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# Educational Leadership Matters: Educational Leadership Preparation Matters Too

**Abstract**

There is a growing understanding that, after engaging teaching, educational leadership is the second most important factor accounting for student success. Despite this fundamental declaration, educational leadership has fallen through the cracks. Little interest has developed concerning in-depth studies of this important position in education. Educational leaders carry the unique responsibility to unify the many independent variables at play in schools, and create an atmosphere in which the synergy produced delivers results far beyond academic achievement. As such, educational leadership preparation programs carry the enormous responsibility to address the fundamental difference between an effective school manager and an effective leader.

Keywords: educational leadership, leadership preparation programs

## Introduction: The importance of educational leadership

Leadership is at the heart of quality education. There is a growing understanding that, after engaging teaching, educational leadership is the second most important factor explaining learning outcomes (Leithwood et al., 2004; 2020; Louis et al., 2010). This means that, as we further our efforts to increase student intellectual development, in addition to focusing on the preparation of effective classroom teachers, it is imperative to broaden our perspective and vision, and understand school leadership preparation programs as paramount to advancements in academic achievement at the school, district, state, and national levels. The idea of school leadership being a major factor influencing learning becomes increasingly important in the context of schools in underprivileged and underserved areas (Wallace Foundation, 2014).

## Educational leadership has fallen through the cracks

In modern times, a school leader, known in different contexts as principal, director, headmaster or administrator, is faced with the responsibility to deal with an entire school swayed by an incredibly wide array of inputs from political, economic, socio-cultural, technological, systemic, institutional, and educational forces (Gurr, 2024). Despite the fact that school leaders are expected to deal with unrealistic demands concerning an incredibly mixed assortment of areas of expertise, little interest has developed concerning in-depth studies on the characteristics of this important position in education, perhaps because of the easily observable direct impact teachers have on the day-to-day life of the classroom. School leaders have fallen through the cracks, perceived as people

who obediently complete administrative tasks while ordering others to be obedient to them (Rousmaniere, 2013).

## School leadership matters

Leadership is of the greatest consequence. Leaders have the power to unbind untapped dormant potentials in organizations. In other words: each school variable, considered independently, has only a small effect on student achievement, but in order

*[t]o obtain large effects, educators need to create synergy across the relevant variables. Among all the parents, teachers, and policy makers who work hard to improve education, educators in leadership positions are uniquely well positioned to ensure the necessary synergy.* (Louis et al., 2010, p. 9)

Moreover, when viewed from the perspective of academic achievement, Superville (2021, p. 1) states that

*replacing a below-average principal with someone in the above-average category, can add the equivalent of 2.9 more months of learning in math and 2.7 more months of learning in reading during a single school year.*

Furthermore, principals also possess the potential to positively impact outcomes beyond academics like attendance, teacher satisfaction, and overall working conditions, resulting in a significant, positive transformation of school culture and climate. According to the National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services (2010), no school sustainably improves the quality of education in the absence of an effective school leadership.

The National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services (2010) also concludes that school leadership matters, since effective educational leaders: 1) define values and vision to raise expectations; 2) restructure the organization and assign roles and responsibilities; 3) shape conditions to enhance the quality of teaching and learning; 4) enhance teacher quality and enrich the curriculum; and 4) build strong relationships inside and outside the school community. In accordance with the conclusions drawn by the National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services (2010), research commissioned by the Flemish Association for Development Cooperation and Technical Assistance (VVOB) (2018) has also shown that school leadership matters for quality education because: 1) school leaders who develop, support, and evaluate the quality of teaching, influence learning outcomes; 2) the impact of school leadership on learning outcomes is second only to the quality of teaching and learning; 3) effective school leadership is critical for raising learners' achievement; 4) effective school leadership is particularly important in improving poorly performing and disadvantaged schools; and 5) successful school leadership has a positive impact on the entire school.

At this point, it is safe to conclude that school leadership matters, as it plays a critical role in driving improvement and influencing practices and behaviors through the establishment of strong connections which, in turn, enable leaders to inspire and mobilize all members of their communities (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000).

