The Importance of Administrators and Leaders

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K-12 Schools
Workforce: Administrators/Other

Introduction

School leaders[1] matter. Early studies indicated that effective principals do more than manage daily school operations: They foster school-wide conditions and climates conducive to learning. As federal and state accountability measures increased, the role of principals became even more significant, making them formally responsible for improving teaching and learning within their schools.

School principals were originally called "principal teachers," experienced teachers who took on additional responsibility for managing school operations. These early principals, almost always men, eventually dropped their teaching duties to become professional administrators. In contrast to the extensive evidence on teachers, many questions about principals remain unresolved. The professionalization of principals is relatively recent, and guidelines and expectations for their practices and time management can vary widely. Principals typically hire and supervise teachers, manage relationships with families, discipline students, and ensure school-wide compliance with district policies and regulations. Although researchers have identified several practices that can substantially improve teaching and learning, the evidence linking these practices to school and student outcomes over time is inconsistent. Additionally, the demands of the principal's role have grown, which may contribute to high turnover rates among principals**.** As principals can significantly influence their schools' success, more comprehensive research on their work is critical to successful school improvement.

This chapter summarizes the research on the effects of school leaders, particularly principals. (See in this handbook for a summary of the research on assistant principals.) Below, we describe four key takeaways from the evidence on the importance of school leaders. These highlights summarize the most critical and current knowledge regarding the importance of school leaders to school and student success.

Key findings

Key finding #1: *Effective principals engage in a core set of leadership practices.*

Principals influence student learning through various means, and their ability to hire and retain effective teachers has the greatest impact on student achievement. Principals are expected to support teaching and learning, or *instructional leadership,* including teacher evaluation and professional development, family engagement, creating and communicating a shared school vision, and promoting an inclusive school culture. Principals must perform managerial and operational tasks and, increasingly, support non-academic student outcomes. While principal skill in each of these areas is crucial for school success, causal evidence linking principal behaviors to measurable student outcomes is limited. There is no consensus on how much time principals should allocate to various leadership activities, adapt their practices in response to school context, or improve their practice over time.

Key finding #2: *Students benefit from having a principal who shares their background, but principals of color and female principals face barriers in the role.*

Research suggests that students of color benefit academically when they have a principal of color, partly due to increased hiring of diverse teachers and potentially through reduced bias, role modeling, and culturally responsive leadership. Women now represent the majority of principals but continue to face barriers to advancement. Both women and principals of color experience systemic challenges, including discrimination, lower salaries, and higher rates of placement in high-needs schools.

Key finding #3: *Principal leadership is an important factor in teacher satisfaction and retention.*

Effective principals are instrumental in retaining teachers. Educators who view their principals as knowledgeable, supportive, and trustworthy are more likely to report being satisfied with their jobs and to remain in their positions. The quality of principal leadership may be particularly critical for retaining teachers in high-needs schools and during times of crisis and uncertainty. Furthermore, principals of color tend to hire and retain more teachers of color.

Key finding #4: *The magnitude of principal effects is contested.*

Estimates place the overall magnitude of principal effects on student learning between 0.05 and 0.25 standard deviations (i.e., a 1 s.d. increase in principal quality improves student achievement by 0.05 to 0.25 s.d.), ranking principals as the second-most important school-related influence, after teachers. However, emerging research indicates that the actual size of these effects may be smaller, potentially in the range of 0.01 to 0.03 s.d., and that existing approaches to estimating principal value-added fail to overcome important methodological challenges. Nevertheless, a credible link exists between principal actions and student learning outcomes.

Evidence

Key finding #1: *Effective principals engage in a core set of leadership practices and behaviors.*

Principal effects on student and school outcomes are indirect, mediated mainly through their work to develop teachers and schoolwide climate[2]. For the past several decades, principals have been expected to be *instructional leaders* whose primary focus is supporting teaching and learning. There is no single definition of instructional leadership, and models of its specific components are abundant[3]. Current field expectations for principals are encapsulated within the Professional Standards for Education Leaders (PSEL)[4], a set of national standards that many states and districts use to guide principal practice, training, and evaluation. These standards are periodically updated to reflect current research.

