



RESEARCH REVIEW

Elizabeth Foster

INVESTING IN PRINCIPALS OFFERS BIG RETURNS FOR STUDENTS AND SCHOOLS

► THE STUDY

Grissom, J.A., Egalite, A.J., & Lindsay, C.A. (2021, February). *How principals affect students and schools: A systematic synthesis of two decades of research.* The Wallace Foundation. www.wallacefoundation.org/principalsynthesis

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The school principal has long been recognized as a critical driver for school improvement and student success, but new research supported by The Wallace Foundation has found that principals have an even greater impact than previously stated. A synthesis of two decades of studies builds on previous research about how principals impact student outcomes and what characteristics and conditions lead to the greatest impact.

The report, *How Principals Affect Students and Schools: A Systematic Synthesis of Two Decades of Research*, updates the evidence base about school leadership, responds to changing policy contexts, and leverages recent improvements in research methodology. This report is a major contribution to the field as well as a critical resource for the revision of Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning.

METHODOLOGY

The research team sought to update the evidence related to the impact of principals by synthesizing what has been learned in the last 20 years about the relationship between school leadership and student achievement. This report builds on the foundational research synthesis, *How Leadership Influences Student Learning* (Leithwood et al., 2004), commissioned by the Foundation more than 15 years ago.

Researchers also sought to respond to changing conditions in education over the past few decades such as the rise of high-stakes accountability systems and teacher evaluations, as well as the increased demand for equity in approaches and outcomes. They used new research methods and the ability to draw on state-level longitudinal data systems to understand and investigate relationships between principals and student outcomes and study the long-term impact of principals in striking new ways.

The researchers sought to answer these questions:

1. Who are public school principals in the United States? How have their characteristics changed over the last few decades?
2. How much do principals contribute to student achievement and other school outcomes?
3. What matters in the role of principal? What are effective principals' characteristics, skills, and behaviors?

To answer these questions, the researchers synthesized qualitative and quantitative studies after conducting a systematic search of scholarly databases and grey literature such as policy analyses and position papers, which initially yielded 4,832 studies. These studies were then screened for relevance, rigor, and methods, yielding 219 studies that were analyzed and synthesized.

The conclusions about student achievement are based on six studies that rely on longitudinal data that allow researchers to track over time the impact of a given principal as he or she moves to different schools as well as the impact of different principals on the same school. These data helped the researchers pinpoint the contributions of principals, separating out the impact of an effective principal from among the indirect relationships through teachers and other school personnel.

FINDINGS

The researchers found that the impact of school leadership on student outcomes has not been emphasized enough, given "the magnitude and scope of their impacts on a range of outcomes." They found strong evidence that having an effective principal contributes substantially to student achievement as well as other student and teacher outcomes and conclude that the work of



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effective principals includes and goes well beyond improving instruction.

The findings related to the first research question provide an interesting look at how the demographics of the principalship have changed in the last two decades. The corps of principals has become more female, and the racial and ethnic diversity among principals has increased, although not to the same degree or as fast as the student body.

The report pays special attention to the positive impact that diversity among principals can have on students and teachers; therefore, this study highlights the urgency of diversifying the principalship. In addition, principals' years of experience levels have decreased, especially in high-need

schools — a finding that needs to be attended to urgently as these are the same schools that are most often staffed with the least-experienced teachers.

The ability of the new research methods to parse out the impact of different principals at a school and the impact of an effective principal at different schools is critical given the high mobility of principals among schools and districts. Using advanced statistical methods newly available via longitudinal data sets, the researchers estimated the impact of increasing principal effectiveness.

The researchers found an effect that can be represented in this way: replacing a below-average principal (25th percentile) with an above-average

principal (75th percentile) would result in the equivalent of about three months of additional student learning in math and reading. The researchers point out that this is only slightly less than what widely cited research has found in terms of the effect of a teacher on student outcomes.

The researchers assert that the impact of principals is large in magnitude but also in scope. Principals not only impact student achievement, but also impact other factors such as student absenteeism. In addition, an effective principal impacts teacher and school outcomes, including improved teacher job satisfaction and reduced attrition.

The report offers a portrait of the critical leadership behaviors and characteristics associated with effective principals related to people, instruction, and organization. They found that effective principals demonstrate skills in four domains of behavior that include:

- Engaging in instructional conversations with teachers related to teacher evaluation and instructional coaching;
- Building a productive school climate that values trust, teamwork, engaging with data, and continuous improvement;

- Facilitating productive collaboration and teachers working together effectively to improve their practice and student outcomes; and
- Being strategic about staffing and the use of resources, most notably time.

These four domains and the specific associated skills discussed in the report align with the Standards for Professional Learning, especially with the concepts in the **Leadership standard**. This research also highlights the importance of leaders prioritizing and facilitating productive collaboration, a critical concept in the **Learning Communities standard**. These findings add to the growing body of research that supports the power of professional collaboration, an uptick that will be reflected in the revised standards.

