How Principals Affect Students and Schools
A Systematic Synthesis of Two Decades of Research

Jason A. Grissom
VANDERBILT UNIVERSITY

Anna J. Egalite
NORTH CAROLINA STATE UNIVERSITY

Constance A. Lindsay
UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT CHAPEL HILL

February 2021
The Wallace Foundation is a philanthropy working nationally to answer important questions that, if solved, could help strengthen practices and policies within a field.

VANDERBILT
PEABODY COLLEGE

Our mission is to enhance the human condition, with a particular focus on children's learning and development, through the preparation of teachers and leaders; through cycles of research, implementation, and refinement; through service to families, schools, and communities; and through external engagement with professionals, leaders, and policymakers.

NC STATE
UNIVERSITY

The College of Education is a voice of innovation for learning across the lifespan. We prepare professionals who educate and lead. Our inquiry and practice reflect integrity, a commitment to social justice and the value of diversity in a global community.

THE UNIVERSITY
of NORTH CAROLINA
at CHAPEL HILL

The School of Education at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill is committed to realizing the transformative power of education, and — in turn — is redefining what it means to educate. Education has the power to break down barriers, lift up individuals, and empower communities to rise and thrive. To that end, we inspire educators to lead; to think creatively, act with passion, and strive toward equity for all.

URBAN INSTITUTE

The nonprofit Urban Institute is a leading research organization dedicated to developing evidence-based insights that improve people's lives and strengthen communities. For 50 years, Urban has been the trusted source for rigorous analysis of complex social and economic issues; strategic advice to policymakers, philanthropists, and practitioners; and new, promising ideas that expand opportunities for all. Our work inspires effective decisions that advance fairness and enhance the well-being of people and places.
Suggested Citation

7. Principals’ Skills and Behaviors That Support Learning

The second part of our synthesis of the best-available studies connecting principals to student achievement and other outcomes focuses on what principals know and do. In this chapter, we use this synthesis to introduce a framework for summarizing the evidence on principal expertise and skills and how they inform principal behaviors that link to outcomes. We identify four categories of principal behaviors that research suggests are most central to effective leadership. We conclude with a discussion of leadership for equity.

Conceptualizing Principal Skills

Our synthesis of the literature identifies promising evidence of three broad categories of skills and expertise that leaders need to be successful: skills and expertise to support instruction, those to manage and develop people, and those related to organizational management. The domains overlap and interact to increase student achievement. This list is not exhaustive but attempts to characterize broad themes from the literature.

Instruction

The first set of skills and expertise to which our synthesis of relevant research points is those related to supporting and leading the school’s instructional program. Effective instructional leaders demonstrate expertise around high-quality instruction that enables them to observe and evaluate teachers and classrooms in a constructive manner (City et al. 2009; Johnson, Uline, and Perez 2011), offering responsive and actionable feedback to improve teaching and learning. Principals must be able to distinguish high- from low-quality pedagogical practices, producing meaningful variation in teachers’ observation ratings (Grissom and Loeb 2017). Instructional leaders also must possess the skills that enable them to provide effective, structured feedback to teachers, with the goal of motivating them to refine their practices. Finally, to ensure teachers are participating in high-quality professional development opportunities, principals need to be able to recognize the characteristics of high-impact professional development offerings, what Fink and Markholt (2011, 149) refer to as “orchestrating professional learning.”
BOX 3
A Diverse Research Base

We again underscore that this synthesis draws on more than 200 studies spanning quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methodologies. Drawing on a diverse research base is essential for this portion of our report because of the challenges inherent in linking different facets of a complex role like principal leadership to school outcomes. Quantitative studies can gather data on a large scale, establishing generalizability of findings and offering opportunities to compare leadership approaches and outcomes across diverse contexts. Large-scale data can also facilitate quasi-experimental designs that can establish causal relationships between facets of school leadership and outcomes. Yet quantitative studies often necessarily sacrifice depth for breadth, relying on coarse measures and statistical summaries of constructs that can obscure nuance and limit opportunities to illuminate mechanisms. Qualitative studies, in contrast, specialize in depth and nuance, providing a rich look at leaders’ and schools’ individual experiences. Careful examination of these experiences can provide important insights about mechanisms, build theory, and provide direction for new avenues of inquiry. The trade-offs, typically, are small numbers of cases that make systematic comparison more difficult and uncertainty about whether conclusions generalize to different circumstances. An ideal principal leadership research base would build systematically on both categories of studies, using the complementary strengths of the two broad modes of inquiry to assemble a cohesive knowledge base.

