

Developing Effective School Leaders

Summary Findings from A Cross-District Study of Principal Pipelines

California school districts face persistent challenges with recruiting, developing, and retaining effective principals—a problem that has grown more acute as principal turnover remains elevated statewide. Over the past decade, a growing number of large, urban districts have responded by building formal *principal pipelines*: intentional strategies to connect aspiring leaders to training, mentorship, and systematic hiring pathways. Yet little is known about how these pipelines are working in practice or whether they are reaching the leaders whom districts need most.

The report *Developing School Leaders* presents findings from a study of principal pipelines in five large, urban California school districts. Drawing on administrative staffing data and interviews with central office leaders, we found that aspiring leader programs have grown substantially and are now a mainstream pathway for new principals. Participation in a district aspiring leader program is associated with faster promotion and longer retention of school leaders. At the same time, districts face unresolved equity challenges and organizational barriers that threaten the long-term sustainability of these gains. The findings point to both the promise and the limitations of principal pipelines as currently designed and demonstrate that California is continuing to build on its already strong foundation of systematic support for school administrators.

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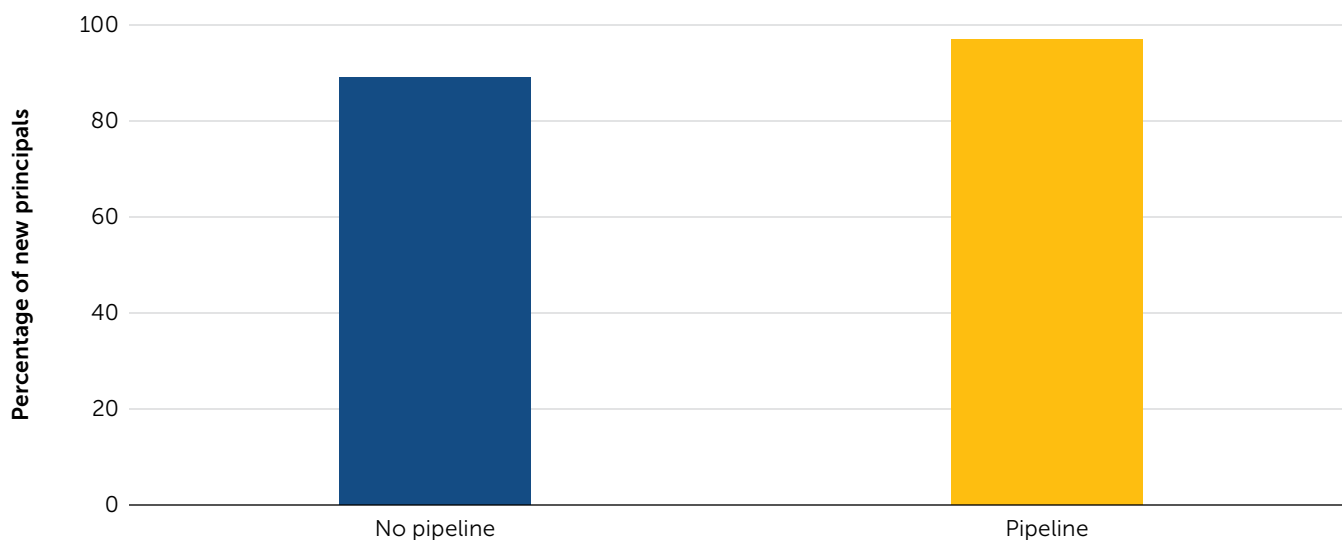
Most New Principals Have Participated in a District-Sponsored Aspiring Leader Program

The percentage of new principals who participated in a district aspiring leader program rose dramatically during the study period. In 2016, only about **5 percent** of new principals in our sample had participated in such a program. By 2021, that figure had risen to **55 percent**. Two of the five districts in our sample now fill most principal vacancies with their own program completers. These programs take many forms, from grow-your-own cohort programs to short leadership intensives, and some operate through internal credentialing pathways approved by the Commission on Teacher Credentialing. This growth mirrors national trends as more districts take an active role in recruiting, training, and selecting school leaders.