This evidence about the skills and

knowledge that lead to impact can help establish targets for professional learning goals, provides a foundation for the identification and selection of professional learning content, and offers a list of priorities to use when assessing the professional learning needs of principals, teacher leaders, and aspiring leaders.

Notably, the research suggests that approaching leadership work with an equity lens can promote more equitable school outcomes. The researchers suggest that applying an equity lens to the skills that the research shows has a positive impact on student outcomes could yield good results for students of color, students living in poverty, students with special learning needs, and English language learners. Such practices might include assessing and improving student discipline practices,

implementing and supporting culturally responsive teaching practices, hiring teachers of color, and engaging with diverse families and caregivers.

Responding to these findings, the researchers propose a framework that centers equity in school leadership and supports efforts to reorient the principal role toward educational equity. This framework elevates strategies such as developing a productive climate that celebrates diversity and communicates high expectations for all students and engaging families and caregivers from all backgrounds.

Using this equity framework, leaders can examine current professional learning against a set of equity recommendations. The framework highlights the importance of equity-focused professional learning for principals, both for their own learning

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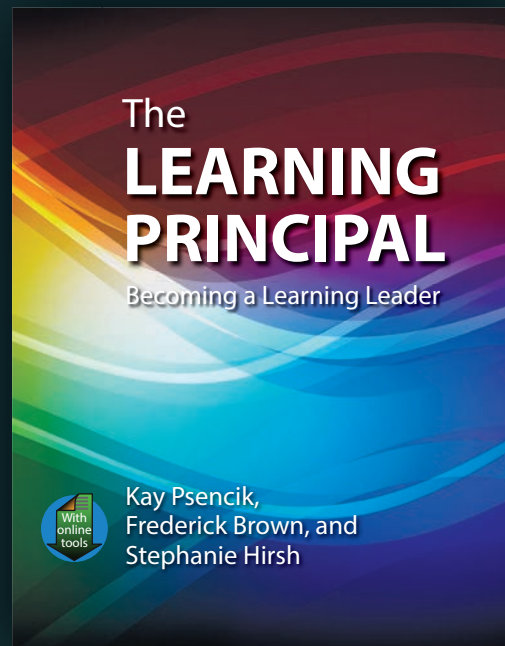
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and in how they conceptualize and prioritize professional learning for others in their schools and systems.

The researchers also note that the presence of a principal of color appears to produce positive outcomes for students of color in terms of higher achievement and improves job outcomes for teachers of color, including retention.

The report acknowledges that the research related to principals is highly variable and calls for additional investment in studying and understanding the role of a high-quality principal workforce. For instance, the evidence related to principals' contributions is drawn primarily from six studies. The findings related to the aspects of the principal role are drawn from more than 200 studies, but those studies are not tightly aligned methodologically and vary by focus and topic.

This variability limits the conclusions that can be drawn. The researchers conclude that the field would benefit from investments in research focused on the role of the principal that is rigorous and cohesive. Additional research syntheses have been commissioned already by The Wallace Foundation to explore the impacts and characteristics of the assistant principal role and principal preparation programs. These studies will no doubt yield important findings to complement this report.

IMPLICATIONS

The report's findings about the critical and widespread impact that results when principals create a vision for collaborative professional learning and provide resources and supports to reach that vision is at the very heart of Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning, spanning the **Leadership and Learning Communities standards**. This research is informing the standards revision process as we deepen the discussion about collaborative professionalism and highlight the role of principals in ensuring equity.

The revised standards will highlight the importance of equity as a foundation for leadership, culture, and actions in much the same way that the Wallace-commissioned report offers an equity framework for the principalship. These points of alignment between the standards and this new research represent a coherence and a reliance on evidence that will lead to better outcomes.

It is worth noting that, while the comparison of the impact of the principal and the impact of the classroom teacher on student outcomes is helpful in highlighting the power of each role, these findings should never be weighed against one another. Investments in both teachers and principals are what will create the systems and conditions that lead to

improved academic and nonacademic outcomes for each student.

With this report, the research team's call for renewed attention to and investment in supporting an investment would build on and leverage the commitment The Wallace Foundation has made to date. This long-term commitment is extraordinary, and a similar investment in professional learning could result in a better understanding of the impact of specific elements and aspects of professional learning.

Exploring how teachers and leaders improve their own practice and a range of student outcomes over time would inform decision-making and planning and be an investment that would yield great returns for teacher and leader practice, growth, and retention as well as student outcomes. Learning Forward is ready to lead the way for this type of investment in coordinated, systematic syntheses of professional learning research.

REFERENCE

Leithwood, K., Louis, K.S., Anderson, S., & Wahlstrom, K. (2004). *How leadership influences student learning: A review of research for the Learning from Leadership Project.* The Wallace Foundation. ■

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