Chapter 2: The Changing Role of Principals

Principals are the key factor in building and sustaining a school culture in which both teachers and students can succeed. Over the last decade, research has established the empirical link between school leadership and improved student achievement, and policy and practice have focused much attention on the role of the principal and what makes a principal effective. In addition to their role as instructional leaders helping to develop good teaching, effective principals are also collaborators, cultivating the leadership of teachers and others in their schools.

In this chapter, we look at the changing role of principals; teachers’ and principals’ perspectives on the most important skills and training for principals to be an effective school leader; principals’ job satisfaction; and how teachers and principals assess the performance of principals in their schools and districts.

Principals Say Their Jobs Have Changed and Become Too Complex

Most principals say that their responsibilities today have changed compared to five years ago and that the job has increased in complexity. Seven in 10 (69%) principals disagree with the statement that a school principal’s responsibilities today are very similar to his or her responsibilities five years ago. In schools where most students are not performing at or above grade level in English language arts and math, principals are more likely to hold this view than principals in schools where most students are performing at or above grade level (76% vs. 65%).

Moreover, three-quarters (75%) of principals agree that the job of the principal has become too complex, a view shared by principals regardless of demographic characteristics such as school level, school location, the proportion of low-income or minority students, or the proportion of students performing at or above grade level in English language arts and math.
Principal Attitudes about the Job of the Principal

**The job of the principal has become too complex**

- Strongly agree: 23%
- Somewhat agree: 52%
- Somewhat disagree: 22%
- Strongly disagree: 3%

**A school principal's responsibilities today are very similar to his or her responsibilities five years ago**

- Strongly agree: 5%
- Somewhat agree: 25%
- Strongly disagree: 41%
- Somewhat disagree: 28%
- Don't know: 2%

Strongly/Somewhat agree (Net): 75%
Strongly/Somewhat disagree (Net): 25%

Strongly/Somewhat agree (Net): 30%
Strongly/Somewhat disagree (Net): 69%

Base: Principals (n=500)
Q820: How much do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements? Strongly agree, Somewhat agree, Somewhat disagree, Strongly disagree
Principals and Teachers Differ in Their Perceptions of the Most Important Experiences and Skills for a School Principal

The ability to use student performance data to improve instruction is most important to principals, while teachers emphasize the experience of being a classroom teacher. Principals are most likely to say that it is very important that a principal uses data about student performance to improve instruction (85%) and has the ability to lead the development of strong teaching capacity across the school (84%) in order to be an effective school leader. In contrast, teachers are most likely to say that having been a classroom teacher is very important (79%). Substantially fewer teachers than principals indicate that it is very important that a principal uses data about student performance to improve instruction in order to be an effective leader (53% vs. 85%). Teachers are also less likely than principals to rate the ability to lead the development of strong teaching capacity across the school as very important (69% vs. 84%).

Principals and teachers are equally likely to say that having been a teacher is a very important experience for a principal (78% vs. 79%). However, principals are more likely to say it is very important that a principal can use data about student performance, has the ability to develop a strong teaching capacity, and evaluates teacher effectiveness using multiple measures than it is to have been a classroom teacher.

Principals and teachers also diverge in their evaluations of the importance of having strong operational skills to be an effective school leader. Seven in 10 (68%) teachers rate this as a very important experience, comparable in importance to the ability to lead development of strong teaching capacity, to evaluate teacher effectiveness using multiple measures, and to share responsibilities for leadership with teachers and other staff. Six in 10 (62%) principals rate having strong operational skills as very important, more than rate understanding how to use technology to improve instruction as very important but fewer than rate the other five skills evaluated as very important.

