



MEMO

TO: Amy McIntosh, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary, delegated the authority of the Assistant Secretary, Office of Planning, Evaluation and Policy Development

FROM: Dr. Erika Hunt and Ms. Alicia Haller, The Center for the Study of Education Policy

RE: Identified Barriers to Successful Leadership Focused Proposals Submitted to the U.S. Department of Education’s 2015 Invest in Innovation Competition

Background

General Lack of Attention to the Role of Principal

Despite an increasing body of research that evidences the significant impact that principals have on teaching and learning, there currently exists a stark absence of an explicit focus on the principalship in public policy. In a report by Paul Manna (2015), he argues that despite growing acknowledgement of principal impact on school and student outcomes, policy makers tend to overlook the needs of the specific role. “The principal’s role has received consistently less attention relative to other topics... policy makers give much more attention to teachers and teacher-related issues than principals” (p. 3). Yet, it is principals that act as “powerful multipliers of effective teaching and leadership practices in schools” (p. 7). In other words, it is the principal that has the ability to impact teaching and learning not only in a single classroom, but school-wide.

Disproportional Federal Funding for Programs and Research on Principals

Exacerbating the problem of inattention and lack of support for principals development is the tendency of policy makers to combine strategies aimed at teachers and principals. When policy makers combine leadership development with teacher development, they create a disproportional funding scenario that ignores the multiplying effect of the principal in favor of a system whereby teacher, due to their larger numbers and direct impact on students, receive the greatest amount of attention. While support for teachers is important, neglecting leadership efforts ignores the larger impact and therefore greater

return on investment that could be achieved by investing in improving principal quality through strategies aimed at building their capacity to scale effective teaching and leadership practices.

Disproportionality occurs when funding for programs or research are targeted at both teachers and principals, and also when principals are grouped with other focus areas, rather than treated as a separate focus area entirely. Typically, the U.S. Department of Education (ED) has allocated program funds aimed at supporting principals under a broader topic area of Teacher and Leader Effectiveness or Teacher and Leader Quality (e.g. Title II, Supporting Effective Educators Development - SEED, etc.).¹ Note in those cases the focus on principals is also combined with “other leaders” including district administrators, school boards, etc.

Grouping principals and teachers together, or grouping principals with other leadership roles, does not occur exclusively with funding for programs, but is also the standard practice for allocating research dollars as well. An example of this can be found with the Institute of Education Sciences (IES). Within IES’s current research focus areas, the grant competition that includes studies on principals falls into the more broadly conceptualized topic area of *Improving Education Systems: Policies, Organizations, Management, and Leadership*. In that category, research studies on principals must compete with other studies on policies, organizations, and management structures. As a result, IES has only funded two research studies exploring leadership under that IES focus area (IES, 2016).²

It should be noted that the ED does have one small discretionary grant program dedicated specifically to school leaders: the *School Leadership Program*.³ However, that program does not accept applications each year, and continuation funding for multi-year grants is subject to annual congressional appropriation. Further, the School Leadership Program has only accepted proposals in one of the last five years.⁴

*Barriers Caused by Grant Requirements Involving What Works Clearinghouse (WWC):*⁵ Leadership programs and researcher studies are disproportionately burdened in grant competitions that pit them against programs designed to support teachers or other types of classroom interventions. Programs and studies that focus on interventions involving principals face multiple barriers in competitive grant opportunities, including:

¹ ED grant programs accessed at <http://www2.ed.gov/admins/tchrqual/learn/tpr/index.html>

² In the 7 year period between 2004-2010, 12 grants were awarded under the topic area *Educational Leadership*. However, that category was eliminated and replaced with the even broader category of *Improving Education Systems* in 2011.

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³ In the ESSA act, the School Leadership Program was included although renamed the “School Leadership Recruitment and Support Program” (Sec. 2243). Its inclusion in ESSA, rather than it being eliminated, may suggest that more attention will be directed to its annual funding.

