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PERSPECTIVE

THE SCHOOL PRINCIPAL AS LEADER:

GUIDING SCHOOLS TO BETTER

TEACHING AND LEARNING

The Wallace Foundation

Supporting ideas.
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THE PRINCIPAL AS LEADER: AN OVERVIEW

Education research shows that most school variables, considered separately, have at most small effects on learning. The real payoff comes when individual variables combine to reach critical mass. Creating the conditions under which that can occur is the job of the principal.

For more than a decade, The Wallace Foundation has supported efforts to improve leadership in public schools. In addition to funding projects in 24 states and numerous school districts within them, Wallace has issued more than 70 research reports and other publications covering school leadership, on topics ranging from how principals are trained to how they are evaluated on the job. Through all this work, we have learned a great deal about the nature of the school principal's role, what makes for an effective principal and how to tie principal effectiveness to improved student achievement.

This Wallace Perspective is a culling of our lessons to describe what it is that effective principals do. In short, we believe they perform five key functions well:

- Shaping a vision of academic success for all students.

- Creating a climate hospitable to education.

- Cultivating leadership in others.

- Improving instruction.

- Managing people, data and processes to foster
  school improvement.

This Wallace Perspective is the first of a series looking at school leadership and how it is best developed and supported. In subsequent publications, we will look at the role of school districts, states and principal training programs in building good school leadership.

INTRODUCTION

Ten years ago, school leadership was noticeably absent from most major school reform agendas, and even the people who saw leadership as important to turning around failing schools expressed uncertainty about how to proceed.

What a difference a decade makes.

Today, improving school leadership ranks high on the list of priorities for school reform. In a detailed 2010 survey, school and district administrators, policymakers and others declared principal leadership as among the most pressing matters on a list of issues in public school education. Teacher quality stood above everything else, but principal leadership came next, outstripping subjects including dropout rates, STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) education, student testing, and preparation for college and careers.[1]

Meanwhile, education experts, through the updated (2008) Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium standards, have defined key aspects of leadership to guide state policy on everything from licensing to on-the-job training of principals. New tools are available for measuring principal performance in meaningful ways. And federal efforts such as Race to the Top are emphasizing the importance of effective principals in boosting teaching and learning. Paying attention to the principal's role has become all the more essential as the U.S. Department of Education and state education agencies embark on transforming the nation's 5,000 most troubled schools, a task that depends on the skills and abilities of thousands of current and future school leaders.

A particularly noteworthy finding is the empirical link between school leadership and improved student achievement.

Since 2000, The Wallace Foundation has supported numerous research studies on school leadership and published more than 70 reports on the subject. It has also funded projects in some 24 states and numerous districts within them. Through that work, we now understand the complexities of school leadership in new and more meaningful ways.

A particularly noteworthy finding, reinforced in a major study by researchers at the University of Minnesota and University of Toronto, is the empirical link between school leadership and improved student achievement.[2] Drawing on both detailed case studies and large-scale quantitative analysis, the research shows that most school variables, considered separately, have at most small effects on learning. The real payoff comes when individual variables combine to reach critical mass. Creating the conditions under which that can occur is the job of the principal. Indeed, leadership is second only to classroom instruction among school-related factors

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[1] Linda Simkin, Ivan Charner and Lesley Suss, *Emerging Education Issues: Findings From The Wallace Foundation Survey,*
    prepared for The Wallace Foundation by the Academy for Educational Development, unpublished, 2010, 9-10.
[2] "In developing a starting point for this six-year study, we claimed, based on a preliminary review of research, that leadership
    is second only to classroom instruction as an influence on student learning, After six additional years of research, we are even more
    confident about this claim." Karen Seashore Louis, Kenneth Leithwood, Kyla L. Wahlstrom, Stephen E. Anderson, *Learning from
    Leadership: Investigating the Links to Improved Student Learning: Final Report of Research to The Wallace Foundation*, University
    of Minnesota and University of Toronto, 2010, 9.

that affect student learning in school. "Why is leadership crucial?" the Minnesota and Toronto researchers ask. "One explanation is that leaders have the potential to unleash latent capacities in organizations."[3]

The principal remains the central source of leadership influence.

