

# Propelling Student Success

Emerging Evidence on School Leadership and the  
Impact of Student Success Systems

August 19, 2026



THE GRAD  
**PARTNERSHIP**

Advancing Student  
Success Systems

# Our Presenters

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# The GRAD Partnership for Student Success

## 1 WHAT

Building student success ecosystems to ensure schools and communities are empowered to graduate students ready for the future and provide pathways to adult success

## 2 WHO



## 3 HOW

- Delivering multiple types of technical assistance to schools, districts, and states
- Certifying and building capacity of local implementing partners to support schools & districts
- Providing a national network
- Developing tools and resources



# The Principal Effect

How Investing in Principals is Key to  
Solving Today's Education Challenges

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## The Principal Effect

How Investing in School Leaders Is Key  
to Solving Education's Challenges

Linda Darling-Hammond, Julie Fitz, Maria Virginia Giani,  
Molly F. Gordon, and Marjorie Wechsler



Wallace

MAY 2026

# Since the Pandemic, Students and Schools Have Experienced a Torrent of Challenges

Mental health  
issues  
Learning loss  
Chronic  
absenteeism  
Educator  
shortages



While we often seek  
individual solutions to school  
problems,



there is a unifying factor that  
can influence them all.

# Principals matter for everything in schools



“It is difficult to envision an investment with a higher ceiling on its potential return than a successful effort to improve principal leadership.”

Grissom, J. A., Egalite, A. J., & Lindsay, C. A. (2021). *How principals affect students and schools: A systematic synthesis of two decades of research*. (p. 43). The Wallace Foundation.



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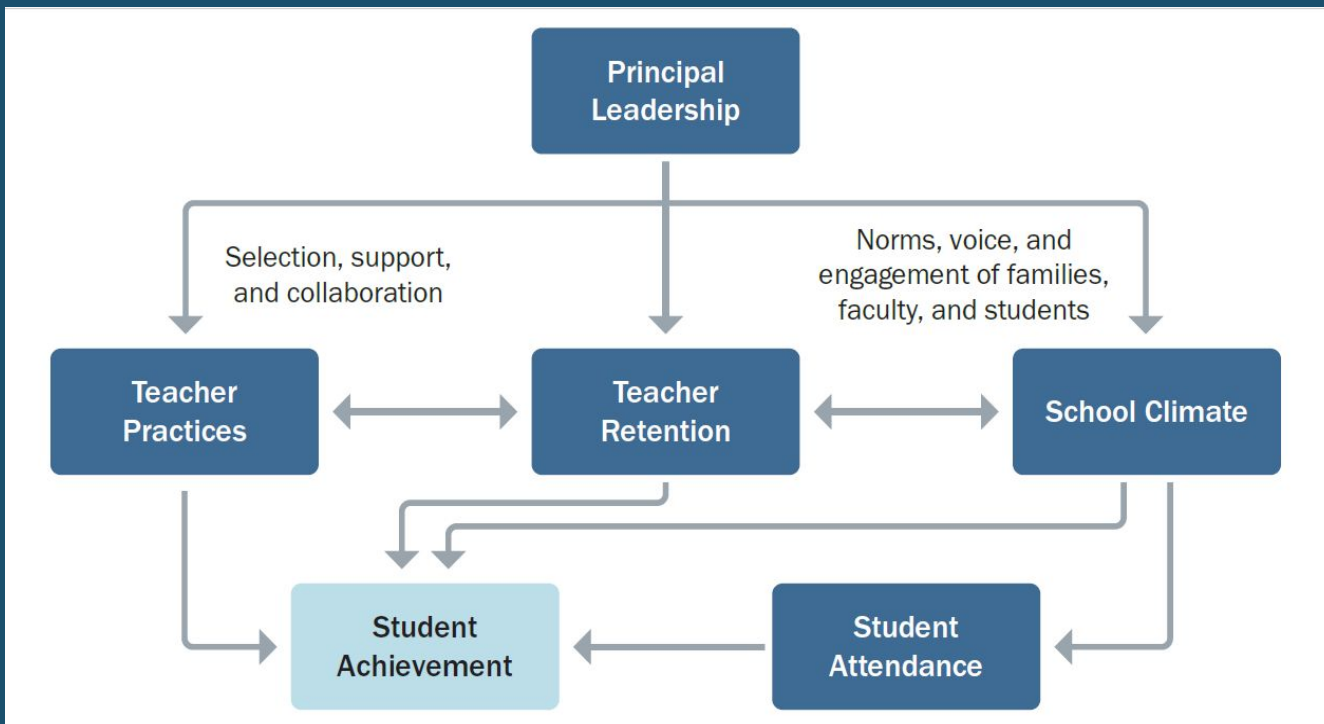


MAY 2026

# Research shows that principals affect student and teacher outcomes by:

- ▷ Supporting effective instruction
- ▷ Retaining teachers, thereby strengthening school stability and expertise
- ▷ Creating a positive climate that welcomes and connects staff, students, and families

# How Principals Influence School Outcomes



# Effective principals support strong instruction, and consequently student learning, by:

- engaging with teachers around instruction: enabling successful practices, observing, coaching, providing feedback, and reviewing data together;
- investing in high-quality staff development;
- working with staff to develop a cohesive educational program with strong curriculum and shared practices;
- enabling teacher collaboration for planning and professional learning; and
- developing shared instructional leadership and shared decision-making.

