

How to Show Appreciation This Principals Month? Empower Them to Lead Our Youngest Learners

By [Abbie Lieberman](#)

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They wake up hours before the school day begins, usually with a handful of text messages or emails in their inbox from staff members who will not be able to come in. They arrange for last minute substitutes if needed and rearrange schedules where possible. They get ready for the day and arrive at school before the doors open. They make the rounds, checking in with staff and talking to parents. They give out hugs and high fives, often calling children by name as their parents drop them off for the day. Then, they start their official school day, which includes supporting teachers and helping them grow.

These individuals are our elementary school principals. They work to ensure that our elementary schools are safe, nurturing, and enriching places for the hundreds of students they enroll and the dozens of educators they employ. October is [National Principals Month](#) and it's an opportunity to acknowledge the hard work of these too often overlooked professionals. Principals have a huge impact on school quality; after teachers, research shows that they have the largest impact on student outcomes.

Being a principal can be extremely rewarding, but it's also extremely demanding work and turnover in this field is high. A [2014 report](#) by the School Leaders Network found that half of new principals don't last longer than three years. Principal turnover is expensive and disruptive to teachers and students. And turnover is worse at high-poverty schools where steady and high-quality leadership is essential to reform efforts. The School

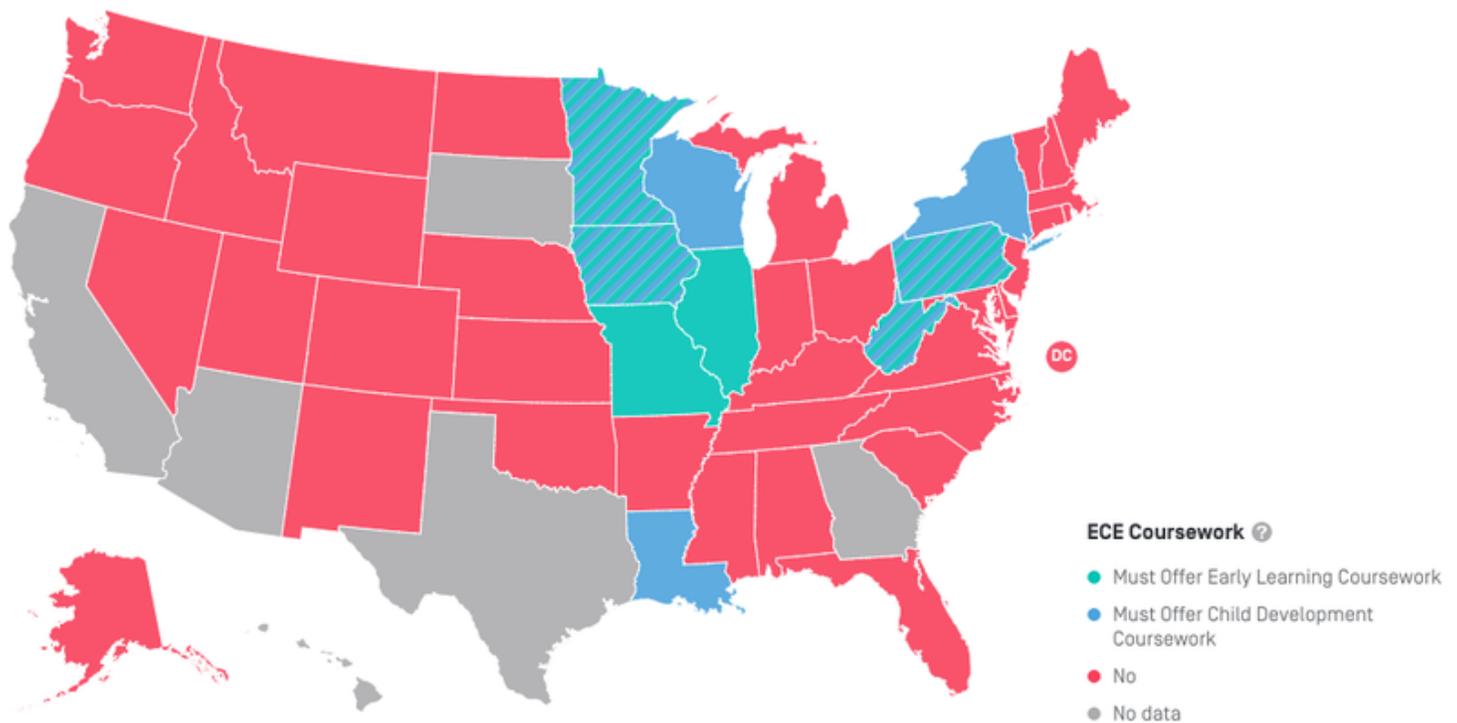
Leaders Network estimates that it takes about five years to fully implement reforms that improve school performance. If a principal doesn't last more than a few years, there is no one to ensure these efforts come to fruition.

