Leadership Practices and School Choice

NATIONAL CENTER ON
School Choice

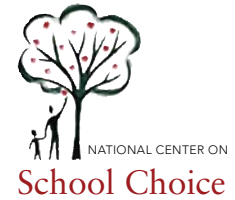**VANDERBILT®**
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Research during the past several decades on how school leaders impact school improvement has reached consensus regarding two major themes. First, the impact of school leadership on student achievement is indirect and mediated by the work of teachers in classrooms. In this causal chain, principal leadership plays a pivotal role in shaping the school culture and driving organizational changes that ultimately lead to a more effective learning environment (Murphy, Elliott, Goldring, & Porter, 2007). Second, among the core components of principal leadership, research repeatedly has identified instructional leadership as one of the essential correlates for school improvement (Hallinger, 2003; Hallinger & Murphy, 1986; Heck, Larsen, & Marcoulides, 1990; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004).

Although major school choice reforms continue to expand and to receive attention for potentially enhancing student learning, little is known regarding if, and to what extent, principals in choice schools exhibit more of the leadership practices associated with school improvement and increased student achievement. Moreover, few studies have compared the roles of principals in public choice schools, private schools, and traditional public schools.

Study Overview

As part of a larger study on school choice, researchers at the National Center on School Choice examined variation in leadership practices across school types, relying on a convenience matched sample of schools that included charter, magnet, private, and traditional public schools. A total of 284 schools[1] agreed to participate in the study—116 charter, 33 magnet, 17 private, and 118 traditional public schools. Among the charter schools, 59 are independently operated; 35 are reported to be operated or affiliated with a larger management organization that has a multistate presence; 9 are mission-driven to serve special student populations, such as those with learning disabilities; and 13 have some affiliation—for example, with a local performing arts center or a local community college—but not at a national scale or with a special population focus.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Principals from choice schools face similar levels and types of leadership challenges.

- The role focus of choice school principals was not significantly different compared with traditional public school principals.

- How principals use their time was similar across school types.

- Differences were found between affiliated and nonaffiliated charter schools.

School Types

At one extreme are traditional public schools that are part of a school system with district-level organizational bureaucracy. On the other extreme are private schools that are largely independent of systems. In between are magnet schools that are part of school district systems and charter schools that are more independent of their local school districts. Some charter schools are independent, while others are affiliated with larger organizations and are operated by education management organizations. Charter school companies that operate in multiple states tend to expect greater compliance with top-down initiatives for consistency and accountability.

[1] These schools were selected from the set of schools with which the Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) had partnered to monitor student achievement through the administration of computerized adaptive tests in mathematics, reading, and language arts every spring and fall of the school year.

Principal surveys were collected from 248 schools, yielding the following response rates: 91 percent from charter schools, 67 percent from magnet schools, 100 percent from private schools, and 87 percent from traditional public schools.

The study took a twofold approach to examine the leadership practices of school principals across school choice types and traditional public schools. First, researchers examined principal practices among school types in terms of challenges, role focus, and time spent on core leadership tasks. Second, they probed the two types of charter school structures—independent and those affiliated with a management organization—to examine the association between differences related to type and principal instructional leadership.[2] Central questions of the study were:

1. Do principals from different school types report different levels and types of leadership challenges?

2. Do principals from different school types report differences in their leadership practices?

3. For charter school principals, are leadership challenges and practices, especially instructional leadership, associated with school management structures?

Dimensions of Principal Survey

The confidential online principal questionnaire addressed three broad dimensions: challenge, influence, and practice.

- **Challenge:** To measure leadership challenges, principals were asked how much difficulty they have experienced in their schools in regard to five areas: acquiring financial resources, recruiting teachers, retaining teachers, attracting students, and retaining students.

- **Influence:** Principals from all schools also were asked how much influence the district administrators, principal, teachers in the school, and parents have

[2] The linkage to a parent organization or larger system provides variation in terms of governance conditions under which school leadership may take place, and allowed researchers to further explore the relationships between systems and leadership and ask whether larger system affiliation can free school leaders to focus on instruction and outreach, or, in theoretical terms, whether larger systems can reduce leader uncertainty and the boundary-spanning roles of principals.

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Schools of Choice and Principal Leadership

In theory, school choice programs should alter the traditional roles of all stakeholders involved in the education of children, including principals (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Hausman & Goldring, 2001). Changes in principals' roles are predicted to stem from more permeable boundaries, reduced bureaucracy, heightened autonomy, and increased responsiveness and accountability (Crew & Anderson, 2003). Choice schools should be able to implement more effective school leadership because the leaders would be able to have more control over their environments. The autonomy and reduced bureaucracy of choice schools suggest that choice school leaders, compared with traditional public school principals, may be more likely to attend to instructional leadership because they would be freed from administrative, compliance, and management tasks that often are required in complex, centralized organizations.

However, research also indicates that the nature of governance in charter schools and other choice schools may create for principals new role demands that compete with time available for instructional leadership. In the absence of a network of support— such as a central office or even back-office services to take care of facilities, buildings, and budgets; student recruitment; and personnel screening—choice school leaders may have limited time and focus on instructional and school improvement matters compared with their traditional public school counterparts.

