



# To The Mountaintop: Transforming Educational Equity as a School Leader

Jasmine James, Melissa Brown-Sims, Melissa Arellanes, Eric Larsen, Sarah Mae Olivar

School leaders, particularly principals, can be true difference makers. Having a strong school leader can shape productive learning environments, give high-quality teachers the support they need, and influence student outcomes. This literature review synthesizes research on the role that school leaders, specifically principals, play in addressing inequities and promoting student success in educational settings, and the impact equity focused school leaders can have on improving educational outcomes for all students, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds. Additionally, this review discusses the changing landscape of education policy and its implications for school leadership by emphasizing the need for equity-centered leadership practices that create inclusive and supportive school environments, and the impact effective principal preparation and development programs play in equipping school leaders with the necessary knowledge and skills needed to foster equitable learning environments in their schools. This literature review also explores the influence that equity-focused school leaders have on teacher and principal retention, the principal pipeline, school culture and climate, and family and community engagement.

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## Abstract

School leaders, particularly principals, can be true difference makers. Having a strong school leader can shape productive learning environments, give effective teachers the support they need, and influence student outcomes. Although their school may have a strong leader, diverse groups of children can still experience differences in treatment. This literature review synthesizes research on the role that school leaders, specifically principals, play in addressing inequities and promoting student success in educational settings, and the impact equity-focused school leaders can have on improving educational outcomes for all students, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds. This literature review also explores the influence that equity-focused school leaders have on teacher and principal retention, the principal pipeline, school culture and climate, and family and community engagement and finds that school leaders who make concentrated efforts to address these areas can make a difference in teacher efficacy, which can ultimately foster better academic outcomes for all students. Additionally, this review considers the impact that effective principal preparation and development programs have in equipping school leaders with the necessary knowledge and skills needed to foster equitable learning environments in their schools. The paper concludes with a call for the development and ongoing support of equity-centered practices to create inclusive and supportive school environments.

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## Introduction

Research suggests that school leaders, particularly principals, can be true difference makers. A growing body of research has shown that strong school leadership is critical for shaping productive learning environments, supporting high-quality teachers and teaching, and influencing student outcomes (Darling-Hammond et al., 2022; Grissom et al., 2021a; Leithwood, 2021). However, the disproportionate treatment of diverse groups of children in schools has long been a concern for policymakers and practicing educators (Leithwood, 2021). The education policy landscape, which has had important implications for school leadership, has changed drastically within the past 10 years. The 2023 Equity Action Plan asserts that “our nation’s future is brighter when we provide every student in every community with equitable access to an academically rigorous, well-rounded education in a safe and inclusive school.” Previous policy acts, such as the Equal Educational Opportunities Act of 1974 (EEOA), were enacted to ensure that a high-quality education is provided to all students. The EEOA provides as follows:

No state shall deny equal education opportunity to an individual on account of his or her race, color, sex, or national origin ...

The 2023 Equity Action Plan builds on these previous policy acts, such as the EEOA, and aims to ensure that school districts serving historically underserved student groups—including students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, students who are English learners (ELs), and others—have the resources they need to support learning recovery. Although these policies have been enacted, schools in the United States of America remain largely inequitable. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2023; Office for Civil Rights, 2014, 2022):

- Students of color, ELs, and students with disabilities experience higher rates of grade retention at the high school level than do other student groups. Twelve percent of Black students are retained in Grade 9—about double the rate at which all students are retained. Students with disabilities served by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and ELs make up 12% of and 5%, respectively, of high school enrollment, but 19% and 11%, respectively, of students held back or retained a year. (Some students may be counted in both categories.)
- Black male students, who made up 7.7% of public school (prekindergarten through 12th grade) enrollment, were suspended and expelled at proportions nearly three times their enrollment. For instance, Black male students received 20.1% of in-school suspensions, 24.9% of out-of-school suspensions, and 25.9% of expulsions.
- Some student groups have limited access to high-level math courses. More than half of high schools nationwide do not offer calculus. Approximately 35% of high schools with high

enrollment of Black and Latinx students offered calculus, compared with 54% of high schools with low enrollment of Black and Latino students.

- Student enrollment in Advanced Placement (AP) courses differed by race or ethnicity. Black students represented 15% of students enrolled in high school but 10% of students enrolled in AP computer science, 8% of students enrolled in AP science, and 6% of students enrolled in AP mathematics. Latino students represented 27% of students enrolled in high school but 20% of students enrolled in AP science, 20% of students enrolled in AP computer science, and 19% of students enrolled in AP mathematics. White students represented 48% of students enrolled in high school, 53% of students enrolled in AP mathematics, 51% of students enrolled in AP science, and 44% of students enrolled in AP computer science. Asian students represented 5% of all high school enrollment, 17% of student enrollment in AP science, 17% of student enrollment in AP mathematics, and 22% of student enrollment in AP computer science.

