

Building Leadership Talent Through Performance Evaluation

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What Is Performance Evaluation?

Evaluation provides a powerful tool for developing leadership practice across the principal career continuum. Evaluation includes the following components:

Practice Evidence + Results Evidence + Feedback = Performance Evaluation

In the formula, *practice evidence* is used to assess the quality of principals' daily work, and *results evidence* determines the degree to which principals' work is associated with important school-level results, such as school culture improvement or student learning gains. *Feedback* involves a conversation between principals and their supervisors or coaches. Taken together, the components provide a holistic depiction of performance and chart the course for reflection and growth.

Principals' roles have expanded significantly over the past decade. Today, these leaders face challenges including new learning standards, more rigorous accountability, and complex cultural and social issues including increased security in schools. Many principals feel underprepared to meet the new demands of their jobs.

Most states and districts scramble to provide professional development to support principals, but *principal evaluation* is often lost amid competing priorities. Evaluation is an important method for supporting principal growth, communicating performance expectations to principals, and improving leadership practice. It provides leaders with evidence for reflection—a critical first step for professional learning and development.

To help school leaders achieve their goals, American Institutes for Research (AIR) has engaged with educators at the state level to design the *Five Essential Practices of School Leadership* framework. Frameworks are the backbone of any performance evaluation system, identifying levels of performance and the professional practices that matter most. Unlike state or national standards (e.g., the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium standards) that broadly describe what principals should do, frameworks describe levels of performance in observable and measurable terms. AIR and its clients are using this framework for principal coaching, self-reflection, and performance evaluation to facilitate principal growth with accountability.

The Missing Link in the Leadership Talent Pipeline: Principal Evaluation

Some say great leaders are born, not made. Yet increasingly, research recognizes that principals' practices develop over time through experience and reflection. Many professions (e.g., doctors, lawyers, military) establish formal learning processes, such as apprenticeships, for developing talent across the career continuum.

As research organizations including The Wallace Foundation and George W. Bush Institute note, principals' career paths have been characterized by a patchwork of learning experiences, which often send mixed messages to principals about how best to develop their skills and, in turn, lead schools. This is where talent management systems come into play. In the field of education, school-level leadership development has not been formalized or structured as in other professions. Talent management systems are typically organized by a common set of performance standards, linked together with data, and coordinated by multiple entities (e.g., principal preparation programs, districts, state education agencies).

Evaluation is a critical component of leadership talent management systems. When evaluations are organized by a common set of standards and employ accurate measures, they provide performance targets at each stage of the leadership pipeline. Evaluation evidence also tells superintendents, state education agency representatives, and preparation program professors and staff about the effectiveness of principal preparation, induction, and hiring processes.

Evaluation is critical to any leadership talent management approach, but school districts have little experience in the process. Although federal incentives and state legislation have required annual principal evaluations since the advent of the No Child Left Behind Act, recent research and reviews suggest that principal evaluation is challenging for many practitioners. According to Clifford and Ross (2011) and Goldring, Cravens, Murphy, Elliot, and Carson (2009), principal evaluation is seen as impractical and time-consuming, inconsistently administered, and disconnected from professional practice and leadership standards. A lack of accurate, reliable measures can mean ineffective or inaccurate feedback.

In addition, few validated principal evaluation instruments (e.g., observation instruments) are available to superintendents, coaches, and others seeking to develop principal practices or make other critical human resource decisions.

For these reasons, evaluation is often a missing link in the leadership talent management system. Without evaluation evidence, talent management systems rely solely on proxy measures, such as school culture changes or student learning gains, to determine how well a principal leads and manages schools. Such proxy measures often lack the specificity and precision necessary to grow principal practice.