While a heartfelt letter or small token of appreciation can show principals how much their work is valued, what principals really need is better support to make their jobs less stressful and to enable them to be strong leaders. State and local policymakers can take steps to ensure that principals have the supports they need to remain in the classroom. This includes better preparing principals for their roles and supporting them once they are leading a school.

One area that many elementary principals could use better support is in their role as early learning leaders. Past research shows that they often come into their jobs without a strong understanding of how young children learn. As more schools add pre-K classrooms and more research reveals how important pre-K, kindergarten, and the early grades are to children's long-term success, it's clear principals need to be able to support teachers in their instruction of young students.

In May, New America released a 50-state scan mapping policies related to pre-K leaders. We gathered data via survey to state departments of education and encouraged officials to collaborate with colleagues in different offices and departments to collect the data. For states that did not respond to our survey, we scanned their websites and contacted officials via email and phone. We also conducted a handful of interviews with elementary school principals to learn more about their roles.

Being a strong early education leader takes specialized knowledge and skills, but we found that states are doing little to ensure that principals know how to lead our youngest learners. As shown in the map below, only nine states reported in our survey that they explicitly require principals to have coursework in early learning and/or child development. More than 35 states and Washington, DC reported that they do not.



We also found that while 38 states and Washington, DC require elementary principals to have teaching experience, only Alaska, Nebraska, and South Carolina require that it be in the elementary grades. Prior teaching experience in the grades that a principal oversees not only improves his or her ability and confidence to guide teachers, but also gives his or her opinions credibility with the teachers they are leading.

As an elementary school principal from Minnesota shared with us, “Until you’re a principal, you haven’t learned how to be a principal.” He credited this to principal preparation programs being “incongruent with real work.” **Research** shows that meaningful clinical experiences, such as internships and assistant principalships, are an important part of principal preparation. Field experiences in elementary schools are especially important for aspiring elementary school principals who haven’t taught young children. Unfortunately, we found that only ten states require elementary school principals to have clinical experiences specifically in elementary schools.

Ensuring that principals have on-going support on-the-job is equally important to quality preparation. **Lack of support** and professional learning is a key reason why principals leave the field. On the early learning front, only 12 states responded to our survey stating

that they offered professional learning for principals around early education. Some states, like Minnesota are leading the way on this work. Minnesota offers professional learning on PreK-3rd alignment for principal-led teams that includes collaboration with superintendents, teachers, and community partners.

Rethinking school staffing models can also help ensure that principals are not overburdened and are held to more manageable expectations. As principals are expected to devote more time to instructional leadership, “many of the other roles principals have traditionally been responsible for have not yielded to make way for these new demands,” **explains** my colleague, Melissa Tooley. In her recent paper, **From Frenzied to Focused: How School Staffing Models Can Support Principals as Instructional Leaders**, she explains how “new school leadership” [NSL] models are attempting to support principals and distribute leadership responsibility.

This Principals Month, it's time to show principals how much their hard work is appreciated. In addition to the candy, flowers, and kind words, let's think more strategically about how we can support them to be effective instructional leaders.

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