# Effective principals retain teachers by:

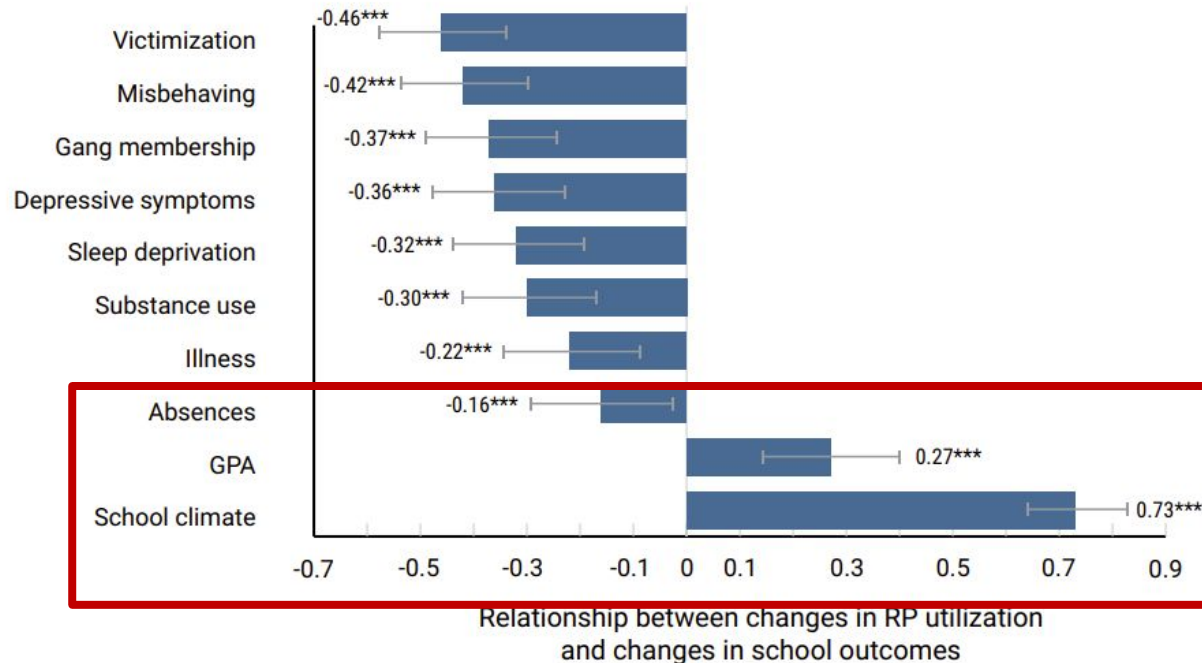
- ▶ developing a safe, nurturing environment that supports well-being and fosters belonging of students and staff;
- ▶ supporting teachers at all experience levels with resources and caring;
- ▶ buffering teachers from external demands while protecting their time and agency; and
- ▶ fostering teacher collaboration and involvement in decision-making.

# Effective principals create a positive school climate by:

- ▶ adopting policies and practices that undergird positive teacher–student relationships characterized by warmth, acceptance, and support;
- ▶ building a welcoming, inclusive, communicative school culture that builds trust between students, teachers, and families;
- ▶ creating structures and expectations for engaging families regularly;
- ▶ establishing high expectations for student learning for both teachers and students; and
- ▶ employing democratic school principles such as shared decision-making.

Strategic efforts have multiple benefits for students, staff, and schools

## Relationship Between School-Level Changes in Restorative Practice Utilization and in Student Outcomes



Notes: Bars depict changes in outcomes (in standard deviation units) per a 1 standard deviation increase in restorative practice utilization. RP = restorative practices

\* $p < 0.05$ . \*\* $p < 0.01$ . \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

Source: California Department of Education. (2013–2019). *California Healthy Kids Survey* [Data set].

Darling-Hammond, S. (2023). *Fostering belonging, transforming schools: The impact of restorative practices*. Learning Policy Institute.

# In schools with positive climates,

- Students have improved behaviors, engagement, academic achievement, and graduation rates. They attend at higher rates.
- Teachers have less emotional exhaustion and burnout and greater feelings of personal accomplishment and job satisfaction. They stay at higher rates.

# Building Collective Efficacy

- ▶ A study comparing Chicago principals in improving schools compared to those in stagnating schools found that those in improving schools:
  - built a culture of shared organizational learning around the school vision
  - helped teachers understand how their collective efforts contribute to the larger purpose;
  - set aside time for staff to regularly work together productively; and
  - shared leadership across their staff.

