

Insights Brief

Strengthening Principal Preparation Through On-The-Job Training Insights from KIPP's Strategies for Developing Assistant Principals as School Leaders

Principals play a critical role as instructional leaders in their schools. They recruit effective teachers, support their instruction, and create the conditions for teachers to develop and improve. School districts and charter school networks face the challenge of creating a pipeline of new principals and developing them into strong instructional leaders. This brief describes insights from a focused effort by KIPP, a charter school management organization, to develop assistant principals into strong school leaders. Although employed in the context of charter schools, many of KIPP's leadership development strategies are relevant to the challenge of preparing administrators to lead traditional public schools.

BACKGROUND

As KIPP has grown to become the largest charter school network in the country, the organization has greatly expanded its pipeline of new principals. KIPP's rapid growth over the last two decades created an enormous need for strong principals to lead its schools. Similar to the approach used by school districts, KIPP identifies principal candidates in its schools primarily from a talent pool of assistant principals. But KIPP has also instituted a number of strategies that effectively turn the assistant principal experience into a structured program for developing the skills required to serve as a school's top administrator.

KIPP prepares assistant principals through on-the-job training that enables them to experience the core activities involved in leading a KIPP school. Assistant principals receive support and guidance from their principals as they learn from these opportunities and develop the competencies they need to be strong school leaders. Principals, in turn, receive support and guidance in developing assistant principals. Taken together, these strategies can help address a key challenge for districts: ensuring that assistant principals have opportunities to gain the skills and experience needed to succeed as a principal.¹

About this series

The U.S. Department of Education's Supporting Effective Educator Development (SEED) grants fund evidence-based programs that prepare and develop effective educators. As SEED grantees implement, adapt, and grow their programs, they gain valuable insights that can inform the work of districts, states, and organizations working to improve educator effectiveness. This series of briefs is designed to share these insights with the broader field. Each brief describes a grantee's perspective on the lessons learned from its implementation experiences. The briefs are part of a broader project for the Office of Innovation and Improvement to disseminate lessons learned from SEED grants. Mathematica Policy Research is leading the project in partnership with AEM and Knowledge Design Partners. This brief was prepared based on input from KIPP.

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The following insights from KIPP address key questions related to preparing assistant principals to become effective principals.

How can the assistant principal position be used to prepare new principals?

KIPP views assistant principals as “principal apprentices.” Assistant principals in KIPP schools are expected to receive a set of experiences that prepare them to become principals. KIPP uses the following strategies to develop assistant principals into principals:

- ❖ **Create opportunities for assistant principals to experience the key responsibilities of a principal.** Assistant principals in KIPP schools have multiple opportunities, or “at-bats,” to lead a series of school leadership activities. Examples of these activities include analyzing school-wide data, hiring new teachers, and giving teachers feedback on their instruction. KIPP’s School Leadership Readiness Criteria summarize these activities—for example, analyzing school-wide data and teacher hiring. These criteria align with seven common behaviors that KIPP identified among its most effective leaders (such as “setting a vision” and “developing teachers...through enabling systems.”)
- ❖ **Ensure that principals model and provide feedback to support assistant principals as they gain experience with key leadership activities.** KIPP principals provide support and guidance as assistant principals complete their at-bats in various school leadership roles. Principals play a lead role in developing assistant principals. The principals use an “I do, we do, you do” approach to development. For example, during an assistant principal’s at-bat for hiring new teachers, the assistant principal will first observe the principal leading the hiring process. Then the principal and assistant principal might interview teacher candidates together. Finally, the assistant principal will lead the hiring process while the principal observes. This gradual release approach supports assistant principals as they train for the principal role. It also enables principals to evaluate the skills of their assistant principals as they develop, allowing principals to provide them with more tailored guidance.

What type of support do principals need for preparing assistant principals as instructional leaders?

KIPP has instituted a number of strategies to support principals in their roles developing new principals:

- ❖ **Provide principals clear expectations and tools for developing the leadership skills of assistant principals.** KIPP encourages principals to use the “70/20/10” approach to leadership development. According to this approach, the ideal mix of development activities breaks down to three items: 70 percent of activities are on-the-job learning experiences, 20 percent of activities are focused on feedback and coaching, and 10 percent of activities are more traditional training activities, such as workshops.ⁱⁱ KIPP principals create a 70/20/10 development plan for each assistant principal based on their competencies and areas they need to improve.

Principals use an *Assistant Principal Development Plan Template* that guides them in assessing assistant principals on KIPP’s leadership readiness criteria and identifying stretch opportunities for assistant principals to grow in their areas for development. Principals also use a companion document titled *How to Ensure a Strong Assistant Principal Development Plan* that provides additional guidance and tips on how to monitor an assistant principal’s progress and make adjustments to a development plan. For example, the plan advises how to choose stretch opportunities that are within an assistant principal’s “zone of proximal development,” which is challenging to complete but not overwhelming. (To see these and other leadership-development tools, go to KIPP’s online resource library: www.kipp.org/approach/resource-library).
- ❖ **Support principals in letting go of many traditional school leadership responsibilities.** Principals must give up some traditional responsibilities to take on the role of developing new principals. In particular, principals must reduce the amount of time they spend on school operations. To accommodate this need, most KIPP schools now have dedicated operations leaders who take on these responsibilities to help principals focus more on school culture and leadership development. KIPP’s school-based operations leaders are responsible for managing issues related to facilities maintenance and repairs, transportation and food service, and budgeting.

Principals also need coaching to become comfortable with sharing leadership responsibilities with their assistant principals. For example, principals might have little experience sharing responsibility with others when making staffing decisions. KIPP principals receive regular coaching from regional school leader managers on how to manage their responsibilities for leadership development. To support this coaching, KIPP provides school leader managers with a *School Leader's Guide to AP Development*, which includes things to look for in principal and assistant principal behaviors. For example, the guide says principals should observe and give feedback to assistant principals at least once a week, and the feedback should set up the assistant principal for success in replicating or adapting a specific leadership skill (the School Leader's Guide is also in the KIPP resource library).

- ❖ **Tailor the level of support to principals.** KIPP adjusts the level of support for principals depending on how prepared they are to develop and guide assistant principals. When supporting principals, regional directors might employ the same “I do, we do, you do” technique that principals use with their assistant principals. For example, a regional director might give feedback to an assistant principal while the principal observes as a way to build the principal’s own skills in providing feedback on leadership behaviors.

How can school districts identify promising principal candidates?

Principals within each KIPP region gather together at least once a year for talent reviews. Each principal presents an assessment of his or her assistant principal based on KIPP’s leadership readiness criteria. Principals also discuss their ongoing work to develop their assistant principals. During these talent reviews, principals ask questions and offer suggestions to each other about the assistant principals they are developing. This process provides principals with another perspective on how

their assistant principals are progressing and keeps the regional leaders aware of assistant principals who are ready to become principals.

About this brief

This brief was prepared based on input from several leaders at KIPP: Tamara Cheng, Emily Reynolds, and Shannon Stockdale. Jeff Archer and Jeffrey Max worked with KIPP to develop this brief. For more information on leadership development at KIPP, go to: <https://www.kipp.org/approach/resource-library/>.

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ENDNOTES

ⁱ Several reports document the challenge of preparing assistant principals to serve as principals when they take on roles focused on management and operational issues rather than instructional leadership (for example, Turnball et al. 2016; Mendels 2016; Bierly and Shy 2016).

ⁱⁱ KIPP adapted the 70/20/10 model from the management literature, including *The Career Architect Planner* by Michael Lombardo and Robert Eichinger.