

# UCEA Knowledge Utilization Brief:

## Preparing and Supporting Principals: What Are the Key Differences Across Small, Medium, and Large Districts?

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How do school districts of different sizes across the United States prepare and support principals? New research from RAND, supported by The Wallace Foundation, seeks to answer that question. Authors Melissa Kay Diliberti, Heather L. Schwartz, and Samantha E. DiNicola published a new report, [\*How School Districts Prepare and Develop Principals: Selected Findings from the Spring 2024 American School District Panel Survey\*](#).

Previous research from RAND on support for principals identified **seven domains** of feasible, effective, and affordable principal pipeline activities (Gates et al., 2019). Extending on that research, Diliberti et al. (2024) sought to better understand how many domains school districts are implementing. They used data from the American School District Panel Survey to investigate the policies, procedures, and activities that districts have to provide high-quality

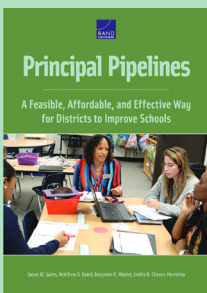
professional learning and support for principals. Surveys were typically completed by district human resources directors or principal supervisors, who typically have the best knowledge of principal support infrastructure. In total, 156 surveyed districts contributed to the report.

Diliberti et al. (2024) investigated differences among districts of different sizes and make an important contribution to the field’s understanding of principal pipeline activities. While previous research has provided a sense of the work that large districts are doing, this report looks at 84 small (serving fewer than 3,000 students), 40 medium (serving 3,000–9,999 students), and 31 large (over 10,000 students) districts. This brief outlines key takeaways and considers implications for educational leadership and preparation. It also provides teaching notes and suggested discussion questions for faculty and educational leaders who wish to use this as a resource for preprofessional coursework and professional development for district leaders.

### Implementation of the Domains: Significant Differences by District Size

Across all seven domains, the authors found the differences between large and small districts in their implementation was statistically significant at the  $p < .05$  level. Further, they found statistically significant differences in domain implementation between large and medium districts in all domains but two: leader standards and principal preparation (see Table 1).

To learn more about the **seven domains** of principal pipeline activities, read [\*Principal Pipelines: A Feasible, Affordable, and Effective Way for Districts to Improve Schools\*](#).



**Table 1**  
*Percentage of Districts That Implemented Each of the Seven Domains*

Domain	Overall	Small	Medium	Large
Leader Standards	60	55	64	87
High-Quality Principal Preparation <sup>a</sup>	47	41	54	76
Selective Hiring & Placement	35	30	34	76
On-the-Job Support & Evaluation	74	71	76	99
Principal Supervision	39	33	38	98
Leader Tracking System	25	23	21	59
Systems of Support	29	24	28	72

<sup>a</sup>These activities include district partnerships with university programs, district partnerships with nonuniversity programs, and district-led programs to prepare principal candidates.

## How School Districts Prepare and Develop School Principals

Selected Findings from the Spring 2024 American School District Panel Survey

### Additional Insights From the Report

Diliberti et al. (2024) looked at other variables in their analysis, including the positions principals held before their current position and respondents' thoughts about the potential impact of the end of COVID-19 relief funds.

- **Pathways to the Principalship:** The authors also asked respondents about which positions principals typically hold immediately prior to being made a principal at their current school. They found that large and medium districts use the assistant principalship as the main path to the principalship. Small districts, however, are more likely to fill principal positions with former teachers than assistant principals. Additionally, they are more likely to bring in principals from outside the district than to elevate an assistant principal. The authors hypothesized that smaller districts may have fewer assistant principals in general, creating a smaller pool of assistant principals to draw from than large districts.
- **Financial Sustainability of Principal Support:** Additionally, the authors asked respondents if they thought that any of their districts' activities might be cut upon expiration of COVID-19 federal aid. Overwhelmingly, this was not a concern for respondents, with 88% responding that they did not foresee cuts. Of those who thought there may be cuts, the most common domain they felt might experience cuts was on-the-job support and evaluation (specifically in the activity of executive coaching or other on-the-job support for current principals).

