

# **Large national study strongly links educational leadership to student achievement**

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A new study released today, the largest of its kind, offers important new evidence affirming the strong connection between what school leaders do and student achievement -- and sheds new light on what effective leadership involves.

The conclusions in the report, *Learning from Leadership: Investigating the Links to Improved Student Learning*, by researchers Kyla Wahlstrom and Karen Seashore Louis from the University of Minnesota College of Education and Human Development and Kenneth Leithwood and Stephen Anderson from the University of Toronto, have broad implications for the understanding of how leadership affects learning across the United States.

"The rubber hits the road in the classroom; that's where the learning happens," said Wahlstrom. "Leadership is important because it sets the conditions and the expectations in the school that there will be excellent instruction and there will be a culture of ongoing learning for the educators and for the students in the school."

The study demonstrates a strong, positive link between educational leaders — particularly principals — and student learning outcomes. As the topic of student achievement and test scores dominates policy discussions at the local, state, and national levels, schools and districts face mounting pressure to improve student outcomes. The report

provides vital information for policymakers and educational leaders to help students succeed.

Researchers of the \$3.5 million study, funded by The Wallace Foundation and conducted over six years, conducted more than 1,000 interviews, surveyed more than 8,000 teachers and administrators, and observed in more than 350 classrooms at all grade levels.

"In Learning from Leadership — the largest study of school leadership to date — researchers found the strongest evidence yet of principals' significant effects on student achievement," said Edward Pauly, director of research and evaluation at The Wallace Foundation. "With current constraints on state and district budgets, this research is all the more timely; the case is stronger than ever for investing in better leadership to improve schools and bring benefits to all students."

Learning from Leadership is an important contribution to the Wallace Foundation's 10-year body of research into understanding and improving leadership in educational settings. The study's authors examined leadership extensively and in its many forms — from the state and district levels to individual principals, school board members, teachers, and community members. They found that collaboration among these stakeholders correlated with improved student learning.

Learning from Leadership discusses how superintendents and principals can most effectively drive gains in student achievement and how and why their practices result in instructional improvement in some contexts and not others.

"Among many other findings, I anticipate readers will be especially interested in our findings about successful leadership practices, the importance of distributing those practices in coordinated ways, and the key contribution of leader efficacy in accounting for district success,"

said Leithwood.

Among the report's key findings:

- Student achievement is higher in schools where principals share leadership with teachers and the community; principals play a key role in encouraging others to join.
- Higher-performing schools generally ask for more input and engagement from a wider variety of stakeholders.
- District support for shared leadership fosters the development of professional communities. Where teachers feel attached to a professional community, they are more likely to use instructional practices that are linked to improved student learning.
- In districts where levels of student learning are high, district leaders are more likely to emphasize goals and initiatives that reach beyond minimum state expectations for student performance.

Major challenges to effective school leadership include:

- The stark lack of district support for principals' professional development and a lack of regular contact between most principals and their district office. District leadership also needs to increase support for principals to use data-driven decision-making.
- The direct negative effect of principal turnover on student achievement due to disruptions in cooperation and shared

leadership with teachers

- A lack of real and sustained leadership directed to improve instruction in high schools
- The absence of comprehensive approaches to education reform in most states

The rich set of findings in Learning from Leadership can help educators, policymakers, and other thought leaders understand how [student achievement](#) is linked to leadership at all levels of the education system, from the classroom to the state capital. The report's implications are vast, but one message is clear: "Schools and districts that don't have good leaders will struggle," said Wahlstrom. "So leadership absolutely makes a difference. I can't say that strongly enough: Good [leadership](#) is critical to good education."

Provided by University of Minnesota

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