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## **Testimony of Paul Manna before the Vermont House Education Committee January 28, 2016**

The views expressed in this document and in my spoken testimony are my own and do not necessarily represent the views of other individuals or organizations, including the College of William & Mary and The Wallace Foundation.

### **1. Introduction**

Good afternoon, and thank you very much for the invitation to speak with you today. My name is Paul Manna. I am a professor of government and public policy at the College of William & Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia. Although I live in Virginia now, I grew up in Michigan and, believe it or not, I was excited to receive your invitation to come to Vermont in January given that I have not seen a “real winter” in several years. All of the snow here makes it feel like I have come home!

Before I get to the heart of my testimony today, I wanted to take a moment to introduce myself.

Since 2003, I have been a faculty member at William & Mary where I serve in the Department of Government and the college’s Public Policy Program. Previously, I earned my M.A. and Ph.D. in political science from the University of Wisconsin, and my B.A. in political science from Northwestern University. You can find a complete description of my work, including links to my publications, at my home page: <http://pmanna.people.wm.edu/>.

In addition to my current research and teaching, which focus on policy implementation, bureaucracy, federalism, education policy, and statistics, I should note that I also have valuable ground-level connections in education that have helped to shape my ideas.

After college I earned a teaching certificate at the University of Michigan and for three years in the 1990s I taught social studies and coached debate at my home town high school in Traverse City, Michigan. Put simply, I was “Welcome Back Kotter”—some of you might remember that show. Also, the inner working of schools is a daily topic of discussion in my household: my wife is a high school teacher in the local public schools and my son is a second grader in our local public schools as well. Since I began studying education policy almost 20 years ago, I have had many opportunities to talk with and engage practitioners in the field. This includes

individuals representing different groups in national, state, and local policy debates as well as individuals working in local school districts and schools.

In 2015, I authored a report on state policy and school principals entitled *Developing Excellent School Principals to Advance Teaching and Learning: Considerations for State Policy*. (The final section of this document provides links to the report and other related resources.) The report was funded and published by The Wallace Foundation. It was the result of more than a year of research and writing that was designed to answer a relatively straightforward but important question: What can state policymakers do to help ensure that schools have excellent principals who advance teaching and learning for all students?

In the report, my collaborators and I answered that question by drawing on a diverse body of quantitative and qualitative evidence. The narrative in the report focused on three main topics:

- The place of principals on state policy agendas.
- The policy levers available to state leaders interested in cultivating and supporting excellent principals.
- The state and local contexts to which state policymakers should attend as they develop their ideas and craft their policy proposals.

I have submitted a copy of my report as an accompanying document to this testimony. My remarks today will draw on that research.

## **2. The specific issue I was asked to address in my testimony today: Why consider principals' voices in developing state policy?**

My invitation to speak with you today, which was engineered by your staff and Ken Page at the Vermont Principals' Association, requested that I focus my prepared remarks on this question: Why according to your research are principals' voices important to consider when developing state policy? I am glad to do that and also to take any other questions you might have about other related topics.

I believe the question posed to me is an important one to consider and much of the research in my report sheds light on why that is so. In my own mind, I frame the question this way: What blind spots, misunderstandings, or missed opportunities are likely to persist when principals' perspectives are omitted or understated in state education policy discussions?

Before getting to the heart of my remarks, I wanted to note that although I believe principals deserve more attention in state policy discussions than they presently tend to receive, I do not mean to imply that principals are necessarily more important, or should enjoy a more privileged status than other groups that have some strong interest in schooling in Vermont, or elsewhere. In the nation's pluralist system, many groups can make some claim that their voices should be heard: parents, teachers and their unions, school support staff, superintendents, and many others inside and outside of traditional education circles. I also would include students themselves on this list.

What my research shows, I believe, is that seeking out and attending to principals' voices in state policy processes can be a win-win for all of these groups I just mentioned. The reason is very simple: all of these groups can benefit when state policy is crafted in ways that enable principals to excel. I would like to spend the rest of my prepared remarks explaining why I believe the evidence supports that claim.

### **3. Reasons for attending to principals' voices in state policy discussions**

There are many reasons to attend to principals' voices in state policy discussions. Consider these five reasons, in particular.

#### **First, excellent principals are powerful multipliers of effective teaching and learning in schools.**

The research presented in my report as well as the work of others that I cite clearly indicates that excellent principals are powerful multipliers of effective teaching and learning in schools. We know, for example, that great principals are able to serve their teachers well. And that a main reason why great teachers leave a school (or sometimes leave the profession altogether) is because they are forced to work under ineffective principals.

