The Importance of the School Principal

Question: What does the research say about the importance of a school principal?

What does the research say about principal effectiveness?

In a Nutshell

Research shows that effective leadership is essential in schools. When schools have effective principals they are far more likely to be effective and to positively impact student achievement (Davis, Darling-Hammond, LaPointe & Meyerson, 2005; Firestone & Riehl, 2005; Marzano, Waters & McNulty, 2005). Researchers have identified a set of leadership characteristics, that when present, impact school climate and student learning. Those characteristics are discussed later in this Research Brief.

Summary of Findings:

Every major report recommending the reform of public education recognizes the important role of effective leadership. This is particularly true in discussions of the revitalization of failing schools. Principals play a central role in setting direction for their schools---articulating a shared purpose and vision and aligning school programs and resources to achieve that vision (Davis, S., Darling-Hammond, L, LaPointe, M. & Meyerson, D. (2005). In short, effective schools have effective principals. The research is clear that when effective leadership is present, students are more likely to achieve (Firestone & Riehl, 2005; Leitwood & Riehl, 2003: NASSP, 2010; Valentine, Maher, Quinn & Irvin, 1999; Williamson & Johnston, 2005)

Leadership exists in many different forms but the research on the formal leadership of the principal is extensive. While leadership is hard to define, but a generally accepted definition of school leadership is "the work of mobilizing and influencing others to articulate and achieve the school's shared intentions and goals" (Firestone & Riehl, 2005).

Leithwood, Seashore-Louis, Anderson and Wahlstrom (2004) reviewed the literature on school leadership and identified three core leadership practices:

- Developing people – Enabling teachers and other staff to do their jobs effectively, offering intellectual support and stimulation to improve the work, and providing models of practice and support.
- Setting direction for the organization – Developing shared goals, monitoring organizational performance, and promoting effective communication.
- Redesigning the organization – Creating a productive school culture, modifying organizational structures that undermine the work, and building collaborative processes.

Researchers at the Stanford Educational Leadership Institute (2005) reviewed the literature further and reported that the three aspects of a principal's job that impact student learning include:

(1) developing a deep understanding of how to support teachers;
(2) managing the curriculum in ways that promote student learning;
(3) developing the ability to transform schools into more effective organizations that foster powerful teaching and learning for all students.

In a meta-analysis of the research on school leadership Firestone and Riehl (2005) found four claims to be supported. They include:

• School leadership makes contributions to the improvement of student learning.

• Leadership in schools is exercised primarily by principals and teachers.

• A core set of basic leadership practices is valuable in almost all contexts.

• Successful leaders in schools with diverse student populations establish conditions that support student achievement, equity and justice.

Researchers at the Calder Urban Institute took a different approach (Branch, Hanushek & Rivkin, 2009). They constructed an analytical test that examined data about a random sample of Texas principals. They found a relationship between the years a principal was in a school and the principal's impact on student achievement. Further they found the greatest impact of principal effectiveness occurred in high poverty schools serving the most disadvantaged students. Finally, they found that principal mobility impacted student learning. When principals stayed in a school, that school tended to be more effective than when there was a regular change in leadership.

Despite the evidence that strong and effective leadership positively impacts schools, there is no common vision of what leadership is and how it manifests itself. We recognize leadership when it is present and we appreciate its power to inspire staff and transform schools, yet it remains difficult to define. Rather than being fixed and unchanging, effective leadership is flexible and malleable, adapting itself in ways that reflect a deep understanding of the context but sustaining itself by relying on a deeply

held set of core beliefs and principles including an unwavering commitment to improving the achievement of every student (Williamson & Johnston, 2005).

Principal as Multi-Tasker

School leadership has been described as a cauldron of competing interests (Bolman & Deal, 2003). Principals are the consummate multi-taskers. They are asked to do many things, and do them well. They are involved in every aspect of their school's operations from management of the day-to-day routines to working with staff and parents to implement a shared vision. They are expected to set direction, develop personnel, redesign the organization, and nurture relationships with families and community (Firestone & Riehl, 2005). While principals are most often held accountable for the smooth functioning of routine activities, their most important role is that of instructional leader.

The principal is the leader of the school and sets the tone for the school. Their impact is significant. What principals pay attention to becomes important and the actions of the principal are noticed and interpreted by others. These priorities impact the school's culture and the values the school reflects.

Many different researchers have studied the characteristics of effective school leaders. While the lists vary they include the following. An effective principal . . .

1. Recognizes that teaching and learning is the priority of the school.
2. Communicates the school's vision clearly and consistently to students, teachers, parents and community.
3. Provides clear goals and monitors progress on those goals.
4. Spends time in classrooms observing teaching and working with teachers on improving their teaching.
5. Nurtures and sustains a climate of trust.
6. Lacks tolerance for poor and/or ineffective teaching.

From: Southwest Educational Development Lab, 2011; Marzano, Waters & McNulty, 2005; Firestone & Riehl, 2005)

Principal Responsibilities and Student Achievement

Marzano, Waters and McNulty (2005) conducted a meta-analysis of the relationship between school leadership and student academic achievement. They identified twenty-one responsibilities that were positively related to achievement gains.