Gordon, M. F., & Hart, H. (2022). How strong principals succeed: Improving student achievement in high-poverty urban schools. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 60(3), 288–302.

# Why Teachers Say they Stay



*[We are] a shared learning community. We are very involved with each other in planning, learning ... lots of team preparation. We all hold the same vision. We believe in our mission and work together to achieve that.*

*Waddel, J. (2010). Fostering relationships to increase teacher retention in urban schools. Journal of Curriculum and Instruction, 4(1), 70–85.*

# Principal retention also matters



About 1 in 5 principals leaves their school each year.

Typically, when principals leave, teacher attrition increases and student achievement declines.

# Principal Turnover is Related to:

- ▷ Salaries
- ▷ Working Conditions
  - School Size
  - Staff Qualifications and Turnover
  - District office support
  - Decision-making authority
  - Accountability approach
- ▷ Preparation, Professional Learning, and Coaching



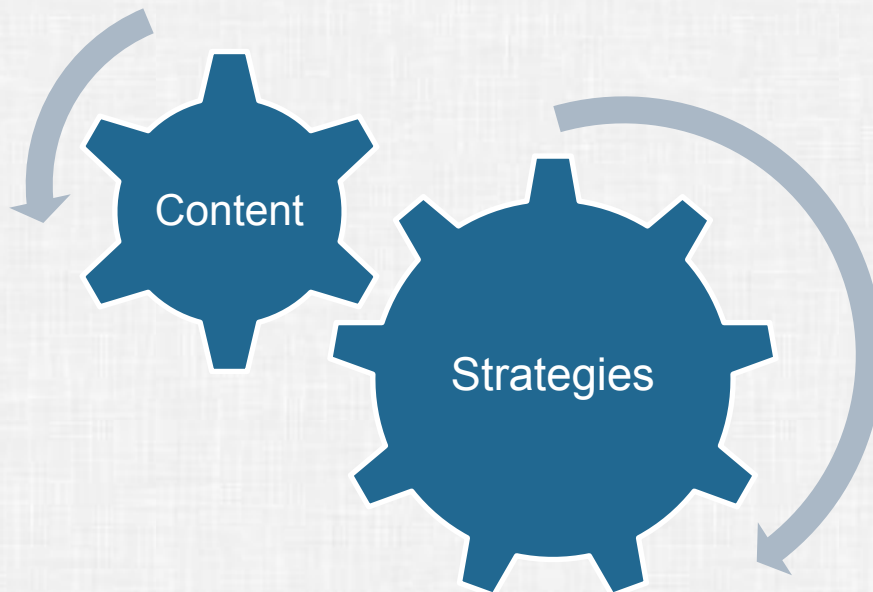
**High-quality principal  
learning matters for  
effectiveness and retention**



# Features of high-quality principal learning

# Two key components of effective learning

- ▷ Instructional support
- ▷ School improvement
- ▷ School culture
- ▷ Developing people
- ▷ Meeting diverse students' needs



- ▷ Applied learning
- ▷ Internships
- ▷ Coaching & mentoring
- ▷ Cohorts & networks

