Northwest Comprehensive Center
at Education Northwest

research brief

Leadership Qualities of Effective Principals

by Basha Krasnoff

There are virtually no documented instances of troubled schools being turned around without intervention by a powerful leader (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004).

While the critical functions of a school principal have remained unchanged over the years, the principal's essential role has shifted dramatically (Hull, 2012). Two longitudinal studies of principal effectiveness suggest dramatic changes in what public education needs from principals (Branch, Hanushek, & Rivkin, 2013). "They can no longer function simply as building managers, tasked with adhering to district rules, carrying out regulations and avoiding mistakes. Principals today must be instructional leaders capable of developing a team of teachers who deliver effective instruction to every student" (Wallace Foundation, 2013, p. 6).

Effective Principals and Student Outcomes

Increasing demands for accountability have led a few researchers to examine the relationship between principal quality and student outcomes. In one longitudinal study, researchers at the University of Minnesota and the University of Toronto investigated the links between principal leadership and improved student learning. Based on their findings, these researchers declared that principals are second only to teachers as the most influential school-level factor in student achievement (Leithwood et al., 2004; Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010).

Of all the school-level factors, researchers estimate that teachers account for more than a third of the variation in a school's achievement; however, principals represent nearly 25 percent of that variation (Louis et al., 2010). This finding has led researchers to suggest that although individual teachers have a tremendous impact on their own students' achievement, it takes multiple in-school factors coming together to significantly improve student achievement on a larger

scale. The research suggests that principals are in a unique position to bring those factors together (Wallace Foundation, 2013).

Branch and colleagues (2013) studied the relative effect of teachers and principals on the students in their school. Using techniques similar to ones that measure teachers' "value-added" to student outcomes, the researchers applied this same calculation to the entire school. They showed that teachers affect only their students, while principals affect all students in a school. By estimating individual principal's contribution to growth in student achievement, they proved that the overall impact of increasing principal quality exceeds the benefit from a comparable increase in the quality of a single teacher (Branch et al., 2013).

Even more important, they found that highly effective principals raise the achievement of a typical student in their schools by two to seven months of learning in a single school year; ineffective principals lower achievement by the same amount (Branch et al., 2013).

Highly effective principals can increase students' scores up to 10 percentile points on standardized tests in just one year, reduce student absences and suspensions, and improve graduation rates (Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003). So, what makes these principals so effective? As yet, there are few rigorous studies that have attempted to identify the leadership qualities that make some principals more effective than others (Branch et al., 2013). This research brief discusses some qualities that evidence shows matter.

Effective Principals and School Quality

Researchers found that highly effective principals raise the achievement of a typical student in their schools by two to seven months of learning in a single school year; ineffective principals lower achievement by the same amount.
—Branch et al. , 2013

Like teachers, principals become more effective with experience, especially during their first three years (Clark, Martorell, & Rockoff, 2009). Many new principals gain their initial experience at challenging schools and then transfer to

easier to manage schools as those positions open up. A study of one large urban district found that principals' second or third schools typically enrolled 89 percent fewer poor and minority students than their first school (Béteille, Kalogrides, & Loeb, 2011; Miller, 2009). Although both effective and ineffective principals typically transfer to less challenging schools within a district, effective principals are more likely to stay at challenging schools longer than their ineffective colleagues (Branch, Hanushek, & Rivkin, 2012).

Principals tend to have a greater impact on student outcomes in low-achieving, high-poverty, and minority schools than principals at less challenging schools (Leithwood et al., 2004; Louis et al., 2010). While placing a new principal in any school causes a temporary slowdown in student achievement, the impact is felt more in low-achieving, high-poverty, and minority schools because the incoming principal is likely to be less experienced and less effective than the outgoing leader. Longer, more pronounced slowdowns in achievement gains have been reported at low-achieving, high-poverty, and minority schools during the transition to an inexperienced principal (Béteille et al., 2011).

The Impact of an Effective Principal

Schools with highly effective principals have:

- Standardized test scores that are 5 to 10 percentile points higher than schools led by an average principal
- Fewer student and teacher absences
- Effective teachers who stay longer
- Ineffective teachers typically replaced with more effective teachers
- Principals who are more likely to stay for at least three years

Effective principals have the most impact in elementary schools and in high-poverty, high-minority schools. (From Hull, 2012)

Effective principals typically recruit and retain effective teachers. Regardless of whether teacher turnover is voluntary or involuntary, it typically increases when there is a change in principals. Although teacher turnover goes up whether the incoming principal is effective or ineffective less effective teachers tend to leave under an effective principal and more effective teachers tend to leave when an ineffective principal takes over (Béteille et al., 2011). Furthermore, effective principals are more likely to replace any teachers who leave with more effective teachers (Béteille et al., 2011; Branch et al., 2012; Portin, Schneider, DeArmond, & Gundlach, 2003).

