

Principal Evaluation – Research Review

Despite the well-established impact of school leaders on student achievement, there is limited research on how specific policies impact principal quality and availability. Generally, efforts to strengthen the evaluation of school leaders are informed by what we know about what effective principals do:

- Highly effective principals positively impact student achievement.
 - Highly effective principals raise student achievement by an equivalent of between two and seven months of additional learning each school year compared to the average principal. Ineffective principals lower achievement by the same amount ([Branch, Hanushek, and Rivkin, 2013](#)).
 - Leadership is second only to classroom instruction in terms of in-school factors that influence student achievement ([Seashore Louis, Leithwood, Walhstrom, and Anderson, 2010](#)).
 - Impact of a strong leader is more significant in more challenging schools. There is no documented evidence of a troubled school being turned around without intervention by a powerful leader ([Seashore Louis, Leithwood, Walhstrom, and Anderson, 2010](#)).
 - Effective principals have a positive impact on graduation levels and a substantially larger impact than ineffective leaders on student achievement in reading. The longer an effective principal remains at a school, the greater these effects become ([Coelli and Green, 2012](#)).
- Effective principals use their time as instructional leaders strategically.
 - Contrary to popular theory, not all practices under the mantle of “instructional leadership” matter. Principal time spent on coaching, evaluation, and developing the school’s academic program is associated with higher math achievement gains ([Grissom, Loeb, and Master, 2013](#)).
 - Conversely, time spent on informal classroom walkthroughs is negatively associated with student growth, particularly in high schools ([Grissom, Loeb, and Master, 2013](#)).
- Effective principals manage staff strategically.
 - Good principals are likely to make more personnel changes in grade levels where students are underperforming, supporting the belief that improvement in teacher effectiveness is itself an important lever for raising the quality of education ([Branch, Hanushek, and Rivkin, 2013](#)).
 - Less effective teachers are more likely to leave schools run by highly effective principals ([Branch, Hanushek, and Rivkin, 2013](#)).
- Effective principals set high standards and create a culture that facilitates high-quality teaching and learning.
 - Among many factors studied, “facilitating a college-going culture and a safe, orderly climate” had the largest association with both better classroom instruction and higher schoolwide student achievement ([Sebastian and Allensworth, 2013](#)).
 - Schools led by principals with stronger skills in organizational management, including personnel and budgeting, demonstrate greater student achievement gains ([Grissom and Loeb, 2011](#)).

How should principals be evaluated?

Expectations for school leaders should be aligned with the practices of effective school leaders.

- Historically, leadership evaluations have rarely aligned to standards or included outcomes-based measures. Instead, typical evaluation tools focused on lists of tasks and responsibilities and characteristics of the principal ([Porter et al., 2008](#)).
- When selecting a tool, administrators should pay particular attention to the alignment between the role of the principal being evaluated and the model of leadership assumed by the evaluation instrument ([Goff, Salisbury, and Blitz, 2015](#)).

Many states will wrestle with whether to utilize a value-added student growth measure as part of the school leader evaluation.

- Measuring principals using student growth data presents a number of interesting challenges, such as how to ensure the measure captures effects under the principal's control, reliability issues in smaller districts with limited sample size, and lagging effects of certain behaviors—for example, hiring teachers is a process over time ([Grissom, Kalogrides, and Loeb, March 2015](#)).
- Different principal evaluation measures have different trade-offs compared to results from staff/parent/student climate surveys, school letter grades, district evaluations, and assistant principal evaluations ([Grissom, Kalogrides, and Loeb, March 2015](#)):
 - The *simple* approach is measuring schoolwide student growth during a principal's tenure at a school. It shows the strongest correlation to non-test measures, but likely overestimates the effects of a particular principal (especially when only using one year of data).
 - Two alternative approaches—*relative*, which compares the school's growth under the current principal with the school's growth in prior years, and *improvement*, which captures the improvement in school effectiveness over the course of a principal's tenure—are both based on stronger assumptions regarding the data, but they have stringent data requirements that make calculations for most principals unavailable.
 - Despite their weaknesses as independent measures, value-added measures may be useful in driving improvement of principal practice because the focus on student growth can be used as a metric that informs professional development.

The Vanderbilt Assessment of Leadership in Education tool.

- Using research regarding principal behaviors related to increases in student achievement, Vanderbilt University created a school leader evaluation instrument (VAL-ED) that incorporates a “learning-centered” design. Its premise is that a principal's work should be centered on improving learning and that the organization and all of the processes are in service of supporting teaching and learning ([Porter et al., 2008](#)).
- Elements of the VAL-ED instrument can be instructive to states as they determine a framework for evaluation policy ([Porter et al., 2008](#)). Accordingly, such a framework would include:
 - Alignment with national leadership standards.
 - Utilization of survey feedback from teachers, principals, and supervisors and requires respondents to identify supporting evidence.
 - Purposeful focus on behaviors and outcomes, rather than knowledge, dispositions, or personal characteristics.
 - Assessment of principal performance across six key areas: high standards for student learning, rigorous curriculum, quality instruction, culture of learning, community connections, and performance accountability.

- The VAL-ED tool is better suited for principals charged with leading instructional improvement in an individual capacity than principals leading through a distributed leadership model ([Goff, Salisbury, and Blitz, 2015](#); [Porter et al., 2010](#)).
- When comparing VAL-ED scores to superintendents' groupings of the top and bottom 20 percent of principals in their district, the VAL-ED scores matched the superintendent groupings 70 percent of the time ([Minor et al., 2014](#)).

Impacting Student Achievement.

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