A University of Washington study employed a musical metaphor to describe three different leadership approaches by principals.[4] School leaders determined to do it all themselves were "one-man bands;" those inclined to delegate responsibilities to others operated like the leader of a "jazz combo;" and those who believed broadly in sharing leadership throughout the school could be thought of as "orchestral leaders," skilled in helping large teams produce a coherent sound, while encouraging soloists to shine. The point is that although in any school a range of leadership patterns exists – among principals, assistant principals, formal and informal teacher leaders, and parents – the principal remains the central source of leadership influence.

THE SCHOOL PRINCIPAL AS LEADER

Traditionally, the principal resembled the middle manager suggested in William Whyte's 1950's classic *The Organization Man* – an overseer of buses, boilers and books. Today, in a rapidly changing era of standards-based reform and accountability, a different conception has emerged – one closer to the model suggested by Jim Collins' 2001 *Good to Great*, which draws lessons from contemporary corporate life to suggest leadership that focuses with great clarity on what is essential, what needs to be done and how to get it done.

This shift brings with it dramatic changes in what public education needs from principals. They can no longer function simply as building managers, tasked with adhering to district rules, carrying out regulations and avoiding mistakes. They have to be (or become) leaders of learning who can develop a team delivering effective instruction.

Wallace's work since 2000 suggests that this entails five key responsibilities:

- *Shaping a vision of academic success for all students*, **one based on high standards.**

- *Creating a climate hospitable to education* **in order that safety, a cooperative spirit and other foundations of fruitful interaction prevail.**

- *Cultivating leadership in others* **so that teachers and other adults assume their part in realizing the school vision.**

- *Improving instruction* **to enable teachers to teach at their best and students to learn at their utmost.**

- *Managing people, data and processes* **to foster school improvement.**

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[3] Seashore Louis, Leithwood et al., 9.
[4] Bradley Portin, Paul Schneider, Michael DeArmond and Lauren Gundlach. *Making Sense of Leading Schools: A Study of the School Principalship,* University of Washington, 2003, 25-26.

Each of these five tasks needs to interact with the other four for any part to succeed. It's hard to carry out a vision of student success, for example, if the school climate is characterized by student disengagement, or teachers don't know what instructional methods work best for their students, or test data are clumsily analyzed. When all five tasks are well carried out, however, leadership is at work.

FIVE KEY RESPONSIBILITIES

Shaping a vision of academic success for all students

Although they say it in different ways, researchers who have examined education leadership agree that effective principals are responsible for establishing a schoolwide vision of commitment to high standards and the success of all students.

Newcomers to the education discussion might find this puzzling: Hasn't concern with the academic achievement of every student always topped principals' agendas? The short answer is, no. For years public school principals were seen as school managers,[5] and as recently as two decades ago, high standards were thought to be the province of the college bound. "Success" could be defined as entry-level manufacturing work for students who had followed a "general track," and low-skilled employment for dropouts. Only in the last few decades has the emphasis shifted to academic expectations for all.

"Having high expectations for all is one key to closing the achievement gap between advantaged and less advantaged students."

This change comes in part as a response to twin realizations: Career success in a global economy depends on a strong education; for all segments of U.S. society to be able to compete fairly, the yawning gap in academic achievement between disadvantaged and advantaged students needs to narrow. In a school, that begins with a principal's spelling out "<u>high</u> standards and <u>rigorous</u> learning goals," Vanderbilt University researchers assert with underlined emphasis. Specifically, they say, "The research literature over the last quarter century has consistently supported the notion that having high expectations for all, including clear and public standards, is one key to closing the achievement gap between advantaged and less advantaged students and for raising the overall achievement of all students." [6]

An effective principal also makes sure that the notion of academic success for all gets picked up by the faculty and underpins what researchers at the University of Washington describe as a schoolwide learning improvement agenda that focuses on goals for student progress.[7] One

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[5] Seashore Louis, Leithwood et al., 78.
[6] Andrew C. Porter, Joseph Murphy, Ellen Goldring, Stephen N. Elliott, Morgan S. Polikoff and Henry May, *Vanderbilt Assessment of Leadership in Education: Technical Manual, Version 1.0,* Vanderbilt University, 2008, 13.
[7] Michael S. Knapp, Michael A. Copland, Meredith I. Honig, Margaret L. Plecki, and Bradley S. Portin, *Learning-focused Leadership and Leadership Support: Meaning and Practice in Urban Systems,* University of Washington, 2010 , 2.

middle school teacher described what adopting the vision meant for her. "My expectations have increased every year," she told the researchers. "I've learned that as long as you support them, there is really nothing [the students] can't do."[8]

So, developing a shared vision around standards, and success for all students is an essential element of school leadership. As the Cheshire cat pointed out to Alice, if you don't know where you're going, any road will lead you there.

