Challenges and Opportunities Facing Principals in the First Year at a School

A school principal’s role is a complex mix of leadership and administration, geared toward enabling and motivating school staff to provide the best possible opportunities for student growth and achievement. School principals face many challenges, especially in their first year at a school, when they must function effectively in a new environment and assimilate quickly to a new culture. Furthermore, the principal is usually expected to improve or at least maintain levels of student achievement. First-year principals’ decisions and strategies are critically important and influence their schools’ performance, their success as a school leader, and the likelihood that they will remain at that school. Because there is little research on this important part of principals’ experience, RAND conducted a study to examine the actions and working conditions of first-year principals (those who are new to their school, regardless of prior experience as a principal), and how those factors relate to student achievement and principal retention.

RAND looked at the experiences of first-year principals in six districts: Memphis City Schools; Chicago Public Schools; New York City (NYC) Public Schools; Washington, DC, Public Schools; Baltimore City Public Schools; and the Oakland [California] Unified School District. Using district data, surveys, and case studies spanning the 2007–2008 and 2010–2011 school years, the researchers examined the relationships among student achievement, new principals’ likelihood of remaining at their schools, and their reports regarding their practices, attitudes, and perceptions of school and district conditions. The RAND researchers found that while most new principals stayed at their schools, many left within the first year or two, and only a few factors could be identified that were clearly related to retention and success. They also found that outcomes achieved by first-year principals varied greatly but saw little evidence that the characteristics of a school, such as the demographics of the students or the school's prior achievement level, determined those outcomes.

More Than a Fifth of First-Year Principals Left Within Two Years

Many first-year principals left their schools after only one or two years on the job. Of the 519 first-year principals in the study, 11.8 percent left within the first year, and 10.7 percent left within the second year. There were substantial differences in principal retention rates across districts, with higher rates in New York and Chicago, and lower rates in Baltimore and Washington, DC. New principals were more likely to leave when test scores declined in their first year; however, the majority of principals whose schools experienced such declines remained in their schools for the duration of the study.
Schools That Lost a Principal After One Year Underperformed the Following Year

Of the 40 schools that experienced clear declines in test score gains in 2007–2008 under a first-year principal and then hired another principal for 2008–2009, only nine schools improved in the next year. Similarly, among the 11 schools that did not experience declines but lost their principal and got another principal in 2008–2009, seven of these schools experienced clear declines and only one experienced gains in the next year.

How Principals Focused Their Time Did Not Appear to Affect Key Outcomes

Principals who participated in case studies tended to name a few strategies, which they often called “big rocks,” on which they focused their time and effort. Most common were promoting data use, conducting classroom observations, building culture and relationships within the school community, forming leadership teams, and promoting teacher professional development. However, the study did not reveal strong relationships between student achievement and principals’ allocation of time. Instead, the quality of principals’ actions seemed to affect outcomes more than how they spent their time, as reported by school staff in the case studies.

Greater Teacher Capacity and Cohesiveness Were Related to Better Student Outcomes

The study examined how principals’ perceptions of school and district conditions were related to principal retention and student achievement but found few significant relationships. School conditions included degree of decisionmaking autonomy, parent support, teacher capacity, the degree of staff cohesiveness, and the level of pressure to raise test scores. District conditions included resources, consistency of district priorities, and quality of district-provided professional development. Two factors that stood out as being related to student outcomes were teacher capacity and cohesiveness: Principals reporting higher teacher capacity—such as skills to help other teachers improve and the ability to promote learning among all students—were more likely to see achievement gains, as were principals who reported that teachers and other staff worked collaboratively and took joint responsibility for students. Although the analysis cannot determine whether teacher capacity was high before the principal assumed leadership of the school, the case studies suggest that actions principals take in the first year can promote improved teacher capacity.

Principals’ Skills as Human Capital Managers Are Important

The findings on the importance of teacher capacity, staff cohesion, and buy-in for key strategies suggest that a principal’s effectiveness as a manager of human capital is an important contributor to the success of a principal’s efforts to improve a school’s achievement. The case study findings suggest several promising ways for new principals to foster buy-in for their key strategies and to develop cohesiveness, including the following:

- Recruiting strong staff immediately
- Conducting one-on-one meetings with all staff
- Respecting prior practices and culture
- Being visible in the classrooms
- Communicating clear and fair expectations.

Efforts to help principals acquire the necessary skills to succeed in their roles as managers of human capital could have important implications for student achievement, especially in low-performing schools.
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