

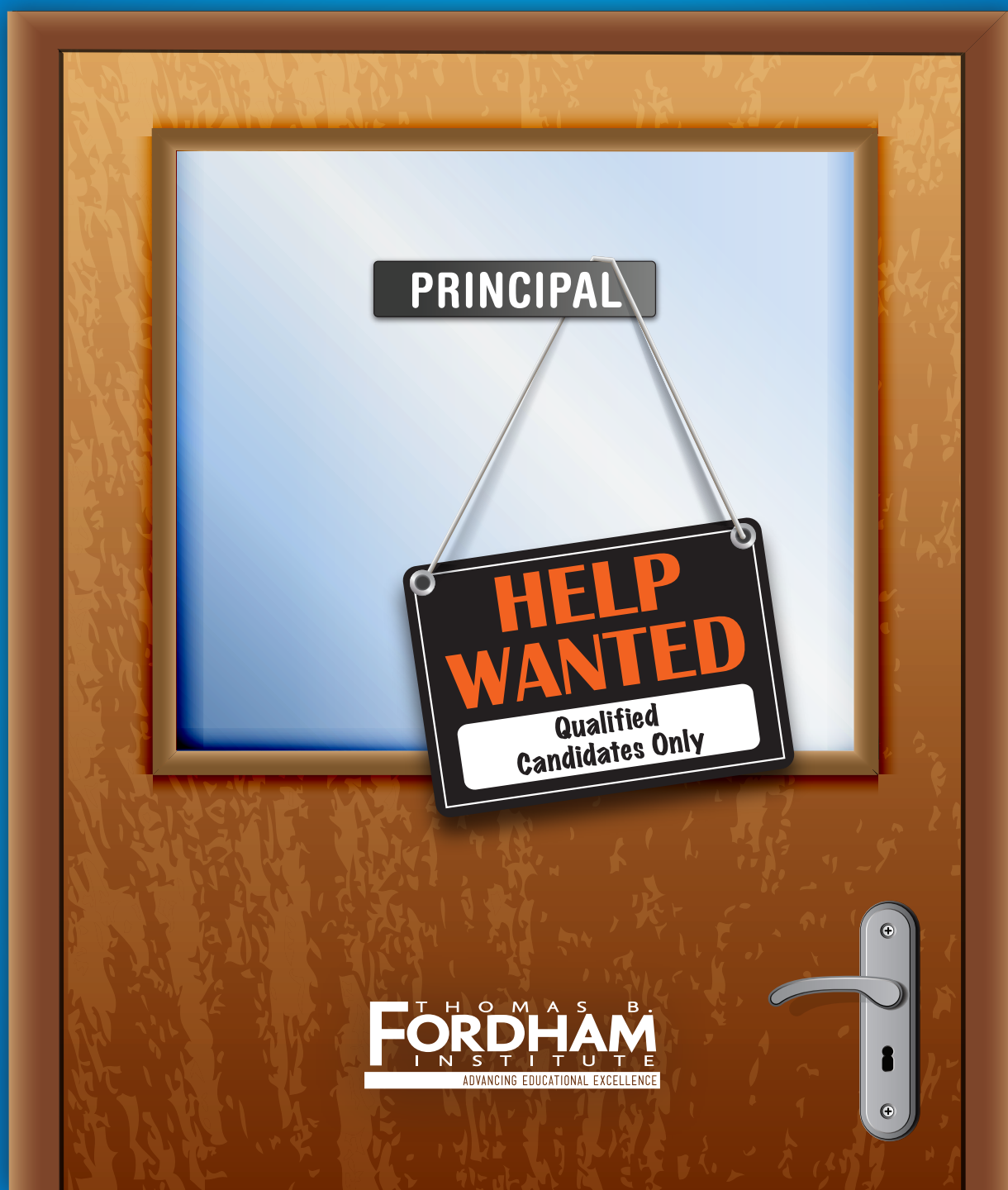
Lacking Leaders:

The Challenges of Principal Recruitment, Selection, and Placement

by Daniela Doyle and Gillian Locke, Public Impact

Foreword by Chester E. Finn, Jr. and Amber M. Northern

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Foreword

by **Chester E. Finn, Jr. and Amber M. Northern**

Yes, it's a truism that "school leaders matter," by now a truism morphing into a cliché that trips easily from the tongue but typically fails to cause movement anywhere in the worlds of education policy and practice.

As a result, far too many U.S. schools lack the leaders that they need. Far too many principals lack the wherewithal—authority, resources, capacity, etc.—to lead effectively. And far too many school systems, especially urban districts with the most urgent need for dynamic competence in this crucial role, haven't yet figured out the best way to find the strongest candidates in the land and induce them to move into the principal's office.

This is scarcely a new problem. Indeed, it's been so much discussed and fussed about that people may be wearying of it—or have come to believe that surely it's been solved by now.

We've done some of that fussing. Over a decade ago (2003), responding to America's shortage of dynamic, high-achieving school principals and the challenges associated with keeping them, Fordham declared, along with The Broad Foundation, that there existed a "crisis in leadership." One way to confront it, we said, was to search high and low for able individuals, provide them with the skills and knowledge that they need to give American children a superior education, and empower them with the authority to lead their schools, not merely manage them. This call to arms, which we called *Better Leaders for America's Schools: A Manifesto*, pressed for hiring reforms that would have traction both within and outside the traditional education sector. From that [report's overview](#):

Instead of erecting higher hurdles to entry, we should pursue two simultaneous courses. First, we should strive to locate and develop strong leaders within the education field by recruiting proven educators with leadership qualities who may not now be seeking such roles because of insufficient salary or because of constraints that make the job of running a school or school system unappealing. Second, we should cast a wider net, seeking prospective school leaders wherever they can be found.

Sixty-five influential education leaders and reformers agreed with these propositions and affixed their signatures to the report. And The Broad Foundation initiated [multiple strategies](#) by which to put the manifesto's recommendations to work in the real world.

How much progress has a decade produced on this front? In a word, some—but not nearly enough. There's been a proliferation of "principal prep" programs designed to develop would-be school leaders who hail from both inside and outside the customary cadres. Many are affiliated with education schools but growing numbers are not. New Leaders for New Schools, now almost fifteen years old, has multiple programs to "strengthen the leadership skills of talented teachers, coaches, assistant principals and others." The Relay Graduate School of Education, a new entity based in New York, offers a job-embedded practicum for aspiring and sitting principals focused on "instructional and cultural leadership." Other university-affiliated pre-service programs, such as the highly regarded Rice University Education Entrepreneurship Program (REEP), combine business-school and K–12 training to equip leaders with both management and education prowess.

Lots of leadership innovation has also occurred in the charter-school sector, with organizations such as KIPP, High Tech High, and Building Excellent Schools offering intense, hands-on leadership programs to staff their own schools and others. Some districts (New York City and Dallas, for instance) now run their own principals' academies; some are led by proactive superintendents who recognize the importance of exceptional principals and have pushed for substantial turnover in their ranks.

All of these worthy innovations attest to the importance of adroit, empowered school leaders. Many of them also make constructive use of new leadership sources, such as Teach For America alums; benefit from some loosening of state rules regarding who can become a principal; and have been nurtured by the substantial philanthropic efforts of leadership-minded foundations, such as the Broad, Wallace, and Kern Family Foundations. We can obviously learn much from these programs, most of which are intended to prepare leaders to run high-poverty schools. And we should assiduously track their progress and figure out how to structure pre-service programs more effectively.

Big challenges remain

Yet scads of other urgent leadership-related changes haven't yet been made in American public education, or have been gingerly tried in just a handful of places. Most states still expect principals to possess a traditional administrative certificate, at least for those running district schools, and most of those certificates are still awarded primarily through completion of traditional "ed leadership" programs via graduate degrees in conventional education schools. Nor has the compensation of school principals much improved; indeed, the annual average salary difference in 2011-12 between what veteran high-school teachers (11-20 years) and their principals get paid was roughly \$40,000. That's not much, considering the extent to which the accountability burdens laid on principals have grown heavier with the advent of more prescriptive teacher evaluation systems (layered on top of existing NCLB provisions or their waiver substitutes, and perhaps some Race to the Top promises). At the same time, many principals' jobs have grown shakier as their continued employment in more districts hinges, at least to some extent, on their schools' performance.

Meanwhile, a principal's authority over and autonomy to run his building has generally not increased. (Fordham first documented that challenge in 2007 with [The Autonomy Gap](#).) That's not to say some "portfolio" districts aren't working on it—they are, as are some visionary superintendents (or "cage-busting" leaders, as Rick Hess calls them). But in far too many places, the principal's role is more akin to "middle manager" than to "executive." (We're mindful that middle managers in the private sector may wield significant authority and independence over the operation of their units. That's notably less true in government agencies and organizations.)

Weak-kneed policy changes aren't all that's wrong. Many aspects of the principalship are little examined and still poorly understood. Indeed, a huge gap exists between the quantity of teacher-related research in recent years and the amount related to the principal—even as we know more than ever before about the importance of the role and have been warned umpteen times about the extent of turnover ahead!

A particular blind spot in our understanding has been the recruitment, selection, and placement of principals.

Only a few studies have documented the challenges of recruiting principals for urban districts. For instance, Susanna Loeb and colleagues found that the Miami-Dade school system mainly locates its principals internally, by tapping existing teachers. The New Teacher Project found (in 2006) a shortage of high-quality principal candidates in urban districts, low applicant-to-hire ratios for open positions, and—like Loeb—heavy reliance on internal candidates. A study called *Stepping Stones* (2012) found that the majority of newly hired principals in high-poverty and low-performing schools lack prior leadership experience; once they obtain such experience, they soon leave those schools for more attractive locales.

Yet far too little is known about how districts go about identifying talent, enlisting the best candidates for the job, and matching their distinctive skills and capabilities to the needs of specific schools. So we set out to see what we could learn.

The present study

We chose five urban districts in different parts of the country, nearly all of which have sought to improve their principal hiring processes in recent years. In return for our offer of anonymity, district staff agreed to speak with us candidly about their successes and their challenges, and to provide us with such data as they have. (It turns out to be far less than is desirable, not just for research but also for sound policy, evaluation, and improvement going forward. These districts don't, for the most part, have nearly enough information about their own practices!)

To conduct the study, we teamed up with Public Impact, a top-notch ed-policy research shop co-founded by Bryan and Emily Hassel, with which we've successfully collaborated for years. Bryan and his team have spent much time in the trenches of education leadership, including helping urban districts to expand their principal pipelines, evaluate leader effectiveness, and equip change agents to turn around schools. We were fortunate to nab two of Public Impact's veteran analysts, Daniela Doyle and Gillian Locke, to spearhead this project.

They spent much of the past winter interviewing district staff and newly hired principals, reviewing documents, and surveying recent candidates. Some of their key findings include:

- To nobody's surprise, the principalship is a high-pressure, grueling job in which the school head's authority is generally not commensurate with his or her responsibility. It's also a job that does not pay very well. Put these shortcomings together and it's not surprising that a lot of folks are none too interested in seeking such a position.
- Recruiting of leadership talent beyond the district's own boundaries is limited and uneven. Often it amounts to little more than posting job notices in local or regional outlets. Paltry recruiting budgets make it hard to search far afield, much less to cover the costs of candidates who might come from afar to be considered for a job. Rarely do districts look outside the traditional population of state-certified public-school educators. And some have been discouraged to find that more vigorous outreach efforts seldom yield top-notch results.

- The result is that most recruiting and selecting of principals is done internally, among individuals already on the district payroll. And they tend to be laissez-faire processes, relying on word of mouth, perhaps with district or school staff encouraging a promising assistant principal or senior teacher to apply for the job. Nothing is wrong with that, but the fact remains: there's not much strategic thought going into how to identify talent. The same can be said for how to match the skill set of a new principal with a specific school: either scant attention is paid to finding the "best fit," or districts try to do it but lack clear or consistent processes by which to make the dual assessments of a school's needs and a candidate's strengths.
- Districts have built into their selection and hiring rubrics many sensible and research-based hiring practices, meaning that cronyism is less of an issue than it used to be. Yet those same rubrics don't collect much in the way of "hard data" that demonstrate a candidate's prior effectiveness in improving student outcomes. And in part because these more elaborate processes take lots of time, contributing to late decision making, promising candidates have been known to drop out of the running.