Even if a principal was highly effective at his or her previous school, it takes time to transition to a new school. Researchers suggest that it could take a new principal as much as five years to stabilize and improve the teaching staff, as well as fully implement policies and practices that positively impact the school's performance (Louis et al., 2010). Many principals leave their posts after fewer than five years. Effective principals, however, still make significant improvements during their first few years and their effectiveness definitely increases over time (Clark et al., 2009).

Researchers and policymakers know that school improvement does not happen overnight. They posit that a principal should be in place for five to seven years in order to have a beneficial impact on a school. The average length of a principal's stay in 80 schools studied in a longitudinal study, however, was 3.6 years. Higher turnover was associated with lower student performance on reading and math achievement tests because turnover takes a toll on the overall climate of the school (Louis et al., 2010).

Researchers conclude that this is far from a trivial problem. They found that schools experiencing exceptionally rapid principal turnover often reported suffering from a lack of shared purpose, cynicism among staff about principal commitment, and an inability to sustain a focus long enough to actually accomplish any meaningful change (Louis et al., 2010).

Effective Principals and Leadership Qualities

Effective principals influence a variety of school outcomes, including student achievement, through their recruitment and motivation of quality teachers; ability to identify and articulate school vision and goals; effective allocation of resources; and development of organizational structures to support instruction and learning (Horng, Kalogrides, & Loeb, 2010). Researchers suggest that success in all these areas of influence entails five key responsibilities:

- Shaping a vision of academic success for all students based on high standards
- Creating a climate hospitable to education so that safety, a cooperative spirit, and other foundations of fruitful interaction prevail
- Cultivating leadership in others so that teachers and other adults assume their parts in realizing the school vision
- Improving instruction to enable teachers to teach at their best and students to learn to their utmost
- Managing people, data and processes to foster school improvement.

(From Wallace Foundation, 2013)

Setting high expectations

High standards are no longer solely for college-bound students. The research literature consistently emphasizes that having high expectations for all students—and making those high standards clear and public—is key to closing the achievement gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students and raising the overall achievement of all students (Louis et al., 2010). Effective principals are responsible for establishing a schoolwide vision of commitment to high standards and the success of all students (Porter et al., 2008).

An effective principal makes sure that academic success becomes the driver of instruction as the entire faculty adopts a schoolwide learning improvement agenda that focuses on goals for student progress (Knapp, Copland, Honig, Plecki,

& Portin, 2010). Developing a shared vision around standards and success for all students is an essential element of school leadership (Portin et al., 2009).

When comparing different leadership approaches that a principal might provide, researchers found that "instructional leadership" has three to four times more impact on student achievement than "transformational leadership," whereby principals focus on motivation and improving the morale of their teachers (Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008). To be effective instructional leaders, principals must spend much more time in classrooms than in the office. They must focus on curriculum and instruction and oversee the collection, analysis, and use of data to support student learning. In addition, they must rally students, teachers, and the community to achieve the academic goals set for each student (Usdan, McCloud, & Podmostko, 2000; Wallace Foundation, 2013).

Creating an optimal learning climate

Research indicates that "a healthy school environment" is characterized by basics such as "safety and orderliness," as well as less tangible qualities such as "supportive and responsive attitudes" toward students, and a sense by teachers that they are part of a community of professionals focused on good instruction. Effective principals ensure that all adults and children at their school focus on learning as the center of their daily activities (Goldring, Porter, Murphy, Elliott, & Cravens, 2007).

Principals at schools with high teacher ratings for "instructional climate" outrank other principals in developing an atmosphere of caring and trust. Also, their teachers are more likely than faculty members elsewhere to find the principals' motives and intentions good (Louis et al., 2010).

Marshall (2003) quotes a former principal who, looking back at a typical staff meeting years ago, recalls that "morale never seemed to get out of the basement [and] discussion centered on field trips, war stories about troubled students, and other management issues." Almost inevitably, teacher pessimism was a significant barrier to change because teachers regarded themselves as "hardworking martyrs in a hopeless cause" (Marshall, 2003, pp. 107 and 109).

To change this kind of climate—and begin to combat teacher isolation, closed doors, negativism, defeatism, and teacher resistance—the most effective principals focus on building a sense of school community. The characteristics of an optimal learning climate include respect for every member of the school community; an upbeat, welcoming, solution-oriented, no-blame, professional environment; and efforts to involve staff and students in a variety of activities, many of them schoolwide (Portin et al., 2009).

Many principals work to engage others outside the immediate school community, including parents and local business people. Interest in this aspect of leadership is growing, but as yet there is relatively weak evidence on what it takes to assure these efforts are worth the time and toil. In one study, researchers developed a performance assessment to rate principals on community building and

parental engagement to determine if there were any measureable effects on student achievement. They found that the principal's role in engaging the external community is vague; however, the principal plays a major role in developing a "professional community" of teachers who guide one another in improving instruction (Porter et al., 2008).

