ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The FHI 360 study team is grateful to all the principals and evaluators who responded to the two rounds of surveys and to the two rounds of in-depth interviews. We are also grateful for the collaboration with the Minnesota Department of Education as a thoughtful learning partner. In addition, we thank the Bush Foundation for supporting work that is highlighting the initial and potential value of an approach to principal evaluation that supports principal growth as a critical component of a strategy to provide effective instruction in every classroom for all students.
Executive Summary

Brief Background on Minnesota’s New Approach to Principal Evaluation

This report summarizes findings from a study of the pilot implementation of principal evaluation in the 2012–2013 school year under a new legislative statute passed by the Minnesota State Legislature in 2011.¹

Prior to the new law, districts used an array of practices to evaluate school leaders, varying in quality and effectiveness and ranging from informal and infrequent assessments to very formal observations and documentation. The purpose of the legislation was to improve principal evaluation in a uniform way so that it directly supports the instructional leadership and organizational skills of principals. Legislators also wanted to hold principals more accountable for school outcomes, but the primary and laudable goal embodied in the legislative language was to encourage the professional growth of principals.

During the 2012–2013 school year, principal evaluation that met the new legislative parameters was piloted in 17 districts selected to represent differences in size, location,

¹ Minnesota Statute 123B.147, 2011.
student demographics, and achievement outcomes. The study findings are based on surveys and interviews of principals and evaluators in the pilot districts and were conducted and analyzed by FHI 360, a nonprofit human development and research organization. The study and its release are supported by a grant from the Bush Foundation, an important regional philanthropic leader in increasing educational achievement and closing the achievement gap.²

Although the state and districts are still learning from the pilot as the new statute requirements are applied this school year (2013–2014) to all districts, the findings in this study indicate that Minnesota is in the midst of an exciting transition from highly variable principal evaluation practices to an intentional effort to use the statute to support all school districts in conducting high-quality principal evaluations. As stated above, the statute supports a principal evaluation model that is designed to develop strong principals with the skills to lead schools that can dramatically improve instruction and student outcomes.

² http://www.bushfoundation.org/
To support this improved approach to principal evaluation, the statute called for the development of a principal evaluation example model to guide the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) and all school districts. This task was given to a Principal Evaluation Working Group, jointly convened by the MDE Commissioner and the Executive Directors of the Minnesota Elementary Principals Association (MESPA) and Minnesota Association of Secondary School Principals (MASSP). The group included representatives of principal associations, superintendents, business leaders, parents, school boards, and other related groups. It submitted an example model to the legislature in February 2012. Pilot districts were able to use or modify the example model within parameters that met the legislative intent. As of 2013–2014, this is required of all districts.

The model requires the use of four performance categories or ratings: Distinguished, Accomplished, Satisfactory, and Unsatisfactory. In addition, the rating of Developing can be added in situations where there is a probationary principal or where there have been significant changes in principal assignments and/or district goals.

To help determine a rating, the example model provides three major components that, when combined, determine the summative rating: (1) a supervisory evaluation of every principal conducted by the evaluator (in most cases the superintendent or a properly trained designee) that includes observations and alignment between the district’s goals and a principal’s own growth plans; (2) school level performance data linked to district achievement goals (35% of the principal’s evaluation); and (3) stakeholder input (teacher survey feedback is required; results from other groups such as parents and students can be included).

The model provides the most detail for the first component: supervisory evaluation. The working group adopted five performance measures that identify important skills of effective principals. For each performance measure, indicators were developed to provide examples of what the performance measure looks like in practice. To provide more guidance on the indicators, rubrics and evidences were developed to identify the behaviors, understandings, and actions for each of the four performance categories.

Finally, an eight-step process to complete the evaluation is recommended in the model. These begin with orientation workshops, then conferences for goal setting and mid- and end-of-the-year reviews with various kinds of supports for principals in between.

An important feature of the example model is that it gives districts enough flexibility to tailor the model to their goals and school improvement strategies. Although the pilot districts implemented the three components and used the eight steps, they were able to adapt the model to their district context. For example, some of the pilot districts modified some of the information reporting forms developed for the model or tailored the rubrics specifically to their school improvement strategies. Ultimately, each district can decide how it wants to implement the eight steps, such as how the review conferences will be structured, how progress will be assessed and how feedback will be provided to principals.
THREE COMPONENTS OF THE STATE EXAMPLE MODEL

1. A supervisory evaluation of every principal conducted by the evaluator

2. School level performance data

3. Stakeholder input
Principals and evaluators in the 17 pilot districts responded to two confidential surveys—mid- and end-of-year—about implementation of the example model or their own principal evaluation process in the 2012–2013 school year. Respondents also were asked about the value of the example model, issues they encountered, and their recommendations to improve it. This report includes data from both surveys, but relies primarily on the end-of-year responses.

In addition, the researchers personally interviewed evaluators and principals in four case study districts, selected in consultation with MDE for their differences in location, size, student demographics, and achievement, and superintendent tenure.

In each section the report includes both survey data and information from the case study interviews. As previewed below, the researchers focused on two major inquiries: perceived value and fairness of the example model, and implementation of the example model at school and district levels. The report concludes with recommendations for improvement of the principal evaluation example model and implementation processes. It also highlights some questions or findings that might warrant further study, including some emerging patterns based on district characteristics (for example, rural or suburban, size, and student achievement) with regard to certain practices and available resources.