# High-quality principal learning is positively associated with:

## Principals

- ▷ Perceptions of effectiveness
- ▷ Attitudes
- ▷ Skills
- ▷ Efficacy

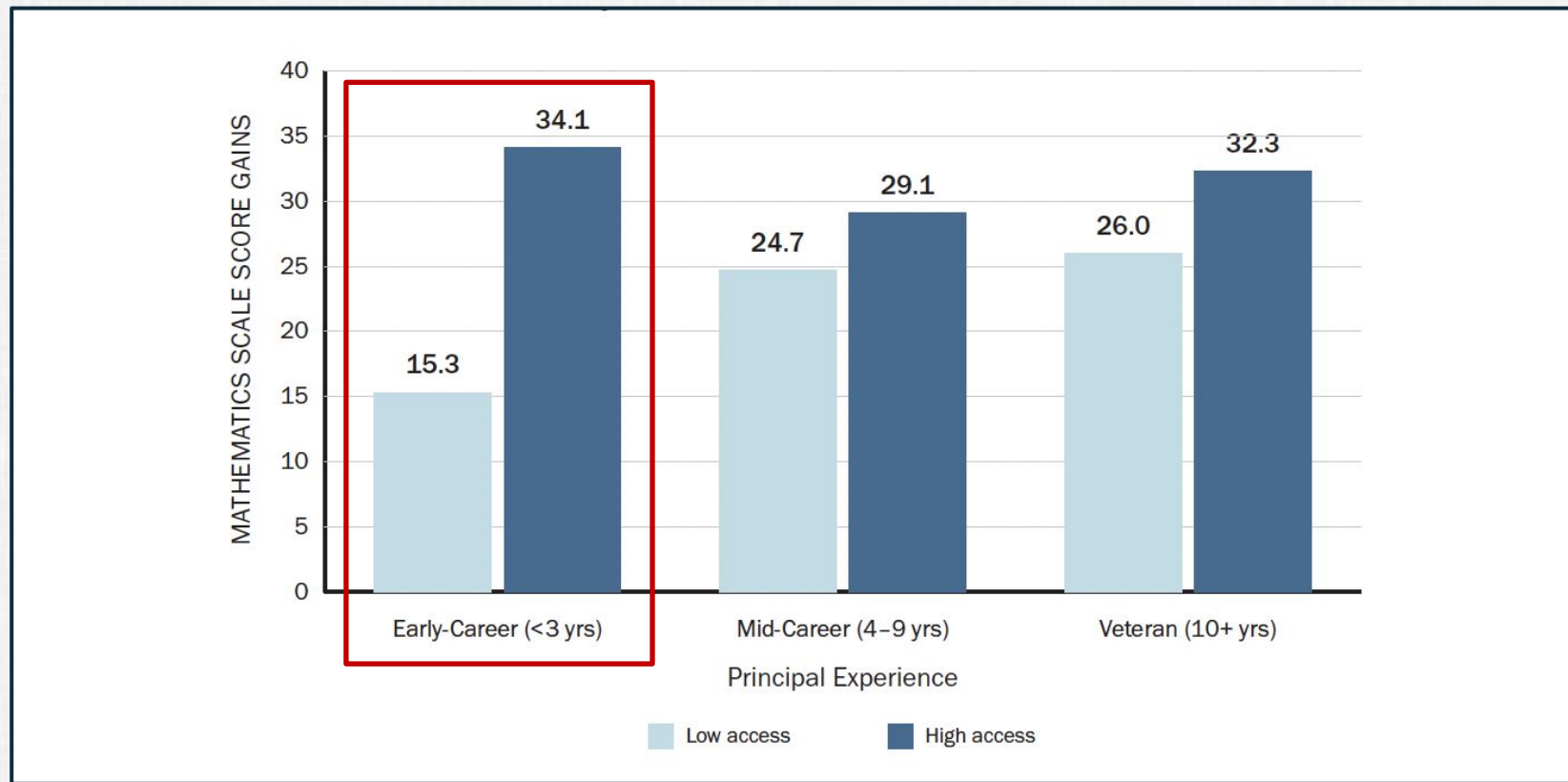
## Teachers

- ▷ Satisfaction
- ▷ Retention

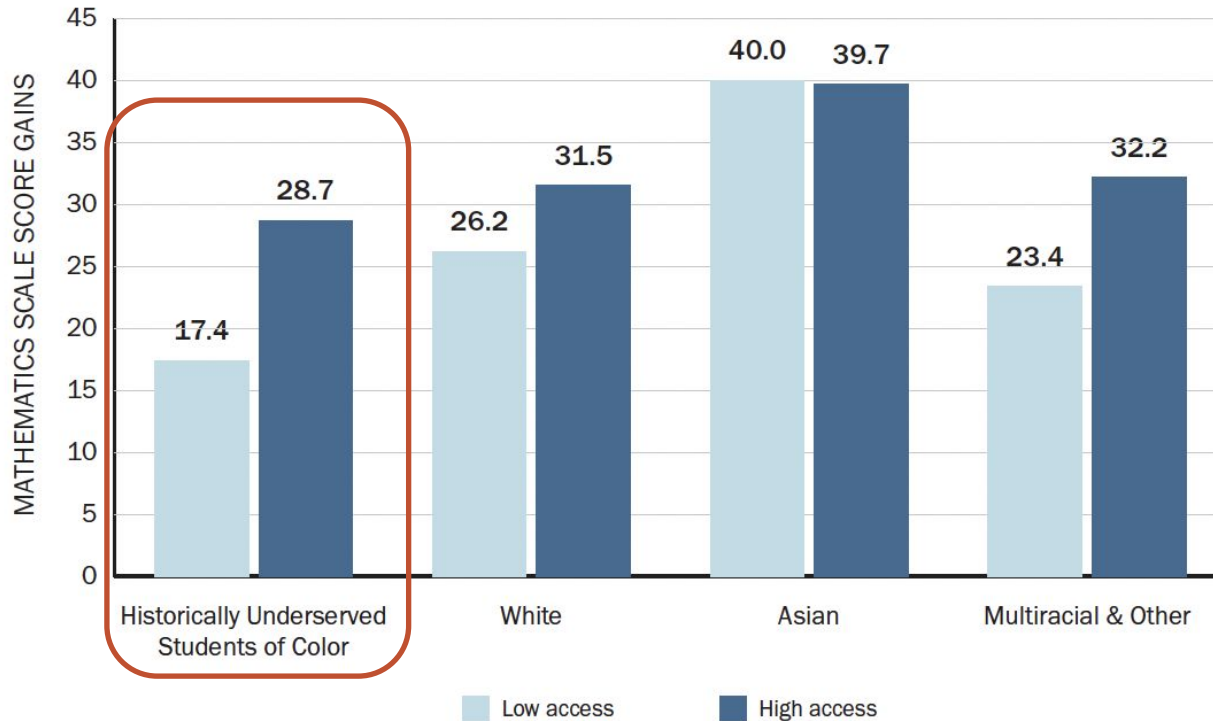
## Students

- ▷ Attendance
- ▷ Achievement
- ▷ Graduation rates

# Student gains in math (points), by principal experience, for principals with low-quality and high-quality professional development (CA)



