

Report sheds light on impact of effective school leadership on student learning outcomes

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A major new research review released today paints a detailed picture of how strong principals affect students' educational and social outcomes.

The report, co-authored by Professor Jason A. Grissom at Vanderbilt University, concludes that school leaders are even more important than previously believed and that investing in their success has a very large payoff.

"Given not just the magnitude but also the scope of principal effects, which are felt across a potentially large [student](#) body and faculty in a school, it is difficult to envision an investment with a higher ceiling on its potential return than a successful effort to improve principal leadership," said Grissom, professor of leadership, policy and organizations who holds a Patricia and Rodes Hart Chair at Peabody College of education and human development.

"How Principals Affect Students and Schools: A Systematic Synthesis of Two Decades of Research," commissioned by The Wallace Foundation, updates a groundbreaking 2004 review of the literature on school leadership by Kenneth Leithwood, et al., that has been downloaded more than 800,000 times from the foundation's website. The authors of the new report are Grissom; Anna J. Egalite, an associate professor at North Carolina State University; and Constance A. Lindsay, an assistant professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Drawing on 20 years of research and 219 studies, the synthesis identifies four behaviors of principals linked to positive school outcomes, suggests continued reorientation of the work of principals toward educational equity, and offers an emerging vision of how the four behaviors can be carried out with an equity focus.

To gauge the impact of principals on student learning, the researchers examined six rigorous studies that followed the same schools and principals over multiple years. The studies showed that principals' contributions to student achievement were nearly as large as the average effects of teachers identified in similar studies—but larger in scope

because they were distributed over an entire school rather than a single classroom.

"Our findings on the importance of principals' effects suggest the need for renewed attention to strategies for cultivating, selecting, preparing and supporting a high-quality principal workforce," Grissom said. "The payoffs to successful strategies appear very large for [student learning](#) and for other important outcomes, such as student attendance and teacher turnover."

For insights into the practices of effective principals, the research team drew on research studies undertaken since 2000. Based on the weight of evidence, the researchers identified four key behaviors of effective principals: (1) focusing on high-leverage engagement around instruction, which includes teacher evaluation, feedback and coaching, and establishing a data-driven instructional program; (2) establishing a productive school climate, in which all individuals in the school can spend their time engaging in or supporting effective instruction; (3) facilitating collaboration and professional learning communities; and (4) using personnel and resource management processes strategically, including intangible resources like time and social capital, with strategic teacher hiring being key. To carry out those behaviors, the study says, principals need three types of skills: people skills, instructional skills, and organizational skills.

Will Miller, president of The Wallace Foundation, calls for a balanced approach in investments at the school level, noting the strong correlation between principal and teacher effectiveness.

The report also describes the composition of the current principal workforce and how it has changed from the recent past. Over the past two decades, the researchers found, the principalship has become markedly more female, with women representing 54 percent of all

principals in 2016, compared with just 25 percent in 1988. Principals' level of experience has fallen on average, especially in high-need schools. The report also shows growing racial and ethnic gaps between principals and the students they serve.

"We have a school leadership corps that is nearly 80 percent white and a student body that is only 53 percent white," Lindsay said. "The context of [school](#) leadership has changed significantly, and to address these patterns, schools and districts should reconsider their human resources policies and practices."

To meet the needs of growing numbers of marginalized students, the report calls for principals to develop an "equity lens," defined as ensuring fair, just and nondiscriminatory treatment of all students, the removal of barriers, the provision of resources and supports, and the creation of opportunities with the goal of promoting equitable outcomes.

"We hope this report will be helpful to practitioners, policymakers and others who are working to improve equitable outcomes for more young people," Miller said.

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

[www.wallacefoundation.org/know ... des-of-research.aspx](http://www.wallacefoundation.org/know...des-of-research.aspx)

Provided by Vanderbilt University

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