Our analysts boil it down this way:

Our primary finding is that principal-hiring practices—even in pioneering districts—continue to fall short of what is needed, effectively causing needy schools to lose out on leaders with the potential to be great. Our research suggests, however, that better hiring practices alone are only part of the solution. Districts must also re-imagine the principal's role so that it is a job that talented leaders want and are equipped to execute successfully.

We obviously agree. But how to get from here to there? Four thoughts.

The tasks ahead

First, make the principalship a more desirable job and compensate talented leaders for taking it on. Succeeding as a school principal has turned into a near-impossible challenge.

Leaders must deal with everything from overstretched budgets to mediocre teachers to unruly (and potentially dangerous) students, not to mention heavy pressure to boost academic results (without, of course, "teaching to the test," much less engaging in even more dubious practices).

Districts need to stop viewing principals as glorified teachers and more as executives with expertise in instruction, operations, and finance—and the ability to add others to their leadership teams who may possess the skills they don't already have. This is not a case of "advertise it and they will come." It's more like "make it a phenomenal career opportunity and they will consider it."

Districts should also see the principal's job as the year-round position that it is and treat—and compensate—it more like the executive role that it's become.

Too costly, you say? Think of it this way: the United States employs roughly 100,000 principals. If we gave each of them a \$100,000 raise, the total price tag would amount to \$10 billion—obviously not chump change. But that's less than 2 percent of the K–12 public school budget—and \$5 billion less than the total new cost estimated to fund President Obama's pre-K plan. Bottom line: how we view the role has a lot to do with how we compensate it.

Second, districts need a serious, systematic talent-recruitment strategy. They should be *strategic* about how they identify, recruit, and retain high-quality school leaders. As this report shows, we have much to learn from the private-school, charter, and corporate sectors in recruiting talent. Many of the skills that effective executives need are transferable across fields, including establishing a vision, motivating employees, deploying (and repurposing) resources to reach goals, and building an infrastructure to support success.

Yet while there are advantages to casting a wide net, most principals will likely continue to rise through the district ranks. This study shows that some districts do better than others at preparing internal candidates for the job. So do some countries. In England, for instance, leadership development programs target three levels: head teachers (the equivalent of principals in the United States), senior leaders, and middle-level leaders, with each program focusing on distinct skills and responsibilities. This tiered leadership system provides a clear career progression for educators and creates a strong infrastructure for meeting school leadership challenges at all levels.

What's more, someone needs to be in charge not just of the mechanics of the H.R. process, but also of locating the ablest possible individuals, persuading them to apply, making sure that the selection process winnows the best from the merely good—then keeping them around. The Cleveland Metropolitan School District recently hired a “chief talent officer” with such a job description. Shouldn't every school system have someone in a similar role?

Districts also need to be as systematic about selecting and placing principals as they are about recruiting them. This means, in part, improving upon the metrics used to vet candidates by seeking solid evidence of prior success. It means developing a tight timeline (and sticking to it) by which would-be principals will be evaluated and offered jobs. And it means seeking—and finding, hiring, and placing—individuals suited to the singular needs of individual schools, not just a generic pool of school leaders for the system as a whole.

Third, districts—and those who make policies that districts are required to follow—should eliminate hurdles that prevent entry into the field and effective performance in the job.

Recruiting executives from outside education means scrapping hurdles that prevent talented candidates from crossing over into education (such as onerous state credentialing requirements). That's something that we and many others have been saying for some two decades. Leaders also need the requisite autonomy and budgetary discretion to do the job well. (We've said that before, too.)

Finally, districts need to be more self-aware and thorough in collecting and using data for principal hiring and placement. They need to gather candidate data—about background, experience, aptitude, skills, you name it—much more systematically than they do. Then they need to use those data in ways that help them identify the most promising leaders—all the while refining and improving their processes, as well as validating them in relation to the results that follow.



We end where we began: school leaders matter. Everybody knows that. Everybody also knows that quality teachers matter enormously to individual children as well as to overall school performance. But even the best of teams need quarterbacks and captains. And weak teams urgently need leaders with the skills to strengthen them.

After all the fussing and discussing, all the hand-wringing and studying, isn't it *finally* time to do a far better job of attracting promising candidates to the position—and a better job keeping them there? Not just in the occasional school or district but throughout the enterprise of public education?

But wishing won't make it so. What's needed is the kind of overhaul of role and procedure and policy that will, once completed, replace the words often used to describe the principalship today—grueling, poorly compensated, and headache-inducing—with words such as invigorating, highly respected, and professionally rewarding. If the job is recast as a true leadership position, we suspect that tomorrow's schools will not lack for talent. Today, alas, far too many of them still do.

Acknowledgments

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Executive Summary

Principals are vitally important. But ever-rising accountability standards, limited authority over key decisions, and mediocre pay make the job more and more demanding and less and less attractive to talented leaders. At a time when schools need high-quality leaders more than ever, the grueling nature of the job makes it a tough sell, and principals tend to come and go.

But are school systems doing all they can to meet these challenges head-on? Or are some making a difficult recruitment and selection job impossible, through bureaucratic procedures, unrealistic calendars, too little outreach, and inappropriate placements?

How can districts hire many more talented leaders and place them where they're most needed?

This report unveils some of the mystery behind principal hiring by taking an in-depth look at practices in five urban districts. To do this, we interviewed district staff and newly hired principals, surveyed principal candidates, and analyzed a range of qualitative and quantitative data related to districts' hiring practices.

Below is a summary of the questions we posed and the answers that we found:

How do these districts identify, recruit, select, and place high-potential principal candidates?

Evidence from the profiled districts suggests that recruiting enough high-potential candidates poses the greatest barrier to hiring excellent principals. Inadequate pay and grueling work make the principalship an unappealing proposition in many places—especially for experienced teachers, who may earn only slightly less than new principals while also enjoying lighter accountability pressures and shorter hours if they remain in the classroom. Recruitment practices are often informal or passive (or both), and therefore likely overlook some high-potential candidates. Moreover, budget constraints and limited past success with external candidates have led some districts to focus almost entirely on homegrown talent—not necessarily a bad thing, but a good thing only when the growing is handled well.

When it comes to selecting excellent leaders from the applicant pool, most of our districts have recently revised the informal processes they once used in favor of more systematic approaches intended to identify talent. These usually include a combination of specific criteria, evaluation rubrics, and structured interviews. Efforts to standardize the selection process have made personal relationships within the district less influential in hiring decisions. Still, most districts request very little (if any) hard data that would demonstrate candidates' prior effectiveness in supporting student achievement. In addition, multiple school-level interviews may prolong the hiring process, causing some high-potential candidates to drop out.

Once candidates have met the selection criteria, districts place them at specific schools. Yet we found few instances of clear and standardized processes by which to gauge a candidate's fit with the needs of particular schools and their communities.

To what extent do these practices enable districts to hire great school leaders?

Districts have made their hiring practices more systematic and thoughtful. Still, we witnessed several cases where such practices did not appear well designed to identify, recruit, and place principals with the greatest leadership potential. Although the data that districts shared do not allow us to

make individual determinations about candidate quality, anecdotal evidence suggests that too few are high-quality. And until districts make the principalship more attractive, it is unlikely that they will be able to attract better talent.

But how will they know how well their processes are working if they don't examine the results? Only one of the five districts we studied is rigorously evaluating recent changes to its hiring processes to determine whether they are enhancing the likelihood of hiring an excellent leader. For the most part, the impact of district changes in hiring practices, as well as the effectiveness of longstanding elements, remains largely unknown.

What steps can districts take to ensure that they engage the ablest individuals to lead their schools?

Based on lessons learned from the successes and challenges of principal hiring in our five districts, as well as successful practices from other industries, we make six recommendations for any district looking to improve its recruitment, selection, and placement procedures:

- 1. *Make the job more appealing—and manageable.*** Give principals the power to lead, including authority over key staffing decisions, operations, and resources.
- 2. *Pay great leaders what they're worth.*** Compensation must be commensurate with the demands, responsibilities, and risks of the job. Principals should earn considerably more than other school staff with less responsibility and should be duly compensated for producing success.
- 3. *Take an active approach to recruitment.*** Develop criteria by which to identify promising principal candidates both inside and outside of the district, and actively seek out those individuals. Woo them when necessary. At the same time, identify and prepare internal candidates systematically—and early—and eliminate barriers that might discourage high-potential candidates.
- 4. *Evaluate candidates against the competencies and skills that research shows successful principals demonstrate.*** Then create rubrics for judging candidates against those competencies, and train raters to use the rubrics effectively.
- 5. *Design the placement process to match particular schools' needs with particular candidates' strengths.*** Assess schools' priorities and leadership needs and develop criteria by which to assess a candidate's fitness to succeed in that specific situation.
- 6. *Continually evaluate hiring efforts.*** Collect and analyze all relevant data—then develop metrics by which to assess each stage of the process, particularly in relation to the school results that follow.

Introduction

For more than a decade, education circles have furiously studied and analyzed the classroom teacher. Her daily teaching has been captured on video. Her pupils' test scores have been analyzed up one side and down the other. She has been interviewed about her reasons for entering the profession as well as her reasons for leaving it. She has been observed for hours on end to identify the practices that differentiate her from her peers. And millions have been spent to find and implement new ways to evaluate her effectiveness and measure her impact.

All worth doing—indeed, essential. Yet the individual most responsible for hiring, developing, supervising, and retaining that teacher and others like her has largely avoided such scrutiny: the school principal.

Principals matter...

Approximately one-fourth of a school's impact on academic achievement can be attributed to the school leader, second only to classroom teachers.¹ According to one study, highly effective principals raise the achievement of a typical student in their schools by between two and seven months of learning in a single school year, while ineffective principals lower achievement by a similar amount.² Moreover, great leaders have the largest impact on schools facing the greatest challenges.³ Principals are so critical to academic success that a six-year study of school leadership could not find a single example of a school improving its student achievement record in the absence of a high-quality leader.⁴

Excellent principals shape a vision of academic success for students, set a positive tone and culture in a building, and cultivate leadership in others.⁵ They also analyze and attack problems, manage all of the systems that position a school and its students to achieve at high levels, and are unafraid to break rules if need be.⁶ More importantly, they create a cadre of high-quality teachers to drive student learning.⁷

...but the job is grueling.

The principalship is becoming more and more demanding, just as increasing amounts of data highlight its critical role, especially in struggling schools. In addition to monitoring teaching and learning quality and managing the school staff, principals must also meet ever-more-exacting accountability standards—many of which may lead to high-stakes consequences for their pupils, their teachers, their school, and themselves (including whether a principal's contract is renewed).⁸ And principals must often do all this with scant autonomy over key decisions, such as which teachers they can hire or fire or how much they can pay their staff.⁹ It should come as little surprise, then, that principals tend to come and go. Fewer than half spend more than three years at a school, with even fewer staying that long if the school serves a large number of disadvantaged students.¹⁰

About this report

Precious little is known, however, about how U.S. school systems go about recruiting, selecting, and placing high-quality principals. And what the field perceives about these practices is generally discouraging: a shortage of high-quality candidates, too little investment in identifying and recruiting the best of them, insufficient opportunities to grow leaders internally, an inability to select the strongest candidates among those who do apply, inefficiencies that deter promising applicants from persisting through the selection process, and, in the end, a job that is simply not as attractive as it needs to be.¹¹

This report aims to unveil some of the mystery behind principal hiring by taking an in-depth look at practices in five urban districts, largely following in the footsteps of earlier reports on teacher hiring.¹² The five districts are located in different corners of the country and vary with respect to size, student demographics, and the degree of union activity, as well as hiring practices. Our findings represent trends we observed across the sites, although not every finding applies to every district.