## Educational leadership extends beyond the managerial responsibilities of principals

The functions of educational leadership are broader than simply managing a school and addressing the logistics of schedules, cafeterias, bus lines, and discipline. It involves,

among other responsibilities, setting institutional guidelines, fostering professional development, and facilitating collaboration with community stakeholders, including families (UNESCO, 2018; Vaillant, 2015). Moreover, educational leadership, as a function, goes beyond academic exercise. Educational leadership is crucial for the development of policies that benefit not only individual schools but also entire education systems (Weinstein & Muñoz, 2014). This recognition highlights the importance of contextualized knowledge about leadership. Consequently, educational leaders must be able to apply research findings meaningfully within their specific contexts (School Leadership Network, 2022).

A compilation of more than 20 years of studies concerning successful leadership have served as a reliable source of evidence establishing some of the most notable leadership practices, beyond academic exercise and school management, required of effective educational leaders. Among them, it is possible to enumerate: 1) defining and modeling vision, values, and direction; 2) sharing leadership; 3) building relationships and engaging the community outside the school; 4) redesigning the organization and aligning roles and responsibilities; 5) staying current with legal and policy changes; 6) providing access and equity for all; and 7) ensuring the safety and wellbeing of the entire learning community (Day et al., 2020; Gurr & Drysdale, 2021).

## The challenge: transforming a school principal into an effective school leader

According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2008): School leadership has become a priority in education policy agendas internationally. School leadership plays a key role in improving school outcomes by influencing the motivations and capacities of teachers, addressing school-specific needs, and providing guidance during challenging circumstances (Priya & Sampat, 2021). Effective school leadership is essential to improve the efficiency and equity of schooling. However, School Leadership Network (2022) also reminds us that "the transformation of every school principal into an effective leader, equipped with clear evidence-based tools tailored to their unique academic and policy context, remains an ongoing challenge" (p. 2).

In the United States, with hundreds of school leadership preparation programs, there has been extensive questioning of the quality and added value provided by these programs (Elmore, 2000; Levine, 2005). Some of the recorded issues of concern include: 1) the substandard quality of leadership preparation programs as perceived by school district leaders; 2) the lack of strong partnerships between preparation programs and school districts; 3) the lack of connectedness between the preparation program contents and the real work of educational leaders; and 4) the barriers created by university policies (Davis, 2016).

In-service professional development for educational leaders has also been examined and found wanting. The main claims concerning the inadequacy of professional development for educational leaders include: 1) too focused on technical issues; 2) programs too far removed from practice; and 3) insufficient use of contemporary learning practices (Murphy, 2020; Parylo & Zepeda, 2015; Shah, 2023; Webster-Wright, 2009; Zhang, 2019).

## Building capacity in school leadership

Building capacity in school leadership starts with building the capacity of those who provide professional development for school leaders (VVOB, 2018). This translates into integrating the idea of educational leadership as a stand-alone notion, and establishing a clear differentiation between educational leadership and educational administration as independent components of academic preparation programs.

Successful capacity building programs in educational leadership: 1) are embedded in the overall school leadership support system; 2) are stimulated by educational leadership at higher levels; 3) are tailored to school leaders' practices and context; 4) evolve from passive to active learning; 5) provide opportunities for effective transitions into the leadership role; 6) evaluate leadership performance; 7) create research and development roles for universities; and 8) validate indigenous knowledge bases across cultures (Pont et al., 2008; Hallinger, 2003).

It has been made clear that standards and competencies are important components of a leadership preparation program, however, Robinson (2010, p. 23) wisely observes that

> [l]earning to lead is not about mastering a long list of capabilities. It is about learning how to draw on and integrate appropriate cognitive and emotional resources in context-sensitive and goal-relevant ways.

Furthermore, educational leadership preparation programs also require the continuous support and provision of opportunities for leaders to actively engage with the community and set strategic goals to foster an optimal learning environment for all (Latham, 2024).

## Final remarks

### Educational leadership matters

In the school setting, an effective leader has the immense responsibility to unite the many independent variables at play and create an atmosphere in which the synergy produced positively impacts not only the academic achievement of every student, but also the overall school culture and climate. Quality education cannot exist in the absence of an effective leadership.

### Leadership preparation and development matters

The transformation of every school principal into an effective leader remains an ongoing challenge. The building of the capacity of school leaders starts with the building of the capacity of the programs providing pre-service and in-service leadership preparation and development. Future school principals must be cognizant of the fundamental difference between functioning as an effective school manager and functioning as an effective leader.

Principals really matter. Indeed, it is difficult to envision an investment with a higher ceiling on its potential return than a successful effort to improve principal leadership (Grissom et al., 2021).

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