# Gains most notable for Black, Latino/a, and Native American students

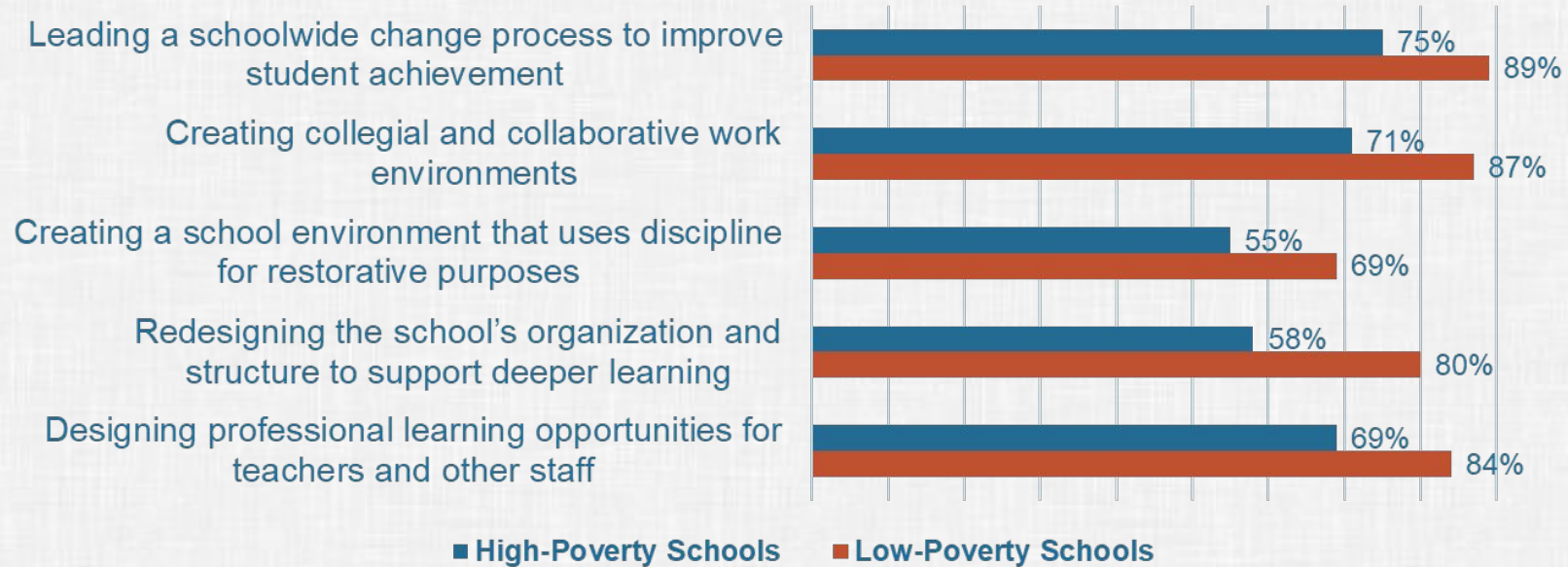


Source: Campoli, Darling-Hammond, Podolsky, and Levin, 2022



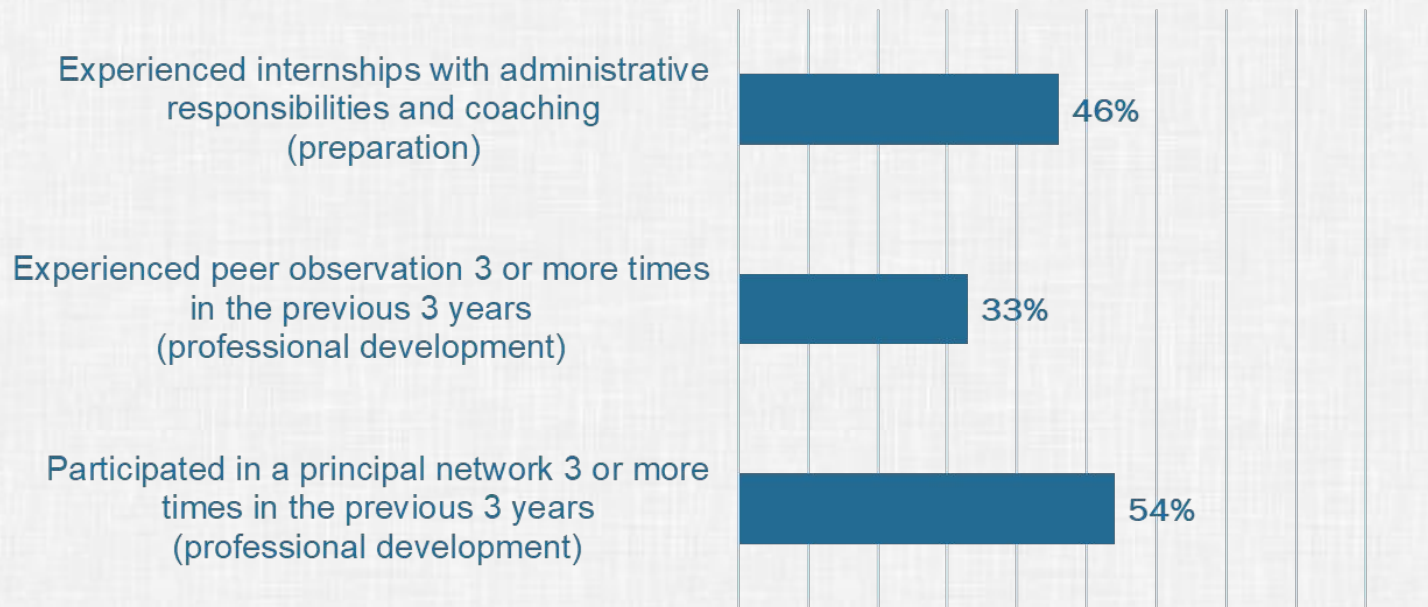
Access to high-quality  
principal learning

# Access to principal learning is inequitable



Source: National Principal Survey

# Access to high-leverage learning is relatively rare



Source: National Principal Survey



Policies that support high-quality principal learning and principal retention can make a difference.

# Implications for policy

- ▶ Ensure high-quality preparation
  - Improve state licensing and program approval standards
  - Subsidize costs for principals, especially for internships
- ▶ Invest strategically in professional learning
  - Support high-leverage approaches (cohorts and networks, PLCs, shared learning, coaching),
  - Build robust local pipelines to develop and place principals

# Implications for policy

- ▶ Attend to working conditions and compensation
  - Decision-making agency and central office support
  - Compensation competitiveness and reliability
- ▶ Establish principal stability as a goal, and create productive mechanisms for principal feedback, evaluation, and mentoring

Supporting Principals is the  
Key Starting Point for Solving  
Our Education Challenges



