

Autonomy and Empowerment – Research Review

Research findings and recommendations regarding principal autonomy and empowerment

Despite the well-established impact of school leaders on student achievement, there is limited research on how specific policies impact principal quality and availability. Much of the available research mirrors general findings on improving overall educator quality and/or is limited to survey and descriptive research from a handful of reputable organizations.

Principals' effectiveness is impacted by their level of authority

- Schools improve when principals have autonomy over decision making ([Ikemoto, Taliaferro, Fenton, and Davis, 2014](#)).
 - According to a 2009 Wallace Foundation study of 17 school districts, decision-making authority had positive correlation with time spent on activities associated with improving instructional practices, including promoting professional development, motivating staff, building a common school vision, and developing leadership capacity.
- Schools with autonomy to determine their needs, goals, and programs do the best job of identifying approaches to change ([Seashore Louis, Leithwood, Walhstrom, and Anderson, 2010](#)).

Principals do not feel they have sufficient authority

- A large gap exists between expectations for principals and the authority they believe they have to manage their schools ([MetLife, 2013](#)):
 - 89 percent of principals agree that “a principal should be held accountable for everything that happens to the children in a school.”
 - 43 percent of principals say they “have a great deal of control when it comes to removing teachers.”
 - 42 percent of principals say they “have a great deal of control over curriculum and instruction.”
 - 22 percent of principals say they “have a great deal of control in making decisions about finances.”
- Though many barriers cited by principals are based on perception, several real barriers exist at the state level, particularly related to funding flexibility and personnel authority ([Miller and Lee, 2014](#)).

Lack of funding flexibility is a significant barrier to principal autonomy

- A number of barriers exist that limit flexibility of principals when deciding how funding should be used ([Miller and Lee, 2014](#)):
 - School funding formulas that utilize averaged salary allocations for personnel costs (district issue).
 - Restrictions on use of grant funding that require schools to hire staff with certain qualifications or purchase specific materials.
 - Class-size requirements that hamper ability to allocate resources to fit needs of students and school programs.
 - Central office spending on behalf of schools (mostly a district problem, but state could require a minimum percentage of funding that is spent at the school level).
 - Timing and complexity of district budget process (district issue).

- Changing *how schools are funded* and *how schools are held accountable* would improve funding flexibility. States could:
 - Hold schools accountable for measures of student performance instead of schooling inputs like seat-time requirements and mandated curricula ([Miller and Lee, 2014](#)).
 - Fund students instead of programs, staff positions, or school days, and judge progress based on the proportion of funding over which the principal has discretion at the school level ([Miller and Lee, 2014](#)).
 - Move away from strict adherence to funding formulas and school-level staffing mandates toward explicitly giving districts and school leaders flexibility to use innovative staffing models and better align the funding with school’s strategic priorities ([New Leaders, 2014](#)).

State procurement rules hamper school-level decision making and stifle innovation

- District central offices (which control most school procurement) are notoriously risk-averse. When coupled with outdated rules and technology, district procurement systems can hinder school leaders seeking to manage their schools efficiently and creatively ([Maas and Lake, 2015](#)).
- While much of the problem can be attributed to district policy and practice, the underlying causes often begin at the state level. Burdensome state bidding requirements and funding constraints inhibit district flexibility to reallocate funds to take advantage of new opportunities ([Maas and Lake, 2015](#)).

Principals do not have authority to build and manage effective teams

- Authority to manage staff (the “ability to hire, promote, and dismiss”) is “the most important, yet most commonly lacking condition for principal effectiveness” ([Ikemoto, Taliaferro, Fenton, and Davis, 2014](#)).
- Lack of personnel authority is not just a perception among principals—about half of the personnel barriers they cited were real. Barriers include ([Miller and Lee, 2014](#)):
 - Collective bargaining agreements (CBA) that prohibit use of performance/incentive pay, require forced placement, use seniority as driver of decision making, and establish overly burdensome dismissal processes (CBAs themselves are a district issue, but states often stipulate which policies are required with respect to personnel).
 - Required use of central hiring pools (district issue).
- New Leaders recommends that states eliminate state-level regulatory/policy barriers that constrain principals in hiring and promoting the best teachers, as well as removing ineffective teachers ([New Leaders, 2015](#)).
- States can also support principals who pursue distributed leadership models by eliminating policy barriers and developing model collective bargaining language that enables teachers to observe, evaluate, and provide feedback for other teachers ([New Leaders, 2014](#)).