Although other models of principal leadership exist, they commonly place instructional leadership as the most important aspect of principals' work. Specific tasks and behaviors associated with instructional leadership include providing regular teacher evaluation and feedback; planning targeted teacher professional development; creating and communicating a shared vision; and promoting an inclusive school culture[5][6][7]. Despite the identified importance of instructional leadership, principals face many other demands on their time, and studies of principal time use have found that principals spend only about 6–20% of their time on instructional matters[8][9][10]. Findings from these studies show that the relationship between time spent on instructional leadership and student achievement is mixed. Grissom et al.[11] found that only time spent on teacher evaluation and coaching (one aspect of instructional leadership) predicts student achievement growth. Other practices, such as informal classroom walkthroughs, were not predictive of student achievement.

Principals must also dedicate time to managerial and operational tasks such as budgeting, as well as relational and organizational activities such as community engagement. However, there is no consensus on the ideal time allocation between these tasks and instructional leadership[12]. This lack of consensus likely stems from (a) the limited causal evidence linking principal behaviors and time use to student

outcomes and (b) the high contextual variation in principals' work from school to school, which can make overarching prescriptions of principal practice difficult. However, certain managerial skills have been shown to benefit student achievement. Principals' organizational management skills appear to be particularly important to student achievement and teacher satisfaction[13][14]. These management tasks include strategically hiring and placing teachers, managing budgets, and ensuring school safety.

As expectations for principals have grown—both in scope and amount—they are increasingly expected to work in teams. About half of principals in the U.S. now work alongside one or more assistant principals[15]. Given the broad set of responsibilities assigned to principals, research has explored principals' use of collective or distributed leadership—delegating specific tasks to other school administrators, staff, and teacher leaders—which has become a popular strategy for principals to manage an increasingly demanding workload while empowering others to take ownership of school priorities[16]. Decisions regarding which leadership activities to distribute and to whom vary among principals and schools. Distributed leadership can be challenging to implement well, and debates exist over the extent to which principals can truly delegate authority and decision-making power within high-stakes settings.

Support for traditional models of principal leadership is not universal. For example, the concept of instructional leadership has been criticized as overly broad[17] and implying a hierarchy of behaviors in which time spent on instructional matters supersedes other tasks[18], while national leadership standards have historically lacked an explicit focus on issues of race, color, and social justice[19]. These criticisms have amplified in the wake of the COVID pandemic and racial reckoning of 2020. Existing frameworks for principal leadership are being revised as principals contend with the after-effects of the pandemic, including learning loss, chronic absenteeism, student mental health issues, and community political contention. For example, Neumerski et al. (in press) found that districts increasingly desire principals to be politically savvy, oriented toward schoolwide equity and wellbeing, and able to independently solve complex problems. As public schools continue to grapple with novel challenges and uncertainty, the field's understanding of what principals must know and do will likely continue to evolve.

Key finding #2: *Students benefit from having a principal who shares their background, but principals of color and female principals face barriers in the role.*

Principals in public schools are becoming more racially and ethnically diverse, but the rate of change is slow compared to the rapidly diversifying student population. Principals of color made up just over 20% of principals in the United States in 2016[20]. Students of color may experience academic growth in schools led by principals of color. Some, but not all, of this benefit can be explained by principals hiring racially diverse teachers[21]. Other possible mechanisms include reduced principal bias towards students of color, role model effects, or the creation of a culturally responsive school climate. Black and Hispanic students with a same-race principal are also more likely to be identified for gifted services[22] and less likely to be disciplined[23]. Principal–student match effects tend to be small and somewhat sensitive to study design. Some studies also find null effects. For example, one investigation of principal–student race congruence found no association with student grade retention[24].

