How Do Principals Affect Students and Schools? A New Synthesis and Its Implications

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How Principals Affect Students and Schools: A Systematic Synthesis of Two Decades of Research

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Main purpose

• A previous synthesis commissioned by The Wallace Foundation, *How Leadership Influences Student Learning* (Leithwood et al., 2004), highlighted the importance of school leadership for the field.

• Much has changed since that report:
  • Changes in the *policy landscape* for school leaders
  • Changes in *research* (e.g., longitudinal data systems, new methods)

• **Our goal:** to synthesize what has been learned in the last 20 years about the relationship between school leadership and student achievement, and other outcomes, as well.
Key takeaways

• Studies using new data and methods show that the importance of principals may not have been stated strongly enough in prior work, given the magnitude and scope of their impacts on a range of outcomes

• Evidence links four domains of behaviors to positive outcomes for students and schools—and they include but go beyond engagement with instruction

• The principalship needs continued reorientation toward educational equity

• We need renewed attention to supporting a high-quality principal workforce
Three research questions

1. Who are public school principals in the United States? How have their characteristics changed over the last few decades?

2. How much do principals contribute to student achievement and other school outcomes?

3. What matters in the role of principal? What are effective principals’ characteristics, skills, and behaviors?

Analyze nationally representative data sources that track principals’ characteristics and placement, 1987-88 to 2015-16

- Systematic search of scholarly databases and grey literature (4,832 studies)
- Screened for relevance, rigor, and appropriate methods
- Coded and synthesized results (219 studies)
1. Who are public school principals in the United States? How have their characteristics changed over the last few decades?

Three Key Findings
The principalship has become more female

Share of Public School Principals Who Are Female

![Graph showing the increase in the share of female principals from 1988 to 2016. The share has increased from around 20% in 1988 to 50% in 2016.](image-url)
Principal experience has fallen, especially in high-need schools

Public School Principals’ Average Years of Experience, by School’s Poverty Percentile

Years
0–25th percentile
26–50th percentile
51–75th percentile
76–100th percentile

Highest poverty schools

Principal racial/ethnic diversity has changed slowly, despite dramatic changes for students.
Main Findings

2. How much do principals contribute to student achievement and other school outcomes?

3. What matters in the role of principal? What are effective principals’ characteristics, skills, and behaviors?
There is strong evidence that having an effective principal contributes substantially to student achievement.
Strong evidence that an effective principal contributes substantially to student achievement

• We identified 6 high-quality studies using longitudinal administrative data from states or large school districts.
  • Together, studies use data from more than 22,000 principals

• Following many principals and schools over time, these studies use advanced statistical methods that can tease out principals’ effects on student achievement growth.

• Across these studies, we find that increasing principal effectiveness by 1 standard deviation (SD) results in an achievement increase of **0.13 SD in math** and **0.09 SD in reading**.
Translation

Replacing a below-average school principal...

...with an above-average principal

The average student gains an additional three months of learning in math and reading

Distribution of principal effectiveness
These effects are large

- Principal effects are nearly as large as estimates of teacher effects summarized in other work (Hanushek & Rivkin, 2010)
  - Replacing a below-average teacher with an above-average teacher increases the average student’s achievement growth by about 4 months of learning.

- Importantly: these are average student-level effects
  - Average elementary teacher’s effect is felt by 21 students
  - Average elementary principal’s effect is felt by 483 students

Comparisons between principals and teachers not “either/or” — principals’ effects on student achievement come largely through ensuring students have effective teachers.
High-quality studies demonstrate principal effects on other outcomes as well

- Studies demonstrate that schools with more effective principals have:
  - Lower student absenteeism and chronic absenteeism
  - Improved teacher reports of their working conditions
  - Higher teacher job satisfaction
  - Reduced teacher turnover, particularly of effective teachers
In sum: Principals *really* matter

Given the **magnitude** of the impact of an effective principal and the **scope** of their impacts across a **range of outcomes**

It is difficult to envision an investment with a higher ceiling on its potential return than a successful effort to improve principal leadership.
Some leadership skills and behaviors are associated with better outcomes.
Our synthesis of the research suggests that there are 3 primary skill areas principals need for school success.
These skills support 4 domains of high-leverage behaviors or practices.

Work with teachers on instructional practice (e.g., use of evaluation, feedback and coaching)
These skills support 4 domains of high-leverage behaviors or practices.

Practices that encourage an environment marked by trust, efficacy, and continuous improvement.

Leadership Behaviors
- Engaging in instructionally focused interactions with teachers
- Building a productive climate
- Facilitating collaboration and professional learning communities
- Managing personnel and resources strategically

Skills
- People: Human development and relationship skills (e.g., caring, communication, trust)
- Instruction: Skills to support teachers’ classroom instruction
- Organization: Management skills that transcend schools (e.g., data use, strategic thinking, resource allocation)
These skills support 4 domains of high-leverage behaviors or practices.

Strategies to promote teachers working together authentically to improve practice and support student learning.
These skills support 4 domains of high-leverage behaviors or practices.
Principals who consistently engage in these behaviors see more positive outcomes.
In sum: Effective principals use a broad toolbox

More than 200 studies published since 2000 suggest that what an effective principal does and who they work with is broad—their work includes but goes well beyond instruction.

Effective principals need skills in three broad areas to support four domains of work that the weight of existing evidence suggests drives student learning and other outcomes.
Taking an equity perspective

• Our synthesis also highlights how principals can have impacts on key student populations, including students of color, low-income students, students with special educational needs, and English learners.

• Channels are both direct and indirect
  • Direct: Pursuing equity in student discipline
  • Indirect: Working with teachers to implement culturally responsive teaching practices, hiring greater numbers of teachers of color, purposefully engaging a diverse range of families in the school’s work.

• Suggests that approaching leadership work with an equity lens can promote more equitable school outcomes.
An emerging framework for centering equity in school leadership
Research argues for strategies to increase principal racial and ethnic diversity

• When considering racial equity, principals of color appear to be especially important actors

• The presence of a principal of color appears to produce positive outcomes for:
  • Students: higher achievement
  • Teachers: better job outcomes, including retention

• These connections increase in salience as a rapidly diversifying student population means a growing mismatch in the race and ethnicity of principals and students
In sum: An equity lens for leaders is a must

Given the impacts of equity-focused principals on subgroups of students and the vital importance of principals of color and emerging evidence on equity-focused behaviors.

Principals and districts must develop an equity lens, particularly as they are called on to meet the needs of growing numbers of marginalized students.
A final observation: The research on principals is highly variable in approach, topic, and rigor

- Research on school principals would benefit from greater topical coherence and attention to replication
  - The evidence on principals’ contributions to student success is compelling but limited to relatively few studies and contexts
  - The research base on “what matters in the role of the principal?” is voluminous but less robust
- A need for more data collection with rigorous application of methods

The field would benefit from new investment in a rigorous, cohesive body of research on school principals.
Implications for Policy and Practice

1. **Invest in improved principal prep and support**
   We need renewed attention to and investment in strategies for cultivating, selecting, preparing, and supporting a high-quality principal workforce.

2. **Focus on high-leverage skills and behaviors**
   Preservice preparation programs, pipeline initiatives, and in-service learning can have more positive impacts by focusing on high-leverage skill and behavior areas.

3. **Continue reorientation toward educational equity**
   Principals approaching work with an equity lens; prioritizing needs of increasingly diverse students; equitable access to principal roles for leaders from diverse backgrounds.