

# Principal Evaluation

## Standards, Rubrics, and Tools for Effective Performance

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## A Framework for Principal Evaluation

Ideally, a performance evaluation system for principals (or for any other educator) will affect the quality of teaching and learning and support ongoing school improvement. It's safe to say that documenting and improving the quality and effectiveness of a principal's leadership should be at the center of performance evaluation. Unfortunately, there is little connection between principals' evaluation results and the quality of their work. Although the disconnect between evaluation results and student learning has been much better documented for teachers than for principals, the same issue exists for both groups.

Without doubt, there are quality principal evaluation systems in place across the United States and around the world. However, too often, meaningful principal evaluation is the exception rather than the rule. We must reverse this pattern for two simple reasons: because quality principals matter, and because principal evaluation matters.

## Principals Matter

Consider the following evidence regarding the role and value of the school principal in effective schools:

- “The experience of the DPS [Dallas Public Schools] is that the quickest way to change the effectiveness of a school, for better or worse, is to change the principal.”<sup>1</sup>
- “The effects of principal leadership will occur indirectly through the principal’s efforts to influence those who come into more frequent direct contact with students . . . . Achieving results through others is the essence of leadership.”<sup>2</sup>
- School leaders are instrumental in facilitating professional learning communities focused on student learning.<sup>3</sup>
- “Principals of effective schools respect their teachers’ skills and judgment, and allow them considerable autonomy in organizing and managing their classrooms. They also protect staff from excessive intrusion by forces outside the school.”<sup>4</sup>
- Principals exert indirect influence on student achievement through their effect on school climate.<sup>5</sup>
- “The more school leaders focus their relationships, their work, and their learning on the core business of teaching and learning, the greater their influence on student outcomes.”<sup>6</sup>
- Wise principals understand that they cannot reach instructional goals alone. In fact, principals who distribute leadership across their schools contribute to sustainable improvements within the school organization.<sup>7</sup>

- “Interestingly, when the studies that report positive findings are reviewed, only one mediating variable shows up with consistency as a significant factor interacting with principal leadership: school goals.... This function of the principal—sustaining a school-wide purpose focusing on student learning—does receive empirical support.”<sup>8</sup>
- Principals of high-achieving schools expect teachers and students to meet the schools’ goals.<sup>9</sup>
- Principals who focus on school improvement have more effective schools.<sup>10</sup>
- Principals of high-achieving schools communicate to all stakeholders that learning is the school’s most important mission.<sup>11</sup>

The list of how principals make a difference in their schools (and more specifically, in teaching and learning) goes on and on. Every day—from the simplest to the most complex—principals matter.

## Principal Evaluation Matters

If there is one lesson we can take away from international comparisons of top-performing education systems, it is that human capital—that is, people—matter. Teachers and principals, in particular, are essential for school effectiveness. Putting our resources into recruiting, hiring, developing, and keeping the best teachers and leaders is paramount for success. And here is why evaluation matters: Unless we have effective evaluation systems in place that accurately

differentiate performance, we simply can't even discern whether or not we have effective principals. Furthermore, if we hope to improve principals' performance, we must be able and willing to provide honest, accurate, and meaningful evaluation feedback in order to identify areas in need of improvement and enable principals to make informed decisions regarding professional development to bridge the gap between current practices and desired performance. If designed and implemented properly, a principal evaluation system can play a fundamental role in guiding professional development and renewal, and ensuring that our schools are both excellent and accountable.

Ratings of principals suffer from the same problem of grade inflation that afflicts teacher evaluation: Most educators are rated as top performers. Many of the current principal evaluation systems do not allow for shades of gray—principals are rated as either satisfactory or unsatisfactory. And even in evaluation systems that allow for three-, four-, and five-point rating systems, the reality is that principal evaluation, on the whole, has not been differentiating, growth-oriented, or accountability-based.

Unfortunately, even though a principal's effectiveness is recognized as a vital factor in improving student achievement, schools rarely measure, document, or use effectiveness ratings to inform decision making.<sup>12</sup> As a result, it is difficult to distinguish among poor, average, good, and excellent principals. One comprehensive study of principal leadership evaluation practices in the United States indicated that

although states and districts focus on a variety of performance areas (such as management, external environment, or personal traits) when evaluating their principals, they have very limited coverage of leadership behaviors that ensure rigorous curriculum and quality instruction.<sup>13</sup> The study also found that the usual practices of principal evaluation lacked justification and documentation of the utility, psychometric properties, and accuracy of their instruments.<sup>14</sup> Other flaws in the current principal evaluation process include

- An absence of meaningful and timely feedback to most principals;
- A lack of consequences of evaluation;
- An absence of clear communication of criteria and standard protocols;
- A failure to enhance principal motivation and improve performance;<sup>15</sup>
- Nonalignment of evaluation instruments with professional standards, which can produce role conflict and subsequent role strain as principals have trouble knowing what they should focus their attention on.<sup>16</sup>

## Principal Evaluation in an Era of Accountability

The school principal's role has evolved rather significantly over the past few decades. In addition to holding the largely managerial responsibilities of the past, today's principals are expected to lead their schools, increase student learning, and help staff to grow professionally. In other words, the

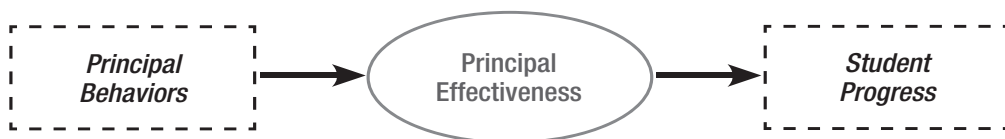
position of principal has evolved to reflect the necessity of both management and leadership roles. Though the responsibilities are many, effective principals can and do balance them.

The purpose of a quality principal evaluation system is to support the principal's growth and development while simultaneously holding him or her accountable for student success. Although principals have always been expected, at least implicitly, to foster student success, one striking difference between today's principal evaluation systems and those of even a decade ago is the explicit expectation that principals are responsible for improved student achievement. In fact, principal evaluation is now virtually synonymous with school evaluation.

Figure 1.1 depicts the two key components of principal evaluation in most U.S. states and in a growing number of countries.

The question that emerges in this new era of principal accountability is as follows: *How do we design and implement a performance evaluation system that is based on the*

FIGURE 1.1  
Two Key Components of Contemporary Principal Evaluation



*evidence of what effective principals do, is fair to both the principal and the school organization, and balances professional growth and accountability?* One approach, and the one that I advocate in this book, is to base principal evaluation squarely on practical, research-guided performance standards that include a balanced measure of both the principal's behaviors and the principal's effect on the school. Such a set of performance standards, shown in Figure 1.2, serves as the basis for this book.

Clearly, the performance standards are overloaded in favor of principal behaviors. This imbalance is justified: It is through the principal's knowledge, skills, and dispositions that results are achieved. The more effective the principal is in terms of all six of the behavior standards, the greater the likelihood of producing more effective and sustained results.

## **Balancing Job Responsibilities with Performance Results**

Although measuring principal behaviors (i.e., the first six performance standards in Figure 1.2) is central to a quality performance evaluation system, it no longer is sufficient. Simply stated, the work of the principal is expected to produce results. Standard 7—Student Progress—reflects the focus of evaluation on holding the principal accountable for student achievement. In fact, the Student Progress standard is valued by policymakers, legislators, and the general public to such a degree that it alone has come to encompass as much as 50 percent of the total evaluation of a principal.



FIGURE 1.2  
Recommended Standards for Principal Performance

