New Leaders
Redefining how schools are led

New Leaders builds the capacity of equity-minded school leaders who are committed to the success of every child. Our leaders remove barriers to success for underestimated and underserved students, supporting students in fully realizing their futures as the next generation of great thinkers, innovators, and leaders for our society.

In 20 years, we have trained more than 6,000 leaders – 60% of whom identify as leaders of color. Our leaders reach more than 750,000 students in K-12 school systems annually and serve as powerful and positive forces for change in their communities.

New Leaders principals drive quantifiable outcomes in learning, teaching, and equity and get results where it matters most: in schools, for students. Multiple independent evaluations have proven that in schools led by a New Leaders principal, students gain additional months of learning and perform better in reading and math.

About This Policy Brief
Hearing from our school leaders

When school buildings closed in March 2020, no one could imagine that it would be nearly 18 months until they would fully reopen. During that time, we connected with our school leaders to hear how they adapted to virtual learning and how they could be best supported. As schools returned to in-person learning in fall 2021, we were eager to reconnect with New Leaders principals to hear their experiences about what’s working and not working as well as what support they need now.

This policy brief focuses specifically on the experiences of school leaders. The majority of New Leaders principals serve students in communities that suffered disproportionate impacts of COVID-19. As the brief will demonstrate, a herculean effort on the part of principals was required to reopen schools safely and reignite learning. Their work is far from over, and there is still a need for policymakers to focus investments in school leaders.

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Methodology
Qualitative case studies and analysis

In fall 2021, New Leaders conducted a series of five one-on-one interviews with current school leaders in district or public charter school settings located throughout the nation. Four interviewees were pre-K-12 school principals. One interviewee was a former school principal who now serves as a principal supervisor at a central office while also stepping in as a school building leader after the school lost an administrator. For the purposes of this brief, we refer to all interviewees as school principals. In these interviews, school principals discussed their experiences with planning and implementing the reopening of schools as well as their challenges with promoting learning acceleration in the context of pandemic recovery. These school leaders were identified by their years of experience in the field and their exceptional commitment and ability to provide insights regarding the challenges school leaders are facing.
Key Findings
The need for better support for school leaders is urgent

Through this cross-case analysis, we learned that principals:

- FOUND BUILDING A STRONG SCHOOL CULTURE WAS ESSENTIAL AND COULD BE PRACTICED IN PRESERVICE TRAINING.
- PLANNED FOR SCHOOL REOPENINGS WITH VARYING LEVELS OF UNCERTAINTY.
- ARE STRETCHED TO THE LIMIT BALANCING PHYSICAL SAFETY, INSTRUCTION, AND TRAUMA; HIRING STAFF IS HARDER THAN EVER.
- DESIRE STRONG ALIGNMENT BETWEEN SCHOOL AND DISTRICT GOALS.
- NEED FUNDING FLEXIBILITY AND REAL-TIME SUPPORT.

**A Strong School Culture Was Essential For Holding Communities Together**

Although the pandemic required new leadership skills in uncharted waters, principals who had built a strong school culture benefited from starting with the trust of their key partners. No principal described being ready for a pandemic, but all spoke of the importance of starting with and maintaining strong relationships with school staff and families. One principal described ongoing extensive efforts to keep morale strong, including by dropping off small, personalized gifts on staff’s doorsteps. Another named the importance of understanding the key stakeholders: “[M]y New Leaders [principal] training, the core of it, was always around culture and thinking about the culture of your school and the culture of your environment. Understanding what would work and who are my real stakeholders.”

**Principals Planned for School Reopenings With Varying Levels of Uncertainty**

School closures stemming from the pandemic presented enormous challenges for students and their families as well as for school officials. Thanks to COVID-19 vaccines and other interventions, schools have been able to reopen their doors to students. However, the path to reopening was fraught. Several of the principals interviewed shared that before and during the school-reopening process, one of the biggest challenges they faced was planning and execution, which was complicated by uncertainty and the unprecedented nature of the crisis. The sentiment that resonated the most among them was the lack of a blueprint for how to handle school reopenings. One administrator stated: “I’ve never been a school leader during a pandemic.” Another administrator elaborated: “We didn’t understand or fully get a grasp before we started the school year of what we would encounter. We didn’t know what we were getting ourselves into [with the] return to school.”

For these school principals, this challenge was further compounded by the fact that they were receiving a great deal of often conflicting information. Another principal reported that “inconsistency was the biggest challenge for leadership. [There were] various sources of information, and we were responsible for staying informed from all channels—nationally, locally, and within our own area schools. Mandates were streaming in from various [state and local] sources as well.” As a result, school leaders found that they had to be resourceful yet decisive in figuring out which sources to trust and then follow. “Leadership,” one principal shared, “had to synthesize [information] to figure out what would work best in our schools and remain compliant with what we were mandated to do.”