Another way that principals have this multiplier effect is in the way that they help to shape the overall culture and operations of their schools. The literature on public management more generally—focusing on schools and other public agencies—shows quite clearly that organizational leaders can have major impacts on the way that agency tasks are defined, whether staffs buy into those task definitions, and how the agency responds to challenges. In schooling, specifically, excellent principals can shape that sort of culture by grooming and identifying talented teachers who also can serve in school leadership positions. They also help to mentor or to find mentors for teachers who may struggle to perform. Through these efforts, they contribute to the ability of schools to be effective and to serve their students well.

Finally, other research also has documented the contributions that principals make to the overall academic success of students. These contributions usually are indirect, and work their way through the processes that principals help to establish, the values they help to cultivate, and the teachers they help to support in their schools.

#### **Second, successful implementation of ambitious state initiatives depends heavily on talented principals.**

During the last two decades, the number of new initiatives aimed to improve the nation's schools has mushroomed. Individually, any one of these initiatives would have been a heavy lift to execute well. Collectively, the work is staggering and includes adjustments to curriculum and assessments, driven by state adoptions of Common Core; the linking of those assessments to things such as judging school performance, and evaluating teachers and principals; further expansion of the process of teacher and principal evaluation; and most recently, the need to adjust current practices in light of the passage of the federal reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which is now known as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).

All of these initiatives likely will flounder unless implemented well in the nation's schools. As leaders on the ground, school principals will bear a heavy load in helping to ensure that this new menu of initiatives succeeds.

Attending to principals more carefully, then, can help state policymakers to better understand the likely challenges and opportunities presented by the current menu of education policy changes. As a colleague of mine, who also is an expert on policy implementation, likes to emphasize, "policy is as practice does." What state governments say their education policies are is one thing. But how those policies actually unfold in practice is intimately tied to the practices and processes that emerge in schools themselves. Principals, as noted earlier, can be powerful shapers of those practices and processes and therefore have a tremendous potential impact on the likelihood of state initiatives enjoying success.

**Third, unfortunately, an imbalance presently exists that means principals' voices are understated in state policy discussions relative to other groups.**

This inattention was evident in my research. My team's systematic analysis of popular press coverage of education as well as the research literature demonstrated a huge imbalance. Much, much, more discussion in those bodies of work has focused on teachers and not principals.

The evidence in my report shows that principals are frequently an after-thought when state policymakers attend to the broad area of education policy. In the research, we learned of instances in states where policy designed to address principal evaluation, for example, was basically crafted by taking the state's current teacher evaluation policy and simply doing a "find and replace" swapping out "teacher" and inserting "principal" instead.

For another example: We learned of state or federal legislative committees attending to important matters of the day in legislative hearings, but forgetting to invite principals or their representatives to participate. This would frequently produce frantic calls at the 11th hour by committee staff attempting to round up a principal to join a long list of teacher representatives and other groups.

In short, although state policymakers often give lip service to the importance of "teachers and leaders," when they use that phrase the "and leaders" part typically is an afterthought.

**Fourth, general policy discussions about the importance of "school leadership" risk losing sight of the unique roles that principals play in schools.**

Earlier I alluded to the leadership roles that teachers and other school staff play in schools. In the research literature, these practices are often labeled as "distributed leadership." The notion here is that leadership is not simply the job of a single person, but can be parceled out to multiple people within a school and, collectively, that leadership team can contribute to a school's overall success.

I believe there are good reasons to think of leadership in such a distributed fashion. In so doing, however, it is important not to lose sight of the particular leadership roles that principals themselves play. For one example, principals are the school leaders who have responsibility for convening leadership teams in the first place. For another, principals often have very specific roles assigned to them, sometimes by law or regulation, that require them, for example, to lead the process of teacher evaluation and other school matters.

It can be problematic when state policymakers craft laws or regulations that are designed to address school leaders in a generic way, considering all school leaders under the same umbrella, but that do not recognize these important and distinct roles that principals play. This can be particularly important when state legislatures and state education agencies consider allocating resources for the development of school leaders and consider principals to be just like all others.

**Fifth, the inattention to principals' voices means that the public and state policymakers operate with a limited view of what principals do.**

Many people draw on their own personal experiences in developing their world views about how schools should operate. As a result, when people tend to think about schools often it is about the school officials with whom they had the most regular contact: namely, teachers.

An additional source of information informing people's limited views of principals is the latest headlines describing contemporary trends in school reform. Those headlines suggest that the principals' job has been "transformed." Principals are no longer building managers but rather are instructional leaders, so the argument goes, who are pushed to operate with a near singular focus on teacher quality and educational excellence in classrooms.