Creating a climate hospitable to education

Effective principals ensure that their schools allow both adults and children to put learning at the center of their daily activities. Such "a healthy school environment," as Vanderbilt researchers call it, is characterized by basics like safety and orderliness, as well as less tangible qualities such as a "supportive, responsive" attitude toward the children and a sense by teachers that they are part of a community of professionals focused on good instruction.[9]

Is it a surprise, then, that principals at schools with high teacher ratings for "instructional climate" outrank other principals in developing an atmosphere of caring and trust? Or that their teachers are more likely than faculty members elsewhere to find the principals' motives and intentions are good?[10]

One principal described to University of Washington researchers a typical staff meeting years ago at an urban school where "morale never seemed to get out of the basement." Discussion centered on "field trips, war stories about troubled students, and other management issues" rather than matters like "using student work and data to fine-tune teaching." Almost inevitably, teacher pessimism was a significant barrier, with teachers regarding themselves as "hardworking martyrs in a hopeless cause."[11]

To change this kind of climate – and begin to combat teacher isolation, closed doors, negativism, defeatism and teacher resistance – the most effective principals focus on building a sense of school community, with the attendant characteristics. These include respect for every member of the school community; "an upbeat, welcoming, solution-oriented, no-blame, professional environment;" and efforts to involve staff and students in a variety of activities, many of them schoolwide.[12]

Cultivating leadership in others

A broad and longstanding consensus in leadership theory holds that leaders in all walks of life and all kinds of organizations, public and private, need to depend on others to accomplish the group's purpose and need to encourage the development of leadership across the organzation.[13]

[8] Bradley S. Portin, Michael S. Knapp, Scott Dareff, Sue Feldman, Felice A. Russell, Catherine Samuelson and Theresa Ling Yeh, *Leadership for Learning Improvement in Urban Schools,* University of Washington, 2009, 55.
[9] Ellen Goldring, Andrew C. Porter, Joseph Murphy, Stephen N. Elliott, Xiu Cravens, *Assessing Learning-Centered Leadership: Connections to Resarch, Professional Standards and Current Practices*, Vanderbilt University, 2007, 7-8.
[10] Seashore Louis, Leithwood et al., 81.
[11] Knapp et al., p. 1.
[12] Portin, Knapp et al., p. 59.

Schools are no different. Principals who get high marks from teachers for creating a strong climate for instruction in their schools also receive higher marks than other principals for spurring leadership in the faculty, according to the research from the University of Minnesota and University of Toronto.[14]

In fact if test scores are any indication, the more willing principals are to spread leadership around, the better for the students. One of the most striking findings of the universities of Minnesota and Toronto report is that effective leadership from *all* sources – principals, influential teachers, staff teams and others – is associated with better student performance on math and reading tests.

The relationship is strong albeit indirect: Good leadership, the study suggests, improves both teacher motivation and work settings. This, in turn, can fortify classroom instruction. "Compared with lower-achieving schools, higher-achieving schools provided all stakeholders with greater influence on decisions," the researchers write.[15] Why the better result? Perhaps this is a case of two heads – or more – being better than one: "The higher performance of these schools might be explained as a consequence of the greater access they have to collective knowledge and wisdom embedded within their communities," the study concludes.[16]

Principals play a major role in developing a "professional community" of teachers who guide one another in improving instruction.

Principals may be relieved to find out, moreover, that their authority does not wane as others' waxes. Clearly, school leadership is not a zero-sum game. "Principals and district leaders have the most influence on decisions in all schools; however, they do not lose influence as others gain influence," the authors write. [17] Indeed, although "higher-performing schools awarded greater influence to most stakeholders… little changed in these schools' overall hierarchical structure."[18]

University of Washington research on leadership in urban school systems emphasizes the need for a leadership team (led by the principal and including assistant principals and teacher leaders) and shared responsibility for student progress, a responsibility "reflected in a set of agreements as well as unspoken norms among school staff."[19]

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[13] See for example, J.W. Gardner, On Leadership, The Free Press, 1993; J. Kouzes, J. and B. Posner, *The Leadership Challenge: How to Keep Getting Extraordinary Things Done in Organizations,* Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2008; and G. Yukl, *Leadership in Organizations,* Prentice-Hall, 2009.
[14] Seashore Louis, Leithwood et al., 81- 82
[15] Seashore Louis, Leithwood, 35.
[16] Seashore Louis, Leithwood, 35.
[17] Seashore Louis, Leithwood, 19.
[18] Seashore Louis, Leithwood, 35.
[19] Knapp, Copland et al., 3.

