Policy Focus Turning to Principal Quality
By Lynn Olson

Washington

The spotlight that has focused on ways of measuring and rewarding teacher effectiveness may now be turning to school principals.

The Center for American Progress released a report this week on reforming principal compensation, while the National Association of Secondary School Principals published guidelines for evaluating effective principals. Calls to create voluntary national certification for principals that first surfaced more than five years ago also are being renewed.

Such efforts are being driven in part by concerns that Congress will define a “highly qualified principal,” just as it has a “highly qualified teacher,” when it reauthorizes the No Child Left Behind Act.

“There’s increased awareness on the part of policymakers that, in this age of accountability, you have to have skilled principals who know a lot more about curriculum and instruction and how to work with faculty in creating the conditions for improved student achievement,” said Gene Bottoms, the senior vice president of the Atlanta-based Southern Regional Education Board.

In most schools that have made dramatic gains in closing achievement gaps, added Jon Schnur, the chief executive officer of New Leaders for New Schools, a principal-training program based in New York City, “there is, in fact, an outstanding, highly effective principal,” even if research has yet to specify the precise mix of leadership knowledge, skills, and behaviors linked to student-achievement gains.

Research Lacking

Yet despite the growing interest in measuring and rewarding effective principals, “we don’t really know a whole heck of a lot” about principal compensation, said Dan Goldhaber, a professor of public affairs at the University of Washington, in Seattle, and the author of “Principal Compensation: More Research Needed on a Promising Reform.”

That report, released here by the Center for American Progress, a Washington think tank, uses data from a nationally representative survey of more than 13,000 schools to examine principal compensation from the 1993-94 to the 2003-04 school year.

Mr. Goldhaber found that principals are rewarded for having more experience, leading a secondary school, leading an urban or suburban school, leading a larger school, or being in a larger school district.

But such characteristics account for only 45 percent of the variation in principals’ pay, suggesting that other factors, such as performance, may be part of the mix. The study found no evidence that principal-salary structures have changed much over time, despite all the talk about performance-based pay.

Still, Mr. Goldhaber argued, there are “good reasons to think about pay-for-performance with regard to principal compensation.”

Teachers, he said, may view the inclusion of principals as a matter of “basic fairness” before teachers are placed under such a system. In addition, some of the difficulties in adopting performance-based pay for teachers may be less of a problem for principals, including concerns about reduced collegiality and the availability of enough data to support such decisions. That’s in part because judgments about principals can be based on the performance of whole schools.

The Reston, Va.-based National Association of Secondary School Principals, meanwhile, released guidelines this week for policymakers seeking to assess principals’ effectiveness. The guidelines, approved by the group’s board of directors, note that while “highly qualified principals” are mentioned throughout the nearly 6-year-old No Child Left Behind Act, it offers no definition of what constitutes such a school leader, similar to the one for teachers.
Not Just Test Scores

A recent “discussion draft” for the reauthorization of the federal law in the House of Representatives includes several provisions related to principal quality. Under the draft, the secretary of education would be authorized to make grants to school districts for bonuses of up to $15,000 a year to “exemplary, highly qualified” principals who agreed to serve for four consecutive years in a high-needs public school.

“My concern with Congress is they’ll just pass a definition that basically speaks about state test scores or adequate yearly progress,” said Gerald N. Tirozzi, the NASSP’s executive director, referring to the law’s key measure of school performance. “We’re trying to suggest strongly that there’s a heck of a lot more to it.”

Designed to help federal, state, and local policymakers, the NASSP guidelines describe the qualities of outstanding principals. They then advocate the use of both quantitative and qualitative data—not just test scores—to inform decisions about principals’ effectiveness. Such measures could include self-assessments; supervisor site visits; documentation of classroom observations; school climate surveys; evaluations by teachers, other staff members, parents, and students; teacher-retention and -transfer rates; and students’ participation in extracurricular and co-curricular activities. The document also calls for using multiple measures of student learning, including performance-based assessments and measures of individual student growth over time.

The NASSP has called on Congress to provide a dedicated funding stream of $100 million to recruit and prepare highly effective principals. Among other purposes, the money could be used to reform principal licensure; support mentoring and professional-development programs; and promote the retention of highly effective principals, particularly in schools with a high percentage of low-achieving students.

But Paul D. Houston, the executive director of the American Association of School Administrators, based in Arlington, Va., said, “I hate to see the federal government getting involved in telling school systems how to make better principals.”

Certification Now?

That’s one reason his organization, which represents district superintendents, joins Mr. Tirozzi’s group in supporting more voluntary efforts, such as the idea of national board certification for school principals. (“Toward the ‘Highly Qualified’ Principal,” Dec. 12, 2007)

When the idea was first raised five years ago, “we couldn’t find funding for it,” Mr. Houston said, and the original notion of creating a certification board for school leaders separate from the existing one for teachers was prohibitively expensive. Now, he argued, there may be a way to fold voluntary national certification for principals into the larger effort.

“We’ve started having some talks,” Mr. Houston said. “I’d say we’re back at the infancy stage of reintroducing this.”

The federal government is paying for some experimentation with performance-based pay for principals through the nearly $100 million Teacher Incentive Fund, which supports the development and implementation of performance-based pay in high-needs districts.

The Prince George’s County, Md., district, for example, is using a TIF grant to help develop performance-based pay for both teachers and principals, to be phased in starting next school year.

The program would provide annual bonuses of up to $12,000 per principal based on four components, said John E. Deasey, the superintendent of the 133,000-student school system. They include student-achievement growth over time; participation and performance in a rigorous evaluation system; engagement in research-proven professional development and service; and willingness to work in a hard-to-staff school.

“Learning how to do this right is really important,” said Mr. Deasey, cautioning that there should be some tolerance for missteps as the system is refined over time.

In his report, Mr. Goldhaber recommends greater experimentation with principal-compensation structures and the development of detailed and sensible principal-pay-reform designs. An influx of new money for such pay initiatives by states, the federal government, and private foundations would help, he said, noting that the TIF grants have “really jump-started” a lot of work in districts.

Coverage of leadership is supported in part by a grant from The Wallace Foundation, at www.wallacefoundation.org.