How Principals Affect Students and Schools:
A Systematic Synthesis of Two Decades of Research

Report published by The Wallace Foundation

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The Wallace Foundation Report, published in February 2021, provides an analysis of research conducted over the past 20 years. The Report details three skills and four behaviours that increase principals' efficiency in impacting student achievement and schools. The Report also provides direct connections with equity work. It concludes with considerations for future research in regard to the impact of principals on students and schools. This paper includes a summary of most of the chapters of the Report, each contextualized with my own perspective as Director of Professional Learning for Canada's largest principals' association. Chapter 1 (Introduction), Chapter 4 (Synthesis Methodology) and Chapter 9 (Implications and Conclusions) are not summarized.

Chapter 2 - The Policy Context of School Leadership since 2000

As reflected in the chapter title, the content of this chapter of the Report features an explanation of the policy context of school leadership in the United States. Given the limited relevance of this context for Ontario, Canada school districts, I am limiting my summary to a few key aspects which, in my view, are also relevant to the Canadian context.

The authors of the Wallace Foundation Report state that equity should be considered a standalone policy and goal. They note an increased focus on cultural responsiveness and equity. This is also true in Ontario, and evidence of that exists within board and school improvement plans where there is a governmental expectation that at least one of the goals is equity-related. There is a needed focus on equity as we look at systemic racist and colonial structures and come together to learn as we seek to dismantle these systems, replacing them with equitable policies, practices and procedures.

Another general area of improvement is the more frequent use of observation, rubrics and discussion tools to support professional learning (PL) for teachers on a continuous basis. Again, this is also the case in Ontario, where school leaders demonstrate and share instructional leadership through formal and informal opportunities to discuss student achievement and well-being with teachers and other school staff.

Chapter 3 - Changes in the Principal Workforce from 1988 to 2016

Chapter 3 provides a detailed analysis of the changing workforce in regard to school principals in the United States. Given some similarities between the United States and Canada, it is possible that similar changes have occurred in Canada. However, without data to support the similarities or differences, we should not make that assumption. Nonetheless, the data can foster interesting discussions amongst principals and at the system level.

The authors note that there are more women in administrative roles, which is a demographic characteristic that more closely resembles the teacher workforce, especially in the elementary panel. In regard to race and ethnicity, the authors found that while the principal workforce is more racially and ethnically diverse than it was, it is still not as diverse as the student population. Additionally, racialized principals are more likely to lead schools in high diversity areas where students more often live in areas of low socio-economic status, there are higher percentages of students with special needs and more English language learner (ELL)

students. For those reasons, school leadership has become more complex, as learning needs are increasingly diverse. As such, principals need a broader set of skills.

The number of administrators with graduate degrees has not changed over time. However, their years of experience has changed, in that they have less experience. In fact, principals with the least experience are most likely to find themselves in poor areas. Additionally, the authors note that tenure in schools has shortened over time, the shortest tenures being in high poverty areas. These factors have an impact on principals' ability to implement change. To support principals, we need to provide principals with tools, resources and knowledge to match the needs of changing populations.

As noted, the portrait of principals depicted in the Wallace Foundation Report is likely similar to that of Canadian or Ontario principals. While there is not readily available evidence of that, if we assume this is also the case, then the question becomes what can we do about it? In the past 12-18 months, we have seen increased awareness related to equity issues, including systemic racism and colonialism. That awareness is not enough. To implement deep and sustainable change, we need to provide better supports to principals both during their training to become principals, and through ongoing PL that meets their needs. Additionally, education systems should consider how to put in place strategies that will lead to a principal workforce that is more representative of the populations we serve as public educators.

Chapter 5 - How Large Are Principal Effects?

The authors note that principal effects are difficult to quantify. The challenges that exist in regard to quantifying principals' impact on students may be due to factors beyond the control of principals, the time it takes for a principal's practices and skills to have an impact on students and the notion that a principal's impact, when compared to a teacher's, is indirect. Despite some of these challenges, through an analysis of six studies, the authors of the Report note that principals' impact on students is almost as large as teachers' effects on students. They go on to note that moving a student who switches from a low efficiency teacher to a high efficiency teacher will have improved results in reading and math. When a similar switch occurs with principals, moving a student from a low efficiency principal to a high efficiency principal, the impact on student achievement is lower than with the teacher scenario, but only a bit. In fact, they express this difference in impact as one month's worth of learning. So, while teacher effect is of direct importance to students, the reality is that having a highly efficient principal is more likely to expose students to highly effective teachers.

