

### Excerpt

*The School Principal as Leader: Guiding Schools to Better Teaching and Learning* (The Wallace Foundation, 2013), 7–8.



Although they say it in different ways, researchers who have examined education leadership agree that effective principals are responsible for establishing a schoolwide vision of commitment to high standards and the success of all students.

Newcomers to the education discussion might find this puzzling: Hasn't concern with the academic achievement of every student always topped principals' agendas? The short answer is, no. For years public school principals were seen as school managers<sup>1</sup>, and as recently as two decades ago, high standards were thought to be the province of the college bound. "Success" could be defined as entry-level manufacturing work for students who had followed a "general track," and low-skilled employment for dropouts. Only in the last few decades has the emphasis shifted to academic expectations for all.

This change comes in part as a response to twin realizations: Career success in a global economy depends on a strong education; for all segments of U.S. society to be able to compete fairly, the yawning gap in academic achievement between disadvantaged and advantaged students needs to narrow. In a school, closing the gap begins with spelling out "high standards and rigorous learning goals," Vanderbilt University researchers assert with underlined emphasis. Specifically, they say, "The research literature over the last quarter century has consistently supported the notion that having high expectations for all, including clear and public standards, is one key to closing the achievement gap between advantaged and less advantaged students and for raising the overall achievement of all students."<sup>2</sup>

An effective principal also makes sure that the notion of academic success for all gets picked up by the faculty and underpins what researchers at the University of Washington describe as a schoolwide learning improvement agenda that focuses on goals for student progress.<sup>3</sup> One middle school teacher described what adopting the vision meant for her. "My expectations have increased every year," she told

1. Karen Seashore Louis, Kenneth Leithwood, Kyla L. Wahlstrom and Stephen E. Anderson, *Learning From Leadership: Investigating the Links to Improved Student Learning: Final Report of Research Findings*, University of Minnesota and University of Toronto, 2010, 78.
2. Andrew C. Porter, Joseph Murphy, Ellen Goldring, Stephen N. Elliott, Morgan S. Polikoff and Henry May, *Vanderbilt Assessment of Leadership in Education: Technical Manual, Version 1.0*, Vanderbilt University, 2008, 13.
3. Michael S. Knapp, Michael A. Copland, Meredith I. Honig, Margaret L. Plecki, and Bradley S. Portin, *Learning-focused Leadership and Leadership Support: Meaning and Practice in Urban Systems*, University of Washington, 2010, 2.

the researchers. "I've learned that as long as you support them, there is really nothing [the students] can't do."<sup>4</sup> So, developing a shared vision around standards, and success for all students is an essential elements of school leadership. As the Cheshire cat pointed out to Alice, if you don't know where you're going, any road will lead you there.

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4. Bradley S. Portin, Michael S. Knapp, Scott Dareff, Sue Feldman, Felice A. Russell, Catherine Samuelson and Theresa Ling Yeh, *Leadership for Learning Improvement in Urban Schools*, University of Washington, 2009, 55.