We tackled three key questions:

- How do these districts identify, recruit, select, and place high-potential candidates for the principalship?
- To what extent do these practices help districts in hiring great school leaders?
- What steps can these and other districts take to ensure that, going forward, they hire the best candidates to lead their schools?

Several of the districts we profile are ahead of the curve with respect to their hiring practices, and have revamped their process in the last few years in an attempt to address some of the issues noted above. These efforts represent moves in the right direction. Yet our primary finding is that principal-hiring practices—even in pioneering districts—continue to fall short of what is needed, effectively causing needy schools to lose out on leaders with the potential to be great. Our research suggests, however, that better hiring practices alone are only part of the solution. Districts must also reimagine the principal's role so that it is a job that talented leaders want and are equipped to execute successfully.

This study differs from those that precede it in two key ways. First, it examines the entire hiring process, from recruitment through placement. Earlier studies related to principal hiring have generally focused on a specific piece, such as preparing candidates within a district, or training and developing principals once they have been hired.¹³ Second, our findings draw on previous research from both the education sector and best practices in other sectors. In contrast, much of what has been written on this topic previously took only a cursory look at existing research, pulling recommendations almost entirely from their own data collection. Our goal is both to consider policies that reflect common sense and to highlight practices that have proven effective within and outside the K–12 world.

The report itself is organized around the three main steps in the hiring process: recruitment, selection, and placement. For each of those steps, we outline how it now works in the districts we profiled and evaluate how well it appears to be working. While the report generalizes where possible, it also points out differences among the five districts, each of which brings somewhat different approaches to the challenge. We then consider the implications of those practices on who the district ultimately hires to lead its schools, before concluding with recommendations that districts nationwide should consider implementing to improve their hiring processes.

Methods

All five of the urban districts examined here recognized that, while they have improved their principal hiring process in various ways in recent years, more work remains. They agreed to speak with us candidly about their process, its strengths, and its challenges. To maintain their anonymity, we refer to them only by monikers throughout the report and avoid identifying data. The table below summarizes key characteristics of the profiled districts (Table 1).

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for profiled districts

District	Number of schools	Number of principal vacancies, 2013-14	Students qualifying for free or reduced- price lunch (FRL)	Students proficient on state assessment, 2012-13
Reformville	101-150	11-20	77%	48%
River City	50-100	10-20	72%	71%
Union City	<50	<10	77%	64%*
Urbanopolis	>200	>20	80%	71%
Harbor Town	50-100	10-20	64%	52%*

All FRL and student performance data from state education agency websites.

*The state did not report a proficiency rate that included both reading and math, so Public Impact calculated an overall proficiency rate using state performance data weighted for the number of students tested in each grade for each exam.

We compiled our research over a nine-month period from August 2013 to April 2014, during which we conducted day-long site visits to each district, interviewing district staff and newly hired principals. We also surveyed principal candidates who had applied for a principal position for the 2013-14 school year, including both those the district hired and are currently serving as principal, as well as those not hired. Finally, we analyzed a range of qualitative and quantitative data. This includes documents outlining districts' hiring processes, data on principal applicants, and statistics on the hiring process itself—such as the number of vacancies, the number of initial applicants, and the number of applicants advancing to each successive round of the selection process. See the Appendix for more on methodology.

Part I. How Districts (Don't Really) Recruit

The first step to hiring a great school leader is getting great candidates, whether internal or external or both, to apply for the position. While this step may seem simple enough, recruiting top talent is no easy task, especially as the principal's role has become so much more demanding and the job arguably less rewarding. Principals must often manage classroom instruction and oversee school operations while under pressure to meet rising accountability standards and with little autonomy to lead—and only so-so pay. Needless to say, the job can be pretty unappealing.

Evidence from the districts we profiled suggests that recruiting enough top-notch candidates poses the greatest barrier to hiring excellent principals. Our analysis of recruitment practices across the districts found that:

- **Finding 1.** Inadequate pay and grueling work make the principalship a tough sell in many districts, especially for experienced teachers.
- **Finding 2.** Budget constraints and meager success hiring external candidates have led some districts to focus almost entirely on growing their own school leaders.
- **Finding 3.** Recruitment practices that are often informal or passive (or both) likely overlook some high-potential talent.

Finding 1. Inadequate pay and grueling work make the principalship a tough sell.

In several of the districts we studied, the district holds principals to exceedingly high expectations, but fails to compensate them adequately. This mismatch between pay and responsibility would make it difficult to recruit high-quality candidates for any job, regardless of other factors. But in some of the districts we studied, teachers have recently received opportunities to earn more and exert greater influence without leaving the classroom. Meanwhile, the principal's pay has essentially stayed flat, even as the duties associated with the role have multiplied.

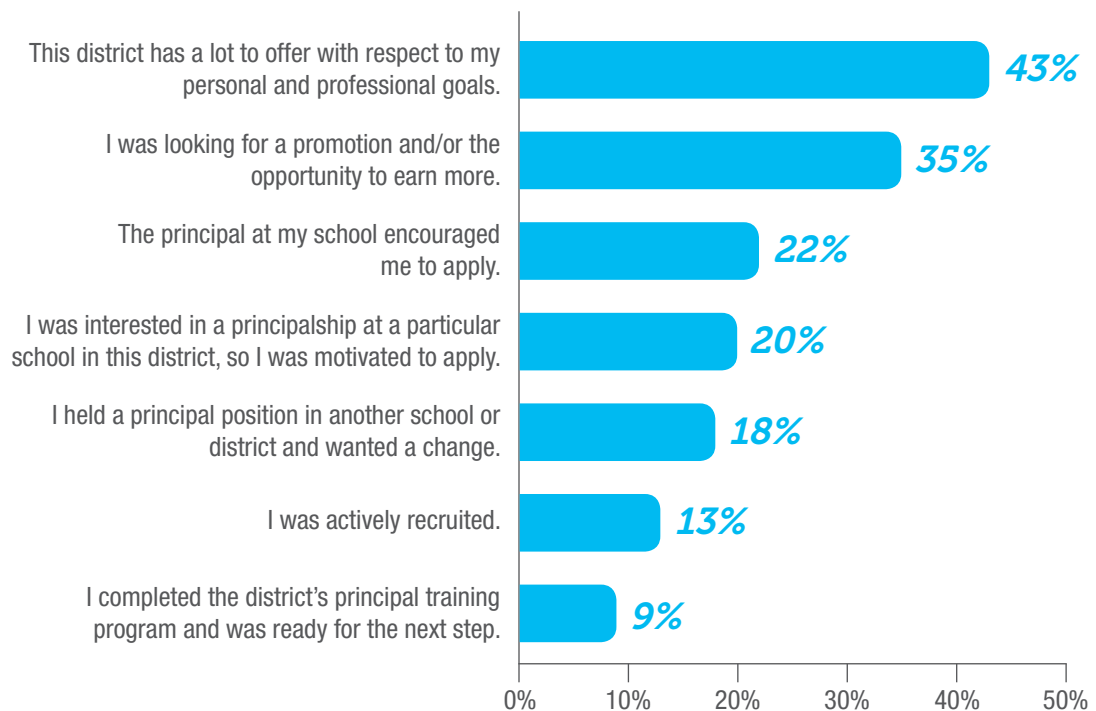
Consider the situation in River City. The base pay for an assistant principal or principal is higher than the base pay for teachers with the same amount of experience. But River City has recently increased pay for its best teachers in an effort to keep them in the classroom. Now a lead teacher with a master's degree and twelve years of experience can earn nearly \$73,000 dollars. Teachers with more experience and advanced credits can earn close to \$90,000. And that figure does not include additional incentive pay teachers might receive for National Board certification or serving a high-needs population when funding is available.

Increasing pay for the best teachers makes good sense for teacher retention, but it is a nightmare for principal recruitment. Aspiring principals stand to earn more in the long term, but their initial pay bump is modest; new principals in River City earn between \$85,000 and \$88,000 a year. Meanwhile, they face much stricter accountability standards: they can be non-renewed after just two years, while teachers essentially have job security after their third year.

Moreover, aspiring principals typically must first serve as assistant principals, and may actually face a pay cut when they transition from teaching to administration; salaries for assistant principals start between \$70,000 and \$75,000. Consequently, there is little incentive for excellent teachers to seek principal positions in River City. “The job is demanding and hard,” an assistant superintendent there explained. “Accountability is a major deterrent for people. If you are a lead teacher in our district, you can make significantly more than assistant principals, while shouldering less accountability and working fewer days, so there is no incentive to leave the classroom.” And River City is not alone in facing a shrinking pay gap between teachers and principals; we heard similar tales from three of our five districts.

Most of the principal candidates who responded to our survey indicated that they were most motivated to apply for a principal position by what the district could offer with respect to their personal and professional goals (Table 2). The opportunity to earn more ranked second, however. So while not the most important factor, pay certainly matters to those who do apply, and potentially even more to those who consider the principalship, but ultimately choose not to seek it.

Table 2. Why candidates applied to become a principal



Source: Public Impact Principal Candidate Survey, 2014.

Yet the pay disincentives described above do not apply universally. Younger teachers or administrators who are lower on the district’s salary schedule may well see a nice salary bump as they move into a principalship. One of the five districts is able to ensure that the transition into school leadership will result in a pay raise despite where and when in her career a candidate makes the move. And so long as a district offers a principal salary that is competitive with the principal salaries in surrounding districts, that district may be able to poach a high-flying principal from another school system. Increasingly, however, better teacher pay and career opportunities, combined with longer hours, a longer year, and greater demands on principals, make the principalship an unappealing proposition for many potential candidates.

Finding 2. Budget constraints and meager success hiring external candidates have led some districts to focus almost entirely on growing their own school leaders.

Districts have several different pools in which to fish for candidates to fill principal vacancies. They can recruit educators who already work in the district (i.e., internal candidates). Or they might cast a wider net in search of outside candidates, deploying recruitment efforts in nearby school districts, districts across the country, or even fields outside of education.

Districts largely focus on internal candidates

Three of the districts we studied focus almost all of their attention on identifying and recruiting internal candidates. In two of them, internal candidates filled every principal vacancy for the 2013-14 school year (Table 3). And in all the districts we examined, internal candidates filled the majority of principal vacancies, despite the fact that several districts received more applications from external applicants.

Districts offered several reasons for concentrating on hiring from within. Several had reached farther afield in the past with little success. The outside candidates they found often struggled to understand the local culture or ways of operating, causing many to stumble where internal hires did not. “In the past, we hired principals from outside [the district],” the head of principal hiring

Table 3. Internal vs. external principal applicants and hires, 2013-14

District	Internal		External	
	Applicants	Hires	Applicants	Hires
Reformville	<25	10-20	>100	<10
River City	25-50	10-20	>100	<10
Union City	25-50	<10	50-100	0
Urbanopolis	>100	>20	>100	10-20
Harbor Town*	<25	10-20	0**	0**

* Refers to applicants in the district’s principal-preparation program.

** The district only advertises the opening if vacancies remain after this process, which was not the case for 2013-14.

for Harbor Town explained. “Maybe the principal was successful someplace else, but with few exceptions, they had all sorts of problems [in our district]...They don’t speak the language of instruction here or know how we organize things.” And even if they did have some success, many external candidates tended to leave after just a couple of years. As the superintendent from River City recalled, “a few years ago, we got grant funding to hire several principals from out-of-state, but because we’re not in the most exciting city, most of them stayed for a year or two and moved on.”

Two districts also noted that their decision to hire external candidates had hurt morale at home. In one instance, a number of assistant principals expressed concern that candidates from outside the district were being hired before they themselves were promoted. Those responsible for principal hiring did not believe the assistant principals were ready to move up, but the situation did make them reconsider what steps the district could take to ensure that current staff would be prepared to step up in the future.

