

KNOWLEDGE IN BRIEF

Findings You Can Use from New Wallace Research

CONNECTING LEADERSHIP TO LEARNING

Over the last decade, educators and policymakers have increasingly recognized sound education leadership as crucial to improving what goes on in the classrooms of the nation’s public schools. But what does effective leadership look like? Why does it matter to children’s education? How does it work? And who are the leaders?

A major Wallace-commissioned study, *Learning from Leadership: Investigating the Links to Improved Student Learning*, provides some insights, beginning by confirming a basic idea: Among school-related influences on student learning, leadership is second in importance only to classroom instruction. The report also makes clear that although principals are the central leaders in schools, they are not the only leaders.

SCHOOL LEADERSHIP: INVITING OTHERS TO JOIN IN

The researchers found a strong connection between student achievement and what they call the “collective leadership” of principals, teachers, parents, school administrators and others in making school decisions. Indeed, the report says that high-performing schools have “fatter” decision-making structures, meaning that almost all people associated with such schools have greater influence on decisions than their counterparts in lower-performing schools. In keeping with that finding, teachers in high-performing schools are more likely than others to see gains in student learning as the contributions of teams of teachers and of participation by parents and students.

The combined influence of educators, parents and others on school decisions has a greater impact on learning than the influence of any one leader, the report says. But paradoxically, principals do not lose clout when they share control. “...Influence in schools is not a fixed sum or a zero-sum game,” the report says. “Collective leadership occurs, in part, because effective principals encourage others to join in.”

ABOUT THE STUDY

Learning from Leadership: Investigating the Links to Improved Student Learning

Authors: Karen Seashore Louis, Kenneth Leithwood, Kyla L. Wahlstrom, Stephen E. Anderson et al.

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The largest in-depth study of education leadership to date in the United States, this report draws on research that included an examination of 180 different schools and 43 school districts in nine states. Researchers surveyed about 8,400 teachers and 470 school administrators; interviewed about 580 teachers and administrators, 304 school district staff members and 124 state personnel; and observed some 310 classrooms. They also gathered and analyzed student achievement on language and math standardized tests.

Find the full report and related materials at:
www.wallacefoundation.org

The “shared leadership” of teachers and principals merits particular notice, as the researchers learned when they examined the relationships between education leadership behaviors and student achievement. The study found links between the combination of principal work to improve instruction, teacher trust in the principal and shared principal-teacher leadership on the one hand – and higher scores on standardized tests in math on the other.

This effect occurs less because of the role principals play in directly improving teacher skills than in their work to motivate teachers and establish suitable working conditions for them, the report says. A telling related finding is that teachers at high-performing schools stress the importance of a school culture that encourages “professional community,” an environment in which teachers

help and guide one another in a school-wide collaboration to improve classroom pedagogy.

Principals and teachers agree that three leadership practices in particular contribute to better instruction:

- Focusing the school on goals and expectations for student achievement;
- Attending to teachers' professional development needs;
- Creating structures and opportunities for teacher collaboration.

Impediments to Better School Leadership

One obstacle to better school leadership is principal turnover. Although there is no ideal amount of time for a principal to serve in a school, a rule of thumb is at least five to seven years. But among 80 schools the researchers examined, the average principal tenure was little more than three-and-a-half years. This has consequences. Principal turnover resulted in measurable “negative effects” on school culture as well as “significant negative effects on student achievement,” the research found.

Another problem is that in secondary schools – where there are more teachers and subjects than elementary schools and principals report particularly severe time constraints – instructional leadership is often a casualty. High schools especially suffer from an instructional “leadership deficit,” and department chairs and others have been unable to compensate. For their part, middle and high school teachers report that they are less likely than their elementary colleagues to trust their principals, involve parents in decisions and serve as instructional leaders.

Implications for school policies and practices

- Educators should acknowledge the value to schools of “collective leadership” that aims to improve student learning.
- Principals need to recognize and take action for their crucial role in motivating teachers and improving work settings.
- Principal jobs need to be redesigned so principals can focus more on improving instruction, an especially important consideration for secondary schools. This may mean assigning others to non-instructional tasks principals typically do.

KEY FINDINGS

- The principal plays the central role in school leadership, but high-performing schools benefit from the leadership of many others, too, with the principal encouraging teachers, parents and others to participate in making decisions.
- Principals improve student learning in large part by motivating teachers and encouraging “professional community” – the help and guidance that teachers give one another to improve their teaching.
- Ongoing leadership problems include:
 - Principal turnover that stymies student achievement;
 - A lack of instructional leadership notable in middle school and, especially, high school.