### Value and Fairness of the Example Model

Overall, the study found that pilot participants believed the new approach to principal evaluation to be both valuable and fair in supporting principal professional growth. Principal satisfaction with the model actually increased over the course of the pilot year. Both principals and evaluators reported that the most valuable component of the model was its focus on professional growth rather than simple accountability in the form of a final rating. Both groups also noted the high value of opportunities for collaboration, discussion and reflection between principals and evaluators during the year and especially at the mid- and end-of-year conferences.

The most troublesome aspects for both evaluators and principals were the changes in the state reading assessment after its alignment to the more rigorous Common Core Standards (which made it virtually impossible for evaluators to calculate principals’ growth scores in reading) and the late availability of student achievement data from the state. With both the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment (MCA) and Multiple Measurement Ratings (MMR) results not available until late September 2013, most districts had to postpone assigning final ratings for principals and goal setting for the following year in the spring/summer lacked guidance from that year’s state assessment results. As a work-around, some districts used data from the previous year or ongoing interim assessments. There was also some concern about the length and alignment to the performance measures of the stakeholders’ surveys MDE selected, when they were administered, and how the results were scored and used.
Prior to the pilot launch, MDE conducted orientation trainings for the evaluators and principals involved in the pilot year. Overall, both groups felt this prepared them well, although principals remained concerned about evidence collection and evaluators did not feel adequately prepared to conduct principal observations.

The principal self-assessment component was seen as valuable because it laid the groundwork for setting goals and collecting evidence, with the mid-year conference allowing principals to assess progress on their goals and receive valuable and constructive feedback from their evaluators. According to interview findings, the evaluation models used in the four pilot districts often led to more frequent interactions between evaluators and principals. Evidence collection provided substance to their discussions, in contrast to what some principals recalled as “opinion-based” or “anecdotal” evaluations in the past.

The majority of principals (54.2%) in the 17 pilot districts received Distinguished or Accomplished summative ratings. Evaluators developed different quantitative rating systems, but if the practice of the case study districts is prevalent, most pilot districts used the recommended weights of 15% for stakeholder surveys, 35% for student achievement and growth, and 50% for the supervisory rating. More than 78% of the principals agreed with their performance measure ratings, but fewer (64%) agreed with their rating for stakeholder feedback; more than half of the evaluators did not believe stakeholder feedback provided an accurate assessment of principal performance.
Recommendations from the Pilot Study

Overall, the example model was perceived as very useful to improving principals’ learning and effectiveness. The surveys and interviews provided the researchers with valuable evidence and insights about not only the benefits, but also challenges and issues faced by evaluators and principals. Feedback from the 17 pilot sites and analysis by the FHI 360 study team led to corresponding sets of recommendations for the state and districts in two areas: strengthening implementation of quality principal evaluation practices and strengthening the design of the example model so that the guidance it provides is even more useful. Although these recommendations address different institutional levels, they depend on clear collaboration and communication between state and local officials.
State Actions to Strengthen Model Implementation

- Develop a feasible strategy to accelerate the timeline for reporting state assessment data.
- Develop a communications strategy and products differentiated for key stakeholders to increase statewide commitment to principal evaluation focused on professional growth as a key means for improving student outcomes.
- Encourage districts to modify and streamline the example model within the parameters of the statute to match their specific context.
- Encourage district leaders to view the next several years as a developmental early implementation stage for refining their district’s principal evaluation process.
- Encourage districts to provide data from interim student achievement measures and measures of progress on district goals to inform the goal-setting process, mid-year conference and the end-of-year summative conference.
- Build the capacity of districts and evaluators to implement effective principal evaluations, e.g. by increasing the skills of evaluators and sharing promising practices through professional associations, state and regional meetings, and the MDE Educator Excellence website.

District Actions to Strengthen Model Implementation

- Ensure that evaluators have sufficient time to make principal evaluation a priority and that they have the skills to provide feedback and learning supports to principals.
- Ensure evaluators and principals know what the performance measures and indicators look like in practice.
- Encourage evaluators to talk with principals about what is working and not working in the model and make appropriate adjustments.
- Ensure data and evidence informs the goal-setting process, the mid-year conference and the end-of-year conference.
- Align district policies, structures, and goals to support principals’ professional growth goals.
- Engage school board support to ensure principal evaluations are conducted annually.

State and District Actions to Strengthen Design (highlights)

- Train new evaluators and principals in the example model.
- Streamline and reformat the state rubrics and indicators to make them easier to understand and to implement.
- Collect and share examples of promising practices, including examples of exemplary mid-year and end-of-year conference practices and of final rating systems.
- Improve stakeholder feedback by developing a state survey(s) and handbook with input from districts, aligned to the state performance measures and indicators.
- Keep districts and professional associations informed of updates to the example model and provide them with periodic refresher orientations.

3 For more state and district actions please see the full report.
This report was written by Jane Armstrong and Deanna Burney with Maud Abeel, Constancia Warren, and Laura Dukess.

ABOUT FHI 360
FHI 360 is a nonprofit human development organization dedicated to improving lives in lasting ways by advancing integrated, locally driven solutions. Our staff includes experts in health, education, nutrition, environment, economic development, civil society, gender equality, youth, research, technology, communication and social marketing — creating a unique mix of capabilities to address today’s interrelated development challenges. FHI 360 serves more than 70 countries and all U.S. states and territories.

ABOUT THE BUSH FOUNDATION
The Bush Foundation invests in great ideas and the people who power them. Established in 1953 by 3M executive Archibald Bush and his wife, Edyth, the Foundation encourages individuals and organizations to think bigger and think differently about what is possible in communities across Minnesota, North Dakota, South Dakota and the 23 Native nations that share the same geographic area.

For more information or a copy of the full report, please contact study team leads Constancia Warren or Maud Abeel at FHI 360, www.fhi360.org or (212) 243-1110.