

Excerpt

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



Effective principals work relentlessly to improve 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, University of Washington researchers found.¹

Effective principals also encourage continual professional development. 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.²

In practice this all means that leaders must become intimately familiar with the “technical core” of schooling — what is required to improve the quality of teaching and learning.³

Principals themselves agree almost unanimously on the importance of several specific practices, according to one survey, including keeping track of teachers’ professional development needs and monitoring teachers’ work in the classroom (83 percent).⁴ 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’s qualified does), observing and commenting on what’s 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.

The Minnesota-Toronto study paints a picture of strong and weak instructional leadership. “Both high- and low-scoring principals said that they frequently visit classrooms and are ‘very visible,’” the researchers write.

However, differences between principals in the two groups come into sharp focus as they describe their reasons for making classroom visits. High-scoring principals frequently observed classroom instruction for short periods of time, making 20 to 60 observations a

1. Portin, Knapp et al., v.

2. 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.

3. Kenneth Leithwood, Karen Seashore Louis, Stephen Anderson, Kyla Wahlstrom, *Review of Research: How Leadership Influences Student Learning*, University of Minnesota and University of Toronto, 2004, 24.

4. Seashore Louis, Leithwood et al., 71.

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.

... In contrast, low-scoring principals described a very different approach to observations. Their informal visits or observations in classrooms were usually not for instructional purposes. Even informal observations were often planned in advance so that teachers knew when the principal would be stopping by. The most damaging finding became clear in reports from teachers in buildings with low-scoring principals who said they received little or no feedback after informal observations.⁵

It is important to note that instructional leadership tends to be much weaker in middle and high schools than in elementary schools.⁶ Unlike their elementary school counterparts, secondary school principals cannot be expected to have expertise in all the subject areas their schools cover, so their ability to offer guidance on instruction is more limited. The problem is that those who are in a position to offer instructional leadership — department chairs — often are not called on to do so. One suggestion is that the department head's job "should be radically redefined" so whoever holds the post is "regarded, institutionally, as a central resource for improving instruction in middle and high schools."⁷

As noted above, a central part of being a great leader is cultivating leadership in others. The learning-focused principal is intent on helping teachers improve their practice either directly or with the aid of school leaders like department chairs and other teaching experts.

5. Seashore Louis, Leithwood et al., 86.

6. Seashore Louis, Leithwood et al., 87-90.

7. Seashore Louis, Leithwood et al., 92.