These data establishing concerns about discrimination highlight how complex the problem has been to address. Additionally, political and bureaucratic backlashes have emerged against initiatives that prioritize diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). More specifically, one of the most significant changes is the U.S. Department of Education's 2024 reversal to its longstanding commitment to advancing racial equity and support for underserved communities through the federal government (U.S. Department of Education, 2024). In response to the administrative anti-racist efforts, President Donald Trump issued Executive Order 13950, entitled "Combating Race and Sex Stereotyping," aimed at countering DEI initiatives that addressed systemic inequities and promoted a more inclusive society (Conyers & Fields, 2025). The order argued that these initiatives "perpetuate racial stereotypes and division and can use subtle coercive pressure to ensure conformity of viewpoint" (Federal Register - National Archives, 2020, Section 1, para. 11). Although the constitutionality of Executive Order 1395 was disputed in *Santa Cruz Lesbian & Gay Community v. Trump*, causing a nationwide preliminary injunction, a precedent had been set.

Many states began introducing censorship laws similar to Executive Order 13950 by targeting Critical Race Theory (CRT) in K-12 curriculum, higher education, and mandatory training (Conyers & Fields, 2025). In 2021 and 2022, there was an increase in legislative measures aimed at combating CRT, with 280 introduced in 2021 and 283 in 2022 (Waxman, 2023). Since 2023, 28 anti-DEI bills have become law (Council on Social Work Education, 2025). For instance, in 2021, Idaho enacted House Bill 377, which became the first statewide prohibition on CRT in public education in the United States (Fowler & Schneider, 2024). The bill prevents public education institutions from compelling students to affirm or adopt tenets related to CRT (ACLU Idaho, 2021). In 2024, Senate Bill 129 was signed into law in Alabama. This law bans DEI offices,

diversity programs, identity-based preferences, and prevents institutions from forcing students and employees to agree with certain “divisive concepts” (Gretzinger et al., 2025). Many other states across the United States began enacting legislation targeting CRT and DEI initiatives (e.g., Tennessee SB 623, Oklahoma HB 1775, and Texas HB 3979) (Conyers & Fields, 2025).

However, recent evidence offers key insights into some possible solutions. School leaders, although often operating under this new and different landscape, can help ameliorate inequities within schools. For example, principals who model a commitment to equity do so by conducting equity-oriented activities, despite dominant policies, structures, culture, and practices in and outside of schools that continue to reinforce and exacerbate societal inequities (Galloway & Ishimaru, 2015; Virella & Woulfin, 2023). Principals cannot solve all of the societal problems that lead to educational discrepancies, but they *can* address key factors in schools that perpetuate them (Gooden et al., 2023).

School principals who are strong, active, and responsive leaders can act as powerful multipliers of effective teaching and leadership practices (Manna, 2015). Yet, school leaders can be influenced by other administrative leaders, making it difficult for them to address inequity. According to Conyers & Fields (2025), an administration can induce a phenomenon known as institutional racial paralysis (IRP) through the anti-DEI movement. IRP can occur when individuals and organizations refrain from making decisions in situations where race plays a critical role or when action is taken that impedes racial progress (Conyers & Wright Fields, 2021). Anti-CRT and anti-DEI policies function as administrative strategies to paralyze racial justice initiatives within organizations (e.g., schools) by enacting policies that undermine civil rights advancements and immobilize organizational DEI efforts. For example, the Palm Beach County School Board voted in July of 2025 to repeal DEI language from its policies after facing pressure from the Trump administration’s threats to withhold federal funding (Washington & Baltz, 2025). School leaders can navigate these anti-CRT and anti-DEI policies by engaging in proactive steps to ameliorate inequities.

Through transformational leadership, clarity, collaboration, example, and encouragement, school leaders can establish a learning environment permeated with caring adults supporting student needs and serve as catalysts in realizing equity (Clayton et al., 2020a). This framework posits that transformational leadership is essential in creating an equitable learning environment within schools. It is grounded in the belief that effective school leaders can significantly influence the academic and social outcomes of their institutions by addressing systemic inequities and fostering an inclusive culture (Clayton et al., 2020a; Leithwood, 2021).

This paper conceptualizes leadership as “the exercise of influence on organizational members and diverse community members toward the identification and achievement of the organization’s vision and goals” (Leithwood, 2021, p. 2). When defined in this way, leadership is “successful” when a leader makes significant, positive contributions to achieving the organization’s vision and goals for school outcomes (e.g., school climate, student attendance, student discipline, teacher retention) as well as student achievement (Bartanen, 2020; Grissom et al., 2021a; Liebowitz & Porter, 2019; Steinberg & Yang, 2022). As described in this review, the term *equity* encompasses related concepts such as social justice and inclusion. (See text box.) The observed patterns of inequity that serve as the focus of school leaders’ attention include various forms of disability, language, culture, sexual orientation, ethnicity, race, social class, color, and poverty (Leithwood, 2021).