A PROFILE IN LEADERSHIP: DEWEY HENSLEY

Nearly all 390 students at Louisville's J. B. Atkinson Academy for Excellence in Teaching and Learning live in poverty. But from 2006 to 2011, principal Dewey Hensley showed this needn't stand in the way of their succeeding in school. Under Hensley's watch, students at Atkinson, once one of the lowest performing elementary schools in Kentucky, doubled their proficiency rates in reading, math and writing. Most recently, the school was one of only 17 percent in the school district that met all of its "adequate yearly progress" goals under the federal No Child Left Behind Act.

Hensley's is not a tale of lonely-at-the-top heroics, however. Rather, it is a story about leadership that combines a firm belief in each child's potential with an unrelenting focus on improving instruction – and a conviction that principals can't go it alone. "Building a school is not about bricks," Hensley says. "It's about teachers. From inside out, you have to build the strengths. I'm not *the* leader. I'm *a* leader. I've tried to build strong leaders across the board."

Today Hensley heads a just-launched Kentucky Department of Education office to help transform other low-performing schools. Principals there and elsewhere could learn a lot from how he led Atkinson with a style that mirrors in many ways the characteristics of effective school leadership identified in research.

Shaping a vision of academic success for all students
His first week on the job, Hensley drew a picture of a school on poster board and asked the faculty to annotate it. "Let's create a vision of a school that's perfect," he recalls telling them, adding: "When we get there, then we'll rest." Hensley, the first person in his extended family to graduate from high school and then college, sought to instill in his staff the idea that all children could learn, with appropriate support. "I understand the power of a school to make a difference in a child's life," he says. "They [all] have to have someone who will give them dreams they may not have."

Creating a climate hospitable to education
School suspensions at Atkinson were among the highest in the state when Hensley took over. Determined to create a more suitable climate for learning, Hensley visited the homes of the 25 most frequent student offenders, telling the

families that their children would be protected, but other children would be protected from them, too, if necessary. Hensley brought in teams to diagnose each child's academic and emotional needs and develop individual "prescriptions" that might include anything from home visits to intensive tutoring to eyeglasses. Chess club, a special program for truant students and ballroom dancing lessons culminating in a formal candlelit dinner that included students' parents were other tone-changers, along with school corridors with names like Teamwork Trail and street signs directing students 982 miles to Harvard or 2,352 miles to Stanford.

Cultivating leadership in others

Hensley set up a leadership structure with two notable characteristics. First, it was simple, comprising only three committees: culture, climate, and community; instructional leadership; and student support. Second, it made leadership a shared enterprise. The committees were populated and headed by teachers, with every faculty member assigned to one. "I relinquished leadership in order to get control," Hensley says. "I asked people to be about leadership."

He also encouraged his teachers to learn from one another. Science teacher Heather Lynd recalls the day Hensley visited her classroom and then asked her to lead a faculty meeting on anchor charts, annotated diagrams that can be used to explain everything from the water cycle to punctuation tips. "He's built on teachers' strengths to share them with others," says reading specialist Lori Atherton. "That creates leadership."

Improving instruction

Hensley did a lot of first-hand observation in classrooms, leaving behind detailed notes for teachers, sharing "gold nuggets" of exemplary practices, things to think about and next steps for improvement. He also introduced cutting-edge professional development, obtaining a grant to set up the ideal classroom in the building, full of technology and instructional resources. And he formed a collaboration with the University of Louisville. In one project, professors observed how Atkinson's teachers kept students engaged and shared the collected data with the faculty in addition to using it for a research study.

Hensley also encouraged teachers to do skill building on their own. As a result, Atkinson teachers began attaining certification at a feverish pace from the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, a private group that offers teachers an advanced credential based on rigorous standards. Finally, Hensley focused on getting students the instruction that tests and observations showed they needed. For example, Hensley paired struggling 1st, 2nd and 3rd graders with National Board-certified teachers who gave them intensive help in reading and writing until they reached grade level.

