



How Do Principals Influence Student Achievement?

LEADERSHIP

Principals are often seen as the primary agents of change to improve student achievement in their schools. Yet the role of the principal is complex, and there are many ways that principals might potentially influence classroom instruction and student learning. What matters most?

Researchers used data from hundreds of schools to learn how principals were most effective at achieving higher learning gains on standardized tests. Then, they visited 12 schools, interviewing principals and teachers, to see firsthand what principals in schools with improving learning gains were doing that principals in schools without improving learning gains were not.

Data Used in This Study:

Quantitative Study

- **Districtwide data on all CPS schools:** 458-509 elementary schools; 99-130 high schools (number of schools depends on the year and the specific analysis)
- **Student and teacher survey data** on their experiences
- **Student test results** (ISAT for elementary schools; ACT's EPAS for high schools)
- **7 years of data collection:** 2007-08 to 2013-14 school years

Qualitative Study

- **Case study schools:** 12 total schools with strong or improving leadership
- Neighborhood schools with high rates of **free/reduced-price lunch** eligibility
- **6 elementary schools:** 3 with improving & 3 with declining/flat test scores
- **6 high schools:** 3 with improving & 3 with declining/flat test scores
- **10 staff interviews per school,** conducted in 2013-14

Principals influence school achievement primarily through changes in the school climate.

Research Findings

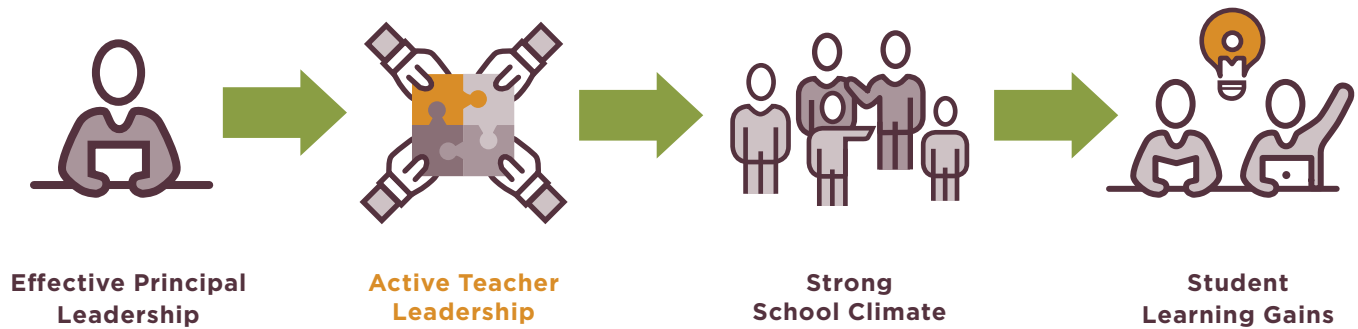
1 Principals Most Influenced Student Learning by Fostering Strong Learning Climates

Strong learning climates are defined as safe, supportive environments with high, consistent, and clear expectations for students. Other principal-led school initiatives that are associated with improving schools—such as teachers’ professional development, program alignment, and engagement with parents—matter for student achievement to the extent that they facilitate a strong school climate. But ultimately, districtwide data showed that a strong school climate is most important for achievement growth. Even among schools that start out with safe climates or high achievement, further improvements in school climate are associated with higher achievement gains.

Interviews in schools with strong learning gains showed what a strong climate means in practice:

- **School staff hold each other accountable for the success of all students in the school, not just in their own classrooms.** This accountability comes with support and capacity-building, so that all teachers can reach their shared goals.
- **Staff members at multiple levels continually examine student data of various types**—including behavior, attendance, grades, student work, test scores, and other assessments. Together they examine data on individual students and on groups of students (by teacher, by department/grade, and school-wide) to see if they are reaching their goals.
- Adults believe that **high expectations for students’** behaviors and academic outcomes are equally important and mutually reinforcing.
- **Expectations are consistent.** For example, teachers are trained in one consistent framework or approach to behavior management and are committed to using it. Administrators are also consistent in their treatment of behavior issues. The result is that adults in the school know what to expect from each other, and they support each other to create clear expectations of students.
- **Systems of student support are universal and opt-out instead of opt-in.** It is not up to students to seek out support. In schools where support is not universal, some teachers may offer to help students after class, but it is up to teachers to decide to offer it, and up to students to decide to utilize it. In schools with universal supports, on the other hand, all students who need help receive assistance through school-wide strategies that are consistent and predictable across all teachers. For example, teachers may coordinate lunchtime tutoring for shared subjects and sign students up automatically if they need to catch-up or improve their grade.

2 Principals Created a Strong Learning Climate by Supporting Teacher Leadership around School-wide Goals



Districtwide data showed that teacher leadership was a critical mechanism through which principals established a strong school climate.

Interviews showed what robust teacher leadership that fosters strong school climate looks like in practice:

- **Teachers work together to find solutions** to common problems. Teachers know how their work contributes to overall school goals. They are accountable to each other and take collective ownership.
- **Teachers' meeting time is used for a planned purpose**, aligned with goals of the school, such as monitoring student progress and planning student-specific supports.
- **Principals support teacher teams.** Principals maintain a collective focus on school goals. They coordinate work within and across teams to facilitate collective efforts. They also make sure that solutions are shared and applied school-wide.

Implications for School Leaders

Schools with the highest learning gains had principals who promoted a strong school climate by empowering and coordinating the work of teachers and school staff around shared goals. Improvements in school climate set up all teachers and students to be successful.

- **Successful principals develop systems for supporting teachers to support students.** They work to ensure that all teachers are collaborating together around school goals, that universal supports and structures for students are in place, and that professional learning is aligned with school improvement efforts. Principals can get caught up in day-to-day needs and may spend too much time on working one-on-one with individual teachers. Ultimately, they need to take time to develop structures for collaboration among staff and to advance the leadership capacity of the school around shared goals.
- **Successful principals are skilled in organizing and supporting shared leadership among staff.** Principals empower staff members and teach-

ers so that they have collective ownership of the school vision and goals—because the work is difficult, if not impossible, to achieve individually.

- **Successful principals manage shared leadership by guiding, coordinating, and monitoring the work of teachers and leaders in the school.** They do not simply distribute leadership responsibilities to different staff members as individual initiatives. Nor do their individual teacher leaders focus solely on their own classroom responsibilities. Principals serve as bridges across a school. They regularly monitor the progress of school efforts, keeping staff focused on school goals and helping them determine the effectiveness of their strategies.

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

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Publications include:

Sebastian, J., Huang, H., & Allensworth, E. (2016)

The role of teacher leadership in how principals influence classroom instruction and student learning. *American Journal of Education*, 123(1), 69-108.

Pareja, A.S., Hart, H., & Gordon, M.F. (forthcoming)

Improving student achievement in high-poverty urban schools: How strong principals succeed. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Consortium on School Research

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