

KATIE TOSH, CHRISTOPHER JOSEPH DOSS

Perceptions of School Leadership: Implications for Principal Effectiveness

Effective principal leadership practices improve school organization, teaching, and student achievement outcomes. These practices include framing and communicating a school's goals and mission, creating shared expectations of high performance, clarifying roles and objectives, and promoting professional development.¹ The quality of principal leadership is the second-most influential school-based effect on student achievement (after classroom instruction).²

However, research demonstrates that teachers tend to rate principals lower on important leadership practices than principals rate themselves, and this mismatch in perception could have negative consequences. Numerous studies in the fields of human resources and organizational management reveal that leader self-awareness—when leader self-perception is in agreement with what subordinates perceive—is directly related to leadership effectiveness.³ The degree to which leaders rate themselves more highly than do subordinates correlates with diminished organizational outcomes, including reduced subordinate job satisfaction and productivity.⁴ Specific to education, negative teacher perception of school leadership correlates with teacher burnout and reduced teacher collaboration.⁵

The AEP asked a nationally representative sample of teachers and principals whether perceptions of school leadership practices vary by educator position. In the spring 2017 survey, we asked teachers and principals to indicate their agreement with the following statements:

- The principal at this school communicates a clear vision for the school.
- The principal at this school sets high standards for teaching.
- The principal at this school makes clear to staff expectations for meeting instructional goals.¹

¹ The AEP intentionally does not survey both principals and teachers from the same school. For principals, the questions were phrased as, "Relative to my ideal for my school and myself, I currently . . ." These questions are based on the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research's *5Essentials Survey* (University of Chicago, 1994).

¹ Leithwood et al., 2004; Marzano, Waters, and McNulty, 2005; Day, Gu, and Sammons, 2016; McCarley, Peters, and Decman, 2016; Gurley et al., 2016.

² Day, Gu, and Sammons, 2016; Gurley et al., 2016; McCarley, Peters, and Decman, 2016.

³ Tiuraniemi, 2008.

⁴ Moshavi, Brown, and Dodd, 2003; Sosik and Godshalk, 2004; Tiuraniemi, 2008; Yammario and Atwater, 1993.

⁵ Hallinger, Wang, and Chen, 2013; Park and Ham, 2016; Owens, 2013.

Principals Almost Universally Rate Their Leadership Highly

Principals almost universally agreed that they communicate a clear vision for their schools, set high standards for teaching, and make clear to staff expectations for meeting instructional goals (more than 98 percent). This result is particularly striking, given that principals were asked to rate themselves “relative to my ideal for my school and myself.” These perceptions were consistent across principals in schools of varying demographic profiles.

Teachers Rate Principals Highly, But Gaps in Perceptions Exist

When asked to rate their principals along the same dimensions, a majority of teachers in the survey agreed with the statements. Eighty-four percent of teachers agreed that principals set high expectations for teaching. As shown in Figure 1, fewer teachers agreed on the other aspects of principals’ school leadership, with 77 percent agreeing that principals had clear expectations and 79 percent agreeing that principals communicated clear visions for their schools. Despite these broadly positive results, large disparities in perceptions exist between principals and teachers on all three questions—from

14 to 20 percentage points. These disparities suggest that a significant minority of teachers do not agree with principals’ self-perceptions, highlighting potential barriers to a cohesive school culture.⁶

Discussion

The AEP data are consistent with previous findings that principals have highly positive self-perceptions of their own leadership practices—and that, while teachers consistently rate principals positively, significant gaps between teachers’ and principals’ perceptions exist. Given the importance of principals’ leadership practices in fostering a positive school culture, quality teaching, and student performance, the disparities in perceptions—even though the principals and teachers in this survey are not necessarily from the same school—suggest some room for improvement. Principals could consider adopting 360-degree reviews to better understand disparities in teacher and principal perceptions of leadership practices and use the results to guide reflective organizational improvement; studies in the social welfare sector have found that more self-aware leaders can use this review information to improve their

⁶ Looking at the underlying Likert score, teachers rated principals between 3.1 and 3.3. Teachers are therefore closer to “somewhat” agreeing with the statements, while principals are closer to “strongly” agreeing.

How this Analysis Was Conducted

For each question, we collapsed responses recorded in a Likert scale into dichotomous indicators for whether the respondent expressed some degree of agreement (somewhat, strongly) or disagreement (somewhat, strongly). The primary analyses were conducted using weighted linear probability models to compare the responses of teachers and principals. We also conducted supplemental analyses that included many additional covariates and a vector of state fixed effects to better understand whether the associations found in the primary analysis were potentially confounded by characteristics of the schools or respondents. These weighted, multivariate linear probability models included a series of demographic control variables from the National Center for Education Statistics Common Core of Data.¹

¹ These included school-level variables, such as urbanicity; percentage free and reduced-price lunch; percentage white, black, and Hispanic; school size; an indicator for elementary school; district-level variables, such as percentage English language-learner students and special education students; and state-level fixed effects.

overall performance.⁷ The Vanderbilt Assessment of Leadership in Education (VAL-ED) is one such evaluation tool that could be integrated into school improvement systems.⁸ More research needs to be done to explore gaps in the perception of leadership

within a school, whether these disparities extend to indicators of principal leadership other than those discussed here, the causes of these gaps, and the implications of these gaps in perception between principals and teachers.

