

The Importance of School Leadership

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Key Points

This brief examines the current environment for school principals and emphasizes the following points:

- Effective leaders are second only to teachers in impacting student achievement.
- Today's principals are held accountable for classroom instruction, student learning, and school improvement.
- Today's principals are accountable for educating increasingly diverse student populations.
- Though most districts can draw from a sufficient pool of principal candidates, some areas suffer from a shortage in qualified principals.

This brief also serves as an introduction to the OREA publication [On the Horizon: State Initiative to Strengthen Tennessee Principals](#).

Several studies place school leadership second only to classroom instruction in influence on student success.¹ This issue brief discusses the roles and responsibilities of school principals to examine why school leadership is important.² The brief looks at the correlation between effective school leadership and student achievement and includes a discussion of the shortage of qualified principals in some school districts across the nation.

The Link Between Effective Leadership and Student Learning

The basics of effective leadership for school leaders are in general the same as those for the leader of any organization, but are specifically directed toward enhancing student learning. They include:

- Developing and promoting a vision and goals that motivate teachers and allow them to improve student learning.
- Understanding how to best develop teachers and staff, which in turn “increases the employee’s enthusiasm and optimism, reduces frustration, transmits a sense of mission and indirectly increases performance.”

- Redesigning the culture and organization of the school.³

Although the primary responsibility is to foster student learning, the school leader’s relationship to students is mediated through teachers and through classroom instruction. According to Linda Darling-Hammond:

It is the work [leaders] do that enables teachers to be effective – as it is not just the traits that teachers bring, but their ability to use what they know in a high-functioning organization, that produces student success. And it is the leader who both recruits and retains high quality staff – indeed, the number one reason for teachers’ decisions about whether to stay in a school is the quality of administrative support – and it is the leader who must develop this organization.⁴

There are virtually no documented instances of troubled schools being turned around in the absence of intervention by talented leaders.

Learning from Leadership Project, *How Leadership Influences Student Learning*, Commissioned by the Wallace Foundation, 2004, p. 5.

The Changing Roles and Responsibilities of School Leaders

School principals were once expected to maintain “clean and regimented institutions – well-oiled machines, running smoothly and causing little stir.”⁵ Today’s principals must still run schools, but they are also held accountable for student progress. Through the accountability it imposes, the federal education law No Child Left Behind (NCLB), originally passed in 2001, has helped redefine the principal’s role, retaining the traditional “building manager” functions, and adding responsibilities for instructional leadership. Instructional leaders are responsible for the seemingly straightforward tasks of determining student needs based on data analysis, and for effectively deploying instructional resources (e.g., teachers, tutors, and technology) to meet those needs. But these tasks are often complicated by student bodies composed of students with disabilities, students with diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and students from a broad range of socioeconomic situations.

NCLB is not the first time federal law has imposed changes on state educational systems. Prior to the 1970s, school districts were not required to provide an education for children with disabilities. The Education For All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 – now the

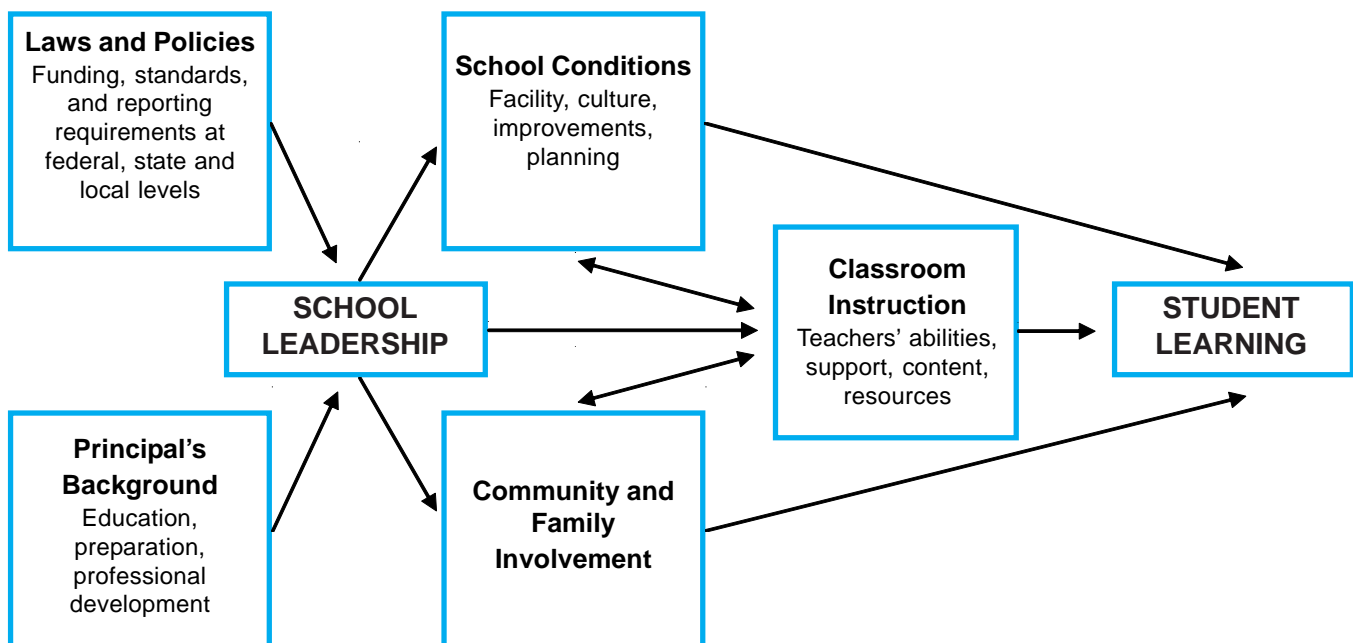
In today’s world of standards-based reform and improvement, expectations for school leaders run well beyond managing budgets and making sure the buses run on time.