This paper explores how school leaders can make concentrated efforts to address key factors that perpetuate inequities within their schools. It begins with a review of how education policy and shifts in school demographics have affected public school students and leaders, and how these shifts have altered the environment in which principals operate. The paper then reviews how school leaders can nonetheless make a difference in student outcomes and teacher efficacy through efforts such as principal preparation or professional development (PD) programs and the use of equity-focused leadership practices. Lastly, this paper concludes with a discussion of the relationship between equity-centered school leaders, specifically those of color, and the impact of their practices on each of the following: teacher retention, principal retention, the principal pipeline, principal preparation and development, school culture and climate, and family and community engagement.

## KEY TERMS

- **Educational equity:** Ensuring that all students have the knowledge and skills to succeed as contributing members of a rapidly changing, global society, regardless of factors such as race, gender, sexual orientation, ethnic background, English proficiency, immigration status, socioeconomic status, or disability (Barth, 2016).
- **Social justice:** Social justice is both a goal and a process: The goal of social justice is full and equitable participation of people from all social identity groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs. The process for attaining the goal of social justice should be democratic and participatory, respectful of human diversity and group differences as well as inclusive and affirming of human agency and capacity for working collaboratively with others to create change (Bell, 2016).
- **Inclusion:** An inclusive approach to education means that each individual’s needs are taken into account and that all learners participate and achieve together (UNESCO, 2023).



## Principal Demographics

According to Grissom et al. (2021a), socioeconomic and demographic shifts have dramatically affected public school students and leaders and have altered the environment in which principals operate. First, the public schools that principals lead have become more racially and ethnically diverse. For instance, between fall 2012 and fall 2022, public school enrollment decreased among students who were White (from 25.4 million to 22.1 million), Black (from 7.8 million to 7.4 million), and American Indian/Alaska Native (from 534,000 to 449,000; National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2024). In contrast, public school enrollment increased between that same ten year period amongst students who were Hispanic (from 12.1 million to 14.4 million), Asian (from 2.4 million to 2.7 million), and of two or more races (1.4 million to 2.5 million; NCES, 2024).

Second, the share of public school students who qualify for free and reduced-price lunch (FRL) has increased from 34% of students to 51% since 2000 (Grissom et al., 2021a). Public schools are also providing special education services to a larger number of students. From 1988 to 2016, the share of public school students receiving special education services increased from 7% to about 13% (Grissom et al., 2021a). Lastly, public schools are serving large numbers of ELs. In fall 2019, students identified as ELs made up 10% of total public school district enrollment in the United States, of which 6% were enrolled in public school districts in rural areas (NCES, 2023b). The changing composition of U.S. public schools showcases the increasing complexity of school leadership and the different cultural, economic, and learning needs that principals are being called to meet (Grissom et al., 2021a).

Although student demographics are evolving and schools have become more racially and ethnically diverse, changes in public school principal demographics have not kept up with changes among students (Grissom et al., 2021a). For instance, among public K–12 school principals during the 2020–21 school year, 77% were White; 10% were Black; 9% were Hispanic; and 1% or less each were two or more races, Asian, American Indian/Alaska Native, or Pacific Islander (NCES, 2023a). The percentage of public school principals who were White was lower in 2020–21 than in 2011–12 (77% vs. 80%), whereas the percentages of principals who were Hispanic and Pacific Islander were higher in 2020–21 (9% and 0.3%, respectively) than in 2011–12 (7% and less than 0.1%, respectively; NCES, 2023a). The fast growth of the Hispanic student population and the slower growth of the Hispanic principal population has resulted in the leadership “representation gap” (i.e., the difference in the proportion of Hispanic students and Hispanic principals in a school) for Hispanic students to grow from 8 percentage points in 1988 to 18 percentage points in 2016 (Grissom et al., 2021a). In contrast, the decrease of the Black student population and the slower growth of the Black principal population has resulted in the leadership representation gap for Black students shrinking slightly, from 5 percentage points in

1988 to 4 percentage points in 2026 (Grissom et al., 2021a). These representation gap examples further highlight how changes in public school principal demographics have not kept up with changes among students.

Evidence also shows that school principals have become more female (with women representing 54% of all principals in 2016, compared with 25% in 1988). Women lead schools with larger numbers of students of color (47%, compared with 38% in the typical male principal's school) and higher shares of low-income students (52%, compared with 50% in the typical male principal's school; Grissom et al., 2021a). These slow changes in the racial and gender make-up of principalship demographics can often lead school leaders to not always identify with the needs and lived experiences of students (Grissom et al., 2021a). However, the changes may encourage school leaders to learn how to address their own biases as well as the broader systemic and structural barriers in place within their schools and the broader student and school community.

