

RESEARCHWORKS

Discoveries in action at the University of Minnesota College of Education and Human Development

When principals support teacher leaders, students gain

Principals have a strong, though indirect, impact on student achievement.

Student test results and school status have dominated news coverage of education since No Child Left Behind became law in 2001. Despite the commitment to raising student achievement, many schools continue to lag established goals. Exploring ways to improve outcomes is the focal point of much educational research, from studies of teacher practice, to classroom and test design. But what effect does school leadership have on student achievement?

Though principals have an indirect impact, it is a significant one, says professor [Karen Seashore Louis](#) (organizational leadership, policy, and development), who has spent much of the past 30 years researching school improvement and reform.

“Their impact is always indirect through teachers, because teachers, in fact, are the people who deliver the goods,” Louis says. “But they have a lot of indirect impact. They have an enormous effect on the way in which teachers work together and the priorities they place on improving instruction in the classroom.”



Principals have the greatest impact on student achievement when they share leadership with teachers and when they create a professional learning climate in which instruction and improvement in instruction are clear priorities. These were the central findings in the five-year study, “Learning from Leadership: Investigating the Links to Improve Student Learning,” for which Louis was principal investigator, along with [Kyla Wahlstrom](#), director of the Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement, and faculty from the University of Toronto.

Funded by the Wallace Foundation, “Learning from Leadership,” is one of the largest studies ever undertaken on the subject. It includes case studies from 36 schools; survey data from 8,391 teachers; and in-depth interviews with teachers, administrators, and state personnel. The study examines school and district practices that influence student achievement and how successful leadership practices directly and indirectly influence the quality of teaching and learning.

What the research shows

Sharing leadership, says Louis, requires involving teachers in identifying problems and areas for improvement. She offers the example of one large, urban high school involved in the study where teachers spent a year identifying priorities for improvement. “The administration didn’t tell them what they were,” she says. “These came from the teachers themselves through guided discussions and staff meetings. There was a teacher-leader appointed for every initiative they worked on.”

Principals also have an impact on student achievement by fostering strong professional learning communities where teachers share values and a common focus on student learning, collaborate in the development of curriculum and instruction, and have opportunities for professional development.

Sharing leadership with teachers means collaborating on identifying problems and solutions.

When teachers share leadership and organize their work around ways to improve student learning, they think and talk more about instruction, think about ways to engage students differently, and they work harder. All of that affects student achievement, Louis explains. Though past research has prioritized shared leadership over instructional leadership, or vice versa, the researchers suggested that these approaches are both complementary and necessary.

While the impact of principal leadership can be difficult to quantify, Louis and her fellow researchers found strong evidence from both survey and case study data linking principals' behavior to teachers' professional learning and quality of instruction—areas that have been shown to directly influence student learning. They discovered that student math achievement scores are significantly associated with focused instruction, existence of a professional community of teachers, and teachers' trust in the principal. State literacy test scores showed comparable results.

Louis and her fellow researchers concluded that administrators must become part of building-based professional communities focused on instruction and learning. They acknowledged, however, that this entails bridging a historical separation of roles. The report also suggested that school leaders focus primarily on increasing teacher involvement in schoolwide improvement.

What others are saying

Shared leadership has made a significant difference at Forest Lake High School, says Principal **Steve Massey**, (Ed.D. '99). Forest Lake had the greatest increase in students with math proficiency (from 30 percent to 51 percent) on the state MCA-II test among large public high schools last year. Reading and science results went up as well.

"There has been a powerful movement in our school around embracing the work of instruction and that has become a collective practice, a public practice," says Massey. "In large part, it's teachers embracing the importance of the work, around a coherent system, around instruction to standards, holding high expectations to kids," he continues. "It was also about teams of teachers, professional learning teams, working together around the critical work of instruction."

With an influx of 300 new students this fall, nearly half the student body, the result of a district reorganization in Robbinsdale Area Schools, Forest Elementary Principal **Connie Grumdahl** says providing teachers with support and fostering a professional learning culture are essential to success. "I want teachers to talk to each other about what is working. If something is not working, and they're not seeing the progress, what are you going to do about it?"

Next steps

Louis and Kenneth Leithwood of the University of Toronto plan to edit a book drawn from the study's findings. The research team intends to delve deeper into promising findings and to work with educational leaders to consider the implications for schools and districts.

Online resources

Leithwood, K., Louis, K.S., Anderson, S. & Wahlstrom, K. (2004). [How leadership influences student learning](#). New York: Wallace Foundation

Louis, K.S. (2006). [Changing the culture of schools: Professional community, organizational learning and trust](#). *Journal of School Leadership*, 16(4), 477-489.

Shared leadership and instructional leadership are both needed.

Significant test score gains tied to collaborative model.

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