### Going Deeper: Implications for Educational Leadership

- **What might explain the differences among small, medium, and large districts?** The authors argue that, based on their findings and previous research, large districts likely have more resources to devote to these activities, essentially making an economies of scale argument. Perhaps this difference among district sizes is also impacted by cultural factors that have not yet been investigated. Also, smaller districts might have patterns of different priorities. There might be different regulatory and policy environments as well that make large districts more likely to engage in the seven domains.
- **What are the equity implications of these findings?** Given the promising nature of the seven domains of

principal preparation and development, educational leaders and policymakers should consider which domains are lacking but needed to create and implement those supports. We should acknowledge that some domains can be achieved through different means in smaller districts. For instance, perhaps a superintendent or other central office personnel could engage in principal supervision in smaller districts.

- **Large districts in this study are supporting principals well within these seven domains.** They stand as a model for how we might extend resources to small and medium districts to ramp up their support for principals. Additionally, large districts in this study demonstrate a strong, clear pathway to the principalship that includes elevating many assistant principals into the principalship and hiring from within the district. Small and medium district contexts may hamper the development of similar pathways, but there may be opportunities for creative efforts toward pathways like interdistrict collaborations.
- **Supporting principals across all seven domains requires substantial, coordinated, and sustained effort from districts of all sizes.** Engagement of stakeholders from across districts and their partners is vital to the high-quality preparation and development of principals. When designing, evaluating, or refreshing district principal support practices, district personnel should consider and address these challenges.
- **Context matters.** Current and aspiring district leaders should have a good understanding of their local context to serve all students equitably. They should consider factors such as the variability of funding streams; pathways to the principalship; and their needs, assets, and values. District size might impact these factors, but unique local dynamics might impact them as well.

### Opportunities for Further Research on District Activities

The authors acknowledge some limits on their study that present opportunities for further exploration. New research could expand upon this study design to encompass more districts and potentially disaggregate even further by district size to create more size categories. Further, expanding the focus to different types of large districts might be fruitful. For instance, practices among large urban districts might be different from large districts that are organized at the county level. Work investigating how districts spent COVID-19 funds on these activities would be welcome as well.

There is also an opportunity to investigate the potential explanations behind these findings. Qualitative research investigating small and medium districts might reveal why they are not engaging with certain domains, which might reveal factors such as infrastructure or funding challenges, different district priorities, or different means of achieving the same support goals.

For faculty wishing to incorporate this text into their course-work, see the following:

- The RAND report by Gates et al. (2019), *Principal Pipelines: A Feasible, Affordable, and Effective Way for Districts to Improve Schools*, established the seven domains, explaining how they conceptualized and why they are foundational to principal preparation and development.
- Faculty could go a step further and design a course project in which students role play as district leaders in different sizes of districts, encouraging them to use their resources to design a principal support network based on the seven domains.

### Pushing Further for Equity: Suggested Discussion Questions

- How can districts use these findings to explore the equity implications for the principal support activities that they implement?
- How might districts tap into existing resources in their offices and communities to expand their support for principals?
- What variations across differently sized districts might account for the differences that the authors found?
- What strengths and assets do different sizes of districts hold that have the potential to provide high-quality preparation and development for principals?

## Concluding Thoughts

Supporting the preparation and development of principals is essential work to foster thriving schools and student success. This report makes important, innovative contributions to the field's understanding of how districts are supporting the preparation and development of principals. Districts of all sizes can draw insights from this work, and all stakeholders in the educational leadership field can make contributions to the collective work of supporting principals.

## References

- Dilberti, M. K., Schwartz, H. L. & DiNicola, S. E. (2024, October). *How school districts prepare and develop school principals: Selected findings from the Spring 2024 American School District Panel Survey*. RAND Corporation. <https://doi.org/10.59656/EL-LS1921.001>
- Gates, S. M., Baird, M. D., Master, B. K., & Chavez-Herrerias, E. R. (2019). *Principal pipelines: A feasible, affordable, and effective way for districts to improve schools*. RAND Corporation. <https://doi.org/10.7249/RR2666>



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