## **Principal Preparation and Development**

One way for school leaders to potentially address biases as well as the broader systemic and structural barriers in place is to participate in either preparation or professional development programs. These programs are pathways through which school leaders can develop the knowledge and skills they will use on the job (Darling-Hammond et al., 2022; Richard & Cosner, 2024). Effective leader preparation and development programs, particularly those with a focus on equity, are crucial, because they equip school leaders with the knowledge and skills to create inclusive and equitable learning environments (Richard & Cosner, 2024). Research highlights that high-quality, equity-centered preparation programs can significantly impact student outcomes, emphasizing the importance of integrating equity-focused training in leadership development (Richard & Cosner, 2024). Through a meta-analysis of research on principal effects, Grissom and colleagues (2021a) argued that principals “must develop an equity lens” (p. xviii) and called for the “continued reorientation of the work of school principals toward educational equity through preservice preparation” (p. 93). Grissom et al. (2021a) also concluded that “the effectiveness of the principal is more important than the effectiveness of any single teacher” for improving a school’s student learning (p. 40) and that interventions that develop principals are “likely the most efficient way to affect student achievement” (p. 40).

Through their comprehensive and systematic research synthesis, Darling-Hammond and colleagues (2022) found that exemplary preservice and in-service programs shared several common features, including meaningful and authentic learning opportunities that apply learning in practice, comprehensive and coherent curricula that align with state and professional standards, expert mentoring and coaching, feedback and opportunities for

reflection, and cohort or networking structures that create a professional learning community. Graduates of programs with these features—in addition to their employers, teachers, and school stakeholders—reported that they were able to effectively engage in practices associated with school success, such as cultivating a shared vision and practice, leading instructional improvement, developing organizational capacity, and managing change (Darling-Hammond et al., 2022).

In a study examining Pennsylvania’s Inspired Leadership (PIL) induction program, a statewide policy reform aimed at improving principal human capital through targeted professional development, Steinberg and Yang (2022) found that principal professional development had the greatest impact on teacher effectiveness when principals completed the professional development during their first 2 years as principals. They also reported that principal professional development improved teacher math effectiveness and student math achievement (Steinberg & Yang, 2022). The PIL induction program uses select high-quality coursework from the National Institute of School Leadership (NISL) for its principal induction program (Steinberg & Yang, 2022). These findings further affirm that high-quality principal preparation and professional development programs are associated with positive principal, teacher, and student outcomes.

Darling-Hammond et al. (2022) also reported that engagement in programs that offer applied learning opportunities (e.g., action research, field-based projects) and reflective projects (e.g., cultural autobiographies, cross-cultural interviews, analytic journals) can lead to growth in aspiring principals’ awareness about how to meet the needs of diverse learners. For example, as part of a principal preparation program at a regional university, aspiring principals identified that a key feature of the aspiring principals’ program was the assignment of action research to address issues of equity and excellence in meeting the needs of ELs (Alford & Hendricks, 2013). Students of the program reported that although writing the action research projects was “stressful,” all agreed that the process was helpful in providing “avenues to be proactive to see changes to meet the needs of all students” and that the action research project assisted in studying the effectiveness of practices to ensure equity and excellence (Alford & Hendricks, 2013). This research confirms that programs that offer applied learning opportunities and reflective projects can lead to growth in awareness about how to meet the needs of diverse learners.

However, developing the skills needed to become an equity-focused school leader can be difficult because not all preparation or professional development programs are alike (Darling-Hammond et al., 2022). Although less is known about the design of high-quality preparation programs oriented around equity, scholars have noted that current programs are often ill

equipped to prepare equity-centered leaders (Richard & Cosner, 2024). Additionally, in 2021, Iowa passed House File 802, a law that prohibits governmental entities in Iowa from providing mandatory DEI staff training that teaches on divisive concepts such as racism, sexism, stereotyping, and scapegoating (Iowa House File 802, 89th General Assembly, 2021). According to Leggett et al. (2023), equity-driven principal preparation programs (P3s) should focus on preparing aspiring leaders to engage in instructionally focused interactions with teachers, building strong relationships and collaborative cultures, strategically managing personnel, and prioritizing the needs of the most vulnerable groups of students. Opportunities that prepare school leaders to build collaborative cultures are key elements that help school leaders develop the skills needed to become equity-focused leaders.