Overall, there is more consensus among principals than teachers on the importance of these factors for school leader effectiveness.
Figure 2.2
Experiences and Skills That Are Important for a School Principal to Have
(% Very important)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principal Experience/ Skill</th>
<th>Principals</th>
<th>Teachers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Uses data about student performance to improve instruction</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has the ability to lead the development of strong teaching capacity across the school</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluates teacher effectiveness using multiple measures</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has been a classroom teacher</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shares responsibilities for leadership with teachers and other staff</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has strong operational skills, such as managing facilities, schedules, budgets, etc.</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understands how to use technology to improve instruction</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Base: Principals (n=500); Teachers (n=1,000)

Q740: In order to be an effective school leader, how important is it that the school principal has the following experiences and skills? Very important, Important, Not too important, Not at all important
Elementary school principals and teachers are more likely than their high school counterparts to rate most of these skills as very important. Elementary school educators are more likely than high school educators to say that the following are very important skills for a principal to have in order to be an effective school leader:

- Uses data about student performance to improve instruction (principals: 89% vs. 71%; teachers: 62% vs. 44%);
- Evaluates teacher effectiveness using multiple measures (principals: 81% vs. 72%; teachers: 71% vs. 61%);
- Has been a classroom teacher (principals: 79% vs. 70%; teachers: 84% vs. 70%); and
- Understands how to use technology to improve instruction (principals: 54% vs. 39%; teachers: 50% vs. 39%).

In addition, elementary school teachers are more likely than high school teachers to say that having the ability to lead the development of strong teaching capacity across the school (74% vs. 64%) and having strong operational skills (72% vs. 62%) are very important skills for a principal to have in order to be an effective school leader. Elementary and high school principals do not differ in their ratings of importance on these measures. However, elementary school principals are more likely than high school principals to say that it is very important to share responsibilities for leadership with teachers and other staff (77% vs. 63%), while elementary and high school teachers do not differ in their ratings of how important they say this is.

Educators Emphasize Professional Accountability for Principals

Principals take responsibility for the leadership of their schools. Nine in 10 (89%) principals agree that, ultimately, the principal should be held accountable for everything that happens to the children in his or her school, including 45% who strongly agree with this view.

Principals in high-needs schools are less likely to agree that the principal should be held accountable for everything that happens to the children in his or her school. Although still the predominant belief, principals are less likely to hold this view when they are from schools with more than two-thirds low-income students (86% vs. 95% from schools with one-third or fewer low-income students); schools with more than two-thirds minority students (85% vs. 92% from schools with one-third or fewer minority students); and schools where no more than some students are performing at or above grade level in English language arts and math (84% vs. 92% from schools where most students perform at or above grade level).

Most teachers (74%) agree that principals should be held accountable for everything that happens to the children in his or her school, an increase compared to 1989 (60%). However, teachers are less likely than principals to hold this view (74% vs. 89%).

Observation:
Using data about student performance to improve instruction is likely to become a more prominent issue as assessments for Common Core State Standards are implemented across grade levels and influence high school graduation requirements. Thus, it is of interest that fewer than half of high school teachers in 2012 indicate that using data is a very important skill for a principal to have in order to be an effective school leader.

More information about teachers’ and principals’ views on the Common Core is included in Chapter 4.
Principals' Control over School Leadership Responsibilities Varies

*While they believe in their professional accountability, principals report varying levels of control over decision making in key areas.* Principals are least likely to report that they have a great deal of control in making decisions about finances (22%). Fewer than half of principals report having a great deal of control in making decisions about removing teachers (43%) or about curriculum and instruction (42%). In contrast, most principals say they have a great deal of control in making decisions about teachers’ schedules (79%) and hiring teachers (74%). Elementary, middle and high school principals report similar levels of control, with the exception of teachers’ schedules. High school principals are more likely than elementary school principals to say they have a great deal of control in making decisions about teachers’ schedules (87% vs. 78%).
Principals in high-needs schools are less likely to say they have a great deal of control in decisions about hiring and removing teachers. Principals are less likely to say they have a great deal of control in making decisions about hiring teachers when they are from urban schools (62% vs. 82% suburban and 77% rural schools); from schools with two-thirds or more low-income students (61% vs. 84% from schools with one-third or fewer low-income students); and from schools where no more than some students are performing at or above grade level in English language arts and math (67% vs. 78% from schools where most students are performing at or above grade level). A similar pattern is seen with regard to control over decisions on removing teachers. In addition, new principals with five or fewer years of experience are less likely to say they have a great deal of control in removing teachers (30% vs. 44% of those with six to 10 years of experience, and 53% of those with more than 10 years of experience).

Principals in high-needs schools do not show consistent differences on control in making decisions about teachers’ schedules, curriculum and instruction, or finances.