⁴ <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/leadership/index.html>

⁵ What Works Clearinghouse: <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/topics.aspx>

- Federal grant programs frequently require an intervention with evidence from a qualifying study that meets What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) standards and demonstrates a statistically significant impact. However virtually no studies involving interventions with principals qualify as meeting both criteria, unlike teacher or classroom interventions which are plentiful;
- Federal grant opportunities aimed at programmatic strategies often prioritize projects that include an evaluation component that will meet WWC standards upon completion. Unfortunately, projects focused on principals are often considered to be underpowered due to small sample sizes and requirements for propensity score matching that are nearly impossible to meet with the level of funding allowed by the program grant.
- Competitive grants for research on leadership interventions include a narrow outcome focus on student achievement/growth and teacher attendance/retention included in the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) research standards.⁶
- It takes a longer period of time to demonstrate the impact of principals on student achievement because their actions have an indirect effect (unlike the direct effect of classroom interventions).

2015 Invest In Innovation Competition

Another example of the lack of attention to the principalship can be found in the ED's Investing in Innovation (i3) grant program. The i3 program is structured to award funding at three levels of implementation: development, validation, and scale-up. In the FY15 competition, ED added an Absolute Priority 1 priority area, titled *Improving the Effectiveness of Principals*. Initially, 24 applications at the development level under Absolute Priority 1 were deemed "highly rated" by reviewers and were invited to submit a full proposal. Ultimately, though, **not one proposal that focused on principal effectiveness was funded in any of the three program levels for the i3 competition.** This was the first year that an explicit focus on principal development was included and the absence of an award in the principal effectiveness area supports Manna's (2015) claim that despite a growing body of research demonstrating the crucial role of the principal in improving schools, policy-makers continue to overlook the role in terms of providing specific funding for programs and supports.

No information was provided by ED regarding the final ratings of each of the 24 full proposals submitted under Absolute Priority 1/Development that were initially considered "highly rated" by reviewers. Therefore there is no way to be certain as to the highest score represented in the Absolute Priority 1 area. However, scores were provided in the reviewers' comments document provided by the ED's i3 Deputy Director. The scores included in the reviewers' comments on the proposal submitted by the Center for the Study of Education Policy represented a total score of 88.5. The lowest rated proposal that was funded in the 2015 i3 competition received a total score of 89.83. While there is

⁶ <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc> During the 2015 i3 and IES competitions, the outcome for proposals focused on principals was narrowly focused on various aspects of student achievement and growth, and teacher attendance and retention. No other outcomes were allowable. A new focus area has been added: teacher instruction.

no public information available to suggest that the Center's proposal was the highest rated in the Absolute Priority 1 area, comparison to the scores of the funded proposals still suggest a lack of prioritization for supporting programs for principals. It was disappointing to realize that potentially a mere point difference was all that separated an Absolute Priority 1 proposal from an awarded proposal in another area. Additionally, it is entirely possible that the Center's proposal was not the highest rated in the Absolute Priority 1 area and the comparison even more strongly suggests that there are specific barriers preventing these proposals from being awarded funding.

Specific Challenges to Absolute Priority 1 Proposals in the 2015 i3 Competition:

Focus on Innovation vs. Strong Evidence of Effectiveness

There appears to be an irreconcilable disconnect between the preference for innovation and the need for strong evidence of effectiveness. For example, in order to meet the evidence requirement, the proposal submitted by the Center for the Study of Education Policy (Center) included a qualifying study that involved an intervention whereby principals were coached to work with instructional leadership teams that then support grade level teacher teams on specific problems of instructional practice. The i3 proposal guidelines mandated that the project be built upon an intervention with strong evidence of effectiveness. However, even when presented with strong evidence, one reviewer's comment suggested they doubted the reliability of the strategy because it is such a ubiquitous practice. Below are comments by reviewers that demonstrate the lack of clarity in terms of how much priority should be placed on innovation when scoring.

Strength Cited by Reviewer:

"The original intervention was assessed using a quasi-experimental design (with similar samples) and yielded strong effect sizes that provide evidence of promise for the current project."