Those headlines do not match the realities reported by the nation's principals. It is true that principals have begun to play larger roles focusing on teaching and learning. They acknowledge that. Still, evidence from the federal Schools and Staffing Survey, a nationally representative survey of principals conducted every few years since the late 1980s, shows that even as principals report how those roles have expanded, the traditional building management functions—keeping schools operational and staffed, attending to discipline, formulating and managing school budgets—have persisted and, in some instances, become even more important as well. These findings appear in my report (see pp. 48-50).

Rather than being transformed—remade from one thing into another—I would argue that the principal's job has simply expanded as new responsibilities have been layered atop the old ones. As a result, principals are bearing more and more weight as they try to do their jobs well. This layering is one factor that has contributed to high principal turnover as principals switch schools seeking a more manageable workload or leave the profession altogether. Vermont has not been immune to those larger national trends.

#### **4. Conclusions: How to proceed?**

How can state policymakers begin to listen to principals' voices in more consistent and valuable ways that go beyond giving lip service to the idea that "leadership matters"? At the moment in

Vermont, several major trains are moving down the tracks that are highly relevant to the roles that principals play. Here I am thinking of your current efforts to consolidate school districts in the state, and also some larger trends, as well, involving the rollout of the new ESSA, and also the degree to which the state might address the new set of educational leadership standards recently published by the Council of Chief State School Officers. This is a great moment of leaders in the state to take stock of principals' roles.

My report that I have referenced throughout these remarks concludes with a set of guiding questions that state policymakers could usefully consider as they attempt to ensure that all of their schools have excellent principals who can enhance teaching and learning.

In particular, I believe it could be incredibly useful for state leaders such as yourselves to consider conducting a systematic audit of all current state policies and initiatives that somehow bear on the state's principals. What does the state currently expect of principals? How well are principals meeting those expectations? And if they are challenged to meet them, what are the reasons?

A related point would be to take seriously the idea of "addition by subtraction." By that I mean that before passing new policies that will bear on the state's principals, make an effort to trim back some of the current things that principals are required to do. Such an effort would help principals to focus their time and effort on activities that the state, working with its local partners, deem to be valuable and most likely to help the students of the state succeed.

Let me close there and invite your questions. Thank you again for the invitation to talk with you today. I hope that today's conversation can help inform Vermont's efforts as you move forward to ensure that all of the state's students have excellent principals leading their schools.

## 5. Additional resources

Paul Manna's home page: <http://pmanna.people.wm.edu/>.

*Developing Excellent School Principals to Advance Teaching and Learning.*

- Full report: <http://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/school-leadership/state-policy/Pages/Developing-Excellent-School-Principals.aspx>
- Infographic summary: <http://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/school-leadership/state-policy/Documents/How-States-Can-Ensure-Schools-Have-Principals-Who-Advance-Teaching-and-Learning.pdf>. Note: The infographic is provided on the last page of this testimony as well.
- Video discussions of the report: <http://www.wallacefoundation.org/view-latest-news/events-and-presentations/Pages/State-Policy-to-Develop-Excellent-Principals.aspx>
- Twitter feed discussing the report: #MannaBriefing at <https://twitter.com/search?q=%23MannaBriefing>

# How States Can Ensure Schools Have Principals Who Advance Teaching and Learning\*

In seeking to improve education for all students, state policymakers often overlook the key role of the school principal as a driver of effective teaching and learning. There's no single formula for better state policy regarding principals because each state is unique, but three sets of considerations can help direct policymaking.

\*From *Developing Excellent School Principals to Advance Teaching and Learning: Considerations for State Policy*, by Paul Manna.



## Assessing State and Local Contexts

- Varied state governance structures and politics
- Diverse locales
- Different capacities to implement policy
- Web of current state mandates affecting principals

Sound policymaking rests on understanding basics about a state and its localities: how different state agencies wield authority and interact with one another; the variety of urban, suburban and rural communities; state and local capabilities to carry out change; and state mandates already shaping the principal's job.



## Considering Policy Levers

- Setting principal standards
- Recruiting aspiring principals
- Overseeing principal preparation
- Licensing principals
- Supporting professional development
- Evaluating principals

States have formal and informal powers to develop more effective principals, from setting standards for the profession to strengthening training, licensure and evaluation.



## Setting Agendas

- Principals' contributions little understood
- Principals a low priority on crowded state agendas
- Yet principals can be multipliers of effective teaching

Principals merit a more prominent place on state education policy agendas because of their powerful and singular role in improving education school-wide.



To read the report and see other Wallace publications about school leadership, visit [www.wallacefoundation.org](http://www.wallacefoundation.org).