Changing Role of the Middle Level and High School Leader: Learning from the Past – Preparing for the Future, National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2007, p. 8.

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) – mandated that districts provide “free, appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment” for students with disabilities. NCLB now requires districts and states to provide evidence that students with disabilities, as well as other student subgroups, are making academic achievement gains. Principals, among others, are held accountable if the subgroups fail to make adequate progress each year.

Not only do principals need a whole new set of skills to effectively inform classroom instruction, but they must now serve “increasing socioeconomic, racial, ethnic, and linguistic diversity in the student population.”⁶ Recent U.S. Census data showed that Hispanic students, many of whom are English language learners, make up one quarter of all kindergarten students.⁷ In 2002, the No Child Left Behind Act included a new provision targeting this group in an

Exhibit 1: The Link between Leadership and Student Learning



Source: Adapted from *How Leadership Influences Student Learning*, Learning from Leadership Project, Commissioned by the Wallace Foundation, 2004, p. 18.

effort “to help ensure that children who are limited English proficient...meet the same challenging State academic content and student academic achievement standards as all children are expected to meet.”⁸ English language learners face unique challenges and principals must know how to best serve this growing population.

A growing percentage of the nation’s students take part in the National School Lunch Program (commonly referred to as the Free and Reduced Price Lunch program, or FRPL), an indicator of socioeconomic disadvantage. In 1997, roughly 15 million students (26.5 percent of the total student population) received a free or reduced price lunch. By 2007, that number had risen to 17.9 million children, or 30.9 percent of the total student population.^{9,10} Students from low income households are more likely to face challenges in school than those from average or high income households, and principals must be prepared to appropriately assist these students. The ongoing diversification – socioeconomically, racially, ethnically, and linguistically – of the nation’s student populations brings with it additional challenges for school leaders.

The accountability measures implemented under NCLB have in many instances helped to identify chronically underperforming schools. To ensure that student learning occurs in these schools, among these various student groups and across these various circumstances, today’s principals need a diverse set of skills.

The school leader’s job description has expanded to a point that he or she is expected to perform in the role of “chief learning officer,” with ultimate responsibility for the success or failure of the organization.

Changing Role of the Middle Level and High School Leader: Learning from the Past – Preparing for the Future, National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2007, p. 8.

Richard Colvin, education journalist and director of The Hechinger Institute on Education and the Media at Columbia University’s Teachers College, argues that in some instances they need to be “diagnosticians...because a school that is in crisis calls for a different set of actions and skills than does one that has made great strides.”¹¹ NCLB requires states and districts to target low-performing schools for assistance and intervention. Principals assigned to these schools must become “turnaround specialists” and must be able to provide the “transformational leadership” necessary to improve the school while laying the groundwork for sustained achievement.¹²

A Shortage of Qualified Principals

The Wallace Foundation commissioned three projects on the labor market for school leaders and found that “there is no statistical evidence of a nationwide shortage of *certified* candidates for the principalship” [emphasis added].¹³ However, the projects did find that there is “no question that some districts, and some individual schools, are having real problems attracting