Cultivating leadership in the school community

A broad and long-standing consensus in leadership theory holds that leaders in all walks of life and all kinds of organizations—both public and private—need to depend on others to accomplish the group's purpose, and they need to encourage the development of leadership across the organization (Gardner, 1990). Schools are no different. Principals who get high marks from teachers for creating a strong climate for instruction in their schools also receive higher marks than other principals for spurring leadership in the faculty (Louis et al., 2010).

In fact, if test scores are any indication, the more willing principals are to spread leadership around, the better it is for the students. One of the most striking findings in studies linking leadership to student achievement is that effective leadership from all sources—principals, influential teachers, teams of staff, and others—is associated with better student performance on math and reading tests (Louis et al., 2010).

Researchers suggest that good leadership improves both teacher motivation and work settings, which can, in turn, strengthen classroom instruction. Compared with lower achieving schools, all stakeholders at higher achieving schools equally influenced decisions and shared knowledge in collaborative work environments (Louis et al., 2010). It seems that principals at higher achieving schools quickly determine that they and district leaders have the most influence on decisions, but they do not lose influence as others gain it. Although the higher performing schools awarded greater influence to more stakeholders, little changed in these schools' overall hierarchical structure (Louis et al., 2010).

According to leadership theory, there are three different approaches to leadership that a principal might take:

- Assume sole authority and responsibility for outcomes
- Delegate responsibilities to others
- Share leadership throughout the school

  (From Portin et al., 2003)

Although in any school a range of leadership patterns exist among principals, assistant principals, formal and informal teacher leaders, and parents, the principal remains the central source of leadership influence (Plecki et al., 2009).

Research on leadership in urban school systems emphasizes the need for a leadership team, led by the principal and including assistant principals and teacher leaders who share responsibility for student progress. Shared responsibility for student progress by the leadership team is reflected in a set of agreements, as well as unspoken norms among school staff (Knapp et al., 2010).

In one study, researchers found that effective principals urged teachers to work with one another and with the administration on a variety of activities, including developing and aligning curriculum, instructional practices, and assessments; problem solving; and participating in peer observations. These leaders also looked for ways to encourage collaboration, paying special attention to how school time was allocated (Portin et al., 2009).

This study of professional community found the critical components to be consistent and well-defined learning expectations for children; frequent conversations among teachers about pedagogy; and an atmosphere in which teachers routinely visit one another's classrooms to observe and critique instruction. The researchers reported that a central part of being a great leader is cultivating leadership in others and that team-based schools impact student behavior, student conduct, and student achievement (Portin et al., 2009).

The importance of collaboration has been supported by other researchers who found that principals rated highly for the strength of their actions to improve instruction were also more apt

to encourage their staff to work collaboratively (Louis et al., 2010). More specifically, the study suggested that principals play a primary role in developing the "professional community" in which teachers guide one another in improving instruction. This research linked professional community and higher student scores on standardized math tests. The researchers concluded that when principals and teachers share leadership, teachers' working relationships with each another are stronger and student achievement is higher (Louis et al., 2010).

Improving instruction

Effective principals work relentlessly to improve student achievement by focusing on the quality of instruction. They help define and promote high expectations; they attack teacher isolation and fragmented effort; and they connect directly with teachers and the classroom (Portin et al., 2009).

Effective principals also encourage continual professional learning. They emphasize research-based strategies to improve teaching and learning and initiate discussions about instructional approaches, both in teams and with individual teachers. They pursue these strategies despite the preference of many teachers to be left alone

Effective Principals Support Teachers

Teachers say that principals provide instructional support by:

- Emphasizing the value of research-based strategies and applying them effectively to their own school
- Encouraging teacher collaboration
- Providing more time for teacher planning
- Observing teachers' work
- Offering constructive feedback
- Providing instructional guidance
- Developing an atmosphere of caring and trust
(From Hull, 2012)

(Louis et al., 2010). To successfully guide continual professional learning, principals must become intimately familiar with the "technical core of schooling" and all that is required to improve the quality of teaching and learning (Leithwood et al., 2004).

According to one survey, principals themselves agree almost unanimously (83 percent) on the importance of several specific practices, including keeping track of teachers' professional development needs and monitoring teachers' work in the classroom. Whether they call it formal evaluation, classroom visits, or learning walks, principals intent on promoting growth in both students and adults spend time in classrooms (or ensure that someone who is qualified does), observing and commenting on what is working well and what is not. Moreover, they shift the pattern of the annual evaluation cycle to one of ongoing and informal interactions with teachers (Louis et al., 2010).

