School Leader Evaluations

A

lthough school leaders have long been evaluated, these reviews were largely used to measure principals’ skills as building managers and to make personnel decisions rather than to improve leaders’ effectiveness and the quality of instruction in their schools. Indeed, these evaluations have traditionally had only a small relationship to academic success and only weakly have been tied to leadership standards or principals’ professional growth. But this is changing due to demands for accountability in the education and policy worlds and for new tools to determine how well students and educators are meeting standards.

The federal Race to the Top initiative for states added fuel to an educator evaluation movement that had been brewing for years. In their grant applications, policymakers promised to develop and implement reforms that varied somewhat from state-to-state, but had in common a pledge to significantly improve evaluation systems for teachers and principals, and to include student achievement as one of the measures for determining success. While much of the public attention has been focused on teachers and the link between student test scores and teacher effectiveness, many principals, too, are now or soon will be judged—fairly or unfairly—on the collective performance of their entire student bodies.

It should be noted that principals, as a group, see evaluation as a vital tool to aid policymaking decisions about the role of school leaders and as a means of improving their own performance. What principals object to are summative evaluations based largely on student test scores that are used mainly as tools to seek and define school underperformance, ultimately leading to reassignment and firings rather than helping principals improve.

But The Wallace Foundation and others suggest a way to move leader assessment forward without relying on summative evaluations. This is to “narrow the focus on the most potent [school leader] behaviors that can promote better learning outcomes, rather than peripheral concerns of daily management that continually bombard school principals.” The Wallace Foundation and its partner states and districts have used the term “driver behaviors” to identify those actions.

Elements of Principal Evaluations

Determining what goes into the evaluations begins, of course, with a state’s standards for principals. A 2013 survey of all states plus the District of Columbia found that 47 have standards for principals in place; 32 use either the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) or a modified version of them; 18 use self-written standards; 2 use some other standards; and 4 have no standards at all (5 states provided multiple answers). The ISLLC standards maintain that a school administrator promotes the success of all students by:

- Developing a vision for learning shared by the school community;
- Sustaining a school culture conducive to student learning and staff professional growth;
- Ensuring operational management and resources for a safe and efficient learning environment;
- Collaborating with families and the community;
- Acting ethically and fairly; and
- Understanding and responding to the broader sociopolitical context.

In addition to the ISLLC standards, reports and recommendations from multiple sources list similar areas that can be used for evaluation, although not always in the same order:

- Student academic growth and achievement. This is often represented in evaluations by student performance on standardized tests and graduation rates;
School culture/instructional leadership. Even though much of a principal’s job consists of general administrative duties, leaders must also focus their energies and the energies of all school personnel on instruction and fostering behaviors shown to improve learning. This may be measured through observation, educator surveys, teacher turnover and other indicators; and

How much and how well principals share authority and delegate responsibility among their stakeholders, including staff and community members. This accounts for the realization that 21st century principals have a lot on their plates. Wallace-funded research concluded that this should not be regarded as diluting principals’ leadership, but as a measure of their ability to develop other leaders who can help advance the learning agenda in their school.6

Finding uniform, valid and reliable measures that meet these criteria has been difficult, though it has become somewhat easier due to the growing use of and market for school leader assessments. Whatever assessment regime is implemented, policymakers must first make sure that each specific measure is clearly related to desired school outcomes. Further, they must ask if the assessment tool is applicable to multiple schools and contexts. This last part is especially important, as maintaining standards of measurement ensures that all principals are evaluated on the same measures in the same ways, and that the data can be compared to results for large numbers of school leaders whose performances have been likewise appraised.7

Policy Considerations

Following are some of the policy considerations boards will likely need to discuss as the evaluation system is being developed or renewed.

What is the purpose of the evaluation? Unless there is an explicit goal for conducting the evaluation, principals see them as having limited value for professional learning or accountability to school improvement;

What will be done with the results? As stated, principals have no problem with evaluations, as long as the end result is professional growth and learning, student growth and achievement, school planning and progress, school culture, their own professional qualities and leadership and stakeholder support;

The evaluation tool itself: There are few widely available tools that display psychometric rigor or that make results public so they can be tested.9

Fairness:

Who is at the table when the standards are written? Are principals represented?

Who conducts the evaluation? Will they be done by other principals or teachers or will they be done solely by district administrators? Regardless of who does the assessment, what training will they have on how to use the evaluation tools?

What lessons from the development and implementation of teacher evaluations can be applied to principal evaluations?

In the States

This vision for school leader assessment is similar to successful evaluation programs already in place in multiple states, including Connecticut and Delaware. Those systems concentrate on observable behaviors, are standards-based, promote change for school improvement, are reliable and tested, account for an array of contexts and circumstances, and are linked to professional learning opportunities.10

This year, Hawaii decided to base 50 percent of a principal’s evaluation on student performance. The remainder would be based on “principal leadership practice,” which includes professional growth and learning; school planning and progress; school culture; professional qualities and instructional leadership; and stakeholder support and engagement.

Last year, Delaware adopted a detailed set of administrator evaluation standards (http://bit.ly/Wn3OHr) that specifically states its intent as a tool to support professional growth, continuous improvement of instructional practice and student outcomes, and “assures quality administrators in every building.” In 2011, North Carolina established a standards-based rubric (http://bit.ly/13iCi57) that enumerates seven levels of leadership and seven specific steps in the evaluation process.

New York, meanwhile, has several approved rubrics (http://bit.ly/13KIsa3) that may be employed by districts only after evaluators are trained in their use and application. Ultimately, the use of rubrics are critical not only because they are a uniform means of observational measurement, but also, as one teacher explained, “rubrics provide the means for principals to build upon their strengths and grow in areas of weakness, working both as a check and as a tool of empowerment.”11
Resources


Endnotes


3. Ibid, 7.


8. Ibid, 4.


10. Wallace, 8.


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