Ultimately, several principals reported that they navigated the challenges associated with school reopenings by relying

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> — New Leaders Principal
Being in this trusted position of being the leader or principal was a heavy weight because teachers and staff placed trust in us during uncertainty.” — New Leaders Principal

on people on the ground, both within and outside their schools and districts. For instance, one administrator stated: “I started to connect with people who were already in the process, especially when it was time for us to try and reach a full distance learning to hybrid learning during April 2021. I started to reach out to superintendents and small districts. I talked to people in New York City—anyone that I could talk to who had a little more experience than we did, I spoke with them. I literally sat with them and just listened and figured out what needed to be done.” Another principal recalled: “The first thing we discovered is that we needed multiple voices at the table. So we needed to engage in a lot of [collaborative thinking]—incorporating leaders, incorporating teachers when possible, and other central office staff so that we could create a plan that was comprehensive and really represented the needs and concerns across the district.”

Principals Are Stretched to the Limit Balancing Physical Safety, Instruction, and Trauma; Hiring Staff Is Harder Than Ever

The pandemic created levels of trauma and food insecurity never before experienced by the principals interviewed. One principal stated: “I’ve had students who died during the time, staff members, children. People who lost their children. I’ve had staff members getting sick, people being afraid to lose their home.” As principals dealt with death and loss in their schools, they also had to find new resources to help their students and community heal. One principal described the variety of actions used to help the community as ranging from “driving to people’s homes and dropping off their favorite sodas … [to identifying] local chefs to teach classes … [to arranging] comedy show[s] … Zumba and music classes.”

Several principals reported that, in addition to the stress and uncertainty of coming up with comprehensive reopening plans, adhering to protocols, and managing concerns about physical safety, they had to address the stress and trauma that both students and teachers experienced. One principal shared that “in a city like mine, we had an uptick in violence in criminal activity in the city during the pandemic, and that [unresolved community and family trauma] showed up in the school when the kids returned.” Principals pointed out that the challenges they faced were mainly with student stress.

Although there were few concerns among our interviewees about access to material resources like personal protective equipment (PPE), many pointed to a lack of human resources, namely school staff, as having the most significant impact. “As we planned and moved forward into the school year,” shared one principal, “we realized that some of the support that we needed

Challenges School Leaders Faced With School Reopenings

- Receiving conflicting information regarding state and local mandates and other guidelines.
- Serving as centers of information and support within communities.
- Setting expectations around developing innovative approaches to managing risks with minimal time to meet new demands.
- Lacking autonomy to execute reopening plans.
- Short on guidance or resources for disaster preparedness, grief and trauma support.
- Having ongoing concerns about student and staff retention, wellness, and safety (e.g., PTSD, medical leaves, trauma).
was really people support. We needed noninstructional staff to support the school building and safety." This administrator went on to report that three teachers at the school resigned before the beginning of the school year and they had a difficult time finding teachers to replace them.

Administrators were worried about losing teachers because of their concerns about personal safety once they returned to school. One administrator who was worried about staff retention shared that they went against the guidance of the district and temporarily allowed teachers to work from home three days a week instead of one. This administrator admitted: “I was not supposed to do that, but I felt it kept them safe. They were able to remain teaching and engaged with their own cohorts in school, and it alleviated much of their stress and anxiety. [W]hen the cohort was at home, I allowed them to be home as well. And that just gave them a sense of peace to know I’m around the same children at the same time.” Staffing situations became so dire that some principals were faced with making up for these challenges using noninstructional staff. Specifically, one principal reported that they had “custodians and school secretaries covering classes. Everyone had to be all hands on deck.” Another principal shared: “We lost about 10 individuals across the district. [We refocused our attention on] figuring out how to prep the room for learning, figuring out how to maneuver through these gaps. So, if you lost your science teacher and you’re having trouble finding a replacement, how do you rework the schedule so that we’re providing kids with science, but maybe it’s being offered from another staff member?”

One administrator observed: “We have to bring everyone around to our primary goal. As administrators, [ours] was to make sure that the environment was safe so the teachers could come in and do instruction.” They added that as principal, their role was to “balance between the safety issues and ... instruction.” In the end, administrators found themselves having to juggle several different concerns at a time. “Our kids have severe needs,” shared one principal, “and I feel a lot of pressure for us to operate as normal when things aren’t normal.”