The share of principals who are women has also grown over time. Women represented 54% of all principals in 2016[25]. However, women continue to experience barriers in advancing to leadership roles. Women are more likely to work in high-poverty schools and elementary schools, factors that may create additional leadership disparities if they lead to higher turnover or fewer opportunities to advance to district leadership roles that favor a secondary school background[26]. Compared to men, women experience longer delays in moving into the principalship, and Black women experience additional delays[27][28] and lower salaries[29]. Male teachers also report lower job satisfaction and higher turnover when their principal is a woman[30]. These differences cannot be fully explained by personal or school characteristics. Despite their progress in gaining representation, female principals continue to face gender discrimination in the role and gendered expectations for their behaviors as leaders. Similarly, principals of color, both men and women, face racialized barriers. Principals of color are more likely to work in high-needs schools and to be demoted than White principals[31].

Gender-based expectations for principals also intersect with race. For example, one study in which researchers followed new female principals over five years found that White women and Black and Latina women principals asserted their authority differently[32]. An interview study found that Black male principals reported feeling pressured to conform to stereotypes of "toughness" in their interactions with students and others, even when this demeanor was at odds with their inner desire to show care[33].

Key finding #3: *Principal leadership is an important factor in teacher satisfaction and retention.*

Among school conditions, principal support is the strongest predictor of teachers' decisions to remain in their schools[34]. Principals play a large role in shaping teachers' working conditions, which in turn influence their job satisfaction and decisions to remain in their schools. Effective school leaders support teachers through actions such as providing teachers with instructional support, buffering them from excessive demands, allocating school resources effectively, and cultivating teachers' sense of belonging and community[35]. Conversely, poor principal leadership is a primary reason for teacher dissatisfaction and turnover.

Teachers in high-needs schools

There is some evidence that lower teacher retention and effectiveness in high-needs schools can be explained in part by ineffective principal leadership[36]. Both principals and teachers are sorted unequally across schools, with less prepared and less experienced individuals tending to work in schools serving greater numbers of low-income students and students of color that face resource constraints, student needs, and accountability pressures[37]. Principal leadership may be especially important in these contexts as a protective factor against teacher stress and burnout. One study using national survey data (SASS) demonstrated that, while principal effectiveness predicted teacher satisfaction and retention in general, the association was larger in high-poverty schools[38]. These studies underscore the critical importance of high-quality principal leadership to teacher success in challenging school environments.

Teachers of color

The role of principals in supporting teachers of color is particularly important given their higher turnover rates compared to their White colleagues. One avenue through which principals retain teachers of color is racial congruence. A study of teacher turnover in New York City found that Black teachers were slightly more likely to remain in their schools when their principal was Black but did not find any relationship for Hispanic teachers and principals[39]. Principals of color are also more likely to increase the overall composition of same-race teachers in their schools through hiring and retention[40]. Teachers with same-race principals report greater feelings of support, job satisfaction, and workplace benefits[41][42]. These findings suggest that principals of color may actively facilitate inclusive and affirming school climates and support networks that retain teachers of color.

Times of crisis

During the COVID-19 pandemic, principals emerged as key figures in shaping teachers' experiences of support and efficacy. Principals who fostered collective resilience by engaging teachers in decision-making and prioritizing staff wellbeing helped mitigate the stress and uncertainty that characterized the early pandemic years. Noting that principals are key drivers of teacher working conditions, Kraft et al.[43] found that teachers in schools with strong working conditions during the pandemic—defined in terms of collaboration, recognition, communication, professional development, and professional expectations—were more likely to be buffered from shock and more likely to report a "sense of success."

