# THE IMPORTANCE OF EFFECTIVE SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

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**Abstract**

The aim of this paper is to provide the rationale for policymakers to invest in school leadership policy. It describes the importance of school leadership and the major challenges faced by school leaders. Effective school leadership is essential to improve teaching and learning within each school and to connect the individual school to the outside world. And yet school leaders across all countries are facing challenges which policymakers need to address. In recent years, the workload of school leaders has expanded and intensified as a result of increased school autonomy and accountability for learning outcomes. As the expectations of what schools should achieve have changed dramatically, schools are seeking to develop new forms of leadership better suited to respond to the needs of rapidly evolving societies. This involves enhancing the capacity of current leaders and preparing and training future leaders.

**Key Terms**

School, leadership matters, challenges, policymakers, effective

## Introduction

As the key intermediary between the classroom, the individual school and the education system as a whole, effective school leadership is essential to improve the efficiency and equity of schooling. Within each individual school, leadership can contribute to improve student learning by shaping the conditions and climate in which teaching and learning occur. Beyond the school borders, school leaders can connect and adapt schools to changing external environments. And at the school-systems interface, school leadership provides a bridge between internal school improvement processes and externally initiated reform.

But school leadership does not operate in static educational environments. As countries are seeking to adapt their education systems to the needs of contemporary society, the expectations for schools and school leaders have changed profoundly. Many countries have made schools more autonomous in their decision making while centralising standards and accountability requirements and demanding that schools adopt new research-based approaches to teaching and learning. In line with these changes, the roles and responsibilities of school leaders have expanded and intensified. Given the increased autonomy and accountability of schools, leadership at the school level is more important than ever.

Policy makers need to adapt school leadership policy to new environments by addressing the major challenges which have arisen over the past decades. There is a growing concern that he role of school principal designed for the industrial age has not changed enough to deal with the complex challenges schools are facing in the 21$^{st}$ century. Countries are seeking to develop new conditions for school leadership better suited to respond to current and future educational environments. As expectations of what school leaders should achieve have changed, so must the definition and distribution of tasks, as well as the levels of training, support and incentives.

Ensuring future quality leadership is also vital for school improvement. In most countries, the leadership workforce is ageing and large numbers of school leaders will retire over the next five to ten years (Hopkins, 2008). At a time of high demographic turnover in school leaders, education systems need to focus on fostering future leaders and making leadership an attractive profession. The contemporary challenge of leadership, in systemic terms, is not only to improve the quality of current leaders but also to develop clear plans for future leadership and effective processes for leadership succession (Robinson, 2007).

## The concept of school leadership

Before moving on to the analysis of school leadership policy, it is important to understand the concept of leadership that this report supports. There is a vast amount of literature exploring generic leadership issues. This report concentrates on school leadership, accepting that there are common elements and trends in leadership practice across sectors and lessons can be learned from non-educational environments as well.

A central element of most definitions of leadership is that it involves a process of influence (OECD, 2001a). as Yukl has phrased it, "most definitions of leadership reflect the assumption that it involves a social influence process whereby intentional influence is exerted by one person (or group) over other people (or groups) to structure the activities and relationships in a group or organization" (Yukl, 2002). The term intentional is important, as leadership is based on articulated goals or outcomes to which the process of influence is expected to lead.

Depending on country contexts, the term school leadership is often used interchangeably with school management and school administration. Although the three concepts overlap, we use them with a difference in emphasis. An often-quoted phrase is "managers do things right, while leaders do the right thing" (Bennis and Nanus, 1997). While leadership involves steering organisations by shaping other people's attitudes, motivations and behaviours, management is more closely associated with maintenance of current operations (Bush and Glover, 2003). Dimmock (1999) provides a distinction between school leadership, management and administration while also recognising that the responsibilities of school leaders often encompass all three:

> *Irrespective of how these terms are defined school leaders experience difficulty in deciding the balance between higher order tasks designed to improve staff, student and school performance (leadership), routine maintenance of present operations (management) and lower order duties (administration).*

This report considers that successful schools need effective leadership, management and administration. While the report's focus is on leadership, this term may encompass managerial and administrative tasks as well. The three elements are so closely intertwined that it is unlikely for one of them to succeed without the others.

The emphasis of this report is on school leaders, including but not confined to school principals. The concept of *principalship* is rooted in the industrial model of schooling, where one individual bears the prime responsibility for the entire organisation. Leadership is a broader concept where authority to lead does not reside only in one person, but can be distributed among different people within and beyond the school. School leadership can encompass people occupying various roles and functions such as principals, deputy and assistant principals, leadership teams, school governing boards and school-level staff involved in leadership tasks.