**Principals Desire Strong Alignment Between School and District Goals**

By the time schools had reopened and begun instruction at the beginning of the 2021–2022 school year, most students had been out of their schools and learning from home for 18 months. This lack of access to traditional face-to-face instruction had a profound impact on many schools and the way school principals did their jobs.

Stress, anxiety, and isolation plagued many students while they were distance learning and sheltering in place. Administrators shared that the trauma students experienced from the negative impacts of COVID-19 was carried back into the classroom. Interviewees reported needing to focus efforts on social-emotional learning to engage students, address their trauma, and develop their emotional skills as an integral part of accelerating their academic progress.

One administrator stated: “A lot of our kids have a flat affect, and there is a [palpable] hopelessness around the things that have happened. They lost grandparents and family members during COVID, so there was a challenge in providing the support and counseling they needed. We’ve always had the need for kids to get counseling and therapy, but this pandemic increased those numbers, and that presented a new challenge we haven’t met the need for.”
Challenges School Leaders Faced With Accelerating Student Learning

- Capacity to meet classroom instruction needs was reduced due to teacher turnover.
- Reopening plans based on anticipated needs did not meet the actual needs of staff and students.
- Persistent student stress as well as social-emotional needs impeded learning.

We Are All in This Together

“Over the summer we developed a robust assessment plan, which included preassessments that would allow teachers to engage in real time how to address unfinished learning. And then through work with the curriculum team, they developed a scope and sequence that incorporated additional flex days. We also reworked our professional development so every six weeks leaders and teachers sat in PLC [Professional Learning Community] to figure out how to incorporate and respond to the data that we had available. And then our instructional schedules were also tweaked. And we added additional time to provide in-class intervention in small groups for math and humanities. We did all these things because we wanted to show everyone that we have to be right, we all are responsible for accelerating learning and for keeping people safe.”

— New Leaders Principal

Tackling an ambitious agenda to accelerate student learning was a central area of focus for principals that began in the summer and continues as an iterative process. One administrator said: “I think everyone is equally aware of the learning gaps, and the needs, and how much instruction students missed.” Despite extensive planning, some principals noted their frustration with how differing goals of key partners affected the execution of the plan. Another administrator expressed: “I don’t think we have a clear... direction. I feel [district leaders] have their own needs [while] I’m focused on safety and student well-being, and my teachers are [focused on] engagement and feel pressure to make sure kids understand certain concepts and standards.”

In a typical year, principals have a certain set of tools and an understanding of the progress students are making. In the 2020-2021 school year, understanding student progress was particularly difficult given the disruption in annual assessments, instruction, and modes of operation. One administrator shared that their district decided to start the year with testing outside the typical assessment schedule. This created challenges for them as they felt the students were rushed into assessments with very little instructional time in the school year. Furthermore, they needed additional support with using the data and assessments given the changing landscape of instructional methods. One administrator noted: “[W]e’ve had to retool with virtual learning, and it was the teachers learning how to use the devices, learning how to use the programs, learning how to instruct on a different platform.”
Some principals expressed frustration that aspects of district oversight did not reflect the real changes that have occurred in the context of the pandemic to be helpful to the school. One administrator shared that “learning walks\textsuperscript{1} have ramped up more than ever; I’ve had three already, and it’s only October. [W]e have people from [the] central office come and walk through the campuses … wanting to look for specific things. And I am a huge proponent of learning walks in general. But I would like my team, my leadership team, my culture team, my teachers to be planning them, to be setting the goals and to be participating in them, not just people from the central office coming in to make judgment calls. So that’s been frustrating.” In evaluating the implementation of school reopenings and fidelity to learning acceleration plans, the people who manage and support school leaders must ensure that the monitoring and oversight process is useful to the school.

**Principals Need Funding Flexibility and Real-Time Support**

The passage of the three COVID-19 packages—the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act of 2020; the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations (CRRSA) Act of 2021; and the American Rescue Plan (ARP) Act of 2021—deployed resources to schools across the country to assist with all levels of COVID-19 mitigation efforts, including securing the PPE that schools needed to reopen safely. Among the administrators we interviewed, all but one said they were adequately supplied or had access to the PPE they needed to reopen safely. This was notable given that each of the New Leaders principals we spoke to serves in an underresourced school.

