Research Utilization Briefs:
School Principal As Leader

Improved student learning is the central focus for contemporary P-12 schools—and leadership is second only to teacher quality as the defining difference between schools that achieve high student performance and those that do not (Seashore Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010). For over a decade The Wallace Foundation has supported diverse efforts to improve leadership in public schools. In its January 2012 publication, *The School Principal As Leader: Guiding Schools to Better Teaching and Learning*, the Foundation presents a synthesis of lessons learned from more than 70 research reports and publications about school leadership. Five key functions performed by effective principals encapsulate the lessons learned from research and frame this Research Utilization Brief.

Function 1: Visions of Academic Success

The global economy of the 21st century demands that public school educators narrow the academic achievement gap between disadvantaged and advantaged students to assure their future career and college success. Narrowing the achievement gap can be accomplished only if a principal establishes a vision of student success and commitment to high standards that is shared and supported by all members of the school community (Knapp, Copland, Honig, Plecki, & Portin, 2010). This shared vision of academic success is essential for "the overall achievement of all students" (Porter et al., 2008, p. 13).

Function 2: Hospitable Learning Climate

Effective learning and teaching requires a school community characterized as an "upbeat, welcoming, solution-oriented, no-blame, professional environment" (Portin et al., 2009, p. 59). School cultures—hospitable to learning—support active engagement by adults and students in diverse activities that develop shared responsibility for safety and orderliness and transmit a supportive, can-do attitude (Goldring, Porter, Murphy, Elliott, & Cravens, 2007). The caring and trusting atmosphere of a professional community makes learning the central focus for adults and children.

Function 3: Cultivating Leadership

Sustaining a shared vision of success and a climate hospitable to learning requires the cultivation of leadership throughout the school community, what Seashore Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, and Anderson (2010) call *collective leadership.* Through shared decision making by principals, teachers, and community members, the school community remains focused on student-achievement expectations and goals. Relational trust created through collective leadership enhances teacher collaboration and professional development—that in turn generates higher student achievement.

Function 4: Improved Instruction

Effective principals understand that quality instruction is essential for improved student learning (Portin et al., 2009). They visit classrooms regularly to observe teaching and monitor student learning, and they engage in ongoing and informal conversations with teachers to assess professional-development needs. These formative assessments inform principals about the school's academic program and student achievement, and about the school's progress in achievement of envisioned goals. Effective principals, particularly those leading secondary schools, cultivate instructional leadership among department chairs and other teaching specialists to assist in monitoring learning and teaching (Seashore Louis et al., 2010). Principals and teacher leaders of high performing

schools focus intently on the technical core to assure quality instruction yields high achieving learning.

Function 5: Management of Resources

Effective principals are likewise effective managers of people, data, and processes within the schools they serve (Portin, Schneider, DeArmond, & Gundlach, 2003). They hire staff members carefully and then nurture and support them; when necessary, effective principals take appropriate action to replace staff members that are under performing. Effective principals use diverse data sources to inform them about school's performance, and they promote "collaborative inquiry among teachers" (Portin et al., 2009, p. v) to assess student-learning progress.

The Vanderbilt Assessment of Leadership in Education (VAL-ED), a tool to assess principal performance, is based on six key processes demonstrated by effective school leaders: *planning, implementing, supporting, advocating, communicating,* and *monitoring* (Porter et al., 2008). Because these six leadership functions and principal longevity are essential components of lasting school improvement, those who hire principals are advised to assess their performance regularly and provide ongoing professional development. Research evidences that high-performing schools are led by effective principals who stay put for 5-7 years. Unfortunately, the average tenure of principals in the USA is only 3.6 years.

Improving School Leadership

The work by The Wallace Foundation suggests that *effective leadership* described in this Brief requires four critical strategies: (a) defining the job of the principal and assistant principal, (b) providing high-quality training for aspiring school leaders, (c) hiring selectively, and (d) evaluating principal and giving them the on-the-job support they need. To assure that states, districts, universities, and other partners have the tools necessary to train, hire, support, and evaluate principals, the Foundation provides free access to its commissioned research reports, such as those listed in references below, through the Knowledge Center on its website (http://www.wallacefoundation.org).

References

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