The authors of the Report also propose that the effectiveness of principals is, in fact, more important than that of teachers when it comes to school improvement: the improvements in student achievement are slightly lower than for teachers, but they apply to more students. The Report indicates that principals' impact on students are not limited to achievement in different subject areas, notably math and reading. Rather, the positive impact of effective principals are also noticeable in regard to reduced student absenteeism, improved school discipline data, enhanced teacher outcomes and attitudes (through the provision of time, professional development and resources) and reduced teacher turnover rates. Essentially, "principals really matter" (p. 61).

This chapter is an important one for principals themselves and for organizations that support PL for principals. It is vitally important for principals to understand the breadth and depth of their impact on teachers, as well as on students through their abilities to implement change and provide support. In a profession where, human nature being what it is, we hear more often about what we are doing wrong than what we have done well, principals currently serving students need to know how important their work is and how much they can bring positive change. Moreover, given the impacts noted occur where principals are efficient, principals need continuous opportunities to develop their skills, knowledge and resources to become efficient, or to remain efficient. Principal preparation programs, school districts and professional associations can all work to support the development of principals' efficiencies with highly relevant, evidence-based programming.

Chapter 6 - How Principals' Attributes Matter: Evidence on Race, Ethnicity, Gender, Experience and Other Characteristics

Chapter 6 is based on data from over 200 studies and analyzes impact on teacher outcomes. Through their analysis, the authors determine that attributes such as race, ethnicity and gender can have an impact on hiring, retention and job attitudes. Often, a principal's identity will influence teachers' identity both from a hiring perspective and a teacher turnover perspective. The Report goes on to explain that there is some evidence that a principal's race and ethnicity has a positive impact on students who share those racial and ethnic attributes.

Also, they note that a principal of colour is more likely to hire teachers of colour, which positively impacts achievement data for students of colour, while also having a positive impact on student attendance. So, what about White principals' impact on students of colour? The Report states that antiracist work is important for all principals, including White principals.

The next section of the chapter is concerned with the impact of gender. The authors note that gender has an impact on turnover, especially for teachers who identify as male, since they are more likely to leave if their principal identifies as female. The Report also states that teachers report a higher level of satisfaction when they work with a principal who shares their gender identity. That being said, there is no evidence that the principals' gender identity has an impact on student outcomes.

The Report also considers other attributes such as experience, age and graduate degrees. Most of these attributes do not have a significant impact on student or teacher outcomes. Experience as a principal and efficiency as a teacher did have positive impacts on student and teacher outcomes. Principal turnover, on the other hand, was found to have a negative impact, though the impact is mitigated if the principal has more leadership experience.

Principal turnover was also found to lead to increased teacher turnover, reduced student outcomes and poorer school climates. Turnover rates for principals were higher for beginning principals and those close to retirement than for those in the middle of their leadership career. School context has been found to have an impact on principal turnover. For example, turnover rates are higher in schools with more students of colour or where there is low or declining student achievement. The higher rate of turnover in certain schools creates inequalities in the distribution of principals as measured by teacher and supervisor ratings.

The data, analysis and conclusions shared in this chapter have implications for systems as they plan for principal placement and provide equity-based leadership training for principals. The schools with the highest turnover rates appear to be the schools which most need the stability of experienced, efficient principals. At the same time, it may be that those very efficient principals who end up in higher-needs schools could also benefit, at some point, in being placed in schools with a different profile. In any event, it is important that systems take the time to consider the data from this chapter, and indeed from the Report, as one of many considerations in the decisions that concern principal placement. Additionally, systems, as well as other providers of PL, need to be concerned with providing principals with equity leadership training that will allow them to address systemic issues such as systemic racism and colonialism. Beyond training, principals need access to a variety of resources that will support their efforts as they endeavour to make schools more equitable learning environments.