## **Effective Practices for School Leadership**

Relatively little is known about the leadership strategies to which principals should dedicate their time and effort to improve teaching and learning conditions in schools (Liebowitz & Porter, 2019). Principals who model a commitment to equity do so by conducting equity-oriented activities (e.g., tethering self-reflection to their equity growth or modeling a commitment to equity by leading restorative justice circles), despite dominant policies, structures, culture, and practices in and outside of schools that continue to reinforce and exacerbate societal inequities (Galloway & Ishimaru, 2015; Virella & Woulfin, 2023). Galloway and Ishimaru (2015) identified 10 equitable leadership practices that they found to be most likely to mitigate disparities for students who have not been well served due to their race, ethnicity, class, home language, or group identity:

- Engaging in Self-Reflection and Growth for Equity
- Developing Organizational Leadership for Equity
- Constructing and Enacting an Equity Vision
- Supervising for Improvement of Equitable Teaching and Learning
- Fostering an Equitable School Culture
- Collaborating With Families and Communities
- Influencing the Sociopolitical Context
- Allocating Resources
- Hiring and Placing Personnel
- Modeling

Although each of these practices represents a critical element of equitable leadership, the practices as a whole interact and mutually reinforce each other, and equity-focused leaders are not limited to these 10 practices (Galloway & Ishimaru, 2020). For example, fostering an equitable school culture requires developing organizational leadership for equity and resource allocation. Hiring and placement of school personnel with strong equity commitments and skills is vital to cultivating equitable teaching and learning and an equitable school culture (Galloway & Ishimaru, 2020).

According to Leithwood (2021), the most powerful practice that equity-oriented school leaders enact is creating authentic partnerships among schools, families, and communities aimed at ensuring student success. This practice of creating authentic partnerships is similar to the *Collaborating With Families and Communities* practice, which requires leadership to develop and maintain meaningful and ongoing relationships with parents, families, and community leaders (Galloway & Ishimaru, 2015). In addition, this practice is identified as powerful because it makes a significant contribution to the community. For example, underserved students and families are often unable to access the community resources (e.g., housing, health care, social services) they need to realize the opportunities potentially available to them in school (Leithwood, 2021). Positioning the school as a physical asset that the community could use for purposes other than schooling can help connect families and schools to the larger community of which they are a part (Leithwood, 2021). Additional evidence suggests that building relationships with community members and viewing students as individuals with unique needs and strengths are important practices and behaviors for school leaders to embody because of the immense challenges that students face and the impact these challenges have on students' behavior and academic outcomes (Clayton et al., 2020b).

Authentic partnerships between equity-oriented school leaders and community members have the potential to enrich conditions in the home. For instance, Leithwood (2021) provided an example of a principal in a predominantly African American school who (a) generated a level of trust by pushing back against low expectations for student success when he encountered it in teachers, parents, and students themselves; (b) confronted teachers who held exclusionary beliefs and practices; and (c) made visits to the homes of his students (Leithwood, 2021). Authentic partnerships can lead to more significant contributions to student success at school (e.g., increasing parent expectations for student success) and can engage otherwise-reluctant parents to participate with the school in decisions about how the school might better contribute to their children's success at school (Leithwood, 2021). By building respect and understanding for one another and learning and respecting the personal stories of those who are showing signs of struggle (i.e., students, staff, and other community members),

administrators and staff are better able to personalize support for students and one another (Clayton et al., 2020a).

Another especially powerful set of practices used by equity-oriented leaders is ensuring that the curriculum guiding instruction in their schools acknowledges and makes use of the ethnic, cultural, and linguistic assets that diverse students and their families bring to the school (Leithwood, 2021). This practice is similar to the *Supervising for Improvement of Equitable Teaching and Learning* practice, which explains that leadership supports staff in developing and implementing multicultural curricula and equitable instructional practices (Galloway & Ishimaru, 2015). Lastly, Virella & Woulfin (2023) include in the list of equity-oriented leadership practices engaging in self-reflection and tether that self-reflection to their equity growth (e.g., reflecting on what they could have done differently). This practice is similar to the *Engaging in Self-Reflection and Growth for Equity* practice, which explains that leadership engages in personal and intellectual work to understand how privilege, power, and oppression operate in school and society (Galloway & Ishimaru, 2015). The overlap in these practices highlights how almost all of the leadership practices can be enacted in ways that contribute to equitable conditions and/or outcomes for students. Implementing such equity-based standards provides marginalized students with the necessary support to achieve academic and social-emotional achievement (Galloway & Ishimaru, 2015).

## **Outcomes of Equity-Focused School Leadership**

Research suggests that equity-focused school leaders can have a profound influence on a school and its efforts to improve. The principalship is the most recognizable leadership position in a school and also the position most empowered by district, and even state, policy (Khalifa et al., 2016). Although principals have little direct influence on student learning, they influence school-level factors, such as climate and human capital decisions, that indirectly affect achievement (Grissom & Bartanen, 2019a). An equity-focused school leader can also influence the principal pipeline, principal retention, and school engagement. A recent synthesis of 2 decades of research on school leadership has documented that effective principals can have a positive impact on teacher retention, school climate, and student academic outcomes (Grissom et al., 2021a). Grissom, Egalite, and Lindsay (2021a) also estimated that a principal at the 75th percentile in effectiveness<sup>1</sup> can yield an increase in student learning schoolwide in reading and math by almost 3 months.