Weakness Cited by Reviewer:

"The applicant identifies a leadership framework within their proposal that relies on traditional approaches to leadership development in their monthly coaching session. Much of what is being shared is a continuation of a process that has not yielded great promise."

Program Requirements vs. What Reviewers Wanted:

Recognizing the fact that the qualifying study involves a somewhat common practice with varying degrees of impact, the Center proposed to combine the principal coaching and professional learning community work with an innovation used to address the well-researched barrier to principal effectiveness: time management. The combination of the qualifying intervention and the innovative approach to time management (SAM model) received positive comments from the reviewers. However, their comments also indicate mixed messages regarding what would strengthen the proposal vs. ED established requirements. For example, reviewers scoring the "Significance" portion of the proposal indicated it would have been strengthened by provided more detail on the innovative SAM model. The challenge in providing more detail on SAM was that it did not have an

evaluation that met the evidence standard and was therefore not the qualifying study that provided the foundation for the project. The proposal guidelines indicated that specific information was to be provided on the qualifying study and how it informed the project design. Unfortunately, that requirement did not align well with the reviewer's perspective.

Weakness Cited by Reviewers:

"The application would be strengthened with more details on what the SAMs model is."
"The SAM intervention is a national model integrating school operational management and instruction training."

Strict Page Limit:

The Center did include some details on the SAM model, and at least one reviewer included a comment indicating it as a "strength" of the proposal. That reviewer commented, "The applicant provides information about a study where 158 schools in 3 states found the SAM tool increased principal's time devoted to instruction. As instructional leadership and time devoted to focusing on instruction is a critical need to improve student learning, this strategy is significant." Unfortunately, the strict page limit imposed now on i3 proposals prevented any elaboration the writers would have liked to include on the leading and lagging indicators of principal impact and how those informed program and evaluation design. Further elaboration on an innovative intervention strategy that combined the qualifying study with an additional process aimed at improving time management was also impossible given the page limits. The page limit forced the writer to focus more on the qualifying study, which reviewers appeared to be less enthusiastic about. Evidence below suggests that approach was viewed as a weakness in the proposal, rather than a limitation created by the page limit.

Weakness Cited by Reviewers:

"The time utilization process on page 7 proposed to explicitly increase principals' time allocation in the domain of instructional leadership. The application would be stronger if more details were given on how the SAMs model has created the shift."

"While the SAM tool is well established, the application does not provide enough information about how that will be used"

Unrealistic Evaluation Expectations:

Another area that proved challenging to Absolute Priority 1 proposals involved the evaluation component. While not an explicit requirement of the program, the i3 application guidelines make clear that the evaluation component of the project should strive to establish a design that if implemented would meet WWC Evidence Standards. As described previously, this standard is challenging in terms of projects involving principals, particularly because they tend to be underpowered due to small sample size, involve short grant periods that are not conducive to indirect impact studies, and require a narrow focus on outcomes involving student achievement/growth and/or teacher attendance/retention. Project evaluations included in the Absolute Priority Area 1 of the i3 are further challenged by the fact that the grant is primarily intended to be a program

grant. A common rule of thumb for program grants is that roughly 10% of the total should be set aside for a rigorous project evaluation that also provides regular feedback to inform the continuous improvement process (CNCS, 2012).

Despite the fact that the Center's 2015 i3 proposal allocated nearly 30% of the budget toward the evaluation component, reviewers still felt the design was insufficient and would not likely meet WWC standards, due to sample size and attrition. In order to determine adequate effect size, a power analysis was completed to determine a minimum of 121 schools needed to be included in the sample. The measurement for the indirect impact of the principal included a proprietary survey that would have needed to be administered each year to both the control and treatment groups of schools. Expanding the sample size and/or providing incentives for control group schools would have been cost prohibitive, or reduced the amount of funds available for the intervention applied to the treatment schools, thus likely reducing overall impact. Reviewer comments indicate misaligned expectations between the evaluation component and the amount of funds provided by the grant.

