EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Strengthening School Leadership in Massachusetts

Understanding and addressing challenges to ensure an effective principal for every school

The role of school principal is critical to setting up students for success. Research shows that skilled, experienced principals can attract and retain effective teachers and have an impact on the quality of teaching, learning, and student achievement.

But as a collective, Massachusetts principals are relatively inexperienced, especially in schools serving the highest need students. And they are less racially diverse than their national peers, despite serving racially diverse students and families.

During 2018 and 2019, a working group of district and charter school leaders and other education leaders from across the state met to explore ways to increase the effectiveness of principals leading Massachusetts schools. The Barr Foundation engaged Attuned Education Partners to facilitate this group and lead exploration of the learning agendas developed by its members.

Working group participants prioritized key challenges and explored solutions that research suggests are most likely to strengthen principalship and drive better outcomes for students—especially the students of color and English learners that the state is currently serving least well.

Statewide Snapshot

- More than half of all Massachusetts principal hires are new to the job

- Fewer than 1 in 3 have previous experience as an assistant principal

- 11 percent are people of color, compared to 40 percent of Massachusetts students and 20 percent of principals nationally

Read the full report, and take action

Find additional research and insight on the challenges and solutions— plus recommended actions tailored to state policymakers, school system leaders, principal preparation program providers, and funders.

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Barr Foundation

ATTUNED Education Partners

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Priority Challenges and Solutions

Members of the stakeholder working group prioritized four challenges to strengthening the principalship that are underscored by research: preparation, coaching, scope, and representation. For each challenge, they explored evidence-based potential solutions.

PREPARATION

Principal preparation programs are limited in demonstrated efficacy and lack alignment to school system needs. Nationally, the majority of principal preparation programs operate without clear evidence of their ability to prepare principals to lead schools that support all students to achieve at high levels.

Potential solutions include:

- **High-quality principal preparation programs** that build on effective practices such as rigorous coursework, data-driven feedback, and on-the-job learning.
- **Preparation program improvements driven by the state** through evaluation, oversight, and transparency of results.
- **University-based preparation program redesigns** in collaboration with schools and systems that hire their candidates.

COACHING

Principal supervisors have limited capacity to support and develop principals as instructional leaders. In many school systems, principal supervisors, if they exist, are responsible for very large caseloads of principals, such that their impact at any one school is limited.

Potential solutions include:

- **Evidence-based focus areas and standards for supervisors** to guide coaching, support for novice principals, and principal development.
- **Effective supervisor role redesign,** which may include a greater focus on instructional leadership, supervising a smaller caseload of principals, systematic training, succession planning, and fewer non-instructional responsibilities.
- **Instructional leadership training alignment across roles** including teacher leaders/instructional leadership team members, assistant principals, principals, and principal supervisors.

The principal role, as configured in many school systems, is too complex for a single person to do well in a sustainable manner. It is not uncommon for a single principal to manage multi-million dollar budgets, hire and manage large staffs, interface with families and community, assume responsibility for student safety and wellbeing, establish and maintain school culture, and manage significant operations—in addition to leading teaching and learning at a school.

Potential solutions include:

• **Distributed leadership models** that take other responsibilities off the plate of the principal so that the principal can focus on instructional leadership.

REPRESENTATION

The racial diversity of principals does not reflect the racial diversity of the students served. Stakeholders in Massachusetts consistently cite lack of diversity among principals as a critical challenge in better serving students.

Potential solutions include:

• **Addressing teacher diversity as an entry point to principal diversity,** understanding that many principals enter the profession as teachers and that teaching may attract more candidates of color if considered in the context of career advancement.
• **Building on programs that beat the odds** in preparing leaders of color at rates that substantially exceed the national average.

See the full report for a collection of case studies demonstrating potential solutions in action.

Preparing Principals with Rigor, Feedback, and On-the-Job Learning (Aspiring Principals by New Leaders)

Collaborating to Distribute Instructional and Operational Responsibilities (Uncommon Schools)

Introducing a Strategy and Logistics Role to Improve Performance and Accountability (District of Columbia Public Schools)

Combining Instructional Leadership with Classroom Teaching (Denver Public Schools)

Implementing Executive-Level Operations Support (Achievement First)

Attracting Strong Teacher Leaders to High-Needs Schools (Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools)

Clarifying Roles for Co-Equal School Leaders (TechBoston Academy, Boston Public Schools)