None of this means that any of the districts has given up on the possibility that an external candidate could successfully lead its schools. But given the limited time and financial resources available for principal recruiting, they often focus on what they consider the safer bet—their present teachers and administrators. “I would love to travel more and try to kidnap people,” the head of principal hiring in Union City joked with us. “But in this age of budget deficits, it seems more reasonable to say, ‘let’s invest in our people, rather than invest in travel [to recruit outside of the district].’”

In fact, all of the districts we studied operate principal development programs aimed at training existing staff to become school leaders.¹⁴ While some programs are little more than a series of district-led seminars or university partnerships that provide classes and credentialing, others are much more intensive. For example, two districts offer year-long residency programs where participants work beside a sitting principal and participate in classes, earning alternative certification as well as critical on-the-ground experience. Even Reformville, which makes a concerted effort to identify and recruit high-performing principals from other districts each year, implemented a new principal pipeline program in 2013-14, from which it plans to fill many of its future vacancies.

To be sure, these internal pipeline programs are not inexpensive. For example, Reformville spends roughly \$20,000 per fellow on training (e.g., books and supplies, university partnership, and coaching), which does not include the time district staff spend managing the program, or fellows’ salaries while they continue to work in the district, which average \$100,000. In some instances, districts just cannot afford these efforts. Both Union City and Harbor Town, which relied on principal pipeline programs to fill *all* of their principal vacancies for the 2013-14 school year, currently depend on private philanthropy or federal grants to underwrite those programs. By and large, however, donors and taxpayers have proven more amenable to funding training programs of this sort than to covering travel costs to recruit outside the district.¹⁵

External candidates offer an avenue to expand the applicant pool

The districts we studied provided a number of compelling reasons for focusing their hiring efforts internally. Nonetheless, all of them have struggled at various times to find enough high-quality candidates, and external prospects represent a largely untapped applicant pool.

Unlike internal candidates, who generally fill a number of stepping stone roles until getting promoted into a principalship, many external candidates have prior experience leading schools. For example, 60 percent of external hires in Urbanopolis for the 2013-14 school year had previous experience as a principal, compared to just 10 percent of internal hires. Rather than identifying and evaluating candidates on their *potential* to lead a school, these external candidates can provide hard evidence that they *have* successfully led a school and had a positive impact on student achievement.

So what about the other concerns that districts raised regarding external candidates, such as “poor fit” or “they don’t stick around long”? A few districts conceded that in the past they did little to acclimate external candidates to their district. Additional or different onboarding and support mechanisms might therefore address these issues.

Meanwhile, districts may be able to identify which external candidates tend to be most successful—and stick around the longest—if they take a closer look at their data. In River City, for example, analyzing candidate data revealed two important lessons; first, new hires from outside were far more likely to remain if they were from or had some connection to the region—a point the district had not considered previously and plans to use in the future when identifying potential recruits. Second, successful leaders from other sectors tended to be more effective and stay with the district longer than veteran principals imported from other districts. As a result, the district is participating in a new program that recruits mid-career changers and provides a pathway for them to get licensed while serving as an assistant principal. In fact, River City is the only district we studied that is targeting leaders outside education for the principalship (see *The case for recruiting leaders across sectors*).

The case for recruiting leaders across sectors

In “Better Leaders for America’s Schools: A Manifesto,” the Broad Foundation and the Thomas B. Fordham Institute made the case that an excellent leader from outside the education sector can also be an excellent school principal, so long as he or she has a strong instructional leader on the team.¹⁶ A much wider talent pool becomes available once districts allow for this type of distributed leadership model. The notion that someone from outside education could make a great school leader may seem implausible to many educators, yet it has been happening for at least a decade. According to the federal 2002 Schools and Staffing Survey, more than 10 percent of principals did not have previous teaching experience.¹⁷ Moreover, an analysis measuring the impact of five different skill sets that principals might possess found that organization-management skills, rather than skills related to instructional leadership, was the only skill set that consistently predicted students’ academic achievement.¹⁸

In the private sector, it is commonplace for highly successful organizations to recruit talented managers from across fields and specialties. In a *Harvard Business Review* piece, “Are Leaders Portable?” researchers show that when a firm hires a CEO from General Electric, renowned for its executive training, the stock at that firm often jumps in value.¹⁹ It does not matter if the firm specializes in automobiles or pottery. Many of the management skills that effective CEOs need, such as setting a vision, organizing, and budgeting, are transferrable across sectors. Another study points to examples from IBM, Eastman Kodak, AT&T, and General Motors to show that the skills a leader brings matter more than his understanding of a particular sector.²⁰ Rather than ruling out effective leaders from other sectors, some firms have therefore developed strong onboarding systems to help get them up to speed on the particular industry and organization’s unique features, a process that school systems could implement as well.²¹

We acknowledge that private firms do not face the same licensure constraints as school districts, so cross-sector recruitment in public education is apt to be harder. But policymakers could change those licensure rules. And the takeaway is the same: great leaders can succeed across sectors.

It is clear, however, that some of the districts we studied have largely discounted external candidates except when there are no other alternatives. Consequently, those districts are limiting their potential talent pool rather than considering ways to expand it.

Finding 3. Recruitment practices that are informal or passive (or both) likely overlook some high-potential talent.

Regardless of whom a district thinks will make the best principal, we found that most districts in our study lack a strategic and replicable system for identifying and recruiting candidates. As a result, they are likely overlooking some high-potential individuals both within and outside of the district.

Most recruitment efforts within districts are informal

When it comes to intra-district recruitment, there are two obvious places to look for new principals: among sitting administrators and graduates of principal training programs.

But how do individuals end up as administrators or in training programs? We found that districts' processes are largely informal. In some instances, motivated individuals just apply. In others, someone from the district's hiring team may reach out to a particular candidate as a result of referrals from a principal or other administrator. Members of a district's leadership development team may also identify candidates based on their own interactions over the years.

For example, the head of leadership development in Harbor Town personally knows many educators in the district because she has worked with them in different capacities and it is a relatively small district. She also works with other administrators, and sometimes receives recommendations from them. Based on such interactions and word-of-mouth, she identifies high-potential principal candidates.

As the district prepares to launch its annual principal pipeline program—its main source for filling principal vacancies—she makes it a point to personally call the individuals she thinks would excel in school leadership. These calls have made a strong impact on a number of candidates, in some instances convincing them to apply when they had not even considered it. “She highlighted what I had to offer [the district],” one candidate told us. “I felt really encouraged.”

The problem with informal recruitment

This method has merit—above all, it seems to work pretty well in Harbor Town—but it is not ideal for at least two reasons. First, it hinges on the insightfulness and motivation of supervisors. A sitting principal, regional superintendent, or human resources officer with an eye toward leadership development may encourage a particularly promising teacher or assistant principal to take the next step, yet an equally strong candidate with less interested or alert supervisors may go unnoticed and never apply.²² There is no way to know how many high-potential leaders simply did not pursue leadership positions, or left education altogether because they were not spotted and encouraged to pursue new responsibilities.

Second, high-potential candidates may get lost in the churn as administrators and central-office personnel come and go. During the course of this study, which spanned less than a year, our main contacts in two of the five districts left their positions, taking a good deal of institutional knowledge

with them. Absent a systematic process that applies a consistent rule or rubric to identify talent, a number of high-potential candidates may be overlooked—to the chagrin of the students who need them.

A more systematic approach

In contrast, consider the steps that talent managers in Reformville take to target candidates for their aspiring principals program. Besides soliciting referrals, they review teacher performance data to identify top classroom performers. Then they personally reach out to those individuals by phone and email, inviting them to information sessions and events and encouraging them to apply to the program. Such an orderly process does not hinge on the drive or institutional memory of a single individual, require managers to know everyone in the district, or even need a large budget to implement; rather, the district has developed protocols and procedures that specific staff members are responsible for implementing. Consequently, outstanding candidates are less apt to fall through the cracks.

External recruitment is largely passive

With just one exception, the districts we studied made little systematic effort to identify and recruit candidates from outside of the district. External “recruitment” in four of the five jurisdictions consisted of little more than posting job vacancies in various outlets and spreading the word about openings through job fairs, conferences, and professional and social networks. In large part, such limp recruitment efforts reflect the low priority that districts place on external candidates, as well as the limited funds budgeted for recruitment. In practice, this approach relies on the outside candidate’s own initiative to identify and pursue opportunities in the district. Of course, most high-potential candidates will also have opportunities in other districts and very likely in private or charter schools, too. On average, just 23 percent of external candidates responding to our survey about the hiring process in the districts where they applied indicated that they had been actively recruited.²³

What *should* external recruitment look like? Reformville provides an example that includes several best practices from the private sector, though it is not yet fully implemented (see *Reality check: Recruitment in other sectors*). In this district, the hiring team analyzes school performance data from other, reform-minded urban districts in the area and also scans news articles for stories about exceptional principals. Based on that information, the team identifies sitting principals with a track record of success. Next, the team reaches out to them and begins the process of selling them on the prospect of coming to Reformville. If the recruitment team knows that there will be a vacancy at a specific school within its district, it will seek out a principal with the needs and profile of that school in mind. Otherwise, the team aims to recruit enough candidates to fill all of the district’s anticipated principal vacancies, mindful that it will sort out particular placements later.

Reality check: Recruitment in other sectors

The private sector often refers to the “war” for talent, and countless articles outline aggressive tactics to identify and recruit high-potential employees. That practice pays off. A report by the Boston Consulting Group found that revenue growth among companies with strong recruiting practices is three-and-a-half times greater than among their less energetic peers.²⁴ What do some of those practices look like?

- Sodexo, a global food and facilities management company based in France, hires 5,700 managers and executives each year. To fill all of those positions, it creates a running list of prospective candidates by conducting deep web searches and studying competitors.²⁵
- At FirstMerit Bank, which HR specialist John Sullivan says has the “best and most aggressive recruiting function anywhere in the world,” recruiters identify talent by going into retail stores and experiencing firsthand who provides excellent customer service, a key skill in the banking industry.²⁶
- The public sector generally pays less than the private sector for kindred jobs. Hence, according to a study of 150 senior-level public sector professionals, it is critical for public-sector organizations to develop brands that clearly communicate what they do, why they do it, and how they differ from others, pitching their particular organization as a desirable place to work.²⁷

Reformville has also developed guidelines for its recruiters that outline key messages, discussion topics, and talking points, as well as what to look for in potential candidates. For example, the district offers principals a robust compensation package, including the opportunity to earn a performance bonus, which recruiters emphasize when talking with potential candidates. The district also gives principals greater authority than most other districts, which makes the job more appealing to some applicants. For example, principals in Reformville cannot be forced to accept teachers that have been displaced from other schools. They also have the authority to remove ineffective teachers much more quickly than in most other districts. These are two big selling points to many external candidates seeking more autonomy to lead. One principal who had been recently poached from a nearby suburb and recruited to Reformville explained: “I believe that the very best teachers need to be in front of our kids, and with [the district’s teacher evaluation system], I can make decisions about my staff that makes that happen.”

Part 2. How Districts (Possibly) Select the Best Candidates

Once candidates have applied for a principal position, districts must determine which are best qualified to lead their schools. Historically, however, most districts have done this rather casually. The typical district has not used a formal selection process for choosing new principals. Rather, candidates that met minimum qualifications have been interviewed before a committee of district-level or school-level representatives, or some mix of the two. These committees may or may not have used a standard list of questions, which were probably only loosely tied to the competencies and actions of successful school leaders. More likely than not, committee members recommended which candidates to hire based on their overall impression of the candidate, absent any set criteria or rubric.

River City was the only district we studied that had not recently revised its principal selection process. In many ways, it provides an example of old-style principal selection. First, the district screens candidates by considering referrals and recommendations, essays describing their past successes, results from an aptitude assessment, and how they conduct themselves overall. Although the aptitude test has a cutoff score, the selection process does not include a formal rubric or scoring mechanism, and the process itself is largely informal.