Managing people, data and processes

Data use figured prominently in Hensley's turnaround efforts. "We test them once, we see where they are," science teacher Lynd says of the students. "If they're not proficient, we re-teach and test again." To track progress across the school, Atkinson used a data board that lined one wall in the school's curriculum center. Under photos of each teacher, staff members could view the color-coded trajectory of students' achievement measured on three levels: grade level, below grade level and significantly below. The display was part of what Hensley calls the faculty's "tolerance for truth," honestly examining results and "taking ownership of each student's performance."

Such methods did not win plaudits from everyone; half the faculty transferred after his first year. But as time went by, the number of teachers seeking to leave the school declined to a trickle and the list of those seeking to transfer in ballooned. Moreover, if winning over skeptics is any indication of success, Hensley points with pride to a comment years later from a veteran teacher who had initially opposed his changes at Atkinson: "She said, 'They sent a lot of people here to fix this school. You're the only one who taught us how.' "

Effective principals studied by the University of Washington urged teachers to work with one another and with the administration on a variety of activities, including "developing and aligning curriculum, instructional practices, and assessments; problem solving; and participating in peer observations."[20] These leaders also looked for ways to encourage collaboration, paying special attention to how school time was allocated. They might replace some administrative meeting time with teacher planning time, for example.[21] The importance of collaboration gets backing from the Minnesota/Toronto researchers, too. They found that principals rated highly for the strength of their actions to improve instruction were also more apt to encourage the staff to work collaboratively.[22]

More specifically, the study suggests that principals play a major role in developing a "professional community" of teachers who guide one another in improving instruction. This is important because the research found a link between professional community and higher student scores on standardized math tests.[23] In short, the researchers say, "When principals and teachers share leadership, teachers' working relationships with one another are stronger and student achievement is higher."[24]

What does "professional community" look like? Its components include things like consistent and well-defined learning expectations for children, frequent conversations among teachers about pedagogy, and an atmosphere in which it's common for teachers to visit one another's classrooms to observe and critique instruction.[25]

Most principals would welcome hearing what one urban school administrator had to say about how team-based school transformation works at its best: "like a well-oiled machine," with results that could be seen in "student behavior, student conduct, and student achievement."[26]

Improving instruction

Effective principals work relentlessly to improve achievement by focusing on the quality of instruction. They help define and promote high expectations; they attack teacher isolation and fragmented effort; and they connect directly with teachers and the classroom, University of Washington researchers found.[27]

Effective principals also encourage continual professional learning. They emphasize research-based strategies to improve teaching and learning and initiate discussions about instructional approaches, both in teams and with individual teachers. They pursue these strategies despite the preference of many teachers to be left alone.[28]

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[20] Portin, Knapp et al., 56.
[21] Portin, Knapp et al., 59
[22] Seashore Louis, Leithwood et al., 82.
[23] Seashore Louis, Leithwood et al., 48.
[24] Seashore Louis, Leithwood et al., 282.
[25] Seashore Louis, Leithwood et al., 45.
[26] Portin, Knapp et al., 56.
[27] Portin, Knapp et al., v.
[28] Seashore Louis, Leithwood et al., 77, 91.

In practice this all means that leaders must become intimately familiar with the "technical core" of schooling – what is required to improve the quality of teaching and learning.[29]

Principals themselves agree almost unanimously on the importance of several specific practices, according to one survey, including keeping track of teachers' professional development needs and monitoring teachers' work in the classroom (83 percent).[30] Whether they call it formal evaluation, classroom visits or learning walks, principals intent on promoting growth in both students and adults spend time in classrooms (or ensure that someone who's qualified does), observing and commenting on what's working well and what is not. Moreover, they shift the pattern of the annual evaluation cycle to one of ongoing and informal interactions with teachers.

A central part of being a great leader is cultivating leadership in others.

The Minnesota-Toronto study paints a picture of strong and weak instructional leadership. "Both high- and low-scoring principals said that they frequently visit classrooms and are 'very visible,' " the researchers write. "However, differences between principals in the two groups come into sharp focus as they describe their reasons for making classroom visits. High-scoring principals frequently observed classroom instruction for short periods of time, making 20 to 60 observations a week, and most of the observations were spontaneous. Their visits enabled them to make formative observations that were clearly about learning and professional growth, coupled with direct and immediate feedback. High-scoring principals believed that every teacher, whether a first-year teacher or a veteran, can learn and grow.