# Building and Sustaining Student Success Systems

## The GRAD Partnership Three Year Impact Results

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# Student Success System

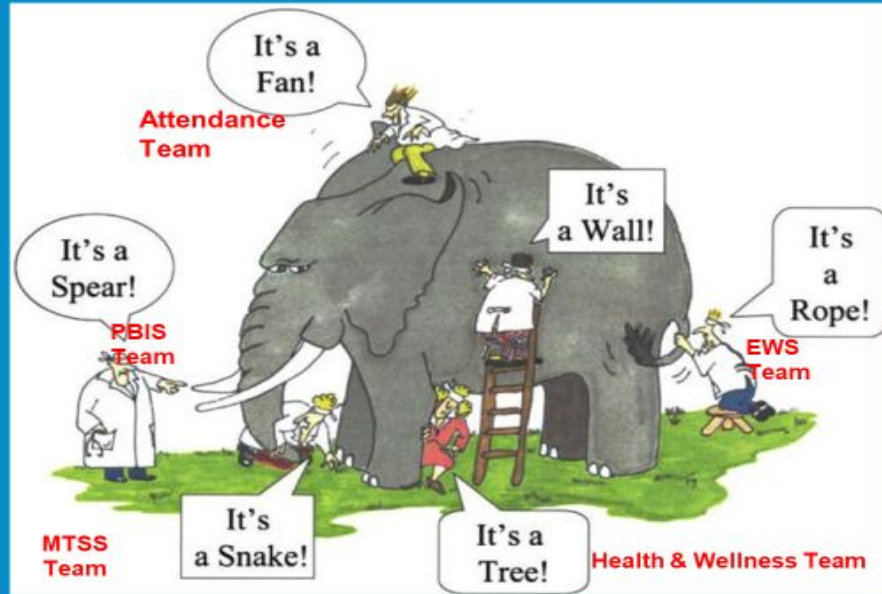
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- Designed with input from over 300 educators to address the new scope and scale of challenges emerging out of pandemic
  - Chronic absenteeism
  - Behavioral challenges
  - Academic gaps and course failures
  - Mental health needs
  - Slowed momentum through high school to postsecondary schooling and/or training (e.g., high school graduation and college going rates)

# Students are holistic, support systems are fragmented

*Each of us only sees a part of the system. The problem is, the part we see is very compelling.*

*Peter Senge*



# Student Success System

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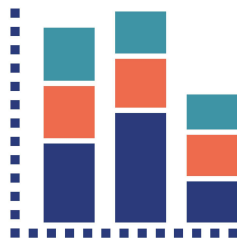
- A unified system that integrates, extends, and increases the capacity of existing student support efforts, including early warning, on-track, and multi-tiered support systems.
- A way to organize a school community to help address **school-wide** achievement patterns and school culture issues, increase school connectedness and a sense of belonging among students, and meet **individual** student needs.
- Creates means for an effective principal **to engage teachers, families and the community in a collective effort** to provide students the supports they need to succeed.