In contrast, selection in the other four districts now includes many practices recommended in cross-sector research, including explicit criteria, structured interviews, and aligned rubrics (see *Reality check: Selection practices from other sectors*). Our analysis of principal selection across the districts found that:

- **Finding 4.** Many districts are now incorporating research-based practices from both education and other sectors to select among principal candidates, although few examine hard data demonstrating candidates' prior effectiveness supporting student achievement.
- **Finding 5.** Historically, “who a candidate knew” heavily influenced principal hiring decisions, but efforts to standardize the selection process have made personal relationships within the district less important.

Reality check: Selection practices from other sectors

Evidence from outside the education sector shows how important it is to have effective selection tools:

- One study found that improvements in selection tools increased profits three times as much as increasing the size of the candidate pool because a good assessment tool leads to a good choice, who in turn will drive performance.²⁸
- The Aberdeen Group, a business research company, found that 53 percent of best-in-class companies use clearly defined competency models to help them select and prepare employees for new roles, compared to just 31 percent of lower-performing organizations.²⁹
- Research suggests that firms use behavioral event interviews (BEIs), wherein candidates are asked to describe experiences they have had that resemble situations they will likely face in the position for which they are interviewing—such as providing feedback to an employee or gaining stakeholder buy-in on a project. Research shows that when candidates spontaneously offer examples of how they thought, felt, and acted in a past, specific, real-life situation, they reveal more about their competencies than when they respond to a hypothetical situation or simply reflect on their own strengths.³⁰

Finding 4. New selection processes largely reflect research-based practices.

Four of the districts have recently revamped the ways they evaluate and select principal candidates to reflect best practices from education and other sectors. Specifically, they identify in detail the competencies and skills they believe principals should possess. They then provide opportunities for candidates to demonstrate these competencies and skills and evaluate candidates against them. Only one district, however, collects and analyzes a number of hard data points demonstrating candidates' prior success supporting student achievement.

Selection criteria focus on competencies and skills believed to be important

Four districts have identified key competencies and skills that they believe successful principals demonstrate, based largely on research that analyzes the behaviors and patterns of thinking that effective school leaders possess. These competencies and skills vary from site to site, but include some common themes:

- **Instructional expertise:** The candidate can identify good teaching and lead others to improve their instruction.
- **People management:** The candidate can build a strong and collaborative team and leverage his staff to maximize their talents and impact.
- **Cultural leadership:** The principal clearly communicates a vision and inspires others, including staff, students, and community members, to work toward a common vision.
- **Problem solving:** The principal can look at a problem, identify relevant information, develop a plan to address the problem, and overcome barriers that turn up along the way.

Most districts look at little hard data regarding candidates' success supporting student achievement

It was striking to us that evidence of prior effectiveness in regard to pupil achievement does not appear explicitly on the list above. It is not that districts do not care about prior effectiveness; they often look at job evaluations or ask candidates to talk about instances when they improved student achievement as part of a competency-based assessment. Yet four out of the five districts do not seem to ask the critical question: is there solid evidence that this candidate has improved student outcomes in his past roles, and therefore reason to believe that he knows how and is apt to do it again?

A number of survey respondents also commented on how little the district where they interviewed seemed to consider their previous performance. For example, fewer than half of the Urbanopolis candidates who made it to the end of the selection process agreed or strongly agreed with the assertion that the selection process evaluated their past experience supporting student achievement. "I would suggest [the district] take a closer look at the individual's past accomplishments and achievements around operating a successful school campus," one respondent recommended. "Review the individual's past school data and allow the data to have a stronger impact on the final decision." (Not surprisingly, candidates whom the district did not hire were more likely to feel this way compared to candidates who were chosen.)

We do not contend that there is a “right” way to use student performance data in the selection process or that it ought to weigh more than key competencies. But the best predictor of future success is evidence of past success, and four of the districts don’t gather much of that kind of evidence about their candidates.³²

We’re mindful that rigorous measures of teacher and administrator effectiveness have not been included in evaluation systems until recently, and are still not available in all the districts we studied (Table 4). But certainly some data are available in the No Child Left Behind era, including school proficiency levels and possibly growth scores, performance on college entrance exams, and graduation rates. Candidates can also supply various kinds of evidence of their past effectiveness even in the absence of a universal measure.

Table 4. Implementation year for evaluation systems that consider student performance

	Teacher	Assistant principal and principal
Reformville	2009-10	2010-11
River City	2013-14	2013-14
Union City	2010-11	2010-11
Urbanopolis	2012-13	2010-11
Harbor Town	None	None

In contrast, Reformville’s hiring team collects a number of hard data points from the candidates’ previous roles. For example, they look at pass rates and improvement over time for sitting principals applying from other districts. And for internal candidates, the district’s evaluation system for assistant principals includes a measure of progress toward three types of school-wide goals: proficiency goals in math and reading, performance goals specific to a high-need student population enrolled at the school, and another school-wide performance goal that the assistant principal chooses.³³ The superintendent then reviews these data and discusses them with candidates during their final-round interview.

Of course, the competencies described above are intended to gauge the likelihood that a candidate will be successful as a principal. The purpose of the interview questions and selection activities is to gather evidence relative to whether candidates possess the educational know-how—and the managerial and cultural leadership—to run a successful school. As one interviewee involved in hiring pointed out, however, a challenge is that smart people generally do well on many assessments yet do not necessarily deliver on the job. Similar to the child who tests well, but does not apply himself and ends up with lousy grades, some candidates may perform well on selection activities, but fail to produce results at the end of the day.

Interviews and activities aim to evaluate candidates on core competencies, but include less predictive activities as well

Historically, few districts had identified the core competencies that successful principals demonstrate. With that list now in hand in four of the districts we studied, those districts have developed interview activities aimed at providing opportunities for candidates to demonstrate those competencies (Table 5). All of the districts rely heavily on in-person interviews. While interviews follow various formats, most include at least some competency-based questions (see *Sample interview questions*). Typically, they ask candidates to describe a situation where they demonstrated a particular competency. For example, describing times they failed to meet their goals would provide opportunities for districts to gauge applicants' perseverance. But districts also use questions that appear less valuable in assessing competence, such as asking candidates to express opinions or speculate about how they might respond to hypothetical situations.³⁴

Table 5. Activities used to evaluate principal candidates

District	Online application	Essays / writing sample	Respond to scenario	Data-based action plan	In-person interview	Interview with superintendent	Other
Reformville	X	X	X	X	X	X	Phone interview
River City	X				X		
Union City	X	X	X	X	X	X	
Urbanopolis	X	X			X		Online assessment; skills demonstration
Harbor Town*	X	X	X	X	X		Referral; facilitation of group discussion

* Refers to selection for principal-preparation program since all (or nearly all) principal candidates are chosen from among program graduates.

In addition to in-person interviews, most districts ask candidates to perform a relevant task, such as giving feedback to a teacher, developing a plan to address a hypothetical issue, or using data to craft an action plan for improvement (see *Examples of additional selection activities*). The four districts that have recently revamped their selection processes have also tried to map each of the questions and activities in their selection process to one or more of the core competencies that they value in principals.

Rubrics aligned with competencies

Three of the districts have also introduced rubrics to evaluate how well candidates demonstrate key competencies and skills, which enables them to compare candidates to one another. The rubrics assign candidates points for each part of the selection process or competency/skill (Table 6). Candidates that meet the benchmark or rank in the top of the group advance to the next round. Often, these rubrics use fairly broad descriptions that could apply to an array of questions or activities. However, a lack of specificity may encourage raters to interpret the criteria differently, the consequences of which we discuss further in the “Implications” section (p. 31). Meanwhile, the other two districts largely rank candidates based on gut instinct.

Some candidates criticize selection process as too burdensome

While there is a strong rationale for many of the steps and systems that districts have instituted to select among their candidates for the principalship, these can become a heavy lift for those candidates. By and large, these new processes require considerable time from applicants, as well as district staff. In Urbanopolis, for example, candidates must clear five different hurdles even to enter the hiring pool, and then they must interview at individual schools as part of the placement process. Reformville employs four steps in addition to school-level interviews. Many activities, including essays, online assessments, and demonstrations, require hours of a candidate’s time. In-person interviews then require candidates to travel to the district and spend up to a full day interviewing with different stakeholders at each step. At least two of our five districts require multiple trips for in-person interviews.

Sample interview questions

- Tell me how you have used time in your building for your teachers to review student data and plan for interventions.
- Describe a time when you were in a leadership position that required you to build consensus among stakeholders with competing goals/interests.
- Why is it that some schools have high levels of parent involvement, while others do not? Identify what you believe to be the most important causes of this issue.

Examples of additional selection activities

- High School X is persistently low performing. It is also plagued by student disciplinary issues and tensions between parents and staff. What steps would you take within the first thirty days as principal to change the culture and performance of the school? (Essay question)
- During a visit to Ms. Teacher’s classroom, you observe her teaching and you note that she has not included guided practice for her students. On each of two previous visits to her classroom, you had also observed that she failed to include guided practice in her lessons. Draft a memo to the teacher. (Essay question)
- Make three data-driven observations looking at a school report card. Identify one key area of need for the school’s students and the potential causes that might have led to this area of need. Outline next steps for addressing this key area with your school community. (In-person data activity)

Table 6. Sample evaluation rubric for core competency: “monitoring and supervising data”

Interview question: Please describe for us what good teaching looks like. What about mediocre teaching? Poor teaching? How would you work with each?	
Score	Descriptor
4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is consistent and unrelenting in reinforcing the highest standards of student learning as central to the mission of the school. • Possesses a deep knowledge of effective instruction and is able to help others make the link between effective instruction and their day-to-day practice. • Explicitly links observation data to clear suggestions for improvement.
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reinforces high standards of student achievement. • Understands effective teaching; uses this information in guiding classroom instruction. • Links observation data to suggestions for improvement.
2	Understands aspects of effective teaching and attempts to use this in guiding classroom instruction.
1	Does not understand the aspects of effective teaching, and/or fails to guide others in their delivery of instruction.

A lengthy selection process is not necessarily a problem, but it surely poses tradeoffs. The time and money that the district spends selecting its new principals is (obviously) time and money not spent elsewhere. Yes, it may be worth the investment if the process yields better hires. As we discuss later, however, most districts do not have mechanisms for evaluating whether the time and effort they spend selecting candidates really does yield sufficient return on investment.

Applicants face tradeoffs and costs, too. Some interviewees and survey respondents noted that they or someone they knew withdrew from the selection process because it required too much time or was not feasible given their other commitments. Outside candidates, in particular, complained that it was a big inconvenience—and significant cost—to travel to the district multiple times during school hours. Candidates who stick with the process essentially gamble that the payoff will be worth it; if they do not receive an attractive offer at the end, however, candidates may have to wait another year to start the process all over again somewhere else. One interviewee recalled frustration about the length of the selection process: “I couldn’t keep coming up for interviews again and again. You would have an interview with someone in HR, and then they would want you to come back and have an interview with [someone higher up], then this person, and then a panel. They lost some good candidates that accepted jobs at other places because the process took too long.” It is also likely that some high-potential candidates did not apply at all because they were not willing to jump through all of the hoops that districts placed before them.

Finding 5. Efforts to standardize the selection process have made “whom you know” within the district less important.

Two districts told us that a large reason they revamped their selection process was because politics and “whom a candidate knows” used to matter more than whether the candidate could do the job well. As the head of principal hiring for Union City explained, personal networks once played a dominant role because there was no true process for hiring principals. By implementing a consistent set of questions and activities that standardized the process, and involving multiple raters who serve as a check on one another, Union City aimed to lessen the influence of those relationships.³⁵ Said one principal, “we are a political district. In the past it wasn’t about merit, but they [the central-office staff] are considering that now.”

Central-office personnel from the districts we studied often admitted that “whom you know” still matters to some degree, but that personal connections are usually helpful only to candidates who already have a foot in the door. A handful of interviewees and survey respondents suggested, however, that personal relationships might still be an important factor. In Urbanopolis, for example, a third of survey respondents who *received an offer* to lead a school indicated that existing personal relationships that candidates have with central-office employees are “very” or “extremely” influential in the district’s final hiring decisions. Not surprisingly, candidates who completed the district’s selection process but did not match with a particular school felt even more strongly that personal connections matter; more than half of candidates selected into the hiring pool but not ultimately hired indicated that these relationships are extremely influential.