Thus, the challenge to schools and principals is that autonomy and independence from a school system may be associated with opportunity costs that result in reduced time and focus on instructional leadership matters. In the case of choice schools, principals of independently run charter schools and private schools may need to be more concerned about raising funding, securing facilities, and maintaining student enrollment than their counterparts who are affiliated with parent organizations. Traditional public schools, or charter schools that are part of a management organization, as with other organizations that operate as a system, may be better able to buffer individual school units to focus on their core technologies of teaching and learning. Thus, the capacity for leadership practices that will enhance student learning may very well differ in terms of a school's system management context.

over four major school decisions: selecting curriculum material, hiring new staff, determining the content of the professional development for teachers, and firing or dismissing teachers. For charter school principals, charter agency and management organization were added as two additional possible influence sources. For private school principals, district administrator was replaced by governing/diocesan board.

- **Practice:** To measure the principals' use of time and their role focus, five scales to measure principals' practices were developed based on theoretical concepts supported by prior research (Camburn, Spillane, & Sebastian, 2010; Goldring, Porter, Murphy, Elliott, & Cravens, 2009). The first two scales measured principal leadership on two dimensions: traditional role focus and choice-related role focus. The traditional focus scale consisted of four items where principals were asked the extent to which they focused on more conventional roles such as managing the building and staff, monitoring instructional improvement, recruiting and hiring teachers, and developing school improvement goals. In contrast, the choice-related focus included five items that may pertain more to principals in choice school contexts: promoting the school to parents and/or students, obtaining facilities for this year or next, managing relationships with the school governing board, increasing public awareness of the school, and securing financial resources. Principals also were asked how much time they spend on three main areas of leadership practice: basic management, instructional leadership, and public relations leadership.

Key Findings

Principals from choice schools face similar levels and types of leadership challenges in terms of acquiring financial resources, recruiting and retaining teachers, and recruiting and retaining students as their counterparts in traditional public schools. Although differences found were small, on average, charter school principals, on average, reported less difficulty in acquiring financial resources but a higher level of difficulty in recruiting and retaining teachers and in retaining students than their counterparts in traditional public schools. Magnet schools do not appear to have noteworthy differences in principal-reported challenges compared with traditional public schools. Private school principals reported significantly more difficulty in attracting students than their counterparts from traditional public schools but less difficulty in retaining their teachers.

The role focus of choice school principals was not significantly different compared with traditional public school principals. However, charter school principals, on average, reported significantly more focus on traditional school tasks than regular public school leaders. There were no significant differences in choice-related tasks when charter schools or magnet schools were compared with regular public schools. Charter school principals do not focus on school choice tasks such as public relations and recruiting more than other public school principals, as might have been expected. Only private school principals reported a significantly higher focus on choice-related tasks compared with regular public schools. Furthermore, the principals of all four school types consistently report a higher level of focus on traditional school tasks than on choice-related tasks.

How principals use their time was similar across school types. All principals reported spending more time on routine school management than on instructional improvement or public relations. On average, principals indicated spending approximately one to two days per week on routine management tasks, compared with a few times per month on instructional leadership and public relations outreach tasks. These findings on principals' time are consistent with the evidence provided by other recent studies on principal leadership practice.

Differences were found between affiliated and nonaffiliated charter schools. Charter schools with national affiliations reported fewer difficulties in acquiring resources and retaining students. Principals in affiliated charter schools also were likely to spend more time on instructional improvement.

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Policy and Research Implications

The current study broadens the understanding of school leadership in a choice environment by examining not only the association between leadership practices and school types but also the influence of school management structures on instructional development beyond school type differences. Although no pronounced differences in challenges faced by principals emerged across school types, the study did find differences in acquiring financial resources and the amount of time principals spend on instructional development between charter schools that are affiliated with parent organizations and charter schools with no affiliation. Such differences suggest the need to address charter school management structure in school choice studies, which often group together choice schools in general categories and compare them with traditional public schools.

Findings from this study generate additional questions to explore. Why do affiliated charter school principals put the most focus on the traditional tasks of principals, such as hiring teachers and monitoring school improvement and instruction, instead of on choice-related tasks? Furthermore, why do affiliated charter school principals tend to devote the highest level of time to instruction-related tasks, more than their counterparts in traditional public school and in nonaffiliated charter schools?

Researchers of this study posit that the differences found stem from the need for leaders to control their boundaries and reduce uncertainty. Under conditions of relative certainty, leaders function more efficiently. That is, they work in environments that are stable, organized, and more resource-abundant. The results of this study suggest that charter management organizations may help reduce the uncertainty that charter school principals face, thus reducing their need to engage in public relations and recruiting activities and increasing their ability to focus on the technical core of schooling: instructional leadership. In contrast, principals in nonaffiliated charter schools—without support from a larger system, network, or organization—spend more time on choice-related tasks, decreasing the amount of time they can focus on instructional leadership and, thereby, increasing the need to distribute core instructional tasks to teachers.

Findings from this study, although with limitations, suggest that it is increasingly important to examine the variation in the organizational arrangements of schools of choice and their influence on school leadership.

With this research, the importance of school governance design strategies that can maximize the organizational potential for student learning is revisited. Within-charter differences in principal leadership echo the findings by previous research that governance structures can influence school leadership practices. The current findings underscore the importance of teasing out the fine distinctions in organizational context that can influence leadership practice.

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