Supported by educational research, principals embrace the role of innovator.

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and Bruce J. Biddle
A bout a decade ago we began to study how research knowledge affects the thinking and professional actions of school principals. Our interest in this topic was piqued by a long history of claims, rarely if ever studied, that educational research has very little effect on practice. We suspected that these claims were nonsense, that research knowledge has a good deal of effect on educators and education, and that principals play key roles in using this knowledge.

To test these ideas, we conducted a study that involved in-depth interviews with 120 principals from a variety of primary and secondary schools in the United States and Australia. Our interviews were carefully structured, lasted an average of two hours, and covered various aspects of research knowledge utilization.

The major findings from our study are reported in a book we recently published, *The Untested Accusation: Principals, Research Knowledge, and Policy Making in Schools* (see sidebar). They confirm that research knowledge has a strong effect on the thinking and professional actions of principals, particularly innovative principals.

**Why Innovate?**

Most discussions of the principal’s role stress that it includes responsibility for keeping up with new ideas and introducing or facilitating innovation (Hallinger 2003). And it has long been recognized that without the support of the school principal, attempts at innovation would likely fail (Berman and McLaughlin 1977). Thus, it was reasonable to assume that principals’ notions about innovation would play a key part in their utilization of research knowledge, and we examined those notions in our study.

The first question we explored was whether principals feel outside pressures to be innovative. More than half of our respondents said they felt weak or strong pressures to be innovative, while a quarter said they felt no such pressures, and less than a quarter said...
they feel pressures to avoid innovation.

From what sources did respondents feel pressures to be innovative? Much to our surprise, we found that most principals, both American and Australian, said that pressures to be innovative came from other principals, followed by pressures from the school system, superintendents, and state and federal governments.

**Thinking Positively About Innovation**

We next examined the extent to which the principals in our sample held positive or negative views regarding innovation. Roughly three-quarters of respondents in both countries said that they mildly or strongly favored innovation. By way of contrast, only 5 percent of the American principals, and none from Australia, said that they disliked innovation.

Here is a typical comment from an American principal of a public elementary school: “I’m an enthusiastic supporter of new ideas, [but] not to the extent that I feel we can throw out anything that works…We should always be growing and trying something new and experimenting.”

But not all of our respondents were so enthusiastic. Another American elementary school principal said: “I probably do not push it to the extent that I’m just ‘gung ho’ for everything [new] that comes out…But prove to me, give me a little background, show me a little reason, give me some justification for how it’s going to work, that it’s going to do any good in our situation…”

**What Strategies Do Innovators Use?**

Even though most of our principals took a positive view of innovation, not all of them went about it the same way. Just as there are different styles of school leadership, so too are there different ways that principals approach innovation.

With this in mind, we asked our respondents to describe their behavior when it comes to innovation. We coded their responses into five categories that reflect the extent to which the principal used collegial or unilateral strategies for making decisions about innovation. The results, displayed in Figure 1, indicate that the most popular style of innovation involved forms of cooperation between the principal and others. American principals said they were more likely to consult with others before making the final decision them-
selves, while the Australian principals were more likely to lead others in forming a group decision.

**Secrets of Successful Innovation**

What makes for successful innovation? To answer this question, we asked each principal to describe a recent attempt to be innovative. From the examples they gave us, we classified the outcomes into three categories, ranging from “not welcome” to “first resisted, then accepted” and “generally accepted” (Figure 2).

It is clear from this figure that most of the innovative attempts described by the principals described were eventually accepted, although a sizeable percentage was initially resisted. But what were the underlying causes for success? To answer this question, we examined correlations between respondents’ attitudes toward innovation and their various innovation styles and the degree to which the innovation attempt they described was successful. In effect, what we were asking was whether being enthusiastic about innovation or being more collegial in its introduction was likely to generate success. We found that the correlations between enthusiasm and innovative success are larger than those for correlations between collegial strategies and success, suggesting that principals’ enthusiasm is more important than the strategy they use when promoting an innovation.