Of course, there is no way to know how large a role politics *actually* plays in hiring decisions today, or how much that role has changed with the introduction of new selection methods. It is clear, however, that “black boxes” remain in the selection process. One of the districts that revamped its procedure does not use a rubric to evaluate and select candidates. Instead, interviewers base their recommendations (regarding who should advance to the next round) on their “gut reactions.” Another district evaluates candidates using rubrics until the final step, when candidates meet senior district staff. In yet another district, the superintendent can allow a candidate to bypass much of the selection process.

Selecting the right leader for a particular school may require a certain *je ne sais quoi*. Ultimately, districts—like any entity hiring for any sort of leadership role—must strike a balance between objectivity and discretion. But the more space there is for deciders to exercise discretion, the more potential there is for existing personal relationships to sway decisions, not necessarily in directions with the greatest payoff for students, teachers, or taxpayers.

Part 3. Placing New Principals Where They (Might) Fit

Principals are employees of the district, but they ultimately serve a specific school community. And each school community is unique. Its strengths, challenges, and culture are distinct—sometimes a little, sometimes a lot—from every other school in the district. Principals are also unique individuals with myriad experiences, views, strengths, and weaknesses. Some will therefore “fit” at some schools better than others and most likely be more effective in those positions. According to one study, a good match between a principal and the school she leads can boost student achievement by 0.17 of a standard deviation—a substantial effect.³⁶

In this section, we examine the steps that districts take to assign candidates that have met their selection criteria to specific schools. Looking across the five districts in our study, we found:

- **Finding 6.** Principal placement largely lacks a clear and consistent process to assess candidates’ fit.
- **Finding 7.** Late hiring causes some candidates to drop out.

Finding 6. Districts generally lack a clear and consistent process to assess candidates’ fit with specific schools.

Placement is the last piece of the hiring process before the district extends a formal offer. At this point, candidates have usually met the district’s selection criteria, making them eligible for hire, but they are not yet assigned to specific schools.

Community members often play a key role in placement

While selection into the eligible pool largely takes place at the district level, we found that placement almost always includes a role for the school community. In every district but one, school-level committees that include teachers, parents, and other non-teaching staff and community members regularly interview candidates and express a preference for whom they would like to be the next principal at their school (Table 7).

After interviewing candidates, school-level committees recommend their top choices for the principalship in the four districts that convene such committees. While committees usually receive their top picks, this comes after the superintendent, and in some cases the school board, approves their recommendations (Table 8). And when a school committee does not receive its top pick, it is often because he or she is the first choice of another school as well.

In some districts, the central office also influences school-level committees’ final recommendations by controlling which candidates can interview at each school. In three districts, schools may only interview candidates the central office sends to them, although schools may ask to meet with particular candidates and candidates may express a preference for a particular school during the selection process. Only in Urbanopolis can schools interview any candidate who passes the district’s selection process and enters the hiring pool. In addition, candidates in Urbanopolis’s hiring pool can reach out directly to school-level committees to express their interest in applying for a leadership role at a particular school.

Table 7. Who is involved in the placement process?

District	Teachers	Non-teaching staff*	Parents	Non-parent community members	Other
Reformville	X	X	X	X	Building representative for teachers' union
River City	X	X	X	X	n/a
Union City	X		X		Central-office personnel and teachers' representative
Urbanopolis	X		X		School improvement officer
Harbor Town**					Central-office personnel

* Non-teaching staff may include administrators, guidance counselors, resource officers, or any other faculty members who do not directly teach students.

** In rare instances, Harbor Town may involve a community panel in placement decisions. Those cases represent an exception, however, rather than a rule. Otherwise, central-office personnel determine placements.

Table 8. Percentage of school committees receiving their top choice for principal in 2013-14

Region	Number of schools hiring	Percentage of schools that received their top choice
Reformville	11-20	~80%
River City	10-20	100%
Union City	<10	100%
Urbanopolis	>20	Not available*
Harbor Town	10-20	Not applicable**

* Urbanopolis is very decentralized and does not collect these data.

** Harbor Town does not regularly include school-level committees in its placement process.

Methods to assess “fit” generally lack a clear and consistent process

It was not clear whether the contributions of these committees were all that useful, in practice. According to interviewees, the involvement of school-level committees may serve two purposes, 1) they provide an opportunity for local involvement in the decision-making process and 2) they assess how well a particular candidate “fits” within a given school community. But they also have a number of shortcomings:

- **They don’t know enough about the principal’s job.** Few on these committees understand what it takes to drive student performance, and instead tend to focus the interview on cultural things, like community engagement and discipline, without ever delving into a candidate’s ability to effect academic gains. School committees also seldom understand the many other hats a principal must wear as he navigates district policy, balances budgets, and works his influence to motivate students and staff.
- **They do not understand leadership needs across the district.** Several candidates may be good fits for one school, while only one candidate may be a good fit for another. Placements in any given year must therefore reflect the best matches across all of the schools in the district that need principals, even if a better match might exist for a particular school.
- **They often expect the district to hire the candidate they recommend.** If the district does not follow the school committee’s recommendation, committee members may be disgruntled and take their frustrations out on the new school leader.³⁷

This is not to say that community members should not be involved in the placement process. It makes sense that they would have some say over who will next lead their school. But districts need a rigorous and systematic process to hedge against the considerations listed above.

Most of the districts we studied do make some effort in this respect. In River City, for example, an assistant superintendent works with each school committee to develop a building-specific needs assessment, which, though not standardized across committees, outlines candidate competencies and priorities that the committee believes make for a good “fit.” For a school struggling with student discipline, for example, criteria could include demonstrated understanding of discipline strategies. Similarly, in Urbanopolis, the school-improvement officer works with the school-level committee to create a profile of the principal needed for that particular school, including any special characteristics, background, and qualifications that the new principal would ideally possess.

But in each district we studied, the placement process is less formal and less rigorous than the selection process. It also largely lacks a clearly defined system for identifying a school’s top needs, evaluating and comparing candidates’ strengths in relation to those needs, or looking back over time to assess fit based on previous district experience.

Finding 7. Late hiring causes some candidates to drop out.

The hiring timeline, and especially the length and demands of placement interviews, also presents a barrier for candidates in some districts. According to the districts we studied, anticipating vacancies is a constant challenge because principals who are leaving have little incentive to announce their intentions early. Two districts offer exiting principals a bonus of up to \$10,000 if they announce their departure by the end of December. But principals still hesitate to do so because they worry that a formal announcement will hurt school morale and undermine their authority for the balance of the year.

As a result, districts must often estimate how many slots they will have to fill, and inevitably, a few vacancies are not announced until summer. Most of the districts in our study have tried to avoid scrambling to find talent too close to the start of the school year by selecting candidates into a hiring pool in the spring. Candidates in the “pool” know that they are eligible to hire, but the district generally has not signed a contract with them.

Late vacancy notifications that lead to late hiring decisions motivate some candidates to withdraw from the hiring process, especially if they have other opportunities or would have to move or make other arrangements if hired.³⁸ We also heard that the placement process, which may require candidates to interview at multiple schools over the course of weeks or months, poses a particular bottleneck in the hiring process.

According to central-office personnel in Reformville, the top reason they lost candidates in the last hiring cycle was because candidates found placement elsewhere before the district could extend an official offer. Other candidates balk at the lack of time they have to prepare for the upcoming school year once an offer is made. “The timing was a little stressful because I didn’t have a guarantee, but needed to let [my old district] know that I was going to leave,” recalled a recent hire who did not receive an offer until July. Another said that “in the real world, people make decisions in April, May, maybe June. The district finally hired me in July and wanted me to start a week later. They need to make offers earlier, or otherwise they’ll get the leftovers.”

Part 4. Implications

Although we found evidence of progress in each of the districts we profiled, we also saw several important examples where hiring practices do not appear well designed to identify, recruit, select, and place school leaders with the greatest potential to succeed in their schools. A grueling job combined with recruitment efforts that are often passive, and focus largely on internal talent, likely mean that districts are not recruiting enough high-quality candidates. Nor will they do so without making the principalship more attractive. Meanwhile, only one district in our study has matched its laudable efforts to revamp the selection process with an equally valiant attempt to measure the impact of those changes, leaving one to wonder whether districts are any better at selecting new school leaders than they were before their recent procedural changes took place. And although both central-office personnel and principal candidates agree that a principal's "fit" with his new school is critical, most districts have generally invested little effort in designing a process to assess it, making it impossible to determine how well they are matching new leaders to their schools.

Too few high-quality candidates likely apply for school leadership positions.

The central-office personnel within every one of the districts we profiled described some amount of worry about attracting enough talent. When we asked interviewees involved in the hiring process whether the district received enough high-quality candidates to fill its principal vacancies, here is some of what we heard:

- *We had unusual spikes in late resignations last year, and that's where we have candidates who maybe aren't quite ready.* – Reformville
- *Not at all. We do not have enough people who are highly qualified.* – River City
- *Do we have enough APs who are on the bench right now? Knock on wood, yeah. But I'm not ecstatic. I'm not jumping up and down.* – Union City
- *We never have enough people.* – Urbanopolis
- *We have high quality, but the quantity is lacking.* – Harbor Town

Actually proving that there are too few high-quality candidates is impossible because there is no established definition or set of criteria for candidate quality—and "quality" doesn't necessarily mean the same thing everywhere. Some data, however, certainly point toward that conclusion. For example, in three of our five districts, hiring teams determined that five or fewer candidates per vacancy were minimally qualified for the job. And none of the districts felt that more than eight candidates per vacancy were minimally qualified.³⁹ Private sector firms often aim to get around one hundred applicants per position in the hopes that about one-quarter will be worth real consideration.⁴⁰ Although mere numbers do not speak to candidate quality, a larger applicant pool translates to a better chance of having a few quality applicants from which to choose—and a better chance of being able to determine which among the quality candidates would do the best job in a particular school setting. So although these data are not conclusive, they suggest that too few quality applicants apply.

We also attempted to examine other data that might shed light on candidate quality. As noted above, few districts have collected hard data on candidates' past success boosting student performance—data that would likely provide the strongest indicator of future success. We also tried to analyze candidates' credentials, including their work history and degrees, but received very little of the data we requested (see *Scarce data on hiring*). Only Harbor Town was able to share those data for all of its principal applicants. As a result, we could not compare how “paper credentials” differed among candidates who became principals and those who did not. Research tells us, however, that such credentials predict little about individuals' effectiveness.⁴¹

Strengthening candidate quality means making the principalship more attractive.

On the whole, we found a lackluster recruitment process and a focus on internal candidates, almost surely allowing some high-potential candidates to fall through the cracks or go unnoticed. More actively identifying and recruiting candidates both inside and outside the district and looking beyond traditional applicant pools would therefore improve the quality (and size) of the candidate pool. So would identifying high-potential candidates within the district early in their careers and providing opportunities for them to

Scarce data on hiring

We requested two types of quantitative data from each district:

- **Candidate characteristics**, including demographics, work experience, whether the candidate was an internal or external applicant, and any data the district collected on past effectiveness.
- **Candidate quality**, including the number of applicants who advanced to each successive round of the selection process and their corresponding evaluation or rubric scores.

Candidate characteristics

Reformville collects and keeps detailed data on candidates' characteristics, but said it could not share this information due to confidentiality restrictions. The other four districts agreed to work with us to share the data, but only Harbor Town shared them for all its candidates. We anticipated that some of the data might prove elusive; that turned out to be the case far more often than we expected. Moreover, much of what we received came with multiple caveats. For example, one district shared descriptive data on the 170 individuals who applied for a principalship over the past four years and met minimal qualifications, but there was no experience data for forty-eight of them. More concerning, the district said that it could not indicate who was actually hired from the list it shared. Another district only shared data for candidates who were hired. And a third district did not share any candidate characteristic data despite repeated promises that it would do so.