Principal Pipelines Are Correlated With Retention of School Leaders

Educators who participated in district aspiring leader programs were significantly more likely to be promoted and to stay. Assistant principals (APs) who participated in a district program were **55 percent** more likely than nonparticipants to be promoted to principal within 3 years. Once in the role, **97 percent** of pipeline participants were still working in the district as principals after 3 years, compared to **85 percent** of principals who never participated (Figure 1). This 12-percentage-point retention gap suggests that local training may be key to building a stable, long-term principal workforce, particularly as principal turnover remains elevated across California.¹

Figure 1. New Principal Retention Rates by Pipeline Status



Note. The figure includes all newly hired principals across four participating CORE districts, 2015–22; $N = 1,943$. District E was excluded because it did not operate a formal pipeline program.

The Demographic Diversity of School Leaders Is Increasing, but Unevenly

All five districts in our sample made meaningful progress in increasing the race and gender diversity of their administrator workforces. The percentage of Black principals more than doubled between 2015 and 2022, from **7 percent** to **16 percent** of all principals, and the proportion of new principals who were women grew from **62 percent** to **69 percent**. Yet these gains were uneven across the pipeline. Latinx principals remain underrepresented relative to student populations. White APs were **50 percent more likely** to be promoted to principal in a given year than Black, Latinx, and Asian American APs with similar experience. Among teacher leaders (TLs; teachers with a formal leadership role), women were **15 percent less likely** than men to be promoted to AP. We also found evidence that special educators are less likely to move into school leadership, even as students with disabilities make up 14 percent of California's student body.² These patterns suggest that principal pipelines, as relatively new district initiatives, have not yet met districts' stated equity and diversity goals.

Teacher Leadership Is a Bridge to School Leadership

TL roles, including Teachers on Special Assignment (TOSAs) and instructional coaches, are an increasingly common stepping stone to school leadership. Across the study sample, **57 percent** of APs and **42 percent** of principals had served as TLs at some point. At least one district now requires all new school leaders to have TL experience, signaling a growing recognition that the formal leadership pipeline begins well before the AP role.

Recommendations for District Leaders and State Policymakers

- Align pipelines across the full career span. Connect grow-your-own teacher efforts with principal pipelines and extend pathways to central office roles.
- Leverage pipelines for retention. Given the 12-point retention gap between participants and nonparticipants, treat pipelines as retention infrastructure, not just training.
- Use TOSA and AP roles strategically. Recruit interested TLs into aspiring leader programs while preserving room for those who prefer to grow in place.
- Address the special education gap. Investigate why special education teachers are underrepresented in pipelines and adjust recruitment strategies accordingly.
- Give pipelines time before reassessing equity goals. Progress on race and gender diversity will take longer to materialize at higher leadership levels.

California districts have shown that investing in principal development pays off in better prepared, longer tenured school leaders. The next step is ensuring that those investments reach all educators equitably and hold up as the public K–12 landscape continues to shift. Realizing the full potential of these investments will require confronting lingering equity gaps, promoting an organizational culture of transparency, and sustaining programmatic commitments even amid fiscal pressures.

Endnotes

¹ Alonso, J., et al. (2026, May). *Leadership stability in California: Capacity, continuity, and system coherence* (Getting Down to Facts III). Stanford SCALE Initiative Accelerator for Learning. gettingdowntofacts.com/research-briefs/leadership-stability-california-capacity-continuity-and-system-coherence

² Ripma, T., & Wall, A. (2026, February). *Advancing inclusive education in California schools: Lessons from the Supporting Innovative Practices Project* [Practice brief]. Policy Analysis for California Education. edpolicyinca.org/publications/advancing-inclusive-education-california-schools