
Principals Path to Leadership: COMPENDIUM OF EFFECTIVE PRACTICES

(from NASSP -- National Association of Secondary School Principals)

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Alabama Principals Leadership Pathway

excerpt:

"In Alabama, 76 percent of students served by the Alabama State Department of Education (ALSDE) qualify for free and reduced-price school meals, and 64 percent of schools receive Title I funding. A diverse student population attends Alabama public schools: 55 percent of students are White/ Caucasian, 33 percent Black/African American, 7 percent Hispanic, 1 percent Asian, 2 percent multiracial, and 1 percent other.

Many efforts to address barriers to learning, teaching, and re-engaging disconnected students were spread across different initiatives. In response to this, the department implemented PLAN 2020, which includes an integrated, systemic approach to strategically address four areas of school improvement: learners, support systems, professionals, and schools/systems. For ALSDE, their ability to support principals and school leaders in the use of a strength-based framework was essential to demonstrating that economic disadvantage is not an impediment to student achievement.

Through the Office of Learning Supports, ALSDE embarked on the statewide Learning Supports Initiative in Fall 2012 to increase student learning and engagement in the teaching and learning process and to eliminate barriers to student success. In the course of this work, ALSDE also targeted the leadership capacity of its principals to drive change. Utilizing the Learning Supports Framework, the initiative was designed to create a distributed leadership model focused on the challenges of achieving positive learning outcomes. Based on the work of Dr. Linda Taylor and Dr. Howard Adelman at the University of California, Los Angeles, the Learning Supports Framework addresses student support services that are fragmented or marginalized—bringing instruction, learning supports, and school management under one leadership team.

To create change, the framework helps principals assess overlapping roles and resources and develop an integrated organizational and operational school structure focused on improving schools. Since the 2013–14 school year, 50 districts and approximately 300 principals have implemented the Learning Supports Framework to address barriers to student achievement, learning, and graduation at their schools.

Program Description ALSDE is especially challenged in attracting, developing, and retaining effective school leaders in rural and high-poverty school districts. For principals working in these districts, a critical area for leadership development is the ability to use a systematic process to implement high academic standards while simultaneously addressing the particular challenges that rural and high-poverty schools face, including a high level of student mobility, a low number of community support services, and a lack of certified teachers.

Through the support of the American Express Principals Path to Leadership grant, ALSDE developed the Alabama Strong program to expand the work of the Learning Supports Initiative to six districts that serve high-poverty and/or rural students: Lawrence County, Birmingham City, Selma City, Perry County, Escambia County, and Bullock County School Districts.

The Alabama Strong program customizes the Learning Supports Initiative to meet the needs of these principals and aims to: ■ Strengthen effective principal leadership. ■ Build capacity for leading change. ■ Develop a

pipeline of effective leadership for schools through a three-year, job-embedded, personalized peer coaching professional development model using the Learning Supports Framework. Originally designed to serve 71 principals and their leadership teams, the Alabama Strong program is currently serving 131 principals and aspiring principals and 21 district office leaders, including six superintendents working alongside their principals, at the request of the participating districts and with their financial support.

The program will enable principals to implement the Learning Supports Framework and receive additional leadership development to:

- Implement a comprehensive framework for school improvement that enables him/her to be the catalyst for sustained school improvement.
- Collaboratively develop and lead a strong vision and mission that is supported by strategic action plans.
- Identify and implement actions and strategies that will foster family and community ties, professional capacity of teachers and staff, a student-centered learning environment, and high-quality instruction for all students.
- Address the barriers of poverty and rural isolation through a strength-based approach.
- Build capacity of school leadership to use a distributive leadership model.
- Utilize a systematic approach to align financial and human resources.
- Improve the learning outcomes of children in high-poverty school districts in Alabama.
- Develop the necessary leadership and change management skills to bring the project to scale through collaboration with the Alabama State Department of Education.

- Use of the Learning Supports Framework to organize and align resources: The framework guides principals in leading change by using a coherent organizational and operational structure that addresses overlapping roles and functions. One aspect of the framework involves mapping, where principals assess the resources currently available at their school, determine the utilization and value of each, and coordinate and integrate resources that are creating change at their school to give principals greater capacity to lead.

Currently, the Learning Supports Initiative is reaching leadership teams in 50 districts in Alabama, including the American Express Alabama Strong cohort. Thus far, the initiative has seen results that have gained the attention of a third-party organization, the Public Affairs Research Council of Alabama (PARCA). PARCA recognized the initiative as a major factor in statewide improvements in the graduation rate, which increased from 72 percent to 86 percent in four years. In addition, the districts and schools involved in the first two cohorts of the applied Learning Supports Framework have shown remarkable improvement in student engagement, reflected by a decrease in student absences. In the second year of using the Learning Supports Framework, the first two cohorts combined saw an average decrease of 10,000 days of student absences per district.