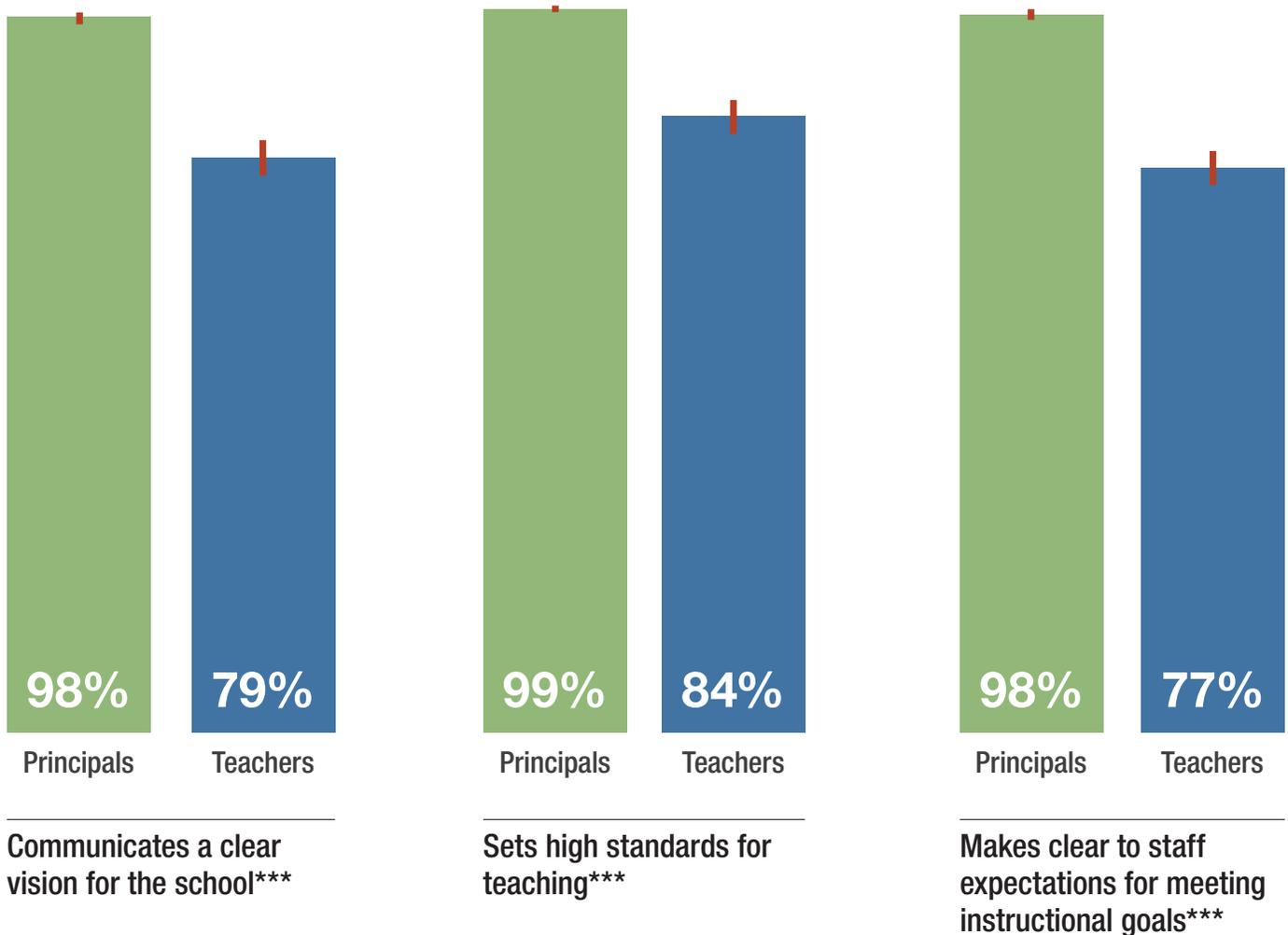
⁷ Tiuraniemi, 2008.

⁸ Goff, Goldring, and Bickman, 2014.

FIGURE 1

Principals Rate Themselves Highly, Teachers Slightly Less Positive

Percentage of Educators Agreeing with Statements Concerning Principal Leadership



NOTE: Vertical red lines represent weighted 95-percent confidence intervals. Asterisks indicate results of a linear probability model used to estimate differences among teachers and school leaders. *** $p < 0.001$.

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The AEP Data Note series is intended to provide brief analyses of teacher and school leader survey results of immediate interest to policymakers, practitioners, and researchers. If you would like to know more about the dataset, please see the Technical Appendix, (RR-2575/1-BMGF, www.rand.org/t/RR2575z1) for more information on survey recruitment, administration, and sample weighting. If you are interested in using AEP data for your own analysis or reading other AEP-related publications, please email aep@rand.org.

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The American Educator Panels (AEP) are nationally representative samples of teachers and school leaders across the country.

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