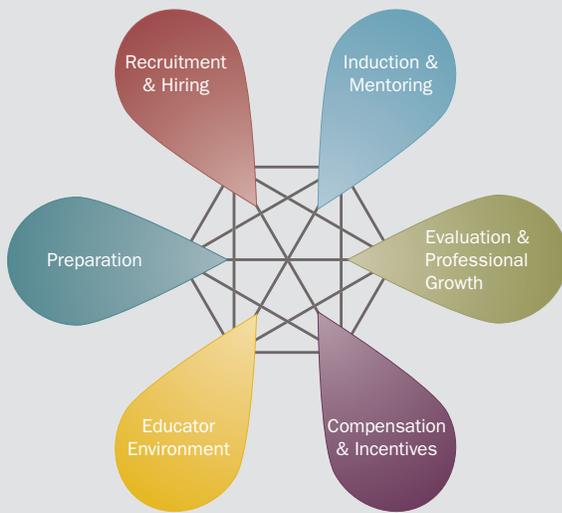
Building Better Principal Evaluation Systems

Evaluation systems should be designed to incorporate leadership research, job priorities, standards of practice, and the daily practicalities of leading schools. The measures used in principal evaluation should be fair, accurate, practical, and, importantly, reflect school improvement and district priorities.

Unlike teachers, principals haven't been routinely evaluated. When I was coming up, I didn't receive feedback about my work from a supervisor or coach. I think principal evaluation has potential for changing the conversation about leading schools, and it can give support to grow principals in the right way, not by chance. Not by the way I came through.

—Highly experienced principal

Educator Talent Management at AIR



AIR's Educator Talent Management system provides a more proactive and strategic approach to securing the teachers and school leaders needed to create a world-class, 21st century education system. The six key components of educator talent management—preparation (including certification and licensure), recruitment and hiring, induction and mentoring, evaluation and professional growth, compensation and incentives, and educator environment—apply to principals and leaders as well as teachers.

For more information, visit www.educatortalent.org.

Currently, 50 states, the District of Columbia, and two territories have passed legislation or administrative rules aimed at improving principal evaluation systems. The National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) and the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) (2012) also have called upon states and districts to build better evaluation systems that are:

- **Fair and accurate** and rooted in **multiple measures** that gather accurate evidence on principal practice and school-level results.
- Based on **shared performance expectations** aligned to **national leadership standards**.
- Reflect the **context for professional practice**.
- Designed explicitly to promote and support **improvements in principal practice** through ongoing coaching and feedback.
- Thoughtfully integrated with a **broader talent management system** for principals, especially **professional learning**.

In addition to NAESP and NASSP's principal evaluation system criteria, AIR's collaboration with states and districts to design better principal evaluation systems has provided many lessons, the first of which is that *context matters for principal evaluation design*.

Principals and other leaders work to reshape contexts

(e.g., sociocultural and historical contexts of the principals' relationships to staff and community, the schools' roles in the district and community) to create better conditions for teaching and learning.

Improved principal evaluation systems must consider the principals' contexts and can actually be designed to *improve* the work contexts. For example, evaluation scoring can be "weighted" to reflect school and district needs, thus signaling how principals should prioritize their work, and evaluation procedures can require principals and their supervisors to have evidence-based conversations about school improvement and principals' career trajectories.

Five Essential Practices of School Leadership

With input from more than 200 educators and more than 100 research studies on principals' approaches to school improvement, AIR designed the *Five Essential Practices of School Leadership* framework.

These practices are as follows:

1. **Build shared purpose.** The leader develops a compelling, shared organizational vision and assures that the vision is “lived” in the daily work of educators.
2. **Focus on learning.** The leader engages in instructional leadership to develop and maintain student access to appropriate, ambitious, and strong instructional programs focused on academic excellence and social-emotional development.
3. **Manage organizational resources.** The leader acts strategically and systematically to create safe and supportive conditions for better teaching and learning by aligning financial assets, human resources, data, and other resources.
4. **Collaborate with community.** The leader assures that parents and community organizations are engaged with the school.
5. **Lead with integrity.** The leader models professionalism by acting with integrity and making his or her learning visible.