Further, some administrators stated that they were able to use funding to cover additional teacher collaborative time and other staff costs important to supporting a full return to school successfully. One leader said: “We used the funding [for] additional social workers, additional interventionists in math and reading. … [W]e added in tutoring in math and early childhood literacy. … [A]ll of these things were things that we were able to do with the additional funding.” Another noted that “we received instructional intervention tools, we received one-to-one … so every child has their own device now, which is definitely a result of funding.” There were a variety of experiences with accessing federal funds to meet the educational needs of students. While some principals mentioned that they received support for many of their requests, others described challenges with understanding what requests would be approved. One principal described uncertainty over how federal funds could be spent, wished there had been more information provided from the district, and wondered if federal funds could be spent on partnerships for teacher wellness, school counselors, and social workers. As detailed later in this report, the school leaders identified continuing needs around hiring, providing trauma support for staff and students, and on-the-job training to address the ongoing crisis.

A consistent theme from the administrators was that funding is critical but not sufficient: principals also need a system of support and planning to meet the new demands on their leadership. In their estimation, the challenges they face around bringing their school operations back to prepandemic conditions revolve primarily around a lack of human resources: teachers, learning intervention specialists, social workers, and so on. One administrator explained that “the needs that we have are unmet because there’s just a shortage of people … we want to hire people.” Another shared that “[w]e’re not being given any support with hiring people to fill those positions that you’ve given us money for, so it’s like, ‘Here’s a bunch of money, now find the bandwidth, find the time, find the human, find the personnel committee time and bandwidth to interview, and then do the work that it takes to get them hired.’ And that’s the part I feel like we haven’t gotten enough support with.”

Reinforcing the capacity challenges, another administrator said: “[O]ne thing that was quite challenging … [was hiring] substitutes. People were afraid to accept jobs and come into the school. And someone called out because they were sick, or they had an appointment, and they just couldn’t come to work that day. We were tasked with figuring out how to cover that class so there was no gap in learning [using] the people who were in the building, and [that] adds challenges because … you have to work around so many schedules and … think about things in a different way when you’re trying to repurpose people.”

Another administrator suggested that having the time and flexibility to direct resources might have aided administrators in optimizing the way they allocated funding, and several named that specific supports would have been helpful. One principal said that “[t]raining for staff and training for administrators around trauma and crisis intervention and things of that nature and really being given the time for those things to be digested [would have helped].”

\textsuperscript{1} Learning walks are brief classroom visits that typically, engage participants in observing a specific area of interest in a school—for example, classroom instruction—and support identification of school or district patterns that, if addressed, will result in desired improvements.
Adressing the mental health of their students and staff was also a consistent theme. One administrator articulated the needs of their school; in addition to mental health supports, they stated: “[W]e need a better transportation system. … We need better food for our kids. I think that’s an understatement. … Our kids do not have sufficient quality, healthy food at home. They come here and they get prepackaged meals that are just not good. They need to put resources into figuring out how we can feed our students better, so they can have a better mind state in school.” Interviewees indicated that students were arriving with new needs that went beyond academic and social-emotional needs. As detailed previously, principals had to use a variety of strategies to support their students and these multiple and growing needs.

In spite of districts’ efforts to make sure that sufficient funding was available to schools, funding was not enough to make up for the shortage of school staff and other professionals needed to provide for students’ needs. Although access to funding plays a critical role in aiding administrators to achieve their goal of rehabilitating their respective school sites in the aftermath of a crisis, strategies and supports like infrastructure, planning, and allocation are also critical, as is access to flexible funds to meet the specific needs of a school community.

These experiences point to several key priorities for supporting school leaders: (1) strong preservice training, (2) funding flexibility for school principals, (3) intentional support and professional development for leading a school through a large-scale crisis, and (4) sufficient autonomy to meet the specific school needs of their school and ensure that all students are safe and learning.

These leaders acutely felt how the success of our schools sits on the shoulders of the nation’s principals. As the country moves to recover from the devastation caused by the pandemic, it is imperative that the lessons learned and the lived experiences of leaders inform current and future policy decisions.

**Policy Recommendations**

**Invest in preservice training, professional development, and systems of support so that school leaders can succeed.**

The themes from the interviews, as well as new and emerging research from the National Association of Elementary School Principals, specifically, *Leaders in the Tumult: Schooling Innovations and New Perspectives From a Year Interrupted*, shows that school leaders have had to make unprecedented decisions in order to navigate the new conditions resulting from the coronavirus pandemic. From managing staffing shortages to procuring PPE, school principals have been leading their schools through the crisis without any prior training in pandemic planning or preparation, while schools have become ground zero for meeting the needs of not only the students but also the communities at large. Although gains have been made since the start of the pandemic in promoting health and safety, principals are still dealing with the ramifications of interruptions during the last two school years.