Chapter 7 - Principals' Skills and Behaviors That Support Learning

Chapter 7 presents three key skills and four behaviours of effective principals. Then, the chapter moves to presenting the results of the analysis of the 200 studies in regard to leadership for equity. The chapter ends with possible interventions.

The three skills are instruction, people and the organization. Instruction is concerned with a principal's ability to observe and evaluate teachers by providing feedback in an effective way such that pedagogical practices move from low to high impact. The skill labeled as people is concerned with a principal's ability to use effective communication skills as a means to interact with and develop people through the creation of a trusting, safe, caring and nurturing environment. The organization is a skill concerned with the management aspect of the school. It is about paying attention to management issues such as health and safety, budgeting and hiring.

The first of the four behaviours is engaging in instructionally focused interactions with teachers. This behaviour falls in the domain of instructional leadership though it moves beyond that. Enacting this behaviour means that principals make use of such resources and practices as observation, evaluation, feedback, coaching, PL and data to engage with teachers. The authors also note a tendency for principals to be overly focused on positive conversations and hesitant to have conversations about weaknesses. However, what works is providing feedback that is actionable and specific while allocating an appropriate amount of resources to PL.

The next behaviour is building a productive school climate. Execution of this behaviour means that the principal pays attention to the school culture and works toward building a strong school climate where all members of the school community work together toward effective teaching and learning by helping teachers feel safe, valued and supported. This occurs through the creation of routines and demonstrable competence.

The third behaviour is facilitating collaboration and professional learning communities (PLCs). Manifestations of this behaviour "[involve] working toward a common goal with shared resources, responsibilities, and accountability" (p. 66). From a principal perspective, this requires creating a culture of learning, providing time and creating opportunities for support through PLCs.

The fourth and final behaviour that emanates from the analysis is managing personnel and resources strategically. This behaviour is related to managing time (principal's time,

scheduling for staff and students, finding ways to create time), external social capital and strategic management of staff (for example, assignment and placement).

The next section of Chapter 7 provides insight into leadership for equity. The authors note that the data available for this part of the analysis is mostly qualitative. Through their analysis they connect equity work with each of the four behaviours. Essentially, leadership for equity requires principals to reflect on how their own behaviours and actions support the removal of barriers. In regard to instructionally focused interactions with teachers, the authors mention that equity leadership manifests as consideration for how interactions with teachers impact the use of culturally responsive teaching and specific populations of students, such as English language learners.

Principals should work with teachers to understand and learn about minoritized students' circumstances while maintaining high expectations for those students. When considered together with equity, the behaviour of building a productive climate manifests as balance between the needs of minoritized students and administrative mandates, paying close attention to how issues such as discipline are managed. Facilitating collaboration and equity results in leadership behaviour that fosters purposeful collaboration with external partners or stakeholders, including families. Finally, managing personnel and resources strategically through an equity perspective allows for consideration of diversity when making decisions in regard to hiring and staffing. For example, hiring for diversity and hiring teachers with pedagogical skills that will support learning for all.

The skills and behaviours, including the attention to leadership for equity outlined proposed in Chapter 7, provide valuable information for principals, systems and other organizations. Principals can use the information in this chapter to reflect on their leadership practices and have conversations with teachers to gain a different perspective of their skills and behaviours as leaders. Additionally, the skills and behaviours, especially with the equity focus, can be used by principals, systems and professional organizations as foundations for developing PL that supports leadership development both in principal preparation programs and in continuous, job-embedded PL.

Chapter 8 - The State of the Evidence on School Principals

The second last chapter of the Report makes a statement about the evidence that currently exists in regard to school principals and their impact on teacher and student outcomes. Essentially, the authors of the Report conclude that while there is variety in the

types of studies that have been done, important topics continue to merit the attention of researchers. Future research should also be concerned with issues that relate to internal and external validity.

Beyond what the authors share in the Report, I would add that the research in regard to the efficiency of principals needs to take into consideration different contextual factors that exist across nations. We need to be able to work both locally and globally to identify strategies that can be effective as-is in local contexts and other strategies that might be adapted or transformed for other contexts. For example, North American educators and researchers should be open to learning about school leadership in other parts of the world, including the global South. As student populations become increasingly diverse, fostering global connectedness, sharing and networking amongst school leaders and researchers becomes an important source of PL for principals.