Much has been written during the past decade about the changing role of the principal and the shift in emphasis from manager to instructional leader. Any of us in education, and especially principals themselves, could develop a mental list of responsibilities that fit within each of these realms. But research makes it clear that both those aspects of the job are important.

This article will highlight two recent research projects, each with significant findings about principal leadership that provide a nuanced picture of activities that contribute to a principal’s effectiveness. In addition, the findings stress the importance of a continuing discussion about principal leadership.
Learning From Leadership Study
Researchers at the Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement at the University of Minnesota and the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto recently completed work on a six-year project commissioned by The Wallace Foundation. Their final report, *Learning from Leadership: Investigating the Links to Improved Student Learning*, focuses on leadership at the state, district, and school levels. The analysis of these links to student learning builds on an extensive research base as well as on data from surveys, interviews, visits to schools, and state test scores on literacy and mathematics assessments.

In the report, the researchers discuss several key areas, including principal leadership practices perceived by both teachers and principals to be essential to supporting instruction, as well as the concept of shared leadership. Building on their research on the study’s schools, the researchers established a framework of core practices “essential for successful leaders.” These include:

- Setting directions (e.g., practices such as building a shared vision and creating high performance expectations that are “aimed at bringing a focus to the individual and collective work of staff members”);
- Developing people (e.g., providing individualized support to teachers);
- Redesigning the organization (e.g., restructuring to support collaboration); and
- Managing the instructional program (e.g., staffing the program and monitoring school activity).

The researchers concluded that principals’ influence on teachers’ motivation and working conditions has more impact on student achievement than their influence on teachers’ knowledge and skills. Three specific practices were perceived by both principals and teachers to help improve instruction: focusing the school on goals and expectations for student achievement, keeping track of teachers’ professional development needs, and creating structures and opportunities for teachers to collaborate.

The researchers also compared the views of teachers in schools with a high percentage of teachers classified as highly effective based on classroom observations, also referred to as high-scoring schools (HSS), with those in schools with low percentages of highly effective teachers, or low-scoring schools (LSS). Teachers from HSS had stronger opinions about the importance of principals’ behaviors that are centered on “supporting teacher collaboration for purposes of instructional improvement.” In contrast, teachers from LSS were more likely than those from HSS to identify “providing instructional resources and materials” and “providing backup for student discipline and with parents” as important principal behaviors. This could point to the need, for example, for a principal coming into an LSS to explicitly recognize teacher desires for support with student discipline while simultaneously working to develop a shared vision for the school. More generally, the view of teachers about what an effective principal should be doing might vary depending on the context of the school as a whole.

The study also asked, “What does instructional leadership look like to teachers?” and compared this profile with that expressed by principals. Their analysis of teacher survey data “pointed to a clear distinction between principals’ efforts to create a vision for learning, on one hand, and what they do to enact that vision, on the other.” The researchers analyzed these two factors separately, calling one Instructional Climate and the other Instructional Actions, with principals scoring in the top 20 percent on either or both of these dimensions designated as high-scoring and those in the bottom 20 percent designated as low-scoring.

In the area of Instructional Climate, the difference between high-scoring and low-scoring principals (based on teacher reports) was largest in regard to the factor “My school administrator develops an atmosphere of caring and trust,” with the teachers of high-scoring principals more likely to rate their principals high on this factor. For the high-scoring principals, the factor receiving the highest mean score was “In general, I believe my principal’s motives and intentions are good.” Other items ranked high by teachers with high-scoring principals included “My school administrator models a high level of professional practice” and, mentioned already as a factor that discriminated between high- and low-scoring principals, “My school administrator develops an atmosphere of caring and trust.”

High-scoring principals were also found to emphasize research-based strategies as a way to help “establish a vision for the school that is centered on high student achievement.”

Moving on to Instructional Actions, the researchers found that “in order to turn the visions of high student achievement into reality, high-scoring principals are actively engaged in providing direct instructional support to teachers.” Several themes emerged from the analysis of teacher responses. First, high-scoring principals “have an acute awareness of teaching and learning in their schools.” An action identified in relation to this factor is the high-scoring...
Principals’ influence on teachers’ motivations and working conditions has more impact on student achievement than their influence on teachers’ knowledge and skills.

principal’s monitoring of lesson plans to ensure they are aligned with instructional goals. In contrast, the low-scoring principal’s approach could be characterized as “hands-off.”

Second, although both high- and low-scoring principals said that they “frequently visit classrooms and are ‘very visible,’” teachers working with the low-scoring principals reported receiving little or no feedback after informal observations with “limited, non-threatening feedback” provided after formal observations. In contrast, high-scoring principals visited classrooms frequently and coupled these with “direct and immediate feedback.”

Finally, high-scoring principals are more likely to “seek out and provide differentiated opportunities for their teachers to learn and grow,” thus moving teachers in the direction of the vision established for the school.

Another major focus area identified by the study as significant to supporting instruction is shared leadership—“teachers’ influence over, and their participation in school-wide decisions with principals.” The researchers suggest that a pattern of shared leadership within schools might have an indirect—although significant—relationship with student achievement. For example, in schools with a strong context of shared leadership, teachers are more likely to organize themselves into professional communities, to engage in reflective discussions about instruction, and to have a collective sense of responsibility about student learning. This might help to explain the indirect link between shared leadership and achievement since “professional community ... is a strong predictor of instructional practices that are associated with student achievement.”

