

A Practical Look at School Leadership

Summary

New research from the Center on Reinventing Public Education argues that a “one-size-fits-all” posture toward leadership training or methods and styles of school leadership serves neither principals nor schools well. In a new report, *Making Sense of Leading Schools: A Study of the School Principalship*, researchers argue that different schools have different leadership needs, and that policy and practice need to support a variety of leadership models.

Too often, school districts and colleges of education treat principals as interchangeable cogs in the education machine. Every principal gets the same training; every principal attends the same workshops. And when districts move a “hero” principal from one hard case to another, they treat leadership success as interchangeable too, assuming that the leader who thrived in one school will automatically be successful in another. In either case, school leadership is treated as a uniform proposition.

Given that not every school needs the same kind of leadership, colleges of education and districts can’t rely on a single path of preparation and development for leaders, and districts that treat leaders as interchangeable are likely to pay a price in ineffective schooling. Instead, the researchers conclude:

- districts need to assign principals to schools that can make best use of their particular leadership skills and style;
- principals need to be given the authority they need to meet their responsibilities;
- states and districts need to widen the pool of candidates for school leadership to include leaders from other organizations; and
- schools of education need to redesign their curricula to better suit the variety of realities in the workplace.

“We set out to understand school leadership by talking to actual school leaders about their work,” says Dr. Bradley Portin, the study’s lead investigator. “What we found shows it’s unrealistic to expect principals to be able to know and do everything it takes to run a school - the job is

Making Sense of Leading Schools

The study’s analysis of 150 interviews in 21 schools – including public, private, elementary and secondary, traditional and charter schools – points to six key findings about what principals say it takes to run a school. These findings have important implications for both policymakers and colleges of education.

The core of the principal’s job is diagnosis: accurately determining his or her school’s particular needs and, given the resources and talents available, deciding how to meet them. Whether principals are dealing with a shortage of capable teachers, staff turnover or unpredictable funding, they face many challenges. Understanding what a school needs, and then delivering it, lies at the heart of leadership.

Regardless of school type—elementary or secondary or public or private— principals point to leadership needs in seven critical areas: instructional, cultural, managerial, human resources, strategic, external development, and micro-political.

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Leadership Area	Leadership Activities
Instructional	Assuring quality of instruction, modeling teaching practice, supervising curriculum, and assuring quality of teaching resources.
Cultural	Guiding the symbolic resources of the school (e.g. its traditions, climate, and history).
Managerial	Overseeing the operations of the school (e.g. its budget, schedule, facilities, safety and security, and transportation).
Human Resource	Recruiting, hiring, firing, inducting, and mentoring teachers and administrators; developing leadership capacity and professional development opportunities.
Strategic	Promoting vision, mission, and goals -- and developing a means to reach them.
External Development	Representing the school in the community, developing capital, public relations, recruiting students, buffering and mediating external interests, and advocating for the school's interests.
Micropolitical	Buffering and mediating internal interests, while maximizing resources (financial and human).

Principals must ensure that leadership happens in all seven of these critical areas, but they don't have to provide it by themselves. Principals can act as a one-man-band, taking responsibility for everything. They can, like a leader of a jazz combo, share leadership with others in the school. Or they can act as orchestra conductors, providing distinct roles for other leaders.

School autonomy—over budgets, staffing, and curricula—affects how principals handle key leadership functions. In schools with greater autonomy, principals seem more likely to spread leadership around the school, involving

teachers and others in leadership tasks. In schools with less freedom of action, principals become mere middle managers. They can easily feel responsible for everything while lacking the authority to decide anything.

Most principals think they learned the skills they need “on the job.” Principals felt short-changed by traditional training programs that emphasized instructional and managerial leadership and overlooked cultural, strategic, and external development leadership skills. Regardless of training, most principals learned on the job. According to one principal, *“There was nothing in my training that prepared me for this job.”*

Policy Implications

One-size-fits-all generalizations about what principals “need to know and be able to do” — no matter how carefully crafted — ultimately misrepresent the situation in many schools. Making sense of what goes on in schools and helping principals do their jobs better requires more than an inventory of things for the ideal principal to oversee. Given the study's findings about the challenges principals face, how they approach their task, and the things that get in their way or help them lead, the authors point to four policy imperatives to support school leaders:

- District leaders should ensure that principals have the authority they need - over budgets, staffing, and curricula - to meet the responsibilities demanded of them.
- States and districts should recognize that former teachers as well as experienced leaders of other organizations might be equally able to lead schools.
- Colleges of education should include complex tasks like diagnosis and planning in principal preparation; once principals start working, they need on-going professional development that is tailored to their school's unique circumstances.
- Districts should place principals in jobs where they match the current needs of the school.

With the sponsorship of The Wallace Foundation's Education Leadership Initiative, *“Making Sense of Leading Schools: A Study of the School Principalship”* was authored by Bradley Portin with Michael DeArmond, Lauren Gundlach and Paul Schneider. The findings and recommendations are solely those of its authors. To download the report please visit www.crpe.org. To learn more about The Wallace Foundation and their work in this and other fields, please visit www.wallacefoundation.org.