In general, however, we found that a more collegial approach to innovation was more effective than an authoritarian approach. As one of our collegially oriented principals said in describing a successful innovation in his school: “They [the teachers and students] get a terrific buzz out of it, because they own it, it’s their idea.”

Underlying the positive attitude toward innovation reported by most respondents is their ability to acquire and apply research knowledge. In most examples they gave us, principals described how they researched the background of their own innovation initiatives. Our study of innovation practices confirms our original premise that educational research indeed is related to the thinking and professional actions of principals.

“Just as there are different styles of leadership, so too are there different ways that principals approach innovation.”

**Figure 2. Percentages of Reactions to Innovation Attempts**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Australia</th>
<th>USA</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Not Welcome</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 First resisted, then accepted</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Generally accepted</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>44</td>
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**WEB RESOURCES**

The authors recommend these resources:

**United States**

www.aera.net

Education Resources Information Center (ERIC)
www.eric.ed.gov

**Australia**

Australian Association for Research in Education
www.aare.edu.au/index.htm

Australian Council for Educational Research

**References**


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...if principals are supposed to provide instructional leadership and assume managerial responsibilities, one assumes that they should also keep up with late-breaking research knowledge on these topics. But surprisingly, very little empirical evidence seems to have appeared concerning their use of research knowledge, and those who have written about the role of the principal have generally not discussed the principals’ use of knowledge based on research. (19)

There is little doubt that, for many scholars and practitioners, professional associations play useful roles. They help participants maintain their professional identity and morale, they aid the dissemination of research knowledge, and they promote the exchange of ideas about “best practice.” (73)

Do principals favor or oppose innovation in their schools? Our evidence suggests that most principals favor innovation. Some authors have portrayed the typical school principal as a stodgy, timid conservative or rule-driven figure who is largely interested in preserving traditional forms of education, the status quo, or his or her authority. Our results do not support such pictures. (121–22)

When asked about sources where knowledge from research on education is displayed, the typical principal we interviewed claimed to be exposed to many such sources—to read several (named) professional journals regularly; to have read one or more (named) professional books during the past year; to have attended at least one (and often several) professional meetings and workshops during the year; and to read various types of bulletins from national, regional, and system-level sources regularly. In addition, many respondents recounted details of how
they had recently been introduced to educational research knowledge by other professionals. (223–24)

Most principals hold positive opinions about research on education. Surprisingly few think it is valueless or are hostile to its use...Most principals are rarely concerned about supposed serious flaws in education research; rather, they are often concerned with problems associated with the transmission and use of the knowledge research generates...When respondents mentioned problems associated with research knowledge, the most popular complaints volunteered were that research knowledge is not always relevant to users' needs, that users are sometimes too busy to acquire relevant research knowledge, and that communication between researchers and consumers may be poor. (224)

Most principals are not regularly exposed to primary sources for research knowledge; rather, the bulk of information sources to which they are exposed is secondary in nature...Most respondents did not report attending professional meetings organized by and for educational researchers, reading refereed journals in which reports of educational research first appear, or examining monographs that are written for scholars. (225)

For many years, school principals and other educators have embraced expensive fads, touted in the name of research, for which evidence was weak or missing—consider, for example, the adoption of language laboratories, teaching machines, open-plan school buildings, computer-assisted instruction, and a lot of "new" or "improved" techniques for teaching mathematics or basic literacy—and a great deal of money, effort, student potential and the commitments of concerned educators have been wasted in so doing. (240)

Clearly, a better system is needed in the United States for distributing reports of educational research knowledge that are honest, unbiased, and well crafted. The lack of such a system has given rise to many problems; the needless proliferation of secondary sources portraying research knowledge; the appearance of competing (and sometimes contradictory) judgments about research evidence; confusion about what is and is not known about important issues in education; difficulties for viewers who would like to find out what is known today from research about a given topic; and opportunities for unscrupulous advocates who want to portray propaganda as research. (245)