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<sup>1</sup> Principal effectiveness is defined by how much a principal contributes to student achievement and other school outcomes, such as student absences and teacher turnover. Principals' primary effects on students come through impacts on factors that create the conditions for students to learn.

The effects of having an equity-focused school leader are even more profound if teachers, students, and members of the community are people of color. The racial identity and lived experiences of principals play an especially meaningful role in improving outcomes for historically underserved students. For instance, Black students attending schools led by a principal of color were 2 to 3 percentage points less likely to receive exclusionary discipline because they were racially matched with their teachers by their principals (Lindsay & Hart, 2017; Modan, 2021). In another instance, when compared with White students in schools led by a White principal, Black students in Tennessee showed greater improvements in mathematics test scores in schools led by a Black principal (Bartanen & Grissom, 2019). Using a modeling approach that allows the effect to vary by the length of the principal's tenure, Bartanen and Grissom (2019) found positive effects on math scores (0.035 *SD*) of Black students after a Black principal's first year in the school. Having an equity-focused school leader, particularly one of color, has a significant influence on a school and its students.

In the sections that follow, we describe the role of having either an equity-focused leader and/or a school leader of color on teacher and principal retention, the principal pipeline, principal preparation, school culture and climate, and family and community engagement.

### ***Teacher Retention***

In general, effective principals attract and retain more effective teachers, improve teacher well-being and school organizational health, and change teachers' perception of their working environment (Steinberg & Yang, 2022). Grissom and Bartanen (2019b) investigated strategic retention behaviors with longitudinal data from Tennessee and found that high-performing teachers, measured by both classroom observation and value-added scores, are less likely to leave schools with effective principals (i.e., principals who received high evaluation scores from their district leaders and their teachers). Additional studies indicate that teacher turnover is lower among Black teachers in schools led by Black principals (Bartanen & Grissom, 2019) and when teachers and principals share the same ethnicity (Goff et al., 2018; Grissom & Keiser, 2011). Bartanen and Grissom (2019) also demonstrated that not only are Black teachers less likely to leave their schools than White teachers but that more effective principals experience lower teacher turnover rates on average.

Effective school leaders can also influence several teaching conditions in a school and can help create environments in which teachers, specifically those of color, want to continue to teach in their schools long term (Carver-Thomas, 2018). If educators of color feel affirmed in a workplace that is also committed to equity and justice (i.e., having a positive sense of belonging in schools where they influence issues related to race, racism, and privilege rather than feeling like they have to avoid or ignore them), they may be inclined to stay in their schools (Grooms



et al., 2021). An analysis of national data from select years between 1999 and 2011 found that teachers of color in schools in which 90% or more of the teaching staff were White were far more likely to switch schools than their White peers if they perceived a lack of administrative support (Carver-Thomas, 2018). However, their retention decisions were similar to those of White teachers when they felt strong administrative support in their schools (Carver-Thomas, 2018). When educators of color feel like they can influence diversity conversations in their school, they feel a greater sense of positive school membership, indicating that strong school leaders may be addressing some of the challenges that teachers of color report experiencing when they are among few teachers of color on staff (Carver-Thomas, 2018; Grooms et al., 2021). This research further affirms that effective school leaders can help create environments in which teachers, specifically those of color, want to continue teaching in their schools.

Lastly, evidence suggests that the *individual* principal matters when it comes to a teacher's perception of their working environment (Burkhauser, 2017). For example, in reviewing 4 years of panel data constructed from the North Carolina Teacher Working Condition Survey, Burkhauser (2017) used value-added modeling to determine how much of the school-to-school variation in teachers' ratings of their school working conditions can be attributed to principals. The estimated effect of increasing principal quality by one adjusted standard deviation in perceptions of teacher time use has the equivalent estimated effect of a decrease in seven students per teacher or a movement to a pupil/teacher ratio of 8 to 1 in the average classroom (Burkhauser, 2017). Thus, having a more effective principal has the equivalent estimated effect of a decreased class size. This review of evidence reaches a clear conclusion: School principals (i.e., those who develop their skills and become more effective) can play a key role in influencing teacher retention and their perceptions of their working environment.

DeMatthews, Knight, and Shin (2022) found additional evidence that highlights how turnover in the principal's office can impact teacher turnover. For instance, in the last year of a principal's tenure, teacher turnover increases by 2.3 percentage points. When a new principal arrives, teacher turnover increases by 2.1 percentage points in the first year of the new principal and by 1.1, 0.9, and 0.6 percentage points, respectively, during that principal's second, third, and fourth years at the school (DeMatthews et al., 2022). In high-poverty schools, principal turnover increases teacher turnover by 2.7 percentage points during the last year of the principal's tenure and by 2.5, 1.3, 1.1, and 0.8 percentage points, respectively, in the first, second, third, and fourth years of the new principal (DeMatthews et al., 2022). These results show that teacher turnover spikes in schools experiencing leadership turnover.



