

Improving School Climate

State legislation and considerations for improving adult professional culture and measuring school climate

How can legislators and education leaders support more positive school climate statewide?

School leadership is fundamental in any effort to improve school climate. Whether the goal is better teaching and learning, higher teacher retention, or a safer learning environment, a crucial element is how school leaders manage and assess change in everything from the school building to adult relationships. So ensuring that administrators and teacher-leaders are ready, willing and able to focus on these things is a very high-leverage strategy.

Recognizing the importance of effective leadership in improving the professional culture in a school building, numerous states have developed induction programs for novice administrators and teacher-leader pathways for motivated and effective educators.

School & Teacher Leadership

Strengthening School Leadership

Pathways to the Principalship

The Maryland State Department of Education has provided professional learning to assistant principals and teacher leaders for several years through their Promising Principals Academy. The yearlong training provides training to professionals interested in becoming principals. The Oklahoma State Department of Education developed training for aspiring principals after meeting with their Maryland colleagues.

West Virginia HB 4006 (2018) requires preparation programs to provide coursework on instructional leadership to aspiring school administrators and authorizes county boards to establish systems of support and supervision for beginning principals.

Leader-Driven Professional Learning

The Arkansas Department of Education developed a regional professional learning initiative called the Arkansas Leadership Quests in 2016. Education service cooperatives nominate Lead Principals, who deliver customized professional development in consultation with support coaches. The state department has created online micro-credentials aligned with the Quests so that administrators can receive competency-based credit for their work.

Florida House Bill 287 (2016) created the Principal Autonomy Pilot Program to provide highly effective principals in three districts with increased instructional and operational autonomy to turn around low-performing schools. Pilot schools received turnaround training, and participating school leaders received a salary supplement.

Ask SREB

Matthew Smith compiled this briefing after a request for information on the topic from a member state. It reflects a scan of legislation and consideration as of September 2018.

We are here to serve you. If you have questions related to this or other topics, please contact our state services team:

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Signaling Commitment to Teacher Leadership

Tiered Certification

Policymakers in Arkansas, Georgia, and Oklahoma have developed tiered certification systems. These systems allow educators to demonstrate both instructional effectiveness and their willingness to assume leadership roles.

Arkansas House Bill 1425 (2017) authorized the State Board of Education to create a tiered licensure system by January 2019. The act authorized the creation of advanced licensure types and the differentiation of salary for educators holding advanced licensure.

The Georgia Professional Standards Commission developed a four-tier licensure system in 2014.

Oklahoma Senate Bill 980 (2018) creates a framework for a tiered licensure system, delineates the requirements for mentor and lead teacher certificates, and provides salary supplements for advanced certificates.

Career Lattices & Advanced Teacher Roles

North Carolina House Bill 1030 (2016, pp. 18-20) created a three-year pilot program to develop advanced teaching roles that link teacher performance and professional competence to salary increases. The General Assembly appropriated \$9.8 million to fund successful district proposals.

Oklahoma House Bill 3114 (2016) allowed districts to implement a career path and compensation framework. The act specifies the five career rungs and the requirements to advance up the ladder. The act requires coaching and professional development for novice and career teachers.

The Louisiana Department of Education has encouraged district and school administrators to identify Teacher Leaders. Over 7,000 teacher leaders participated in the most recent Teacher Leader Summit. The department has selected Teacher Leader Advisors through a competitive application process. The advisors develop instructional and assessment resources, review state department materials, and facilitate professional learning sessions.

School Administrator and Teacher Leader Resources

- Arkansas Leadership Quest (Arkansas Department of Education)
- Can Good Principals Keep Teachers in Disadvantaged Schools? (Grissom, 2011)
- Feedback on Teaching: A Fresh Look (SREB) [Link]
- Maryland Promising Principals Academy (Maryland State Department of Education)
- Systemic Approach to Elevating Teacher Leadership (Learning Forward)

Professional Learning

Improving Early-Career Induction and Mentoring

The Delaware Department of Education requires early-career educators to complete the Comprehensive Induction Program. The four-year program requires districts to deliver induction curricula that are responsive to individual teachers' needs. The program provides structured guidance on the specific tasks and professional learning activities that participants should complete during each school year.