In addition, the researchers found that the effects of principal leadership on student achievement “occur largely because effective leadership strengthens effective community.” Teachers and parents in the higher performing schools were provided with more opportunities to influence school policies and practices even without changes in the formal decision-making structure. Significantly, leadership does not need to be a zero-sum game since principals “do not lose influence as others gain influence.”

Principals “as a group generally expressed confidence in their abilities to engage in tasks” within the category of instruction management, with similar ratings given by most principals to most of the actions within three more of the categories. They were less likely to report feeling effective regarding actions in the external relations category.

The researchers then looked for a relationship between principals’ perceived effectiveness with each of the five dimensions and student achievement as measured by results from the state accountability system. They found that “self-assessed effectiveness in Organization Management is positively related to school performance ... [and] no other task-efficacy dimension is statistically associated with school performance.”

As an external check, assistant principals’ evaluations of the principals’ effectiveness were also correlated to student achievement and the only dimension found to correlate was organization management. Finally, teacher satisfaction and parent ratings of school performance were correlated with principals’ self-assessment of their skills and, again, the only correlation for each of these groups was found with organization management.

The researchers discuss their findings and, especially, the lack of a link between principals’ assessment of their

Data were collected to measure principals’ self-assessment of their effectiveness with specific tasks, assistant principals’ assessment of principal effectiveness, teachers’ satisfaction levels, parents’ assessment of school effectiveness, and student achievement levels, as well as gains in achievement over time. Hence, the title of the report Triangulating Principal Effectiveness, since views of multiple groups were meshed in an effort to provide a comprehensive picture.

The researchers then looked for a relationship between principals’ perceived effectiveness with each of the five dimensions and student achievement as measured by results from the state accountability system. They found that “self-assessed effectiveness in Organization Management is positively related to school performance ... [and] no other task-efficacy dimension is statistically associated with school performance.”

As an external check, assistant principals’ evaluations of the principals’ effectiveness were also correlated to student achievement and the only dimension found to correlate was organization management. Finally, teacher satisfaction and parent ratings of school performance were correlated with principals’ self-assessment of their skills and, again, the only correlation for each of these groups was found with organization management.

The researchers discuss their findings and, especially, the lack of a link between principals’ assessment of their

External relations (e.g., communicating with the district to obtain resources, working with local community members and organizations, and fundraising).

Researchers Jason Grissom and Susanna Loeb studied principals in a large urban school district in an effort to identify both “the range of skills needed for principals to perform their job effectively” and linkages between these and school effectiveness. The focus was on specific sets of principal behaviors and actions, grouped into five dimensions:

- Instruction management (behaviors such as planning professional development for teachers and evaluating curriculum);
- Internal relations (e.g., counseling staff about conflicts with other staff members and counseling students or parents);
- Organization management (e.g., maintaining campus facilities, managing budgets and resources, developing a safe school environment);
- Administration (e.g., managing student records, reporting and implementing standardized tests); and

Internal relations (e.g., counseling students or members and counseling students or parents);

- Instruction management (behaviors such as planning professional development for teachers and evaluating curriculum);
- Internal relations (e.g., counseling staff about conflicts with other staff members and counseling students or parents);
- Organization management (e.g., maintaining campus facilities, managing budgets and resources, developing a safe school environment);
- Administration (e.g., managing student records, reporting and implementing standardized tests); and

www.naesp.org
own skills in the area of instruction management and student achievement, teacher satisfaction, or parents’ ratings of school performance. In their view, the findings are “not necessarily inconsistent with the research advocating the importance of instructional leadership for principals.” But they go on to make a critical point: “Increasing the principal’s focus narrowly on overseeing instruction and observing teachers in classroom[s] at the expense of managing key organizational functions, such as budgeting and maintaining campus facilities” is likely to detract from the school’s ability to educate students to high levels. In their view, “effective instructional leadership combines an understanding of the instructional needs of the school with an ability to target resources where they are needed, hire the best available teachers, provide teachers with the opportunities they need to improve, and keep the school running smoothly.”

Alignment Between Findings

Some specific implications for practice outlined by researchers who conducted the Learning from Leadership project signal an alignment with findings from the Triangulating Principal Effectiveness study. In the view of these researchers, principals should pay “careful attention to classroom instructional practices, but should not neglect many other issues that are critical to the ongoing health and welfare of the organization.” For example, both teachers and principals in the more effective schools identified principal efforts to create opportunities to collaborate as important.

The researchers go on to suggest that school leaders should avoid having a narrow focus on classroom practices since the larger context—the overall environment of the school—either supports or detracts from efforts to improve instruction. Grissom and Loeb, authors of Triangulating Principal Effectiveness, would likely agree and suggest that the results from their study “argue for a broader definition of instructional leadership that includes skills embodied by our Organization Management dimension.”

Careful reading of both these studies makes one thing clear: Individual principals might have different notions of what constitutes effective practice. For example, both high- and low-rated principals who were part of the Learning from Leadership study reported making routine visits to classrooms to observe instruction. However, these visits, along with the subsequent feedback to teachers—or lack of it—were viewed differently by teachers. Thus, an important piece of the conversation about principal effectiveness should include attention to more specific details about principal actions as well how these actions impact teachers and the school environment in support of teaching and learning.

Nancy Protheroe is director of special research projects at the Educational Research Service.

References