DISTRICT LEADERSHIP: SUPPLYING SUPPORT AND DIRECTION

School district policies and practices make a difference in student achievement, and one way they do so, according to the study, is by helping principals develop a realistic sense of “efficacy,” that is, confidence in their own, their staff members’ and the district’s abilities to meet district goals. By probing how scores on state language and math tests track with measures of principals’ views of their own capabilities and other factors, the researchers found that principal efficacy had a “small but significant” effect on test results.

“Higher-performing districts tend to be led by district staff who communicate a strong belief in the capacity of teachers and principals to improve the quality of teaching and learning, and in the district’s capacity to develop the organizational conditions needed for that to happen,” the researchers write.

District leaders have the greatest impact, when they focus on supporting and developing the professional capabilities of principals and teachers. Principals in the study pointed to seven district measures that they found especially helpful:

- Providing schools with the funds and staff they need;
- Encouraging school leaders to develop strong working relationships with parents and the community;
- Allowing individual schools flexibility in pursuing district goals;

- Insisting on data-based decision-making;
- Helping schools interpret and use data to improve instruction;
- Allowing principals to staff their schools with the people they need;
- Providing clear direction to schools through standards and curriculum.

The study stresses, however, that districts that take only one or two such actions could see their efforts come to naught or even backfire. District professional development, for example, “had a negative effect when it failed to acknowledge different needs among schools,” the report says. Similarly, the absence of principal efficacy can thwart important district initiatives. The study found that district use of data, for example, had a negative effect on student achievement, as measured by scores on standardized math tests, if principals didn’t believe that they and their staffs were up to what was expected of them.

In fact, the growing use of data in decision-making about how students are taught is a key example of the important role district leaders play; researchers found few examples of schools using data to shape instruction if the district didn’t require it. To improve data use in education, districts must add support for high-need schools; ensure that assessments, curriculum and teaching strategies are in sync with state and federal mandates; and build the ability of principals and teachers to make “data-informed decisions.” Put simply: If they require schools to use data, district leaders should spend more time helping principals and teachers do so well.

Implications for district policies and practices

- District leaders should focus consistently on student achievement and instruction, in part by setting clear expectations and helping schools meet them.
- Districts should acknowledge the needs of individual schools. For example, district leaders should support development of school improvement plans that mesh with state and district standards, but also give school leaders reasonable discretion in determining how to reach the goals.
- Districts’ leaders need to recognize the downside of rapid principal turnover and examine whether district policies and practices – such as required principal rotation, promotion of successful principals to central office positions or easy transfer opportunities – encourage it.
- Professional development for principals and district administrators needs re-thinking; in contrast to how they handle teacher training, most districts lack a formal, systematic approach to principal and administrator training.

STATE LEADERSHIP: EXPERIENCING GROWING PAINS

Though far removed from the classroom, state education leaders and policymakers make their presence felt there. Most principals surveyed for the study believe state policies and actions have a positive effect on their schools.

Still, the picture is far from rosy. A pivotal player in state education leadership, the state education agency, is widening its focus from oversight duties alone to support of districts and schools. Yet change has been slow, with agencies often timid in taking important steps – among them adopting more collaborative, less compartmentalized ways of working internally. In addition, the agencies face financial constraints that often keep them from carrying out new responsibilities adequately. Furthermore, few states have developed comprehensive approaches to reform, and most provide only limited guidance to districts and schools on improving student achievement.

Implications for state policies and practices

- States and the federal government should find ways to provide the resources state education agencies need to carry out their new roles.
- New state legislation should support agency organizational change.
- States should better support training and professional development for both district and state education agency staff members. ■

THE REPORT

Learning from Leadership: Investigating the Links to School Improvement, by Karen Seashore Louis, Kenneth Leithwood, Kyla L. Wahlstrom and Stephen E. Anderson, was commissioned by The Wallace Foundation and produced by the Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement at the University of Minnesota and the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto.

The full report, a separate executive summary and this Knowledge in Brief can be downloaded free of charge at Wallace's Knowledge Center at www.wallacefoundation.org. The Wallace web site also contains video interviews about the report with one of the study's co-authors and Wallace's director of research and evaluation.

RELATED KNOWLEDGE

These and other related publications may also be downloaded for free from Wallace's website:

Central Office Transformation for District-Wide Teaching and Learning Improvement, Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy (University of Washington), 2010

Improving School Leadership: The Promise of Cohesive Leadership Systems, RAND Corporation, 2009

Assessing the Effectiveness of School Leaders: New Directions and New Processes, The Wallace Foundation, 2009

Preparing School Leaders for a Changing World: Lessons from Exemplary Leadership Development Programs – Final Report, Stanford University and The Finance Project, 2007

How Leadership Influences Student Learning, Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement (University of Minnesota) and Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (University of Toronto), 2004

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- Strengthen educational leadership to improve student achievement,
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