**School leadership is a policy priority**

School leadership has become a priority in education policy agendas across the world because it plays a key role in improving classroom practice, school policies and connections between individual schools and the outside world.

**It contributes to improved student learning**

There is increasing evidence that within each individual school, school-leaders can contribute to improved student learning by shaping the conditions and climate in which teaching and learning occur. A large body of research on school effectiveness and improvement from a wide range of countries and school contexts has consistently highlighted the pivotal role of school leadership in making schools more effective (Scheerens and Bosker, 1997; Teddlie and Reynolds, 2000; Townsend, 2007).

An important finding emerging from the research is that the relationship between school leadership and student learning is mostly indirect. As school leaders work mainly outside classroom, their impact on student learning is largely mediated through other people, events and organizational factors such as teachers, classroom practices and school climate (Hallinger and Heck, 1998). The finding that the relationship between leadership and student learning is mediated through such factors underscores the powerful role of the school leader in helping to create the conditions for effective teaching and learning. School leaders influence the motivations, capacities and working conditions of teachers who in turn shape classroom practice and student learning.

Moving a step further, the research on school leadership effects has revealed a number of leadership roles and responsibilities that are particularly conducive to enhancing student learning. Findings of the research on leadership effects have recently been consolidated in a number of reviews and meta-analyses. These show that certain leadership practices are associated with measurable improvements in student learning (Hallinger and Heck, 1998; Marzano et al, 2005; Robinson, 2007; Waters et al, 2003). This report identifies four major domains of responsibility as key tasks for school leadership to improve teaching and learning within their schools: supporting and developing teacher quality, defining goals and measuring progress, strategic resource management and collaboration with external partners.

**It bridges educational policy and practice**

School leadership also plays a major role in education reform. Much has been written about top-down versus bottom-up strategies for school improvement and there is widespread agreement that the two need to be combined and synhronised (Fullan, 2001; Hopkins, 2008; Moos and Huber, 2007). While higher levels of the educational system can provide policy directions for schools, their success often depends on the motivations and actions of leaders at the school level.

For centrally initiated reforms to become meaningful to all school-level stakeholders, they need to be associated with internal school improvement activities in a coherent way (Stoll, et al, 2002). Successful implementation and instituonalisation of reform requires leadership at the school level to promote adaptations of school processes and systems, as well as cultures, attitudes and behaviours.

Therefore, unless school leaders feel a sense of ownership of reform and agree with its purposes it is unlikely that they will engage their staff and students in externally defined reform objectives. School reform is more likely to be successful if school leaders are actively involved in policy makers and those who lead schools at the front line are thus essential for successful large scale reform.

**It links school to their environments**

In addition, school leaders are in charge of connecting and adapting schools to their surrounding environments. According to Hargreaves et al, (2008), school leaders will increasingly need to lead "out there" beyond the school, as well as within it, in order to influence the environment that influences their own work with students. In small towns and rural areas, school leaders have traditionally stood among the most important leaders in the communities. While it may be argued that urbanisation, immigration and school size have weakened school-community ties, these and other pressures on family structures have at the same time contributed to make the community responsibilities of school leaders even more important today.

School leaders play an important role in strengthening the ties between school personnel and the communities that surround them (Fullan, 2001). Leaders of the most successful schools in challenging circumstances are typically highly engaged with and trusted by the schools' parents and wider community (Hargreaves et al, 2008). They also try to improve achievement and well-being for children by becoming more involved with other partners such as local businesses, sports clubs, faith-based groups and community organisations and by integrating the work of the school with welfare , law enforcement and other agencies (Price water house Coopers, 2007).

Moreover, in rapidly changing societies, the goals and objectives to be achieved by schools and the ways to get there are not always clear and static. In increasingly globalised and knowledge-based economies, schools must lay the foundations for lifelong learning while at the same time dealing with new challenges such as changing demographic patterns, increased immigration, changing labour markets, new technologies and rapidly developing of knowledge. As a result of these developments, schools are under enormous pressure to change and it is the role of school leadership to deal effectively with the processes of change.

**School leadership responds to changing policy environments**

The organisational arrangements for schools have changed significantly over time due to profound changes within the societies they serve. While school context and system-level differences have differential implications for the exercise of school leadership across countries, a number of global trends have impacted on schools across countries. Very broadly, over the past decades, school leaders in most countries have evolved from practicing teachers with added responsibilities, to head teachers and bureaucratic administrators, to professional managers and, in some countries, to leaders of learning. This section gives a short overview of the major trends in educational governance which have shaped school leadership over time.