Maryland Senate Bill 493 (2016) created an induction pilot. Participating districts would allow first-year teachers to spend at least 20% more time during the week receiving mentoring, peer observation, and planning assistance.

The South Carolina Department of Education requires districts to assign mentors to all novice teachers. Districts submit plans that describe how they will select mentors, provide at least three types of professional learning, and assess the effectiveness of induction programs. These requirements do not guarantee effective mentor selection or growth, but they do set expectations for system monitoring and define roles for district and school leaders.

Increasing Opportunities to Engage in Professional Learning

Arkansas House Bill 1646 (2017) allowed educators to obtain credit for required professional development through a micro-credentialing process approved by the SEA. The State Board of Education is considering proposed state regulations that would provide more detailed guidance on how educators could receive credit for competency-based learning.

Kentucky Senate Bill 73 (2018) establishes a pilot program for performance-based professional learning projects. Two or more teachers would design an instructional practice or strategy project to address classroom challenges.

Professional Learning Resources

- Adult Professional Culture (Research for Better Teaching)
- Effective Teacher Professional Development (Learning Policy Institute)
- Evaluator Training: A Guide for States (SREB)
- Mentoring New Teachers: A Fresh Look (SREB)

Collecting and Reporting School Climate Data

Georgia House Bill 763 (2018) requires county committees to review district policies that affect school climate to improve student performance, student and teacher morale, and community support.

Through a partnership with the New Teacher Center, the Kentucky Department of Education administers the Teaching, Empowering, Leading and Learning (TELL) survey. Partnerships with educator groups contributed to a 91 percent response rate in 2017.

Maryland House Bill 978 (2017) required the use of school climate surveys as one of the state ESSA plan's school quality indicators and that at least one of the questions on the climate survey ask educators about receiving critical instructional feedback.

North Carolina has surveyed teachers and administrators on working conditions since 2002. The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction partners with the New Teacher Center to administer the Working Conditions Survey. Over 109,000 educators responded to the survey during 2018. The survey serves as one of the primary instruments for state policymakers and local practitioners to assess school improvement efforts.

Virginia Senate Bill 360 (2016) required the Superintendent of Public Instruction to develop a system to track teacher turnover, which may include the use of exit questionnaires.

Engagement and Data Resources

- Measuring School Climate (National School Climate Center)
- North Carolina Working Conditions Survey
- Student Surveys: A Fresh Look (SREB)
- Teaching, Empowering, Leading, and Learning (TELL) Survey (New Teacher Center)

| The Dimensions of School Climate | | |
|---|--|--|
| Physical Space | Relationships | Instruction |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• School Building• Classroom Configuration• School Safety• Resources | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• School Administration• Professional Learning• Parent Engagement• Student Discipline | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• School Improvement Planning• Teacher Effectiveness• Student Engagement with Curriculum |

Three Considerations

1. Review How To Keep Talented Educators

State legislators, two state governors, and numerous advocacy organizations have sounded the alarm about the rate of teacher turnover in South Carolina. While improving school climate could decrease teacher attrition, state legislators might consider strategies that encourage highly effective educators to stay in the classroom. In some cases, these strategies would discourage exit from the profession; in other instances, strategies might give educators a compelling alternative to ‘graduating into administration.’

Above, SREB summarized two approaches that state policymakers have developed — tiered certification and advanced teaching roles. These statewide strategies signal to educators that state policymakers recognize that teaching is a professional endeavor in which teachers might progress, specialize, and grow. While some states adopting these models have attached salary considerations to attainment of advanced licensure or teaching roles, recognition of instructional effectiveness is another key outcome.

2. Investigate How to Support Educator-Driven Professional Learning

Most educators want professional learning activities that are relevant and targeted. Giving educators the flexibility to design and execute their own professional learning is one way to distribute leadership and decision-making throughout a school building. Also, finding ways to measure and verify teacher mastery could help school administrators identify which educators are prepared for advanced roles.

3. Explore How to Assess Adult Professional Culture in the School Building

Several states have found ways to assess school climate and teacher working conditions. Through its ESSA plan, South Carolina already measures student engagement with grade three through 12 surveys. Similar surveys of adults, including teachers, administrators, parents, and the community, could pinpoint areas of strength and areas for growth. Schoolwide examination of the survey results and collaborative planning also could improve relationships between educators and the broader community.