Candidate quality

We only received candidate quality data from Reformville. A second district said it had those data but simply did not have the time and resources to pull the information together for us. As described above, two other districts do not use a rubric. The last district simply failed to respond to our request.

Over the course of this project, we checked in with the districts repeatedly to address some of the concerns noted above, and even offered to provide funding for their office to help fulfill our data request—an offer just one district accepted. We also realize that districts may not collect these data points in the format we requested, although we volunteered to re-format any files they were willing to share.

The end result was a patchwork of data, sometimes missing critical pieces that made them almost completely unusable. As a result, we can say little about how the principal candidates that districts hire differ from those they do not hire, or how many applicants meet the criteria that districts have set for effective leadership. Far more concerning, however, is that some of the districts we studied cannot answer these questions themselves.

grow and move up an administrative track, thus perhaps also mitigating the financial disincentives that teachers face when they consider transitioning to school leadership ten or more years into their careers.

Our conversations with district personnel and evidence from other research suggest, however, that a real deterrent for many high-potential candidates is that the principal position simply demands too much—and pays too little. According to one of the districts, previous survey data showed that many teachers and teacher leaders were not interested in pursuing administrative roles because the job brought on too much stress and the compensation package was too small. Others pointed to the longer hours that principals must put in—pretty much year-round—and the increasingly high-stakes accountability standards they face. Bain & Company found that less than half of the more than 2,500 teachers and teacher leaders they surveyed across seven districts and five charter management organizations thought that principals had appropriate levels of responsibility and autonomy.⁴² And only about 30 percent thought that principals had a sufficient level of support or that school conditions allowed them to be successful. Consequently, less than 20 percent of survey respondents thought that the most talented people in their districts became principals.

Meanwhile, Reformville’s hiring team credits its ability to poach talent from other districts to the fact that it can offer principals what many other districts do not—competitive pay with the potential to earn a performance bonus, greater authority to hire and fire teachers, and membership within a district that has redefined itself over the last several years around a message of reform and performance. As one candidate noted when asked why he decided to apply for a principalship there, “everyone is really passionate about reform, and not every district has that.”

Of course, the job in Reformville remains incredibly demanding and we can easily picture steps that district leaders could take to make it more manageable, such as creating jobs and structures that distribute the work, providing opportunities for teacher leaders to play a more active role, and supplying more and better support mechanisms once principals are on the job.

Evaluating district efforts in these areas was beyond the scope of this report, although some of the districts we studied are surely taking action to improve the position. But the larger point remains: if districts want to be able to select among a greater pool of excellent candidates to run their schools, they will have to largely reinvent the principalship so that it is a more appealing job that pays principals what they are worth and that promising candidates truly yearn to fill.

The impact of changes in the selection process is largely unknown.

Despite apparent improvements in the ways that most of the districts we studied select principals from among those who do apply, districts can offer scant evidence that they are selecting the best candidates, or even doing a better job now than before. The selection processes that districts shared with us look good on paper, but there are many ways such processes could fall short. They could potentially:

- **Evaluate the wrong things.** Perhaps some of the competencies and skills that districts have placed at the center of their selection process are not actually the best clues to a future principal’s success in a specific district.

- **Use invalid rubrics.** Similarly, the rubrics that districts use may not appropriately identify talent or differentiate between candidates.
- **Use the rubrics incorrectly.** Even if the rubric is valid, raters may not be using it correctly, allowing politics or charisma to cloud their evaluations.
- **Fail to provide adequate opportunities for all candidates to demonstrate competence.** The questions that candidates must answer and the activities they are asked to perform may not provide sufficient opportunities for them to demonstrate the skills and competencies on which they are being evaluated, or may be biased toward candidates with a particular background or experience.

That is not to say that any of these things *are* happening, but it is critical that districts test their approach to determine how well it is working and how best to deploy limited resources in making these crucial staffing choices.

We asked all of the districts to describe any evidence indicating that they are selecting better candidates than they did before overhauling their selection process, but we received few specific examples. Reformville seems to have done the most; its staff regularly reviews the performance results of new principals and data from the previous year's selection process to identify trends, as well as potential shortcomings. As a result of this feedback loop, the district continues to improve its hiring process every year.

Other districts said they plan to improve their evaluation methods in the future, but have not gotten there yet. In part, they have been so focused on changing the process, they have not given much energy to evaluating it. And again, limits on time, budget, and data availability posed barriers to putting evaluation systems in place.

Given the amount of time and resources involved in designing these new processes, and the importance of selecting the best people, it is disturbing that some of these trailblazing districts are not doing more to evaluate their own valiant efforts. Until they develop a plan to assess their processes and determine which pieces best predict a principal's future success in *their* district or at a particular school, they will likely waste energy on selection activities while pushing away potentially excellent candidates unwilling to put forth the time and effort to meet their selection demands.

Quality of match between principal and school is a mystery.

Similarly, without a system to define what a good match looks like, districts cannot know whether current assignment methods are working. Much like candidate quality, the quality of the match between schools and principals is presently unknown (or at least unreported). Given that three of the districts we studied replaced 20 to 25 percent of their principals last year, districts have much to gain by ensuring that new principals have both the right skill set and the right personality to meet the needs of the schools in which they are placed.

Recommendations

How can districts ensure that they recruit enough high-quality principal candidates, select the best from those that apply, and match new hires to the school where they can have the greatest impact? We offer six big recommendations to any district looking to improve. They reflect lessons learned from what works well in the five districts we studied, as well as areas of needed improvement, plus our review of other research on successful hiring in schools and other industries.

1. Make the job a lot more appealing.

- **Give principals the power to lead.** Top-notch leaders want the leeway to run their organizations successfully: selecting a team, setting strategy, and deciding how to use resources to get the job done. Districts could make the principalship more attractive by extending this kind of autonomy.
- **Make the job more manageable.**
 - > Create school structures that distribute the leadership responsibilities among two or more people, such as an operational leader and an instructional leader.
 - > Provide opportunities for teacher leaders to take a more active role, again reducing the demands on the principal. For example, teacher leaders could take full responsibility for leading teams across grades or departments. They could also observe and evaluate other teachers.
- While giving them more authority, offer principals the option to purchase needed support services from the district to replace work the principal would have to do himself. For example, principals could purchase data analysis services from the district office, taking that responsibility off of the principal's plate.

2. Pay great leaders what they're worth. Pay must be commensurate with the demands, responsibilities, and risks of the job. Principals should therefore earn considerably more than other school staff with less responsibility. They should also be compensated for taking on more challenging positions as well as for producing success.

3. Take an active approach to principal recruitment. Districts ought to invest the time and resources needed to strategically recruit talent within and outside of the district:

- **Develop criteria to identify promising principal candidates.** The primary criterion should be past effectiveness improving student performance, followed by evidence of critical leadership competencies. For external candidates, the district should also identify in which geographic regions or from which backgrounds to search for these candidates. Ideally, candidates from within the education sector will have had experience working with a similar student population and/or in a similar community to one or more of the schools for which the district is hiring a new principal.
- **Actively seek out those candidates.** Districts should implement a recruitment plan for engaging promising candidates, from both within and outside of district, and including both those who have expressed an interest in working there and those who have not. The recruitment process should emphasize what the district has to offer as well as why the district believes that the candidate would be an asset.
- **Identify and prepare internal candidates systematically and early.** Districts should also take steps to build an internal pipeline to the principal's office by identifying high-potential

leaders early in their teaching careers and offering them leadership experiences that truly prepare them for them for the job. Again, districts ought to develop criteria for identifying these high flyers and actively pursue them for leadership opportunities rather than simply posting such opportunities and waiting for candidates to apply. Especially important are real leadership positions that are stepping stones to the principalship, such as teacher leader roles in which educators actually assume accountability for a team of teachers and the results of all students the team taught.

- **Eliminate barriers that might discourage potential talent.** Streamline the hiring process wherever possible so that candidates can receive an offer in time to prepare for it, eliminate credentialing requirements that preclude talented candidates both within and outside of education from making the transition into school leadership, and promote all that school leadership has to offer.

4. Evaluate candidates against the competencies and skills that successful principals are known to possess. Districts should create rubrics for evaluating candidates against the skills and competencies that research shows is most indicative of future success as a school leader. In addition to creating an aligned rubric, it is critical that districts train raters to use the rubrics correctly.⁴³

5. Design the placement process to match schools' needs with candidates' strengths. Placement should add to the overall hiring process by providing all schools that have vacancies the best possible match given their unique needs and the strengths of individual candidates for the principalship. For example, a candidate who is a good fit for a school in need of turnaround leadership likely offers different strengths from a candidate who would fit well with a high-performing school. A true needs assessment should therefore:

- **Assess schools' needs.** Work with each school community to determine its challenges and strengths to identify the type of leader most likely to succeed at the school.
- **Develop criteria by which to assess a candidate's fit with the school.** Create a rubric or similar tool to compare objectively how well different candidates fit with a particular school based on the school's needs assessment, and choose the best match.

6. Continually evaluate hiring efforts. While the need for evaluation may be obvious, all but one of the districts we studied has largely overlooked this step. To effectively evaluate their hiring methods, districts must:

- **Collect and analyze plenty of data.** These should include: applicant characteristics (to determine whether certain types of candidates are more successful overall or in a particular setting); candidates' prior student performance data (to see whether and how they correlate to future success); candidates' scores at each stage in the selection process (to determine which steps are most indicative of future success); principal effectiveness once hired (to determine success); strength of match between principal and school; and principal turnover rates.
- **Develop metrics to assess each stage of the hiring process.** The metrics should examine past district decisions to shed light on key questions, such as how likely it is that a particular candidate will be successful in the district or at a particular type of school.

Conclusion

What do districts do to hire the best people to do the toughest job? So far as we've been able to learn, not enough. Looking across the five districts we studied (and these are districts that are in many ways out front on these issues):

- Districts *don't really* recruit—pay is often not sufficient to compensate for the grueling work principals must do, focusing on grow-your-own strategies limits the talent pool in some districts, and high-potential candidates fall through the cracks of informal or passive recruiting practices. As a result, it is likely that too few high-quality candidates apply for school leadership positions, and that too few will ever apply unless the position becomes more attractive.
- Districts might *possibly* select the best candidates—their selection processes are increasingly standardized and incorporate research-based practices, but they largely overlook hard data demonstrating that a candidate has previously moved student performance.
- And districts place new principals where they *might* fit—but current processes are not clear enough or systematic enough to reliably match candidates' strengths to specific schools' needs, and in some cases they extend the hiring process to the point that some candidates drop out.

We recognize that many districts have made progress toward improving their practices in this crucial realm, that they continue to reform their hiring practices, and that they face real tradeoffs with respect to how they spend their time and money. The districts we studied are some of the trailblazers—yet even there, much more work remains to be done. In the meantime, districts will struggle to find the best people to do the demanding work of school-level leadership that they—and their students—so urgently need.

Appendix: Methodology

This study examines principal recruitment, selection, and placement practices in five school districts. We used qualitative and quantitative data gathered by reviewing district documentation, interviewing central-office personnel and recently hired principals, and administering principal candidate surveys. Based on these data, we identified trends and variances across hiring practices in the five districts. In addition, we scoured relevant research from both inside and outside of the education sector with which to put our findings into context. This section details our methodology for each stage of the study.

District selection

In identifying districts, we sought to include a mix of sites based on a number of characteristics, including: size, geography, presence of alternative principal pipelines, contractual protections for principals, the role of community-based councils in principal hiring, and degree of union activity.

As a first step, we conferred with a number of experts who recommended a total of sixteen potential sites. Next, we gathered information related to the characteristics listed above. Based on that information and existing district relationships, we ranked each of the sites on our list. We reached out to the sites on our list based on their rank, ultimately recruiting the five profiled in this report.

Data description

To understand principal recruitment, selection, and placement practices in each of the districts, we requested and gathered a mix of qualitative and quantitative data from each site. Table A1 summarizes those data.