**The industrial model of schooling: bureaucratic administration**

Before the advent of mass primary and secondary education, schools had most commonly been run by a teacher with added supervisory responsibilities for buildings, students and staff (OECD, 2001b). The position of principal emerged with the development of public schooling as an essential social service in industrialising economies in the second half of the 19th century. Increased industrialisation and the accelerated need for workers with basic education required more systematic school organisation, which resulted in the appointment of a part-time or full-time administrator at the school level.

In the early 20th century, schools were designed to fit industrial models of efficient production. According to OECD (2001b) "the organisation and content of schooling in many ways reflected industrial development. Just as factories were organized as branches of a larger enterprise conforming to predetermined common standards, so public education came to follow a supervisory style with anticipated outcomes and the principal in the role of branch manager."

In the bureaucratic management systems predominant throughout most of the 20th century, the principal held overall responsibility for the operation of an individual school within a wider system run by the central bureaucracy (Aalst, 2002). The roles within the school were quite clearly delimited. Teachers operated in relative isolation from each other and the principal's role was most commonly conceived of in terms of bureaucratic administrator or head teacher, or some combination of the two.

The bureaucratic administrator was seen as responsible for the overall operation of the school or implementation of the school project. This individual was responsible for overseeing compliance with national, state, or municipal legislation was responsible for guidelines and was accountable for the use of resources.

The head teacher was seen as primus inter pares, first among equals. This person retained a greated or lesser degree of teaching responsibilities and handled the non-teaching tasks of managing resources and communicating with parents and other elements of the education system. Collegial relationships were prized, in the sense that teachers were considered the instructional experts and left to their own, rarely disturbed in their classrooms.

**New public management: towards decentralization, autonomy and accountability**

As countries strive to transform their education systems to prepare students with the knowledge and skills needed to function in rapidly changing societies, most countries are adopting a number of similar policy trends. Since the early 1980s, "new public management" structures stressing decentralisation, school autonomy, parental and choice have become the predominant school governance approach in many countries and have significantly altered education systems (Mulford, 2003). The rationale behind these governance approaches is that autonomy and

accountability can respond more effectively to local needs. This section briefly describes the impact of these changes on the roles and responsibilities of school leaders.

**Decentralisation and school autonomy**

Many countries have increased decision making authority at lower levels of the educational system. Decentralisation of educational decision making can be implemented in a variety of forms and the implications for school leaders vary accordingly. Decentralisation may involve delegating responsibilities to the school level, or to intermediate levels such as states, provinces and local educational authorities. Among the recent decentralisation movements having an impact on school leadership, Glatter et al (2003) distinguish two models of decentralisation which have important implications for the role of school leaders.

Local empowerment refers to the transfer of responsibilities to an intermediate authority between central (or state) governments and schools, such as school districts in the United States. In such contexts, schools are generally viewed as part of a local educational system or a broader network of schools, with reciprocal rights and obligations (Glatter et al, 2003). The municipal or local education authority may play a role in connecting schools to other public services and community development as well as in encouraging schools to collaborate with each other. School leaders may thus be asked to play a greater role in leadership "beyond the school borders".

School empowerment (or school autonomy) refers to the devolution of responsibilities to the school level. Transferring decision making powers to schools has been a major objective of the decentralising and restructuring reform movements since the 1980s. in contexts of increased school autonomy, school leaders are asked to fulfil responsibilities that call for expertise which many do not have through formal training. New responsibilities include establishing budgeting and accounting systems, choosing and ordering materials, setting up of relationships with contractors and vendors, designing recruitment schemes for hiring teachers, to name just a few. In many cases, school autonomy makes the job of school leaders more time-consuming by increasing their administrative and managerial workload. As financial and personnel responsibilities are sharply increasing, school autonomy is sometimes associated with less time and attention for providing leadership for improved teaching and learning.

Decentralisation often also requires school leaders to engage more in communication, co-operation and coalition building. Where local empowerment is predominant, school leaders are required to develop strong networking and collaboration skills and to engage with their peers and with intermediate bodies throughout the local education systems. Where school empowerment prevails, the teaching staff, parents and community representatives are often formally or informally brought into the school-level decision making process. School leaders thus need to continuously negotiate between top-down demands from central regulations and standards,

internal demands from teachers and students and external expectations from parents and the local community.