## ***Principal Retention***

Principals play a vital role in creating inclusive and high-performing schools; however, approximately one in five principals leave their school each year, and turnover is higher in schools that serve low-income students of color (DeMatthews et al., 2022). Goldring and Taie (2018) reported that among all U.S. public school principals in the 2015–16 school year, about 82% remained at the same school in the next year, 6% moved to a different school, and 10% left the principalship. According to Levin and Bradley (2019), principals leave their positions for five reasons: inadequate preparation and professional development, poor working conditions, insufficient salaries, lack of decision-making authority, and high-stakes accountability policies. This research is further supported by evidence from Grissom and Bartanen (2019b), who reported that 60% of turnover cases in Tennessee schools are equally likely to be within-district transfers, promotions to central office, and demotions, which suggests that adjusting school districts' decisions about personnel placement can have a great impact on principal turnover. The researchers also noted that turnover is higher in schools with larger numbers of low-income students and lower average achievement (Grissom & Bartanen, 2019b).

Principals leave schools for a variety of reasons, and if they are school leaders of color, their retention is impacted in even more ways. In a study investigating the career advancement experiences of Latinx secondary principals from suburban school districts, some participants reported that they doubted that they would pursue a career in education and that their leadership capabilities were challenged or questioned by others (Fernandez et al., 2015). For example, two of the participants cited instances in which a subordinate questioned a decision and stated that questioning led to an internal questioning of their own leadership acumen (Fernandez et al., 2015). Participants also noted how gender discrimination and district and school leaders' resistance to change were barriers to their principal careers (Fernandez et al., 2015).

In another study about strategies to recruit and retain Black male principals, interview participants shared that some district leaders believed that Black male principals weren't knowledgeable enough to be instructional leaders and that stereotypical views of Black males held by White administrators impacted the (limited) hiring of Black male principals in their districts (Jackson, 2018). Participants also suggested that many of their Black male counterparts have left the district due to a lack of job security and a lack of appreciation (Jackson, 2018). Educators of color work in racialized school climates in which the curriculum reinforces White supremacy and the oppression of students from minoritized backgrounds, within a policy environment designed for them (and students of color) to fail and with White colleagues who may actively resist conversations about equity and justice (Grooms et al., 2021). School leaders, particularly those of color, who feel supported in their decision-making authority in school

leadership and have improved working conditions may be more inclined to stay in their schools (Levin & Bradley, 2019).

## **The Principal Pipeline**

Ensuring equity-centered school leadership requires making holistic changes in hiring and placement (Gooden et al., 2023). Having an equity-focused school leader can influence districtwide approaches to principal development, which are important elements of the principal pipeline (Gooden et al., 2023). According to Fuller and Young (2022), the most important step in the principal pipeline is the decision to seek and obtain principal certification. Individuals can be “tapped,” meaning that a current principal has encouraged a teacher to enter a principal preparation program with the intent of the teacher becoming a principal (Fuller & Young, 2022). However, although the “tapping” of individuals is important in filling the principal pipeline, principals tend to tap teachers of the same gender and race/ethnicity (Fuller & Young, 2022). Despite this feature of the principal pipeline that presents potential problems, researchers have found BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) teachers to be more likely than their White peers to seek and obtain principal certification (Fuller & Young, 2022). Gooden et al. (2023) suggest that hiring diverse candidates is a way to solve oppressive practices. Principals of color have significant roles in recruiting, hiring, and retaining teachers of color, meaning that these principals tend to add diversity to the principal pipeline by increasing and/or maintaining numbers in the pool of teachers of color (Perrone, 2022).

Despite this influence, however, even assistant principals of color have few opportunities to become principals. In a study analyzing the probability and time to promotion for assistant principals in Texas from 2011 to 2017, authors Bailes and Guthery (2020) found that Black assistant principals are 18% less likely to be promoted across all time periods relative to White candidates, holding education, gender, experience, urbanicity, and school level constant. Their findings suggest that people of color are less likely to be promoted, and those promotions, if attained, are likely to take longer.