The need for better preparation and support for principals is urgent. Given principals’ critical role in supporting teachers, students, and school communities, we recommend that policy leaders make explicit investments in school leaders in the following ways:

1. **Federal: Support ongoing preservice training and on-the-job support for principals.** Authorized under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965, and as amended by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015, the School Leader Recruitment and Support Program (SLRSP) is the only federal program with an exclusive focus on supporting evidence-based, locally driven strategies to strengthen school leadership. These programs are needed and can be part of a sustainability strategy. A recent poll from the National Association of Secondary School Principals found that 45% of school leaders said they have accelerated plans to leave the profession as a result of the pandemic. Every school across the country needs a principal who is prepared to lead both in typical times and in crises. Congress can enable both a strong principal pipeline and critical professional development support for sitting principals by appropriating SLRSP funds (at least $30 million annually) as a down payment on a comprehensive approach to ensuring that every school has strong leadership.

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2 American Institutes for Research and National Association of Elementary School Principals, *Leaders in the Tumult: Schooling Innovations and New Perspectives From a Year Interrupted*. October 2021. This brief is part of the larger series, *Leaders We Need Now.*
2. **Federal and State: Include high-quality training and an opportunity to practice instructional leadership, operational management, and building a strong school culture during preservice preparation.** Strong principal leadership was critical as schools rapidly converted from in-person to remote learning and back. From coordinating the technology to training staff on remote platforms for instruction, principals were forced to train and transition their entire schools quickly. Staff trust in school principals to lead was essential. Learning how to build this trust is a key leadership skill that begins with strong preservice training, as our interviewees stated. Congress can support these efforts by increasing Title I and II funding and directly invest in evidence-based principal preparation and support with a proven track record of improving school and student outcomes. State education agencies (SEAs) can use existing federal Title I and Title II dollars to strengthen principal training and licensure, as well as pay for stipends to support school-based opportunities to practice leadership and build principal pipelines. SEAs can also make effective use of the 3% set aside for state-level principal and school leader support (including preparation academies).

3. **Federal and District: Allow principals flexibility in funding to meet the unique needs of their schools.** School leaders are focused on both the health and the academic outcomes of students. Although support from the district is critical, it is also important that school leaders be able to access flexible funding to meet the specific needs of their school communities. Formula funds allow districts to provide principals and other school leaders this spending flexibility in accordance with ESSA; CARES and CRRSA explicitly allow districts to provide principals and others school leaders with the resources necessary to address the needs of their schools. Principals with faster access to flexible funding are better able to respond to urgent community needs and design contingency plans. As districts continue to make decisions on use of federal dollars even beyond the pandemic, they should consider empowering principals to make decisions that best meet the needs of their schools. And, as federal policymakers consider future investments, they should continue to provide needed flexibility to school principals.

4. **Federal, State, and/or District: Maximize funding to meet both short-term needs and anticipated long-term needs.** Principals stated that more training on allowable uses of funds could have helped in their planning, including more education on how federal funds can be maximized to meet the needs created by the current pandemic and burgeoning staff shortages. Spending on training and professional development are allowable uses of funds under the ESEA, as amended by the ESSA. Specifically, there should be more training and education for districts and school leaders on how federal recovery funds and other federal funds can be used to meet both immediate needs and long-term needs, including getting ahead of anticipated pipeline shortages for school leaders and other educators.

5. **District: Provide meaningful, sustained support for school leaders.** In addition to providing access to flexible funds, districts should consider the role of the school leader in the success of any school-based policy initiative as they continue to spend federal funds. School leaders are responsible for physical safety, instructional learning, and mental health. School principals expressed frustrations over misalignment between the most pressing needs identified by the district and those identified by individual schools. Districts can work to have better alignment with leaders by ensuring that the role of the principal supervisor is designed to push toward goals while providing support. In many cases, such efforts require reducing the number of schools within principal supervisors’ networks so that they can provide sufficient, targeted support to principals based on individual and school strengths and needs. States should encourage districts to structure principal supervisor roles and networks to support priorities and address their local needs.

### Conclusion

All school personnel and students felt the effects of the pandemic. This brief highlights the challenges that school principals in particular experienced as well as their efforts to implement new strategies to navigate successful school-reopening plans and their challenges with promoting learning acceleration in the context of pandemic recovery.

Many of these issues are intertwined—for example, staffing challenges added additional uncertainty to reopening plans—and ultimately, all of these issues intersect with the decisions made by school leaders. Principals are the cornerstone of successful implementation of any school-based policy or initiative. Investing in their preparation and support is critical to the success of all school-based policy goals – and all efforts to create great schools where teachers love to teach and students love to learn.