While most countries are moving to more decentralised models of governance, important differences remain between different countries. In highly centralised systems where most decisions are still made at the national or state level, the school leader's job remains quite narrowly confined to translating policies decided at higher administrative levels into a reality for teachers and students. At thee other end of the continuum, in systems that have decentralised authority over curriculum, personnel and budgets to the school level, the school leader's job is very different, with much more responsibility in areas such as human and financial resource management or instructional continuum, with some functions centralised, others decentralised and substantial interplay among leaders at the different levels of the education system.

**Accountability for outcomes**

While there is a clear trend towards decentralising responsibilities for budget, personnel and instructional delivery in most countries, may have simultaneously centralised curriculum control and / or accountability regimes to the state or central government as a way to measure and promote school progress. Accountability frameworks and reporting of performance results create new obligations fro schools and school leaders to perform according to centrally defined standards and expectations.

As requirements for regular standardised testing are increasing, the role of the school leader has changed in many countries, from being accountable for inputs to being accountable for the performance outcomes of teachers and students. Increasing accountability requirements put pressure on school leaders to produce documented evidence of successful school performance. This may substantially add to the paperwork and time constraints for school leaders because they are required to carefully record, document and communicate school-level and student-level developments.

In their planning processes, school leaders are increasingly expected to align local curricula with centrally mandated standards. According to Leithwood (2001), school and data-driven about he means to accomplish these goals". This involves interpretation of tests results for school improvement and mastery of skills associated with data-wise management.

**School choice and competition**

Another observed trend across countries is a move towards increasing school choice. In some cases, school choice is deliberately used as a mechanism to enhance competition between autonomous schools. In systems where funding follows the student, parents are treated as clients who choose the school providing the best quality.

Even if not all school choice settings actually put pressure on schools and school leaders to compete, in some environments school leaders are more and more expected to market their schools efficiently, know what competing schools offer, develop niches for their schools and maintain good customer relations with students and parents (Leithwood, 2001). Therefore they are required to lead strategically and discern a wide range of local, national and international developments, threats and opportunities that may affect their schools (Barnett, undated).

**A renewed focus on teaching and learning**

The policy directions reviewed above have been part of a broader trend to strengthen education systems and improve student performance. For most countries, this has meant some or all of the following: raising levels of overall student performance, closing the gap in achievement between student populations, providing inclusive education services for such populations as students with special needs and immigrant children, reducing dropout rates and achieving greater efficiency. The combination of mandates and programmes developed to reach these goals has one common denominator: to increase the focus of schools on teaching and learning.

Schools in several countries are in particular being asked to increase individualisation and personalisation of learning and instruction and to provide more inclusive and multicultural instruction. As the key intermediary between central policy and classroom practice and as the primary agent setting the conditions in school for effective teaching and learning, the school leader bears much of the responsibility for translating policy into improved teaching and learning.

Scholars (Elmore, 2008; Nulford, 2003) are now suggesting that an essential function of school leadership is to foster "organizational learning", that is to build the capacity of the school for high performance and continuous improvement through the development of staff, creating the climate and conditions for collective learning and thoughtful use of data to improve curriculum and instruction.

**New understanding and approaches to teaching and learning**

Research has added to and in some cases radically altered, conceptions of student learning and cognition and of teaching and instruction, so schools must adopt new approaches to teaching and learning and to the organisation of instruction. School programmes in many countries have traditionally emphasised passive rote learning and didactic teacher-centred instruction. Assessments have measured fact-based memorisation and recall rather than deep understanding, ability to synthesise with other knowledge and applications in real-world situations outside the classroom.

The requirements brought about by the development of knowledge societies and the higher comparability of student outcomes across countries due to international assessments such as PISA are leading some countries to modify their modes of instruction and student work. Many countries strive to exploit the possibilities of more powerful forms of active, constructivism learning and "teaching for understanding". Ireland, for example, has revised the primary school curriculum to encourage the use of active teaching and learning methodologies and the post-primary syllabi to emphasise more independent, active learning (Robinson, 2007).

Teaching has traditionally been practiced as a solo art by individual teachers alone in their classrooms. Autonomy was highly prized and intrusions into solitary practice were resisted. But a large body of convincing research in the last two decades has developed new views of effective teaching that are based on the development of professional learning communities (Louis et al, 1996; Stoll and Louis, 2007).

