pipelines underpin the recruiting, training, and maintenance of excellent school leadership we also count on to ensure the best possible education for our nation's children and youth.

Developing People

A long time coming, the recently passed Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) acknowledges school leaders as vital to student achievement. The new law allows states to specifically dedicate allowable funds to the professional development of principals. If enacted by states, these targeted funds can be used to fulfill ESSA's promise for developing improved pipelines for capacity-building in novice and aspiring school leaders and principals who are focusing on their own continued personal and professional development, impacting future generations of principals.

Nurturing and mentoring leaders-in-training has become a top priority as the most direct pathway to positively influencing student achievement. Consider for example the Department of Education's 2014 Teach to Lead program, whose Teacher Leader Model Standards include leadership skills such as building collaborative cultures and using data to inform instruction. The program has been welcomed by school leaders, who have long relied on teacher leaders to stay on top of grade- and department-level instructional needs.

Cultivating future school leaders and leveraging ESSA to find new ways of honing their own expertise is the responsibility of every principal in the profession. And yet, as we already know—and as reaffirmed by the principals' experiences that are reflected in this issue—it is not just a responsibility, but a joy and a privilege to help grow leadership in others and to watch them, in turn, do the same.

Systems Change

Evidence from The Wallace Foundation and elsewhere also points to the advantage of a "fatter," more collective decision-making structure over single-source leadership when it comes to higher quality outcomes for students. For example, rotating school staff through leadership positions provides a head start on the kind of broad, inclusive leadership structures that ultimately lead to student progress.

More rigorous preparation programs based on the National Educational Leadership Preparation (NELP) standards, which are being developed to align with the recently-revised Professional Standards for Education Leaders (PSEL), are essential for the preparation of beginning-level school building and district leaders.



Also, improved hiring practices can lead to better prepared principal candidates. For example, in 2011, Maryland's Prince George's County redesigned hiring practices to focus in part on how candidates handle "situational" challenges, and learned of widespread gaps in knowledge among vice principals in the area of data analysis. The district was then able to address this gap with targeted training.

These and other pipeline strategies that effect broad-based systems must strike a balance between stability and flexibility in order for them to change as school improvement strategies evolve, say both The Wallace Foundation and education reformers such as Michael Fullan, whose concept of "motion leadership" reflects the need for a systematic culture of continuous reflection and growth.

How to Get There

NAESP has always been and continues to be an aggressive supporter of principal pipelines, and has long been actively involved in setting and influencing the standards for principal preparation and practice as mentioned above. Additionally, NAESP's National Mentor Training and Certification Program offers a highly structured professional development program that can make the critical difference in sustaining skilled leaders. Further, NAESP is reinventing its National Principals Resource Center in order to provide a range of resources, including custom trainings on trending topics such as teacher evaluation and college- and career-ready standards. These professional learning experiences emphasize systematic solutions for not just fixing pipeline "leaks," but ensuring solid pipelines that provide a continuum of leadership support for generations of principals.

The Pipeline 101 website tells us that the first pipelines were "short and basic," but that design and materials were gradually improved to be more sophisticated and efficient. That is also very much the purpose and mandate of principal pipelines. As networks that directly fuel student achievement through nurturing leadership and growth, they are energy lifelines for our nation's schools and children—and expanding their reach and power is a worthy goal by anyone's standards. **P**