Review of Research: How Leadership Influences Student Learning


Leithwood and his colleagues began their study of leadership with a review of effective schools studies conducted in the 1970s and then broadened their search to include additional case studies as well as large-scale quantitative studies. In their view, the effects of leadership on student learning are typically underestimated, and their analysis identifies leadership as “second only to classroom instruction among all school-related factors that contribute to what students learn at school.”

In addition, the researchers found that “leadership results are usually largest where and when they are needed most” and expand on this:

There are virtually no documented instances of troubled schools being turned around without intervention by a powerful leader. Many other factors may contribute to such turnarounds, but leadership is the catalyst.

They go on to identify three practices as making up the “basic core” of successful leadership:

- Setting directions: Charting a course that helps colleagues “make sense of their work” and establishing mechanisms to measure progress toward agreed-upon goals;
- Developing people: Providing teachers and others with system supports they need to succeed; and
- Redesigning the organization: Ensuring organizational conditions support, not inhibit, the use of effective practices.

While research-supported findings on administrative leadership are the focus of their report, the authors also discuss other factors that affect student learning. For example, they provide a brief overview of what research tells us about the role that district leadership plays in educational change and improvement, as well as other key factors that include student and family background, school and classroom conditions, teachers, and leaders’ professional learning experiences.