School leaders must master the new forms of pedagogy themselves and they must learn how to monitor and improve their teachers' new practice. Moreover, instead of serving as head teacher primus inter pares, they have to become leaders of learning responsible for building communities of professional practice. Methods of evaluation and professional development take more sophisticated application and principals must embed them into the fabric of the work day.

While practices vary across countries, it is clear that school leadership is generally expected to play a more active role in instructional leadership: monitoring and evaluating teacher performance, conducting and arranging for mentoring and coaching, planning teacher professional development and orchestrating teamwork and cooperative instruction. Countries also note a shift in emphasis from more administration and management type functions to leadership functions of providing academic vision, strategic planning, developing deeper layers of leadership and building a culture and community of learning.

As a result of the increasing central mandates and programmes, changing student populations and growing knowledge about effective practice, schools are under enormous pressure to change and it is the school leader's role to manage the processes of change. The transformation of policy into results occurs most critically through the adaptation of practice in the school and classroom. This process is complex and must be led intentionally and skillfully. In some cases, resistance to change needs to be overcome with carefully structured support, relevant information, a clear sense of purpose and goals and opportunities to learn requisite skills (Hall and Hord, 2005). While some changes are purely technical and can be readily accomplished, more significant change calls for deeper adjustment of values and beliefs about the work (Heifetz, 1998). Sophisticated skills of "adaptive" (Heifetz and Linsky, 2002) and "transformational" leadership (Burns, 1978 and Leithwood, 1992 are needed here.

**The current reality of school leadership**

We need to contrast these trends with the current practice and shape of school leadership in many countries. Traditionally in many countries there has been only one individual – the principal – holding a formal leadership position in schools. While the roles and responsibilities of principals have varied in different context and over time, the existence of principals remains a common feature of all education systems.

In many countries there is growing concern that the role of principal designed for the needs of a different time may not be appropriate to deal with the leadership challenges schools are facing in the 21st century. Even as countries are adopting more distributed and collaborative approaches to leadership, on average across all countries, it is the principals who carries the largest bulk of school-level leadership responsibilities. This section gives a brief overview of the characteristics of the principal workforce and the major challenges facing the profession.

**Principals work in a variety of contexts**

Depending on the school contexts in which they work, principals face very different sets of challenges. School-level differences or contextual factors have important implications for their leadership practice. Leithwood (2005), in a review of the findings of case studies in seven countries, found features of the "organizational or wider social context in which principals work" that impact on their practices. These features include: student background factors, school location (e.g. urban, rural), school size, government or public versus non-government designation of schools, school type and school level (elementary, middle, secondary).

In other studies, the level of schooling has been found to influence the type of leadership practices required. Primary schools tend to be smaller and involve different leadership challenges than large secondary schools. Small primary schools provide more opportunities for principals to spend time in the classroom and closely monitor teachers, whereas leaders in large secondary schools tend to influence teaching more indirectly and may rely on teacher leaders or department heads to engage in curricula issues (Leithwood et al, 2004). In many primary schools, principals are also classroom teachers, which may lead them to envisage their leadership in a more collegial and participative way. Heck for example, found that principals in effective primary schools are more directly involved in instructional issues than principals in effective secondary schools (Heck, 1992).

**Summary: why school leadership matters**

School leadership has become a priority in education policy agendas across countries. It plays a key role in improving school outcomes by influencing the motivations and capacities of teachers, as well as the environment and climate within which they work. Effective school leadership is essential to improve the efficiency and equity of schooling.

School leadership practice has been greatly influenced by changes in educational governance and school contexts. On the one hand there are moves towards decentralisation and autonomy coupled with greater accountability; on the other, new approaches to teaching and learning processes and increasingly varied student populations are changing leadership roles and responsibilities.

As a result of these trends and factors, school leadership has changed dramatically across countries. It is now increasingly defined by a demanding set of roles including administrative and managerial tasks, financial and human resources, public relations, quality assurance and leadership for improved teaching and learning.

In many countries the current generation of principals is reaching retirement age and it is getting harder to replace them. Potential candidates are discouraged from applying mainly because of overburdened roles, lack of preparation and training, lack of career prospects and inadequate support and rewards.

These developments have made school leadership a priority in education systems among countries. The quality of school leadership needs to be enhanced and it needs to be made sustainable. In the following chapters, this report identifies four main policy levers which, taken together, can improve school leadership practice. These should help governments to decide how to prepare and build high quality leadership:

1. (Re)defining school leadership responsibilities
2. Distributing school leadership
3. Developing skills for effective school leadership
4. Making school leadership an attractive profession.

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