"… In contrast, low-scoring principals described a very different approach to observations. Their informal visits or observations in classrooms were usually not for instructional purposes. Even informal observations were often planned in advance so that teachers knew when the principal would be stopping by. The most damaging finding became clear in reports from teachers in buildings with low-scoring principals who said they received little or no feedback after informal observations."[31]

It is important to note that instructional leadership tends to be much weaker in middle and high schools than in elementary schools.[32] Unlike their elementary school counterparts, secondary school principals cannot be expected to have expertise in all the subject areas their schools cover, so their ability to offer guidance on instruction is more limited. The problem is that those who are in a position to offer instructional leadership – department chairs – often are not called on to do so. One suggestion is that the department head's job "should be radically rede-

[29] Kenneth Leithwood, Karen Seashore Louis, Stephen Anderson, Kyla Wahlstrom, *Review of Research: How Leadership Influences Student Learning*, University of Minnesota and University of Toronto, 2004, 24.
[30] Seashore Louis, Leithwood et al., 71.
[31] Seashore Louis, Leithwood et al., 86.
[32] Seashore Louis, Leithwood et al., 87-90.

fined" so whoever holds the post is "regarded, institutionally, as a central resource for improving instruction in middle and high schools."[33]

As noted above, a central part of being a great leader is cultivating leadership in others. The learning-focused principal is intent on helping teachers improve their practice either directly or with the aid of school leaders like department chairs and other teaching experts.

Managing people, data and processes

"In the great scheme of things," noted one research report, "…schools may be relatively small organizations. But their leadership challenges are far from small, or simple."[34] To get the job done, effective leaders need to make good use of the resources at hand. In other words, they have to be good managers.

Effective leaders studied by University of Washington researchers nurtured and supported their staff members, while facing the reality that sometimes teachers don't work out. They hired carefully, but – adhering to union and district personnel policies – they also engaged in "aggressively weeding out individuals who did not show the capacity to grow."[35]

When it comes to data, effective principals try to draw the most from statistics and evidence, having "learned to ask useful questions" of the information, to display it in ways that tell "compelling stories" and to use it to promote "collaborative inquiry among teachers."[36] They view data as a means not only to pinpoint problems but to understand their nature and causes.[37]

> *Effective leaders view data as a means not only to pinpoint problems but to understand their nature and causes.*

Principals also need to approach their work in a way that will get the job done. Research behind VAL-ED (the Vanderbilt Assessment of Leadership in Education), a tool to assess principal performance developed by researchers at Vanderbilt University, suggests that there are six key steps – or "processes" – that the effective principal takes when carrying out his or her most important leadership responsibilities: planning, implementing, supporting, advocating, communicating and monitoring.[38] The school leader pressing for high academic standards would, for example, map out rigorous targets for improvements in learning (planning), get the faculty on board to do what's necessary to meet those targets (implementing), encourage students and teachers in meeting the goals (supporting), challenge low expectations and low district funding for students with special needs (advocating), make sure families are aware of the learning goals (communicating), and keep on top of test results (monitoring).[39]

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[33] Seashore Louis, Leithwood et al., 92.
[34] Portin, Schneider et al., 14.
[35] Portin, Knapp et al., 52.
[36] Portin, Knapp et al., v.
[37] Seashore Louis, Leithwood et al., 195.
[38] Andrew C. Porter, Joseph Murphy, et al. *Vanderbilt Assessment of Leadership in Education*, 16-19.

Principals – and the people who hire and replace them – need to be aware that school improvement does not happen overnight. A rule of thumb is that a principal should be in place about five to seven years in order to have a beneficial impact on a school. In fact, the average length of a principal's stay in 80 schools studied by the Minnesota-Toronto researchers was 3.6 years. They further found that higher turnover was associated with lower student performance on reading and math achievement tests, apparently because turnover takes a toll on the overall climate of the school.[40] "It is far from a trivial problem," the researchers say. "Schools experiencing exceptionally rapid principal turnover, for example, are often reported to suffer from lack of shared purpose, cynicism among staff about principal commitment, and an inability to maintain a school-improvement focus long enough to actually accomplish any meaningful change."[41] The lesson? Effective principals stay put.