Weaknesses Cited by Reviewers:

“The proposed sample is the exact amount required to detect a small effect (minimum effect size of 0.1). Any loss in the sample could potentially impact the overall study... this project would then not meet WWC Evidence Standards with reservations.”

“No detail is provided as to how the evaluator will motivate school staff in the comparison schools to complete the CALL.”

WWC Evidence Bias:

While including an evaluation component that could meet WWC standards would be ideal, insufficient funds to provide a large enough sample size is a much more significant barrier to projects proposing interventions at the school, rather than classroom level. Additionally, it is widely understood that randomized controlled trials (RCT) are considered the gold standard by the WWC. RCT is an acceptable design in many cases, such as when evaluation is the primary focus of the funding, or where the intervention is untested and necessary to establish evidence of effectiveness, or when the intervention is short enough in duration to not disadvantage the control group. However, when it comes to program grants involving principals that are expected to demonstrate school wide impact over several years of a study, it is extremely difficult to find districts to agree to those types of studies. In the case of the i3, a school chosen to participate in a control group would have to agree not to implement an intervention that has already demonstrated strong evidence of effectiveness – and agree to that constraint for as many as five years. Moral and ethical concerns expressed by a number of our partners, which led to the inclusion of a quasi-experimental design, which was deemed insufficient by the reviewers.

Recommendations for Reducing Barriers to Proposals Involving Leadership Programs and Research

If ED's goal is to direct more funding to more school leadership proposals, the Center respectfully recommends that ED staff consider the following:

Ed Grants Overall:

- Consider the set aside of targeted funding specific to leadership within its other grant competitions (i3, IES, etc.) and not require proposals focused on principals to compete against proposals with teachers, policies, or structures.
 - When absolute priorities are included in grant competitions, ED may want to assess the possibility of assuring that at least one proposal in each absolute priority area is funded;
- If ED does not wish to aside targeted funding specific to leadership, we recommend that an assessment of program and research grant requirements be conducted to better reflect an understanding of leading and lagging indicators of school improvement that demonstrate principal impact;
- Consider how scoring criteria for any competitive grant competition that includes both teacher and principals may reflect differences between interventions with direct impact to student outcomes (teachers impact on students) vs. interventions with indirect impact (principal impact on teachers and school culture leading to improved student outcomes);
- Consider how WWC Evidence Standards might be revised to include a more expansive list of outcome areas that reflect emerging research on leading and lagging indicators of principal impact;

ESSA Funding

- In order to increase understanding of effective strategies for principal preparation and development, ED should encourage and incentivize state education agencies to reserve up to 3% of their ESSA-Title II funds to support activities specifically targeted to principals and other leaders, including statewide research on effective principal preparation and development strategies; and
- ED should encourage and incentivize local education agencies to adequately allocate ESSA-Title II funds specifically to support activities targeted to principals and other leaders

Investing in Innovation (i3) Grants:

- Conducting a comparative analysis of reviewer comments between priority areas of the i3 to identify distinct differences between teacher and principal interventions and the impact of those differences in terms of scoring. Identified differences should be reflected in revisions to the 2016 applications and scoring criteria;
- Consider an optional extension to the page limit in competitive grant proposals for programs that have to describe in greater detail how they will demonstrate increased student achievement and growth through the indirect actions of the principal or for programs that combine a common practice supported by strong evidence with an new innovative strategy;
- Review the highly rated pre-proposals in Absolute Priority 1 to assess how revisions for the 2016 competition could create the conditions for successful proposals in this priority area;

IES Grants:

- Consider what collaborative strategies between WWC and IES could occur to remove barriers faced by innovation research on principals that are currently considered to be underpowered due to small sample sizes and requirements for propensity score matching;
- Given the dearth of research on effective principal preparation or development strategies, IES research grants should specifically target this area and include evaluation designs of longer duration;
- Consider additional funding for program grants that require robust evaluation involving school wide impact to allow for a larger sample size to provide sufficient power analysis, given a reasonable expected level of attrition