# Four Components of Student Success Systems

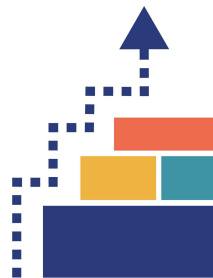
Student success systems combine a focus on building strong **relationships** with real-time, actionable, holistic **data**, result in strategic improvement **actions**, and are shaped by student-centered **mindsets**.



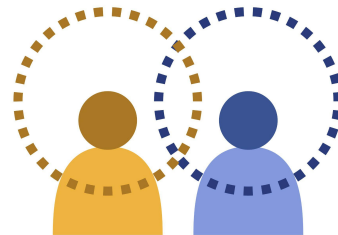
**Strong,  
Supportive  
Relationships**



**Real-Time,  
Actionable,  
Holistic Data**



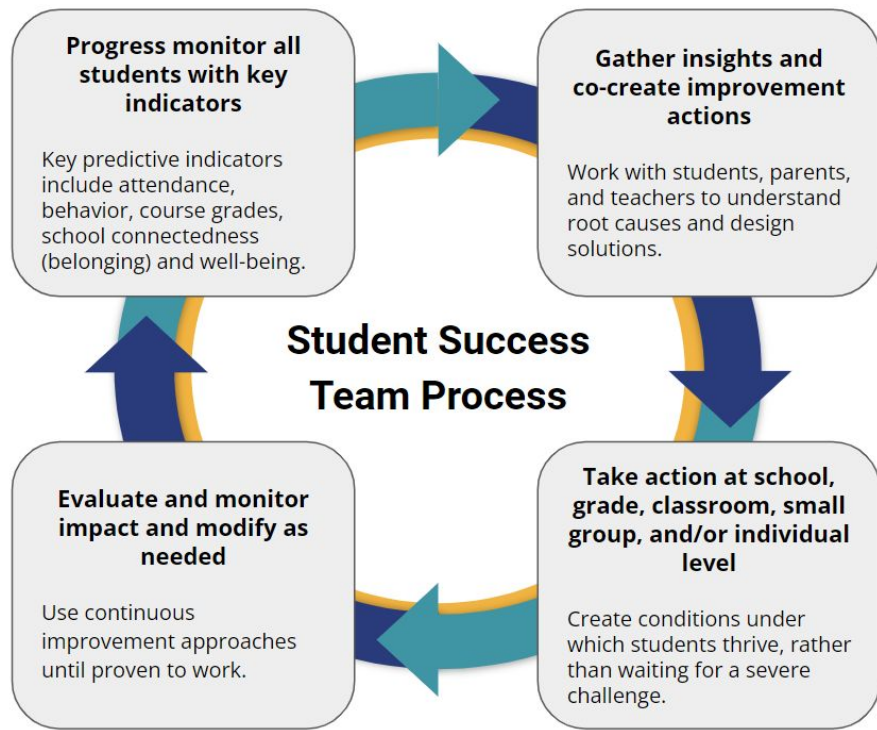
**Strategic  
Improvement  
Actions**



**Student-  
Centered  
Mindsets**

# Student Success Teams

- A group of adults who work together on a **regular basis** to implement, **continually improve** a student success system
- School community effort: school leaders, teachers, counselors



# Student Success Systems Work

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Three years of GRAD Partnership impact data show that implementation of student success systems results in substantially more students on-track to high school graduation and post-secondary success.

## **Course Failures:**

- Percent reductions double between the first and second years of implementation, and double again between the second and third years.

## **Chronic Absenteeism:**

- Percent reductions triple between the first and third years of implementation.

Improvements in these critical student outcomes also indicate the strong potential for future gains in high school graduation and post-secondary degree and certification attainment rates.