Responsibility	Description

1. Affirmation	Recognizes and celebrates accomplishments and acknowledges failures
2. Change Agent	Is willing to challenge and actively challenges the status quo
3. Contingent Rewards	Recognizes and rewards individual accomplishments
4. Communication	Establishes strong lines of communication with and among teachers and students
5. Culture	Fosters shared beliefs and a sense of community and cooperation
6. Discipline	Protects teachers from issues and influences that would detract from their teaching and time or focus
7. Flexibility	Adapts his or her leadership behavior to the needs of the current situation and is comfortable with dissent
8. Focus	Establishes clear goals and keeps those goals in the forefront of the school's attention.
9. Ideals/Beliefs	Communicates and operates from strong ideals and beliefs about schooling
10. Input	Involves teachers in the design and implementation of important decisions and policies

11. Intellectual Stimulation	Ensures faculty and staff are aware of the most current theories and practices and makes the discussion of these a regular aspect of the school's culture
12. Involvement in Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment	Is directly involved in the design and implementation of curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices
13. Knowledge of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment	Is knowledgeable about current curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices
14. Monitoring/Evaluating	Monitors the effectiveness of school practices and their impact on student learning
15. Optimizer	Inspires and leads new and challenging innovations
16. Order	Establishes a set of standard operating procedures and routines
17. Outreach	Is an advocate and spokesperson for the school to all stakeholders
18. Relationships	Demonstrates an awareness of the personal aspects of teachers and staff
19. Resources	Provides teachers with materials and professional development necessary for the successful execution

	of their jobs
20. Situational Awareness	Is aware of the details and undercurrents in the running of the school and uses this information to address current and potential problems
21. Visibility	Has quality contact and interactions with teachers and students

Skills of Successful School Leaders

The National Association of Secondary School Principals (2010) more recently conducted an analysis of the literature on school leadership complemented by their three decades of work assessing and studying the skills of school leaders. As a result of this analysis NASSP identified four sets of skills that comprise the most essential facets of school leadership. Within the four areas are 10 discrete skills.

Theme	Skills
Educational Leadership:	• Setting Instructional Direction • Teamwork • Sensitivity
Resolving Complex Problems:	• Judgment • Results Orientation • Organizational Ability
Communication:	• Oral Communication • Written Communication

Developing Self and Others:	• Developing Others • Understanding Own Strengths and Weaknesses

Summary

The evidence is clear that effective principals positively impact their schools and that principal effectiveness is related to improved student achievement.

Print Resources:

Firestone, W. & Riehl, C. (2005) (Eds.). *A new agenda for research in educational leadership*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Leitwood, K., Seashore-Louis, K., Anderson, S. & Wahlstrom, K. (2004). How leadership influences student learning. New York: The Wallace Foundation.

Marzano, R., Waters, T., McNulty, B. (2005). *School leadership that works: From research to results*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

National Association of Secondary School Principals (2010). *10 Skills for Successful School Leaders*. Reston, VA: Author.

National Association of Secondary school Principals (2004). *Breaking Ranks II: Strategies for Leading High School Reform*. Reston, VA: Author.

Williamson, R. & Johnston, J. H. (2005). Leadership in the middle level school. In V. Anfara, G. Andrews & S. Mertens (Eds.). *The encyclopedia of middle grades education*. Greenwich CT: Information Age Publishing.

Online Resources:

Leadership that Facilitates School Change – Information from the Southwest Educational Development Lab (SEDL) on leadership and change.

www.sedl.org/change/leadership/history.html

How Leadership Influences Student Learning – Leithwood, K., Seashore-Louis, K., Anderson, S. & Wahlstrom, K. (2004). A report of the Wallace Foundation

http://www.wallacefoundation.org/KnowledgeCenter/KnowledgeTopics/CurrentAreasofFocus/EducationLeadership/Pages/HowLeadershipInfluencesStudentLearning.aspx

Policy Brief: School, Teacher and Leadership Impacts on Student Achievement – A McREL Research Brief - http://www.mcrel.org/pdf/policybriefs/5032pi_pbschoolteacherleaderbrief.pdf

School Leadership Study – Davis, S., Darling-Hammond, L, LaPointe, M. & Meyerson, D. (2005). A report of the Wallace Foundation on the characteristics of effective school leadership and the preparation of school leaders.   http://www.srnleads.org/data/pdfs/sls/sls_rr.pdf

Educational Leadership: An Agenda for School Improvement (2009) – A report of the Wallace Foundation

http://www.wallacefoundation.org/KnowledgeCenter/KnowledgeTopics/CurrentAreasofFocus/EducationLeadership/Pages/education-leadership-an-agenda-for-school-improvement.aspx

Estimating Principal Effectiveness – Branch, G., Hanushek, E. & Rivkin, S. (2009). – A report from the Calder Urban Institute National Center for Analysis of Longitudinal Data in Education Research sponsored by Duke University, Stanford University, University of Florida, University of Missouri-Columbia, University of Texas at Dallas, and University of Washington.

http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/1001439-Estimating-Principal-Effectiveness.pdf

Creating Conditions for Leadership Effectiveness: The District's Role – Miller, K. (2004). This McREL Policy Brief discusses the role of school districts in supporting effective school-level leadership.

http://www.mcrel.org/PDF/PolicyBriefs/5042PI_PBDistrictLeadershipBrief.pdf

Changing Role of School Leadership – A report from the National Education Association on the ways school principals impact their schools. http://www.nea.org/assets/docs/mf_PB09_Leadership.pdf

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http://www.educationpartnerships.org