The framework is designed to support principals in developing their own professional goals and to provide them with an approach for reflection on their practices. But other stakeholders and professionals in the field can take full advantage of this tool:

- Human resources offices at the district level, for use in their principal evaluation systems
- Supervisors (e.g., superintendents) to assess individual principals
- Principal coaches (although not formally evaluating principals) for use in communicating the most important features of school leadership to principals

This framework is driven and informed by AIR’s work with educators to ensure its utility for providing feedback to principals and its applicability across diverse school contexts. It is guided by the following foundation:

- **Focus on what matters most.** Principals are often responsible for a multitude of school leadership tasks, from performing playground duty to coaching teachers. No evaluation system can, or should, account for every responsibility. In designing the *Five Essential Practices* framework, AIR prioritized instructional leadership and school management, which are essential to principals’ work.

How to Use Evaluation Frameworks

Communicate. Frameworks provide a common language for describing performance standards and levels.

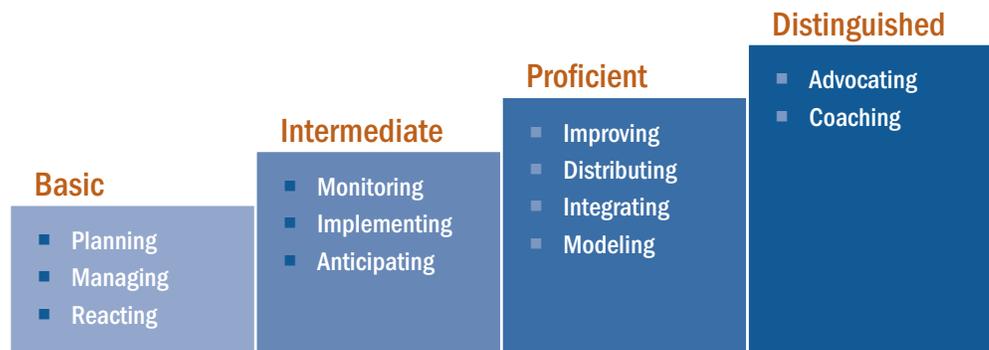
Inform professional learning. Frameworks provide a rich description of performance levels that principals, supervisors, and coaches can use to prioritize growth areas and locate resources to advance leadership practice.

Rate practice. Frameworks provide a basis for scoring principal practice using aligned measures.

Focus feedback. Research indicates that the best feedback is fine grained and focused. Frameworks can be used to highlight strengths and identify areas of growth.

We also aligned the framework with the national Interstate School Leadership Licensure Standards, which have been adopted or adapted by 45 states.

- **Useful for improving practice.** The *Five Essential Practices* framework is intended to describe leadership practice, regardless of principals' experience level, career trajectory, or school context. Principals can use the framework as a self-reflection tool, to identify their current performance level and map practice improvements. Supervisors and coaches use the framework with measures (e.g., portfolio, observation tools) to provide performance feedback to principals.
- **Clearly defined performance levels.** Strong evaluation systems distinguish among levels of performance. The *Five Essential Practices* framework identifies five levels of performance, from *below basic* to *distinguished performance*. Principals must display evidence of lower levels of performance in order to be considered for higher performance levels. So, for example, a principal must be able to perform *basic*-level skills before he or she can be considered *intermediate*. Levels of performance are consistent across the practices.



Below basic means principals do not demonstrate one or more of the practices at the basic level.

Conclusion

As principals' roles and expectations continue to evolve, evaluation can serve as a means of support and provide opportunities for reflection and growth.

Each state and district is different, and AIR understands that the goals, challenges, and contexts for principal evaluation will be unique in every setting. AIR uses the *Five Essential Practices of School Leadership* framework as a starting point for creating a customized principal evaluation framework for states, districts, and partnerships. Our engagement ensures that principal evaluation systems align with state and district priorities and improvement plans so that these expectations are reflected in principal performance.

For more information on how AIR's *Five Essential Practices of School Leadership* can help states and districts meet their goals, contact Matthew Clifford at mclifford@air.org.

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