

Improving Principal Leadership through Professional Development, Feedback and Coaching

Ellen Goldring, Peabody College, Vanderbilt University

Research Brief Project Abstract

Principal leadership has been identified as having an indirect, but major influence on student achievement. It is one of the few influences on student achievement that can be modified unlike other factors such as socioeconomic status. However to date, there has yet to be many rigorous evaluations, including randomized-design studies, testing interventions that are intended to improve leadership and demonstrate a connection between improved leadership and student achievement.

My colleagues at Peabody College, Vanderbilt University, USA are interested in studying professional development, coaching, and feedback on school leadership with robust research designs and innovative measurement instruments. One important strategy for improving leadership is receiving feedback, and subsequent action on performance. A feedback system that assesses and communicates sound leadership behaviors and school indicators can be a promising tool for developing and maintaining effective leadership and school improvement. Coaching and professional development have the potential to direct the motivation provided by feedback in a productive manner. However, the research literature reveals that principals rarely receive systematic, specific, constructive feedback that enables them to know whether their actions are consistent with their intentions or expectations. Few principals receive systematic coaching on how to use feedback information.

Our research program aims to develop systematic feedback from teachers to principals on their leadership and to determine if and how such feedback influences the quality of that leadership and in turn, student achievement. Numerous studies outside of education have reported improved leadership, increased leader self-awareness, and overall improved performance following feedback from subordinates. In addition, this study developed a coaching intervention that assists principals with analyzing, processing, and utilizing the feedback-based insights from teachers. A team from Peabody College, lead by Professor Len Bickman, has obtained a federal grant from the US Institute of Education Sciences to study and devise a system for collecting teacher feedback about principals' leadership and for developing a coaching process that will assist principals in analyzing, processing, and using systematic feedback.

A theoretical model for feedback and coaching to principals is being tested. Seventy elementary and middle school principals were randomly assigned to the experimental or control condition. The experimental group (n=35) received feedback three times a year based on teacher and self ratings of their leadership. In the following academic year principals are receiving coaching. The experimental group will continue receiving feedback while also receiving coaching specific to the feedback report. The control group from the first year will receive feedback, but no coaching. This design will allow us to compare within groups as well as between groups. The study is a multi-phase randomized longitudinal study based on mixed-method research design. The study consists of 4 phases spanning 4-years with development activities running throughout. The key measures of outcome are changes in principal leadership and student achievement.

We are interested in expanding this work to include school indicators as feedback, and other models of professional development beyond coaching to develop leaders and support leaders to use feedback data. Furthermore, we are interested in implementing robust measures of leadership in such areas as expertise and practice, to implement theory-based program evaluation in rigorous research designs.