



How principals can ensure that every student succeeds

BY SUZANNE BOUFFARD

Ensuring that every student succeeds takes a shared commitment among all adults in a school and the system that houses it. Principals play a key role in leading and modeling that commitment. Through instructional leadership, professional learning, interactions with colleagues and students, and many other

responsibilities, principals can prioritize equity and establish expectations and processes for their colleagues to address every student's needs.

This commitment to equity cannot be a standalone initiative or an add-on task, but instead should be woven into the fabric of leadership and into the school as a whole. As Learning Forward (2020) has articulated in its

equity position statement, students', teachers', and leaders' experiences are interconnected.

Because leadership is a cornerstone of an equity-focused system, The Wallace Foundation commissioned a group of experts to review the research and scholarship on culturally responsive leadership and consider how to integrate it within principal

LEARNING FORWARD'S VISION FOR EQUITY

Learning Forward believes schools achieve their utmost potential when:

- Each student experiences relevant, culturally responsive, rigorous learning and benefits from the collective guidance and care of exceptional teachers and leaders;
- Each educator has access to high-quality professional learning so they can cultivate the strengths and address the needs of each student they serve; and
- Each leader advocates for and builds an education system that dismantles institutional racism and removes other barriers to students' equitable access to learning.

Source: Learning Forward, 2020.

development and support structures, such as those the foundation has helped to flourish. The research illuminates what principals need to ensure all students succeed, and high-quality, standards-aligned professional learning plays a key role.

A LEARNING-CENTERED SYSTEM FOR DEVELOPING PRINCIPALS

From 2011 to 2017, Wallace supported six large school districts to develop comprehensive, aligned principal pipelines — intentional, research-grounded approaches to identify, recruit, develop, and support school leaders. Accompanying research identified the following seven key elements, or domains, of principal pipelines that not only result in stronger leadership but also higher student achievement (Gates et al., 2019, 2020):

- Leader standards that delineate what principals should know and be able to do.
- Preparation programs for aspiring principals and assistant principals.
- Selective hiring and placement of principals.
- On-the-job professional learning, support, and evaluation.
- Principal supervision processes that include hiring, supporting, and evaluating principal supervisors.
- Leader tracking systems to

monitor and connect preparation, hiring, support, and evaluation.

- Sustainable systems of support that include a district-level position or office responsible for school leadership.

Because learning happens throughout the pipeline, and throughout a principal's career, professional learning and support are integral across the domains. And that learning happens in multiple contexts, not just in the principal's office. As the graphic on p. 66 shows, multiple stakeholders and institutions play a role in building principals' capacity, including schools, districts, and higher education.

BUILDING EQUITY INTO THE PIPELINE

The commitment to leaders' continuous learning throughout the pipeline provides valuable opportunities for principals to expand their understanding of and capacity for equity-centered leadership. To highlight those opportunities and provide guidance on how to leverage them, Wallace turned to a team headed by Mark Gooden and Muhammad Khalifa who, with James Earl Davis, had created the influential Culturally Responsive School Leadership framework (Khalifa et al., 2016).

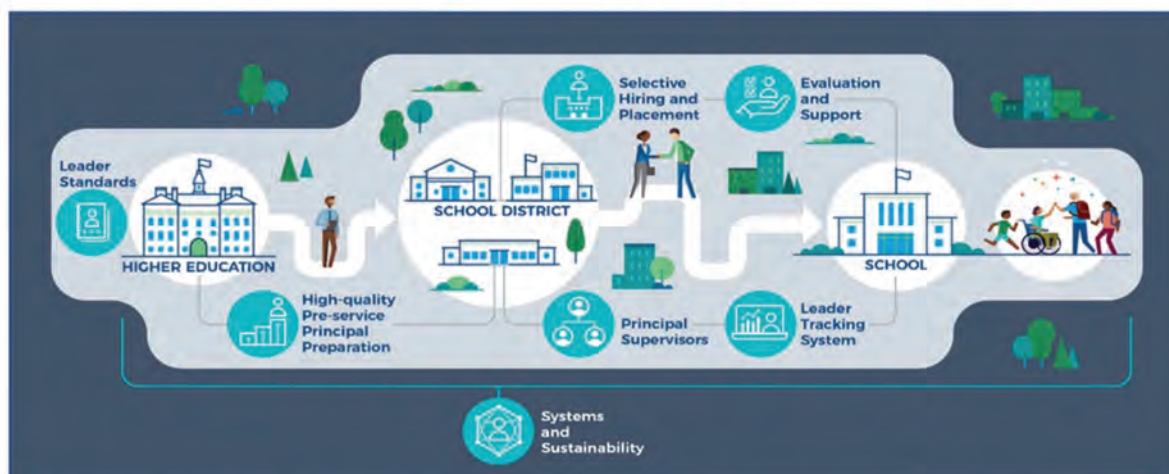
Gooden, Khalifa, and team

produced a report that connects the framework with the domains of the principal pipeline (Gooden et al., 2023). It can help systems and individuals cultivate principals' equity mindsets and practices in a way that is integrated and integral to strengthening the workforce and its positive impact on students overall.