Our assessment from synthesizing this diverse research base is that we, as a field, have not constructed a cohesive knowledge base on the drivers of principals’ contributions. The problem is not an overreliance on either quantitative or qualitative approaches, as both are well represented in our synthesis. Instead, as we worked to make meaning out of studies connecting facets of leadership to school outcomes, we observed dizzying variation in what factors leadership studies considered, how those factors were operationalized, and the approaches the studies employed for analyses. Even among studies of the same topic, we seldom encountered two studies using the same measurement tools, or studies that replicated an earlier result. The challenges we faced in synthesizing this diverse—even disparate—array of studies parallels a challenge for the field more broadly. We return to this idea in chapter 8.

We also faced a body of studies that varied substantially in how well they could credibly demonstrate causal links between leadership and outcomes. Quantitative studies often failed to account for factors that could confound the conclusion that a principal’s skills or behaviors drove (rather than merely was correlated with) a particular outcome. Many qualitative studies in our synthesis in fact were not primarily about principals’ impacts on outcomes but discussed leadership as one aspect of inquiry into a related topic, so the specific leadership evidence they presented may have been thin. Even when leaders’ impacts were the primary focus, claims about those impacts may not have been reinforced by multiple-case comparisons or other approaches that could reinforce their robustness. In synthesizing these studies, we weighed some studies more heavily than others given the strength of the research and resulting conclusions.\(^\text{18}\)
People

The second set of skills describes how principals develop and interact with people in and around their school: teachers, support staff, parents, and the broader community. This set of human development or relationship skills is broad. We focus on three components highlighted in the literature: caring, communication, and building trust. The three are interrelated.

Researchers note that principals’ ability to both develop and demonstrate a sense of caring for the teachers in the building can be a factor in positive relationship development. Brown and Wynn (2007) find that principals who retain teachers at higher rates offer proactive support to new teachers and are committed to the success of both novice and veteran teachers. Similarly, Jacobson and coauthors (2007) document the importance of principals in creating and maintaining safe and nurturing environments for everyone in the school. Caring principal leadership is associated with increased student support and teachers’ sense of collective responsibility (Louis, Murphy, and Smylie 2016).

The ability to communicate effectively is another skill principals need to develop interpersonal relationships and positively influence school outcomes. In an investigation of principals in challenging schools, Jacobson and coauthors (2005) focus on communication as an essential element of developing people. In a case study of four principals, Hollingworth and colleagues (2018) find that successful principals communicate purposefully, implementing strategies like “open door” policies, sending weekly emails with information staff need and recognition of staff contributions, and being willing to have challenging conversations with staff when necessary. Effective communication can build shared expectations, which predicts teacher satisfaction, cohesion, and commitment to the school (Price 2012). Effective communication with families or caregivers is also necessary to increase parental involvement, which is associated with higher levels of student academic achievement (Gordon and Louis 2009).

Cultivating trust is another critical skill for principals. In a study of an urban district, collective trust—the degree of trust among principals, teachers, and students—was positively associated with the school’s academic performance (Adams 2013). In a study of elementary school teachers in an urban district, Moe and coauthors (2005) find that teachers who felt empowered at work had higher levels of trust with their principals; similarly, principals in Hollingworth and colleagues’ (2018) study of high-quality leaders gained teacher trust via provision of autonomy. Price (2015) shows the close interconnection between trust and how teachers perceive their relationship with their principal and shows how these factors inform teachers’ attitudes toward their students. When teachers view their principal as a competent, reliable leader, they trust the principal (Handford and Leithwood 2013). In a study looking at schools implementing reforms, Tschannen-Moran (2001) find that trust has to
precede any collaborative efforts. Khalifa (2012) demonstrates that school leaders can build trust between the school and the wider community by serving as highly visible community leaders.