Districts that aim to produce and support equity-focused school leaders can do so by hiring and placing diverse candidates who are connected to their students’ lives and communities and by investing in principal professional development programs that focus on meeting the needs of diverse learners (Gooden et al., 2023). A strong body of evidence shows that principals of color are, on average and holding other factors constant (e.g., teacher-principal sex/gender congruence), better than their White peers at recruiting and retaining teachers of color and are more likely to lead teachers of color with higher levels of job satisfaction, trust, and supplementary pay (Perrone, 2022). Equity-focused school leaders influence the principal pipeline through the creation of an inclusive environment by recruiting racially diverse staff,

encouraging teacher-to-teacher professional learning, and promoting inclusive instructional experiences for students (Gooden et al., 2023). For instance, Marschall and Shah (2020) found that Black and Latinx principals were more likely to report having school-based (e.g., parent volunteering, parent workshops) and home-based (e.g., homework assignments involving parents) parental involvement policies in place in schools with predominantly Black and Latinx student populations. Additional evidence suggests that the lowest performing schools in principal pipeline districts (i.e., the six school districts listed in the study as part of the Principal Pipeline Initiative) benefited in meaningful ways from improvements in school leadership (Gates et al., 2019). Having an equity-focused school leader can influence the principal pipeline, leading to improved outcomes for schools, teachers, and communities.

## **School Culture and Climate**

Research suggests that equity-focused school leaders can also play a role in building a productive school culture and climate. The National School Climate Center (2021) defines school climate as the quality of school life as it relates to norms and values, interpersonal relations and social interactions, and organizational processes and structures. School climate is an outgrowth of the more stable school culture, which is the shared beliefs of people in the school community (Grissom et al., 2021a). A strong climate is one in which all individuals in the school can spend their time engaging in or supporting effective teaching and learning (Grissom et al., 2021a). For instance, when principals foster collaborative processes among teachers and good relationships among all community members are established, it impacts school culture and promotes positive culture (Dolph, 2017).

Equity-focused school leaders who are culturally responsive can also have an impact on the school climate. Culturally responsive school leaders promote inclusive school environments by exhibiting a strong association with social justice and a commitment to advocating for the inclusion of traditionally marginalized students (Khalifa et al., 2016). Educational leaders who are people of color and may have direct experiences with institutionalized racism may be more likely to recognize the need and practice leadership for social justice and educational equity (Santamaría, 2014). By refusing to consider culture and race as relevant to school learning and denying the existence of White privilege, White school leaders can fail to tap into the uniqueness of individual student cultures, values, and beliefs as tools for developing culturally relevant pedagogy and leadership that could benefit all students (Khalifa et al., 2016).

## Family and Community Engagement

Research suggests that equity-focused school leaders can also influence school engagement. Although schools can raise the collective aspirations of students and parents to foster social, economic, and political change, the role of the school leader falls far short of representing and/or replacing parents when the school and home communities are separated (Watson & Bogotch, 2015). Culturally responsive school leaders create welcoming spaces that feel like caring communities and learning organizations at the same time (Khalifa et al., 2016). For example, in a study that investigated how school leaders conceived and engaged in parent communication, Flores and Kyere (2021) found that school leaders “broke down walls” by creating monthly family nights and by valuing parents as assets in educating children. But when parents are seen as “failing” at tasks that non-equity-focused school leaders perceive as supportive of student success—such as checking homework and attending school-sponsored events—these parents are not only viewed as unsupportive but are also seen as not providing loving and nurturing home environments (Watson & Bogotch, 2015). In contrast, equity-oriented school leaders contribute to effective parent–school engagement by building trusting relationships and by developing critical self-reflection (Flores & Kyere, 2021).

## Conclusion

Although there is a general expectation that the educators and administrators working in public education are committed to ensuring that all students are educated, education for all cannot mean one size fits all if we want all to achieve their highest potential (Nadelson et al., 2019). Moreover, the continued historically disproportionate access to resources, opportunities, and outcomes for students of color and marginalized backgrounds in many urban and rural districts indicates a growing need for training, mentorship, and support for school leaders. As described in this review, strong school leadership is critical for shaping productive learning environments and for influencing student outcomes. With additional support, school leaders can work with teachers and instructional leadership teams to implement equitable leadership practices, which can improve school climate, enhance principal and teacher retention, and ultimately foster better academic outcomes for all students. Regardless of the inequities, school leaders can make a difference in student outcomes.

Looking across all the evidence, it can be concluded that effective leaders who adopt an equity lens, which involves approaching the work with equity as a central concern, can significantly improve a school’s ability to meet the needs of students from marginalized backgrounds. Equity-focused school leaders orient their practice toward building a productive school climate and developing authentic relationships. By adjusting their practice and engaging in equitable leadership practices, effective principals attract and retain more effective teachers, improve

teacher well-being, create welcoming environments for teachers, create opportunities for diverse candidates to join the school, and contribute to family and community engagement. The effects of having an equity-focused school leader are even more profound if teachers, students, and members of the community are people of color. Having a school environment that is conducive to learning, that is fair, equitable, and with a high level of buy-in from community members, is important to a school's central mission of generating high academic achievement among all students.

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