# Student Success Systems Work: Course Failures

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## After One Year:

- All grades: 33% to 30% (-3 percentage points; 9% decline) (n=130)
- 9th grade: 32% to 26% (-6 percentage points; 19% decline) (n=40)

## After Two Years:

- All grades: 35% to 27% (-8 percentage points; 23% decline) (n=51)
- 9th grade: 38% to 28% (-10 percentage points; 26% decline) (n=18)

## After Three Years:

- All grades: 39% to 22% (-17 percentage points; 44% decline) (n=15)
- 9th grade: 51% to 28% (-23 percentage points; 45% decline) (n=3★)

→ **Reduction in course failure rate is almost six times greater among schools in the third year of implementation than schools in the first year**

→ **Strongest results in the 9th grade**

# Student Success Systems Work: Chronic Absenteeism

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## After One Year:

- All grades: 31% to 28% (-3 percentage points; 10% decline) (n=121)
- 9th grade: 35% to 31% (-2 percentage points; 6% decline) (n=37)

## After Two Years:

- All grades: 33% to 27% (-6 percentage points; 18% decline) (n=43)
- 9th grade: 34% to 27% (-8 percentage points; 24% decline) (n=14)

## After Three Years:

- All grades: 50% to 40% (-10 percentage points; 20% decline) (n=9)
- 9th grade: 77% to 59% (-18 percentage points; 23% decline) (n=2\*)

- **Average percentage point decline is twice as high after the 2nd year of implementation compared to the 1st year, and over three times greater after the 3rd year compared to schools in their 1st year.**
- **Attendance improvements during the 1st year are strongly associated with strength of implementation**

# Implementation Findings

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- Nearly three quarters of schools receiving TA from the GRAD Partnership achieved solid or strong implementation of student success systems in the 1st year.
  - With implementation support, middle and high schools are able to operationalize many of the key components of student success systems during the 1st year of partnership.
  - The ability to achieve solid implementation in the 1st year, in turn, is likely why substantial improvements in course failure and chronic absenteeism rates also occurred in implementing grades.
- By the 2nd year, solid/strong implementation grew to 94% - sustained through the 3rd year.
- In addition to measuring overall implementation level, collected data on ten elements aligned with the four key components of student success systems.
  - All but two components showed increases in the share of schools reaching a strong or solid implementation level from the 1st to the 2nd year of implementation. Increases *range from 4 to 27 percentage points*.
  - Achieving solid or strong implementation for *all ten* components of a high-quality student success system is a multi-year process.

# Implementation Components - Year 1 to Year 2

| Implementation Component                                                                                                                                        | Solid or Strong |        |         |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------|--------|---------|
|                                                                                                                                                                 | Year 1          | Year 2 | Change* |
| <b>Data Access and Use</b>                                                                                                                                      |                 |        |         |
| Student success team uses predictive data and human insights                                                                                                    | 48%             | 67%    | +19     |
| Student success data is sufficiently/frequently updated                                                                                                         | 94%             | 98%    | +4      |
| Student success data is regularly analyzed sufficiently/frequently                                                                                              | 69%             | 83%    | +15     |
| Actionable holistic data is easily accessible to members of the student success team(s)                                                                         | 43%             | 70%    | +28     |
| <b>Improvement Actions</b>                                                                                                                                      |                 |        |         |
| Student success teams have a structure, on-going participation by team members, regular and frequent time to work together, and the authority to make decisions | 65%             | 72%    | +7      |
| Steps are taken to understand what drives student actions/root cause                                                                                            | 87%             | 93%    | +6      |
| Interventions/actions taken by student success team are strategic                                                                                               | 85%             | 94%    | +9      |
| Student success teams track the impact of their actions and make adjustments as needed                                                                          | 93%             | 89%    | -4      |
| <b>Relationships/Mindset</b>                                                                                                                                    |                 |        |         |
| Student success teams work to create supportive relationships across the school and with families                                                               | 37%             | 48%    | +11     |
| Student success teams work to spread student-centered mindsets in the school                                                                                    | 11%             | 28%    | +17     |

\*Totals may not sum due to rounding

# Third Year Implementation

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- **Student success teams in their 3rd year of implementation obtained higher levels of implementation in five key components of students success systems**
  - Using both predictive data and human insights to identify students in need of support (+23 percentage points for strong/solid from year 2 to year 3)
  - Effective team structures (+17 percentage points for strong/solid from year 2 to year 3)
  - Student success data are regularly analyzed (+6 percentage points from year 2 to year 3)
  - Collaborating to increase supportive relationships (+26 percentage points for strong/solid from year 2 to year 3)
  - Working to spread student-centered mindsets (+14 percentage points for strong/solid from year 2 to year 3)
- **Components with declines (frequency of data updates, strategic actions taken, tracking impact of actions) may indicate staffing changes or shifts in responsibilities**
  - E.g. person responsible for updating the data or documenting the actions left the team and that role was not taken on by another team member.

# Third Year Implementation

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- This is 1st year GP has implementation data for three consecutive years - cohort starting in 2022-23; 37 schools (smaller than subsequent cohorts)
- Third year of implementation is a progression, during which core practices can deepen and move towards institutionalization.
- It is also when school leadership changes or shifts in the personnel on student success teams can create a regression in the implementation of one of more key components of student success systems.
- Data suggest both these forces may be at work across the components of student success systems as student success teams moved from the second to third year of implementation.

# Discussion

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# Thank You

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