IMPROVING SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

The simple fact is that without effective leaders most of the goals of educational improvement will be very difficult to achieve. Absent attention to that reality, we are in danger of undermining the very standards and goals we have set for ourselves. Fortunately, we have a decade of experience and new research demonstrating the critical importance of leadership for school principals and documenting an empirical link between school leadership and student growth. And we have the benefit of the professional standards developed by ISLLC and principal evaluation tools like VAL-ED.

How do we create a pipeline of leaders who can make a real difference, especially in troubled schools?

Still, the lives of too many principals, especially new principals, are characterized by "churn and burn," as the turnover findings bear out. So what can be done to lessen turnover and provide all teachers and students with the highly skilled school leadership they need and deserve? In other words, how do we create a pipeline of leaders who can make a real difference for the better, especially in troubled schools?

A pipeline for effective leadership

Wallace's work over the last decade suggests such a pipeline would have four necessary and interlocking parts:

- **Defining the job of the principal and assistant principal.** Districts create clear, rigorous job requirements that detail what principals and assistant principals must know and do, and that emerge from what research tells us are the knowledge, skills and behaviors principals need to improve teaching and learning.

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[39] Porter, Murphy, et al., 141-142
[40] Seashore Louis, Leithwood et al., 168-171.
[41] Seashore Louis, Leithwood et al., 165-166.

- **Providing high-quality training for aspiring school leaders.** Principal training programs, whether run by universities, nonprofits or districts, recruit and select only the people with the potential and desire to become effective principals in the districts the programs feed into. The programs provide the future leaders with high-quality training and internships that reflect the realities education leaders face in the field.

- **Hiring selectively.** Districts hire only well-trained candidates for principal and assistant principal jobs.

- **Evaluating principals and giving them the on-the-job support they need.** Districts regularly evaluate principals, assessing the behaviors that research tells us are most closely tied to improving teaching and student achievement. Districts then provide professional development, including mentoring, that responds to what the evaluations find for each individual.

Coordination of state and district efforts

Effective school leadership depends on support from district and state officials. Except for the most entrepreneurial, principals are unlikely to proceed with a leadership style focused on learning if the district and state are unsupportive, disinterested or pursuing other agendas.

As one of the major Wallace-funded studies reports, central offices need to be transformed so that the work of teaching and learning improvement can proceed.[42] That is to say central offices need to "re-culture" themselves so they focus less on administration and more on supporting principals to improve instruction. As for states: through policy, accreditation and funding for principal training programs, and other levers, they have a major role to play in getting schools the leadership they need. If the states and districts can do the difficult work of coordinating their various efforts, so much the better. [43]

Leadership and the transformation of failing schools

Armed with what we've learned about the potential for leadership over the last decade, there is cause for optimism that the education community's long neglect of leadership is at last coming to an end. We still have a lot to learn, but we have already learned a great deal. In the face of this growing body of knowledge and experience, it is clear that now is the time to step up efforts to strengthen school leadership. Without effective principals, the national goal we've set of transforming failing schools will be next to impossible to achieve.

But with an effective principal in every school comes promise.

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[42] Meredith I. Honig, Michael A. Copland, Lydia Rainey, Juli Anna Lorton and Morena Newton, *Central Office Transformation for District-Wide Teaching and Learning Improvement,* University of Washington, 2010.

[43] Catherine H. Augustine, Gabriella Gonzalez, Gina Schuyler Ikemotoa, Jennifer Russell, Gail L.Zellman, Louay Constant, Jane Armstrong, and Jacob W. Dembosky, *Improving School Leadership: The Promise of Cohesive Leadership Systems,* RAND Corporation, 2009; and Linda Darling-Hammond, Michelle LaPointe, Debra Meyerson, Margaret Terry Orr, Carol Cohen, Preparing School Leaders for a Changing World: Lessons from Exemplary Leadership Development Programs – Final Report, Stanford University, 2007, 127-129, 139-140.

Additional Readings

The Knowledge Center at www.wallacefoundation.org contains more than 70 publications about school leadership. Here's a sampling:

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Vanderbilt Assessment of Leadership in Education: Technical Manual, Andrew C. Porter, Joseph Murphy, Ellen Goldring, Stephen N. Elliott, Morgan S. Polikoff and Henry May, Vanderbilt University, 2008. http://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/school-leadership/principal-evaluation/Pages/Vanderbilt-Assessment-of-Leadership-in-Education-Technical-Manual-1.aspx

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