Gooden and colleagues describe how the seven domains of the principal pipeline can be infused with the following equity-centered practices from the Culturally Responsive School Leadership framework:

- Develop critical consciousness about historical oppression and current school conditions and resources.
- Ensure inclusive school environments that are welcoming and culturally affirming through active collaboration with historically and currently marginalized people.
- Provide culturally responsive instructional leadership for teachers to support them in honoring the knowledge, contributions, and ways of engaging people of color and challenge systems that marginalize people and communities.
- Enact culturally responsive leadership engagement in community contexts by

Seven Domains of a Comprehensive, Aligned Principal Pipeline



From *A Culturally Responsive School Leadership Approach to Developing Equity-Centered Principals: Considerations for Principal Pipelines* (2023), p. 4, available for free at www.wallacefoundation.org

establishing partnerships with families and the community at large.

The components of this framework can be integrated into all aspects of principal pipelines in multiple ways, as the authors of the report show. The table on p. 67 highlights some of them.

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING THAT EMBODIES EQUITY

For principal pipelines to be equity-centered, principals’ professional learning should not only address equity but embody and reflect equity. Learning Forward’s Standards for Professional Learning, which describe the content, processes, and conditions for high-quality professional learning, address equity explicitly and intentionally (Learning Forward, 2022a). All standards are grounded in the goal of “equitable and excellent outcomes for all students,” and three

standards home in on equity as a feature and a topic of professional learning: Equity Foundations, Equity Drivers, and Equity Practices. (See table on p. 68.)

The full set of standards helps to disrupt and dismantle inequities, as articulated in the equity position statement (Learning Forward, 2020), through multiple mechanisms that include eliminating gaps in access and opportunities by ensuring high-quality teaching, leading, and learning and equipping educators with knowledge and strategies specifically designed to recognize and eliminate bias in the classroom and in their own instructional practices.

School and system leaders play especially important roles in implementing the standards in general and the equity standards specifically. For example, the Equity Foundations standard points out that leaders “have

primary responsibility and autonomy to establish conditions, structures, and cultures that put equity at the heart of professional learning” (Learning Forward, 2022a, p. 56). When they set the table for equity, leaders make it possible for educators at all levels “to contribute to such conditions through how they engage, respond, and make explicit their expectations for themselves, their peers, and the leaders who support them” (Learning Forward, 2022a, p. 56).

The equity standards show how professional learning can be an avenue for enacting the equity-centered work recommended by Gooden and colleagues, especially the recommendations in the pipeline domain of on-the-job support.

For example, a recommendation for developing critical consciousness includes engaging in personal identity work to examine biases, assumptions,

SELECTED EXAMPLES OF INFUSING EQUITY INTO PRINCIPAL PIPELINES

Principal pipeline domain	Examples of recommendations based on the Culturally Responsive School Leadership framework
Leader standards	Include specific aspects of identity in new revisions to leadership standards.
Principal preparation	Be intentional about infusing equity into the recruiting, selection, and admissions process for principal and assistant principal training programs.
Selective hiring and placement	Construct specific ways to recruit, interview, and assess candidates for equity mindsets.
On-the-job support and evaluation	Explicitly include equity in the supervising, supporting, and evaluation of principals.
Adapted from Gooden et al., 2023.	

and mental models. Professional learning provides one avenue for engaging in that work, and the Equity Drivers standard points to educators’ identifying and addressing their own biases and beliefs as a component of high-quality professional learning.

The recommendation to nurture inclusive school environments asks educators to “support and evaluate principals’ efforts to build relationships with teachers and students, and to challenge current practices that marginalize students based on race, gender, social class, sexuality, ability, immigration status, language, and religion” (Gooden et al., 2023). The Equity Practices standard mirrors this intention by encouraging professional learning leaders to make space for exploring and embracing student assets through instruction and strategies for fostering relationships with all students, families, and communities.

The focus on nurturing culturally responsive instructional leadership describes the need for school leaders to support the development and implementation of a vision of equity-focused instruction. Similarly, the Equity Foundations standard includes educators setting expectations for equity and structures of equitable access to learning, both for educators and students.

Furthermore, recommendations for culturally responsive school leadership that makes learning accessible to all students requires high-quality professional learning about pedagogy and curriculum. The Curriculum, Assessment, and Instruction standard dovetails with the equity standards to provide guidance on how to support all teachers and other educators to ensure rigorous learning for all students.

