A Practical Look at School Leadership

Summary

New research from the Center on Reinventing Public Education argues that a “one-size-fits-all” posture toward leadership training or methods and styles of school leadership serves neither principals nor schools well. In a new report, Making Sense of Leading Schools: A Study of the School Principalship, researchers argue that different schools have different leadership needs, and that policy and practice need to support a variety of leadership models.

Too often, school districts and colleges of education treat principals as interchangeable cogs in the education machine. Every principal gets the same training; every principal attends the same workshops. And when districts move a “hero” principal from one hard case to another, they treat leadership success as interchangeable too, assuming that the leader who thrived in one school will automatically be successful in another. In either case, school leadership is treated as a uniform proposition.

Given that not every school needs the same kind of leadership, colleges of education and districts can’t rely on a single path of preparation and development for leaders, and districts that treat leaders as interchangeable are likely to pay a price in ineffective schooling. Instead, the researchers conclude:

• districts need to assign principals to schools that can make best use of their particular leadership skills and style;
• principals need to be given the authority they need to meet their responsibilities;
• states and districts need to widen the pool of candidates for school leadership to include leaders from other organizations; and
• schools of education need to redesign their curricula to better suit the variety of realities in the workplace.

“We set out to understand school leadership by talking to actual school leaders about their work,” says Dr. Bradley Portin, the study’s lead investigator. “What we found shows it’s unrealistic to expect principals to be able to know and do everything it takes to run a school - the job is...
teachers and others in leadership tasks. In schools with less freedom of action, principals become mere middle managers. They can easily feel responsible for everything while lacking the authority to decide anything.

Most principals think they learned the skills they need “on the job.” Principals felt short-changed by traditional training programs that emphasized instructional and managerial leadership and overlooked cultural, strategic, and external development leadership skills. Regardless of training, most principals learned on the job. According to one principal, “There was nothing in my training that prepared me for this job.”

Policy Implications

One-size-fits-all generalizations about what principals “need to know and be able to do” — no matter how carefully crafted — ultimately misrepresent the situation in many schools. Making sense of what goes on in schools and helping principals do their jobs better requires more than an inventory of things for the ideal principal to oversee. Given the study’s findings about the challenges principals face, how they approach their task, and the things that get in their way or help them lead, the authors point to four policy imperatives to support school leaders:

- District leaders should ensure that principals have the authority they need - over budgets, staffing, and curricula - to meet the responsibilities demanded of them.
- States and districts should recognize that former teachers as well as experienced leaders of other organizations might be equally able to lead schools.
- Colleges of education should include complex tasks like diagnosis and planning in principal preparation; once principals start working, they need on-going professional development that is tailored to their school’s unique circumstances.
- Districts should place principals in jobs where they match the current needs of the school.

With the sponsorship of The Wallace Foundation’s Education Leadership Initiative, “Making Sense of Leading Schools: A Study of the School Principalship” was authored by Bradley Portin with Michael DeArmond, Lauren Gundlach and Paul Schneider. The findings and recommendations are solely those of its authors. To download the report please visit www.crpe.org. To learn more about The Wallace Foundation and their work in this and other fields, please visit www.wallacefoundation.org.