One study described strong and weak instructional leadership. Researchers reported that both high- and low-scoring principals said that they frequently visited classrooms and considered themselves as "very visible"; however, the two groups of principals gave significantly different reasons for making classroom visits. High-scoring principals frequently observed classroom instruction for short periods of time, making 20 to 60 observations a week, and most of the observations were spontaneous. Their visits enabled them to make formative observations that were clearly about learning and professional growth, coupled with direct and immediate feedback. High-scoring principals believed that every teacher, whether a first-year teacher or a veteran, can learn and grow. These principals used data as a means of understanding the nature and causes of problems (Louis et al., 2010).

In contrast, the informal visits or observations of low-scoring principals were usually not for instructional purposes. And, even informal observations for instructional purposes were planned in advance so that teachers knew when the principal would be stopping by. Most significant,

the teachers in buildings with low-scoring principals said they received little or no feedback after informal observations (Louis et al., 2010).

Finally, the researchers found that instructional leadership tends to be much weaker in middle and high schools than in elementary schools because secondary school principals—unlike their elementary school counterparts—do not have expertise in all the subject areas in their schools' curriculum. If a central part of being a great leader is cultivating leadership in others, a learning-focused principal should help teachers improve their practice either directly or with the aid of school leaders such as department chairs and other teaching experts. Researchers suggested that the department head's job should be radically redefined as a central resource for improving instruction in middle and high schools (Louis et al., 2010).

Managing people, data, and processes

In the greater scheme of things, schools may be relatively small organizations, but their leadership challenges are far from small or simple. To get the job done, effective leaders need to make good use of the resources at hand. In other words, they have to be good managers (Portin et al., 2003).

Researchers found that effective leaders nurtured and supported their staffs, while facing the reality that sometimes teachers do not work out. In one study, high-performing principals hired carefully, adhering to union and district personnel policies, while they also took responsibility for "aggressively weeding out individuals who did not show the capacity to grow" (Portin et al., 2009, p. 52).

These researchers also found that when it comes to data, effective principals try to draw the most from statistics and evidence, learning to "ask useful questions" of the information, to display it in ways that tell "compelling stories" and to use it to promote "collaborative inquiry among teachers" (Portin et al., 2009, p. 52). Effective principals used data to pinpoint problems and to understand their nature and causes.

Other researchers have suggested that principals need to approach their work in a way that will get the job done. Using an assessment tool, they

uncovered six key steps - or "processes" - that the effective principal takes when carrying out his or her most important leadership responsibilities: planning, implementing, supporting, advocating, communicating and monitoring (Porter, Murphy et al. 2008).

These researchers suggested that a school leader pressing for high academic standards would, for example, map out rigorous targets for improvements in learning (planning); get the faculty on board to do what is necessary to meet those targets (implementing); encourage students and teachers in meeting the goals (supporting); challenge low expectations and low district funding for students with special needs (advocating); make sure families are aware of the learning goals (communicating); and keep on top of test results (monitoring) [Porter et al., 2008].

Conclusion

Research and practice confirm that there is little chance of creating and sustaining a high-quality learning environment without a skilled and committed instructional leader to shape teaching and learning. Research has clearly shown that the principal is a key ingredient in the performance of the school, especially if that school enrolls a large number of low-performing and/or poor and minority students. Unfortunately, challenging schools are more likely to be led by less experienced and less effective principals. And, while effective principals tend to remain at challenging schools longer than ineffective principals, most effective principals ultimately transfer to less challenging schools within the district—not because of the students, but because of the working conditions.

As pressure increases for all children in every school to succeed as learners, there is broad acceptance that education leaders need to be more than building managers. If principals are to be effective at turning around low-performing schools and propelling student learning, they need the training, skills, and experience to focus on instructional leadership and maximize teachers' individual effectiveness, as well as the school's effectiveness as a whole. State agencies and policymakers that focus on supporting the

principal as the instructional leader must collect and act on the right information about principal effectiveness. If principals are required to be instructional leaders, only ongoing assessment of their behaviors and skills will drive continual improvement of their effectiveness.

Effective Districts Support Principals

Principals believed that districts have the greatest role in improving their effectiveness by providing:

- Strong guidance on curricular and instructional improvements

- Guidelines to help shape and support motivation for change within their own schools

- Clear expectations for certain leadership practices

- A clear vision of what constitutes a good school

- Autonomy to make decisions within the framework of the strategic plan

- Tools and processes that principals can use to ensure instruction is aligned with the district's goals and standards

- High-quality professional development for principals and teachers

- A culture and support for the use of data beyond simple test scores to improve student outcomes

Districts also can improve principal effectiveness by regularly identifying promising principal candidates within schools and helping create a smooth transition when a principal decides to leave. (From Bottoms & Schmidt-Davis, 2010)

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