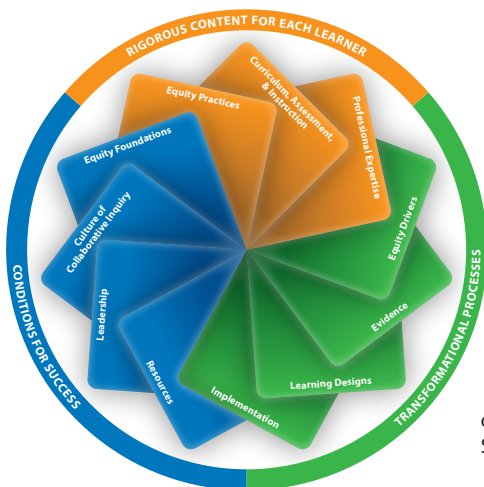
The Standards for Professional Learning apply to all educators,

including principals and those they supervise as well as principal supervisors, who are a key part of principal pipelines. Learning Forward has created role-specific action guides that provide step-by-step guidance for implementing each standard. They include Innovation Configuration (IC) maps, which show how to get from entry to ideal implementation of each standard. See example on p. 69 from a portion of the Equity Drivers standard as it applies to the role of principal.

SYSTEMWIDE COMMITMENT TO GROWTH

When professional learning is designed with equity in mind, it can be a powerful tool to build principals’ capacity to support each and every student to high achievement. High-quality, equity-focused professional learning can be embedded at every stage of the principal pipeline,

IDEAS



Equity standards are embedded in each of the three frames of Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning.

STANDARDS FOR PROFESSIONAL LEARNING EQUITY STANDARDS

Standard	Constructs
Equity Foundations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Educators establish expectations for equity. • Educators create structures to ensure equitable access to learning. • Educators sustain a culture of support for all staff.
Equity Drivers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Educators prioritize equity in professional learning practices. • Educators identify and address their own biases and beliefs. • Educators collaborate with diverse colleagues.
Equity Practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Educators understand students' historical, cultural, and societal contexts. • Educators embrace student assets through instruction. • Educators foster relationships with students, families, and communities.

Source: Learning Forward, 2022a.

especially when those who supervise and support principals are also engaged in learning. That systemwide commitment to growth can build everyone's capacity for culturally responsive leadership and instruction so that every student is seen, supported, and successful.

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EXCERPT OF THE PRINCIPALS’ INNOVATION CONFIGURATION MAP FOR THE EQUITY DRIVERS STANDARD

Equity Drivers IC map			
Professional learning results in equitable and excellent outcomes for all students when educators prioritize equity in professional learning practices, identify and address their own biases and beliefs, and collaborate with diverse colleagues.			
Construct 1: Prioritize equity in professional learning practices.			
Desired outcome: Builds own and staff’s capacity to use professional learning to cultivate knowledge, practices, and beliefs around equity.			
Level 1 (Ideal)	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4 (Entry)
Models, for all staff , use of research to deepen knowledge on the importance of equity.	Models, for all school leaders and select staff , use of research to deepen knowledge on the importance of equity.	Models, for all school leaders , use of research to deepen knowledge on the importance of equity.	Models, for select school leaders , use of research to deepen knowledge on the importance of equity.
Develops own and all staff’s capacity to analyze, synthesize, and share research to deepen knowledge on the importance of equity.	Develops own, all school leaders’, and select staff’s capacity to analyze, synthesize, and share research to deepen knowledge on the importance of equity.	Develops own and all school leaders’ capacity to analyze, synthesize, and share research to deepen knowledge on the importance of equity.	Develops own capacity to analyze, synthesize, and share research to deepen knowledge on the importance of equity.
Develops own and all staff’s capacity to analyze and interpret national, state, local, provincial, and ministry policies that govern equity, including policies that perpetuate inequities, biases, power dynamics, and prevalent mindsets, expectations, and misconceptions.	Develops own, all school leaders’, and select staff’s capacity to analyze and interpret national, state, local, provincial, and ministry policies that govern equity, including policies that perpetuate inequities, biases, power dynamics, and prevalent mindsets, expectations, and misconceptions.	Develops own and all school leaders’ capacity to analyze and interpret national, state, local, provincial, and ministry policies that govern equity, including policies that perpetuate inequities, biases, power dynamics, and prevalent mindsets, expectations, and misconceptions.	Develops own capacity to analyze and interpret national, state, local, provincial, and ministry policies that govern equity, including policies that perpetuate inequities, biases, power dynamics, and prevalent mindsets, expectations, and misconceptions.

Source: Learning Forward, 2022b.

Standards for Professional Learning Innovation Configuration (IC) maps describe what the standards look like when enacted in systems and schools, bringing detail and specificity to the concepts in each standard. The IC map presents behaviors across four levels of descending impact from left to right, with the far left column representing ideal behaviors that most fully embody the intent of the standard and the far right column representing initial behaviors and first steps.

Each standard has multiple constructs or components and desired outcomes. This excerpt shows behaviors that lead to one of the desired outcomes of the Equity Drivers standard.

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