Principal practices that support teacher retention

Principals play an active role in attracting and retaining high-performing teachers. Numerous studies have identified the critical role that principals play in using evidence, such as evaluation scores, to hire and retain effective teachers and counsel out low-performing teachers[44][45]. For their part, teachers appear to directly and indirectly consider the quality of their principal's leadership when making retention decisions. Survey and interview research has identified several principal leadership practices that teachers value in their retention decisions. One study found that teachers considered praise and recognition, clear communication, and a focus on student learning in their retention decisions[46]. Other research has found that teachers report being more likely to stay in their schools when they feel included by principals in school leadership decisions[47]. Given the challenges in establishing causal links between principal behaviors and school outcomes (described in key finding #1), the scalable principal practices that increase teacher retention and satisfaction are unclear.[48]

Linked principal and teacher turnover

Principal mobility can drive teacher turnover. Principal tenures in schools are relatively short, with the average principal spending just four years in their school[49]. Studies examining the impact of principal turnover have found that teachers are slightly more likely to exit after their principal leaves[50][51]. The relationship across studies is consistently small, with a principal exit increasing the likelihood of teacher turnover by 1–3 percentage points in the year immediately afterward before fading out over the next two years. Other studies have found additional evidence that teacher turnover jumps in the year immediately prior to a principal departure,[52][53] although the mechanisms behind this remain unclear. These patterns suggest that declining school conditions, leadership instability, or a principal's disengagement before departure may contribute to teacher attrition.

Key finding #4: *The magnitude of principal effects is contested.*

Following value-added methods applied to understanding the effects of classroom teachers, researchers have applied similar methods to quantify how much effective principals matter in improving student outcomes. The basic intuition of this approach is to generate a prediction for a student's outcome (typically, their test score performance in a given year) as a function of their prior-year outcomes and other observable characteristics, such as race/ethnicity or free/reduced-price lunch eligibility. Then, each student's predicted performance is subtracted from their actual performance to generate a "residual." These residuals are averaged across all students in a school led by a given principal to produce an estimate of that principal's "added value" to student outcomes. Finally, these principal value-added estimates form a distribution from which one can quantify how much principals "matter." Specifically, researchers estimate the magnitude of principal effects: how much student outcomes increase for a 1 s.d. increase in principal value-added.

Typical estimates of the magnitude of principal effects vary widely from as low as 0.05 s.d. (i.e., a 1 s.d. increase in principal value-added increases student test scores by 0.05 s.d., on average) to 0.25 s.d.[5455565758596061626364] However, recent work using data from three diverse contexts (Tennessee, Oregon, and New York City) demonstrates that the prior literature likely overstates the effects of principals. Specifically, Bartanen et al.[64] show that the standard principal value-added approach attributes to principals' school-level factors over which they have no control, such as fluctuations in the readiness of incoming cohorts of students or the retirement of a highly effective teacher. Comparing the standard principal value-added approach to a more robust approach that better accounts for factors principals cannot control, the study shows that the magnitude of principal effects declines from 0.08 s.d. (in math) and 0.05 s.d. (in reading) to 0.03 s.d. and 0.01 s.d., respectively. Conceptually, the key insight is that because principals face constraints on their ability to shape the various school-level factors that influence student outcomes (for example, their ability to hire effective teachers is constrained by the local labor market), standard value-added methods will produce overstated estimates of the magnitude of principal effects because these methods implicitly attribute all school-level changes to principals and do not properly account for factors beyond principals' control.

There remains a strong basis for the claim that effective leadership can improve student outcomes through a wide range of school-level processes.[65][66] Measuring and quantifying principal effects, however, remains an open area of inquiry. In addition to the misattribution problem described by Bartanen et al.,[67] principal value-added approaches do not account for the lagged nature of principals' contributions to school performance. For example, a new principal largely inherits the conditions established by her predecessor, and these conditions may only be partially malleable in the short term.[68] Advances in the methodological approach to estimating principal effects that accounts for these known issues may allow for a more accurate picture of how much effective leadership matters for student outcomes.

Endnotes and references

[1] In this chapter, we use the words "school leader," and "school administrator" interchangeably with "school principal" unless otherwise specified. In some schools, particularly charter and private schools, principals may hold titles such as director or head of school. The meanings are the same.

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