Data collection

We collected the data above by

- Conducting interviews with district personnel and newly hired principals;
- Reviewing district documentation on the hiring process; and
- Administering surveys to recent principal candidates.

Interviews

We conducted a one-day site visit at each district site, during which we interviewed central-office personnel directly involved in the hiring process, as well as principals who had been hired for the 2013-14 school year. Interviews focused on: recruitment and selection strategies; processes for recruitment, selection, and placement; perceived effectiveness of the hiring process; and recent hires' perceptions of district processes.

In addition, we conducted follow-up interviews with each site as we finalized the report to clarify components of the hiring process and collect additional information.

District documentation

All of the districts shared documents related to the qualitative data outlined in Table A1. However, we received only a handful of the quantitative data requested.

Table A1. Data requested

Qualitative data	Quantitative data
<p>Recruiting Process Documentation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Job postings for the principal position • Recruiting materials • Description of recruiting practices <p>Selection Process Documentation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Documentation outlining the hiring process from start to finish • Timeline for the hiring process • List of individuals involved in the hiring process by position <p>Selection Tools</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Application for principal position • Interview protocol for principal candidates for all rounds of selection process • Activities related to the selection process, for example: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Scenarios to which candidates must respond or role play > Data candidates are asked to analyze > Group interview questions • Rubrics for evaluating principal candidates, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Rubric for evaluating candidates' initial applications, including any minimum criteria > Rubric for evaluating interview responses > Rubric for evaluating any of the activities listed above 	<p>Applicant Characteristics</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Background information, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Year of application > Age > Race / Ethnicity > Type of principal licensure • Whether the candidate worked in the district, and if so, position held • Education experience (e.g., if previously a teacher, academic coach, assistant principal, or principal) • Full-time work experience outside education • Credentials, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Names of universities attended > Degrees earned • Other training (e.g., New Leaders for New Schools, Building Excellent Schools, etc.) • Other certifications in non-education fields • Evaluation results in previous roles • Awards / accolades • Evidence of effectiveness in prior roles <p>Summary Selection Metrics</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of principal vacancies • Number of applicants • Number of candidates to whom the district extended an offer • Number of candidates who accepted offers <p>Candidate Quality</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of candidates asked to proceed to each round in the selection process • Number of candidates who actually proceeded to each round in the selection process • Average rubric score for candidates that proceeded to the next round of the selection process, for each step

As Table A2 shows, two of the districts did not share any data related to candidate characteristics, and caveats exist for the trio that did. Data from Harbor Town were the most complete, but it had the fewest applicants and the majority of them were selected. River City shared descriptive data on the 170 individuals who applied for a principalship over the past four years and met minimal qualifications, but there was no experience data for forty-eight of them, and the district told us that it could not indicate who was actually hired. Urbanopolis only shared these data for the principals it hired (rather than all of the candidates who applied). Reformville did not provide applicant characteristics data because of concerns related to the district's personnel policies. After repeated requests, Union City was unable to respond to our data request for unspecified reasons.

Table A2. Collection of candidate characteristics data

Applicant characteristics			
District	Applicant background	Work experience (within and outside of education)	Credentials and training
Reformville*	-	-	-
River City**	Partial	Partial	Partial
Union City	-	-	-
Urbanopolis***	Partial	Partial	Partial
Harbor Town	Full data	Full data	Full data

* Reformville did not provide applicant characteristics data because of concerns related to the district's personnel policies.

** There was no information related to experience and credentials for approximately 25 percent of principal applicants for River City.

*** Urbanopolis provided applicant characteristics data, but it included only candidates the district ultimately hired.

We also requested summary data describing each district's most recent selection and hiring process. These data included the number of principal vacancies the district needed to fill, the number of applicants for those vacancies, the number of candidates who received offers, and the number of candidates who ultimately became principals in the district. We received these data from all of the districts.

Finally, we requested data related to the number and quality of candidates advancing through the hiring process. Only Reformville shared these data.

Survey administration

We asked districts to send online surveys to all candidates who applied to be principals for the 2013-14 school year and were deemed minimally qualified for the position. To administer the survey, we provided each district contact a unique link to a survey customized for the hiring process in that district. The primary goal of the survey was to gauge applicants' impressions of the selection and placement processes. All responses were anonymous.

Everyone who made it past the district’s initial screening did not experience the full selection process, or in some cases, even most of it. The survey therefore only asked candidates who indicated that they had at least participated in an in-person interview for their opinions on the process. Districts’ response rates were low—with the exception of Harbor Town, no more than 45 percent of those who received the survey link in a given district responded (Table A3).

Table A3. Descriptive statistics for principal candidate survey

District	Response rate	Respondents that completed the selection process	Respondents that were hired	Actual hires
Reformville	35%	<10	<10*	10-20
River City	45%	10-20	<10	10-20
Union City	-	-	-	-
Urbanopolis	38%	>50	10-20	>20
Harbor Town (Principal-Preparation Program)**	94%	10-20	N/A	N/A
Harbor Town (Newly Hired Principals)**	100%	10-20	10-20	10-20

* The district requested that we not ask recent hires who participated in interviews to also take the survey to preserve their time. As a result, a maximum of five candidates who were hired for the 2013-14 school year could have responded to the survey.

**Since Harbor Town filled all of its principal vacancies for 2013-14 from graduates of its principal-preparation program, we administered two surveys there—one to those who applied for the principal-preparation program, which we considered the district’s selection process, and one to newly hired principals.

Additionally, because completing the survey was voluntary, we recognize the potential for selection bias. Candidates who either had very positive or very negative experiences with the districts’ hiring processes may have been more likely to complete the survey. Thus, responses may not be representative of the entire survey group.

Given the small number of opinions our survey represents and the potential for selection bias, we do not try to draw conclusions from or generalize the results. Throughout the report, we present the results only when they help to illustrate a particular point raised in our interviews. In addition, we often only present survey data from the largest district, for which we received the most responses.

Analysis

We created a cross-site summary tool that compares the hiring process across sites to analyze the collected data. The tool considers steps in recruitment, selection, and placement processes across districts. To complete it, we first reviewed district documentation and developed common language to describe the steps that constitute each site's processes and practices. Next, we reviewed interview notes and added quotes and procedural details. We followed the same protocol to add other data pieces to the grid, then analyzed the summary tool to identify trends with supporting evidence.

Endnotes

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12. Most notably: Jessica Levin and Meredith Quinn, *Missed Opportunities: How We Keep High-Quality Teachers Out of Urban Schools* (New York, NY: The New Teacher Project, 2003), <http://tntp.org/assets/documents/MissedOpportunities.pdf>.
13. For example, see Bierly and Shy, *Building Pathways*, and The Wallace Foundation's school leadership work (<http://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/school-leadership/Pages/default.aspx>). The only exception is a 2006 study by TNTP, but after eight years, much has changed in the sites we studied as well as others.
14. Alternatively, districts can prepare future leaders by developing true stepping-stone roles that offer aspiring principals opportunities to learn the skills and competencies needed on the job, with increasing responsibility at each step. We found little evidence that these types of stepping-stone roles exist in many of the districts we studied, however.
15. It is worth noting that Reformville has secured some private funding to support recruitment activities outside of the district.
16. The Broad Foundation and the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, *Better Leaders for America's Schools: A Manifesto* (Washington, D.C.: The Thomas B. Fordham Institute and Los Angeles, CA: The Broad Foundation, 2003), http://www.edexcellence.net/sites/default/files/publication/pdfs/manifesto_8.pdf.
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19. Boris Groysberg et al., "Are Leaders Portable?" *Harvard Business Review*, May 2006, <http://hbr.org/2006/05/are-leaders-portable/ar/1>.
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21. Kowal and Hassel, *Importing Leaders*.
22. Similarly, a 2010 study found that nearly three-quarters of elementary principals in Miami-Dade County had been "tapped" for the district's principal pipeline by their own building principal. See Jeannie Myung et al., "Tapping the Principal Pipeline."
23. See Appendix for more on our survey process.
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27. Glenn Davidson et al., *Recruiting and Staffing in the Public Sector: Results from the IPMA-HR Research Series* (Alexandria, VA: International Public Management Association for Human Resources, 2007), <http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/ipma-hr/unpan027173.pdf>.
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31. For example, the Wallace Foundation has been working with states and school districts to improve the way they train, hire, and evaluate school principals since 2000. In 2012, Wallace issued a report drawing on lessons learned from its experience in which it identified five key practices of effective principals: shaping a vision of academic success for all students, creating a climate hospitable to education, cultivating leadership in others, improving instruction, and managing people, data, and processes to foster school improvement. Meanwhile, two of the districts we profiled use the Haberman model, which is based on studies of star urban principals and includes thirteen dimensions of urban school administration, such as instructional leadership, vision setting, problem solving and being a responsible leader. The Wallace Foundation, *The School Principal as Leader: Guiding Schools to Better Teaching and Learning* (New York, NY: The Wallace Foundation, 2013), <http://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/school-leadership/effective-principal-leadership/Documents/The-School-Principal-as-Leader-Guiding-Schools-to-Better-Teaching-and-Learning-2nd-Ed.pdf>; "The Star Urban Administrator Questionnaire" (Houston, TX: Haberman Educational Foundation), <http://www.habermanfoundation.org/StarAdministratorQuestionnaire.aspx>.
32. The fifth district told us that it could not share candidate characteristic data for confidentiality reasons. However, as mentioned above, the district shared the list of student performance data it collects and reviews for finalists for the principal position.
33. The district's current evaluation system for several other leadership positions does not include a student achievement component, however.
34. P. J. Taylor and B. Small, "Asking Applicants What They *Would* Do Versus What They *Did* Do"; H. T. Krajewski et al., "Comparing the Validity of Structured Interviews for Managerial-level Employees"; E. D. Pulakos and N. Schmitt, "Experience-based and Situational Interview Questions."
35. In addition, all of the districts use multiple raters. Research shows that employing multiple raters increases rating reliability and fairness because raters bring different perspectives and counterbalance one another. Raters may also force one another to justify their scores, hedging against personal bias. Raters must be properly trained and normed to ensure that their scores are valid, however. Gregorio Billikopf, "Validating the Selection Process" in *Labor Management in Agriculture* (Davis, CA: University of California, updated 2014), <http://www.cnr.berkeley.edu/ucce50/ag-labor/7labor/03.htm>.
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37. It is because of the last point in particular that Harbor Town decided not to include the school community in placement decisions at all. According to our contacts there, community members would often get upset if their top choice did not get the position, so the district opted not to include them in the process.
38. The New Teacher Project, *Improved Principal Hiring*. In its 2006 study, TNTP noted that one-third of principal vacancies in one of the districts it studied occurred after July 1.
39. Defined as advancing to the subsequent round in the selection process after submitting an application.
40. John Sullivan, “Why You Can’t Get a Job ... Recruiting Explained by the Numbers” (New York, NY: ERE Media, 2013), <http://www.ere.net/2013/05/20/why-you-cant-get-a-job-recruiting-explained-by-the-numbers/>.
41. Research has linked few candidate characteristics that appear on paper to principal effectiveness. Much like studies that have evaluated teacher effectiveness, research has shown that prior experience as a principal matters, but only very early in a principal’s career. Having served as an assistant principal (AP) only seems to improve principal effectiveness if the school at which the candidate was an AP was a good one. The selectivity of the university from which a principal receives his or her master’s degree seems to have no correlation with effectiveness. Knowing whether a principal holds an administrator’s certification also sheds little light on his or her likely effectiveness. In addition, candidates hired from outside the district appear to be as effective as those hired from inside the district. See Jim Hull, “The Principal Perspective” (Alexandria, VA: Center for Public Education, 2012), <http://www.centerforpubliceducation.org/principal-perspective>; Dhuey and Smith, “How Important are School Principals in the Production of Student Achievement?”; Damon Clark et al., *School Principals and School Performance* (Washington, D.C.: National Center for Analysis of Longitudinal Data in Education Research, 2009), http://www0.gsb.columbia.edu/faculty/jrockoff/cmr_principals_calder_WP38.pdf.
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