Exhibit 2: Roles and Responsibilities for Principals – Past vs. Today

Past Principals’ Roles and Responsibilities	Today’s Principals’ Roles and Responsibilities
➤ Keep the school clean	➤ Keep the school clean
➤ Manage funds and distribute paychecks	➤ Manage funds and distribute paychecks
➤ File reports to district and state on time	➤ File reports to district and state on time
➤ Maintain order	➤ Maintain order
➤ Respond to inquiries	➤ Respond to inquiries
	➤ Improve student achievement
	➤ Impact classroom instruction
	➤ Ensure an increasingly diverse population is being served
	➤ Diagnose problems and develop solutions in low-performing schools
	➤ Know how to use data to drive reforms

Source: Adapted from Bradley S. Portin, Christopher R. Alejano, Michael S. Knapp, and Elizabeth Marzolf, *Redefining Roles, Responsibilities, and Authority of School Leaders*, Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy, University of Washington, Oct. 2006, p. 8, <http://depts.washington.edu/ctpmail/>; Frederick M. Hess and Andrew P. Kelly, *Learning to Lead? What Gets Taught in Principal Preparation Programs*, American Enterprise Institute, pp. 5-8.

enough *qualified* job seekers.”¹⁴ In fact, the schools and districts that presumably need the most qualified principals – the ones in “problem-plagued” districts – are having the hardest time attracting candidates.¹⁵

The Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) suggests a more comprehensive reason for the low supply of qualified principals: “The most common explanation is that the principal’s job has become impossible to perform, but the real problem is that recruitment, preparation and professional development programs for educators who want to become leaders are out of sync with scaled-up expectations.” SREB’s Leadership Initiative addresses the curious discrepancy between the “shortage of qualified school administrators” and the abundance of certified administrators.¹⁶ In 2005, the SREB received a grant from the U.S. Department of Education to work with Tennessee on redesigning the principal preparation process. The aim of the project is “to build capacity at the state level, in partnership with local agencies and universities, to prepare effective school leaders.”¹⁷

Some research suggests that insufficient compensation discourages potential candidates; principal salary ranges are often close to those of senior teaching staff.¹⁸ Others suggest the intensity of the job and the supplemental duties associated with it (e.g. attendance at sporting events, PTA meetings, and community meetings) as reasons behind the shortage.¹⁹

A Public Agenda report found that almost half of talented principals who leave the field do so because of politics and bureaucracy.²⁰ (See Exhibit 3.)

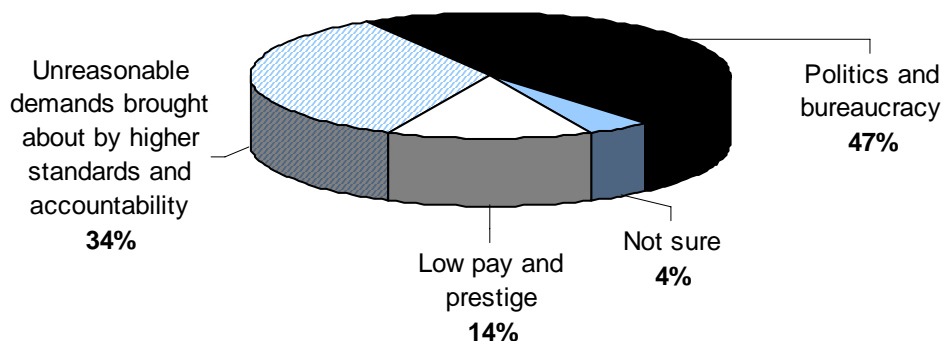
Teachers and counselors who sought the principalship in the past are not pursuing the position today. Instead, they consider the incredibly long hours, unreasonable workload, unfair accountability, and undue pressures from all angles and choose to avoid the once-admired seat of authority.

National Association of Secondary School Principals, *Changing Role of the Middle Level and High School Leader: Learning from the Past – Preparing for the Future*, 2007, p. 61, adapted from M. Pierce, “Portrait of the ‘Super Principal,’” *Harvard Education Letter*, 2000.

[See also the OREA publication [On the Horizon: State Initiative to Strengthen Tennessee Principals](#) for more information.]

Exhibit 3: Principals’ Reasons for Leaving

Talented principals who leave the field are most likely to leave because they are frustrated by:



Source: Steve Farkas, Jean Johnson, Ann Duffett and Tony Foleno, with Patrick Foley, “Trying to Stay Ahead of the Game: Superintendents and Principals Talk about School Leadership,” A Report from Public Agenda prepared for the Wallace-Reader’s Digest Funds, 2001, p. 8, <https://www.policyarchive.org/> (accessed Sept. 2, 2009).