The Organization

The final set of skills we identify is a general class of management skills that transcend schools. That is, they would be relevant to leading other kinds of organizations, such as private businesses or nonprofits.

Principals need skills to manage a complex organization. Studies of effective schools from the 1970s and 1980s often highlighted the importance of more traditional management skills for creating a high-functioning learning environment. More recent studies echo this conclusion. In an analysis of survey and administrative data from Miami, Grissom and Loeb (2011) show that principals’ ratings of their organizational management skills (examples include developing a safe school environment, managing budgets and resources, and hiring personnel) predict higher student achievement growth, teacher satisfaction, and parent ratings of the school. Principals in Chicago showed a similar pattern, with higher ratings of organizational management skills correlated with higher achievement (Sebastian et al. 2018). In a study measuring organizational management practices in a cross-national sample, Bloom and coauthors (2015) found that US schools had higher performance when leaders reported broader engagement with organizational management, as measured by a management index. School outcomes also are higher when principals spend more time on management (Horng, Klasik, and Loeb 2010).

A challenge for these studies is that they often cannot differentiate areas of organizational management skills; principals who are rated highly on personnel management, for example, are the same ones rated highly on school safety and maintaining facilities (Grissom and Loeb 2011), and perhaps even in other domains, such as instructional leadership (Sebastian et al. 2018). Still, the literature points to specific organizational management skills that may be especially important. One is data use skills (Anderson, Leithwood, and Strauss 2010), which principals can make use of across domains of decisionmaking. Another is the ability to set goals and think strategically about how to harness available resources to meet those goals (Finnigan 2012; Lorton et al. 2013).
Domains of Leadership Behaviors and Practices Linked to School Outcomes

Skills and expertise alone are not sufficient to affect schools, as evidenced by the fact that scores on licensure examinations, which measure the skills and knowledge school leadership is purported to require, are poor predictors of later performance outcomes, including student achievement (Bastian and Henry 2015; Grissom, Mitani, and Blissett 2017).

Our synthesis of the literature identifies four interrelated domains of behaviors and practices that integrate instruction, people, and organizational skills to produce school outcomes. We label these:

1. Engaging in instructionally focused interactions with teachers,
2. Building a productive climate,
3. Facilitating collaboration and professional learning communities, and
4. Managing personnel and resources strategically.

These behavioral domains, described below, are not exhaustive. Our synthesis of research on principal practices that predict more positive student and school outcomes finds, however, that these practices are ones most clearly supported by the weight of existing evidence.

Successfully engaging in these four leadership behaviors requires expertise in all three of the underlying skills—people, instruction, and the organization—to see improvements in school and student outcomes (figure 7.1). Some leaders have more proficiency in one skill area or another and may need to consciously build proficiency in other areas to engage in more effective practices that will benefit the school and students. For example, some principals are master teachers themselves and have a deep well of knowledge to draw on in interacting with their teachers around instruction but may have less well developed organizational skills that can help them prioritize and focus their time coaching struggling teachers. To be effective, a principal needs to build capacity across all three skill areas that they can integrate to advance the leadership behaviors and practices we describe. Finally, it is important to note that the various skills and leadership behaviors described here are affected and shaped by the school, district, and policy context in which principals finds themselves operating.
Engaging in Instructionally Focused Interactions with Teachers

*Instructionally focused interactions with teachers* refers to forms of engagement with teachers around instruction and instructional practice.

Traditionally, the field has referred to principals’ engagement with teaching and learning under the broad heading of “instructional leadership.” This term, however, does not have a clear, agreed-upon definition and lacks specificity (Neumerski 2013; Rigby 2014). Our synthesis emphasizes that not all instruction-related activities are productive ones; high-leverage instructional activities appear to be those that support and improve teachers’ classroom instruction (May and Supovitz 2011). We group these activities into three interrelated buckets: teacher observation and evaluation, feedback and coaching, and the establishment of a data-driven instructional program.