

We need to prioritize principals in 2016 state budget

By J. Walter McDowell Guest columnist Apr 22, 2016

It's time for North Carolina to treat principals with the respect and compensation they deserve.

As the legislative session resumes next week, business leaders across North Carolina will be looking for a strong focus on what we know is key to the success of any organization – the best possible talent. For BEST NC members who believe that North Carolina can have the best education system in the nation, this means a strong focus on North Carolina's educators.

We are seeing signs that the new budget will continue to increase teacher pay, as it has for the past few years. These are crucial investments for recruiting and retaining great teachers and we ask that the governor and General Assembly also think about the systems of support for these teachers.

Along with investing in North Carolina's teachers, it is critical we invest in our school leaders. In the private sector, our business members know that great leaders matter. Research – not just intuition – tells us the same is true in schools. Teachers can perform at their best when they have strong and supportive principals.

Take Alison (Harris) Welcher, principal at Ranson IB Middle School in Charlotte from 2011- 2015, where more than 80 percent of students in 2014 lived in poverty. Once one of the district's lowest performers, Ranson enabled students last year to achieve the highest academic growth among Title I schools in the state and was in the state's top one percent overall for growth. The current Ranson principal, Erica Jordan-Thomas is following in Welcher's path, continuing the tradition of strong leadership.

Without a corps of outstanding principals like Welcher and Jordan-Thomas, the effectiveness of all of the other K-12 programs the governor and General Assembly propose will be compromised.

Fortunately, in 2015 North Carolina policymakers made a crucial investment in school leadership by establishing the Transforming Principal Preparation program, which aims to significantly increase the rigor and relevance of principal preparation in our state.

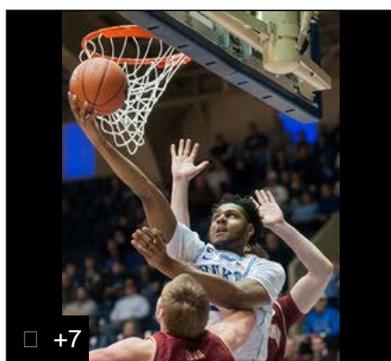
In addition to recruiting and preparing great school leaders, it is critical to compensate them as the important professionals they are. Unfortunately, North Carolina's principal compensation is not competitive within our region or the nation. We have the second-lowest average principal salaries in the country. Over the past 10 years, accounting for inflation, North Carolina principals have seen their average salaries decline by approximately 12 percent.

Our members at BEST NC understand that great talent is critical to the success of everything we want to accomplish. It is the same for our schools, which is why elevating all educators is our top advocacy priority. We urge the governor and General Assembly to continue prioritizing investments in teacher salaries, so we can recruit and retain great talent in the classroom. It is past time to do the same for principals. Together, there may be no more important investments we can make to positively transform education in our state.

J. Walter McDowell is board chair of Business for Educational Success and Transformation North Carolina (BEST NC).



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