Endnotes

- ¹ Linda Darling-Hammond, "Excellent Teachers Deserve Excellent Leaders," *Education Leadership: A Bridge to School Reform*, prepared for the Wallace Foundation's National Conference, Oct. 2007, p. 17, <http://www.wallacefoundation.org/> (accessed Aug. 12, 2009); Kenneth Leithwood, Karen Seashore Louis, Stephen Anderson and Kyla Wahlstrom, *How Leadership Influences Student Learning*, Learning from Leadership Project, Commissioned by the Wallace Foundation, 2004, p. 5, <http://www.wallacefoundation.org/> (accessed Aug. 12, 2009).
- ² This OEA issue brief considers leadership only at the school level. Equally important, however, is leadership at the district level – the superintendent. For an overview of district-level leadership, see "School District Leadership that Works: The Effect of Superintendent Leadership on Student Achievement," J. Timothy Waters and Robert J. Marzano, Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning, Sept. 2006, <http://www.mcrel.org/> (accessed Aug. 5, 2009).
- ³ Leithwood, et al., *How Leadership Influences Student Learning*, pp. 8-9, 24.
- ⁴ Darling-Hammond, "Excellent Teachers Deserve Excellent Leaders," p. 17.
- ⁵ Bradley S. Portin, Christopher R. Alejano, Michael S. Knapp, and Elizabeth Marzolf, *Redefining Roles, Responsibilities, and Authority of School Leaders*, Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy, University of Washington, Oct. 2006, p. 2, <http://depts.washington.edu/ctpmail/> (accessed Aug. 6, 2009)
- ⁶ Ibid, p. 17.
- ⁷ U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Study 2007, Table 3, "Nursery and Primary School Enrollment of People 3 to 6 Years Old, by Control of School, Attendance Status, Age, Race, Hispanic Origin, Mother's Labor Force Status and Education, and Family Income: October 2007," <http://www.census.gov/> (accessed Aug. 12, 2009)
- ⁸ NCLB Title III, Part A, Section 3102, <http://www.ed.gov/> (accessed Aug. 9, 2009).
- ⁹ U.S. Department of Agriculture, "National School Lunch Program: Participation and Lunches Served," (data as of April 2009), <http://www.fns.usda.gov/> (accessed Aug. 11, 2009).
- ¹⁰ U.S. Census, Current Population Survey, Historical Table A-1, "School Enrollment of the Population 3 Years Old and Over, by Level and Control of School, Race, and Hispanic Origin: October 1955 to 2007," <http://www.census.gov/> (accessed Aug. 4, 2009).
- ¹¹ Richard Lee Colvin, "Beyond Buzz: Leadership is Moving to the Heart of School Reform," *Education Leadership: A Bridge to School Reform*, prepared for the Wallace Foundation's National Conference, Oct. 2007, p. 10, <http://www.wallacefoundation.org/> (accessed Aug. 14, 2009).
- ¹² Darling-Hammond, "Excellent Teachers Deserve Excellent Leaders," p. 19.
- ¹³ The Wallace Foundation, *Beyond the Pipeline: Getting The Principals We Need, Where They Are Needed Most*, 2003, p. 4, <http://www.wallacefoundation.org/> (accessed Sept. 2, 2009).
- ¹⁴ Ibid, p. 5, emphasis added.
- ¹⁵ Ibid.
- ¹⁶ Southern Regional Education Board, *SREB Leadership Initiative: Creating Effective Principals Who Can Improve the Region's Schools and Influence Student Achievement*, p. 1, <http://www.sreb.org/> (accessed Sept. 2, 2009).
- ¹⁷ Tennessee State Board of Education, "Tennessee School Leadership Redesign Commission," <http://www.tennessee.gov/sbe> (accessed February 4, 2009).
- ¹⁸ Kathryn Whitaker, "Where Are the Principal Candidates? Perceptions of Superintendents," *NASSP Bulletin*, 85, (625), p. 6, <http://www.ed.uiuc.edu/> (accessed Sept. 2, 2009)
- ¹⁹ Aimee Howley and Edwina Pendarvis, "Recruiting and Retaining Rural School Administrators," ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools, Dec. 2002, p. 1, <http://www.ericdigests.org/> (accessed Sept. 2, 2009).
- ²⁰ Steve Farkas, Jean Johnson, Ann Duffett and Tony Foleno, with Patrick Foley, *Trying to Stay Ahead of the Game: Superintendents and Principals Talk about School Leadership*, a report from Public Agenda prepared for the Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund, 2001, p. 8, <https://www.policyarchive.org/> (accessed Sept. 2, 2009).

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