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## Effective Elementary School Leadership: Does Teacher Perception of Leadership Effectiveness Matter to the Academic Performance of Elementary School Students?

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**Effective Elementary School Leadership: Does Teacher Perception of Leadership Effectiveness Matter to the Academic Performance of Elementary School Students?**

Goldy Brown III & Tina Salzman

**Abstract**

The current study investigated one research question regarding the potential school leaders have in increasing student outcomes in low socioeconomic elementary schools. Based on teacher perception, are certain aspects of effective leadership more vital to the success of low socioeconomic elementary schools than others? The findings show that a school leader's ability to build a productive school climate may have a more exigent connection to student outcomes in low-socioeconomic elementary schools than in elementary schools with a majority of affluent students.

Keywords: school leadership, low-income students, effective leadership, Title 1 schools

**Introduction**

Teachers directly impact student achievement by providing instruction. Their perception of how effectively their school leader supports their efforts is an effective way to measure a school leader's ability to impact student outcomes in elementary schools (i.e., Leithwood et al., 2020). We measure the effectiveness of school leaders in elementary schools by surveying teachers within their buildings. Extant studies have concluded that effective leaders can impact student outcomes (Grissom et al., 2021; Leithwood et al., 2004, 2020). However, the scholarship has not identified conclusively if a classroom teacher's perception of their school leader's effectiveness correlates to high-performing elementary schools; whether this quality is more important in schools that service capable students from lower-socioeconomic backgrounds; or whether certain aspects of their leadership are more vital than others in increasing student

outcomes for lower-socioeconomic students. Given that principals influence school quality in so many areas, leadership is clearly vital to schools. Evidence suggests that the impact of successful leadership is “considerably greater in schools that are in more difficult circumstances” (Leithwood et al., 2004, p. 5). Branch et al. (2012) further suggested that “principal skill is more important in the most challenging schools” (p. 27). This study seeks to further our understanding of what school leaders do in high performing Title I elementary schools in comparison to the work of school leaders in high-performing, affluent elementary schools by using data from teachers surveyed in 40 elementary schools in 5 different states to answer the following research questions:

1. Based on teacher perceptions, are certain aspects of effective leadership more vital to the success of low socioeconomic elementary schools than affluent elementary schools?

### **Literature & Framework**

To date, studies have concluded that principals have an effect on student learning (Bartanen, 2020; Chiang et al., 2016; Dhuey & Smith, 2018; Grissom et al., 2015), with Leithwood and coauthors (2004) suggesting, “Leadership is second only to classroom instruction among all school-related factors that contribute to what students learn at school” (p. 5). More recently, this claim was fortified by (Grissom et. al., 2021), which concluded that principals do matter partly due to the scope of their influence across an organization. While ongoing discussion has considered whether principals have an indirect impact on student learning (Grissom & Loeb, 2011; Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Sebastian & Allensworth, 2012; Witziers et al., 2003) or a direct one (Hallinger & Heck, 1996), effective leadership has been found to matter for student achievement as well as for other student outcomes such as attendance (Bartanen, 2020) and discipline (Sorensen et al., 2020). In this context a survey was developed with

questions in the following four categories, identified as ways school leaders improve student achievement:

1. Engaging in instructionally focused interactions with teachers
2. Building a productive school climate
3. Facilitating productive collaboration and professional learning communities
4. Managing personnel and resources strategically

These categories were chosen based on analysis of 30 years of literature on school leadership conducted by Grissom et al. (2021). These themes were identified in the literature as pertinent to what effective school leaders do in high-performing schools.

### ***Engaging in instructionally focused interactions with teachers***

Forms of engagement with teachers that center on instructional practice, such as teacher evaluation and instructional coaching, and establishing a data-driven, school-wide instructional program to facilitate such interactions. Tasked with leading and managing complex organizations, school leaders draw upon expertise and a broad set of skills to support instruction (Grissom & Loeb, 2011). Efforts to influence instructional practices require leaders to engage teachers in dialogue focused on instruction and instructional practices (City et al., 2009). Further, leaders must demonstrate the skills necessary to identifying high-quality instruction and provide targeted, instructionally focused coaching feedback (Garet et al., 2017; Grissom et al., 2013). Useful feedback helps teachers develop strategies to improve their classroom practices, which are positively associated with increased student learning (Wayne et al., 2016).

### ***Building a productive school climate***

A leader's ability to impact the school climate is also associated with increased student achievement (Sebastian & Allensworth, 2012). According to Tagiuri et al. (1968), climate

comprises the physical aspects of a school, the characteristics of individuals within the organization and their relationships, and the culture or shared set of beliefs about the organization. Principals create and sustain a strong school climate by carefully growing their understanding of the school and community—specifically of their needs, norms, beliefs, and values (Klar & Brewer, 2014). Drawing upon this knowledge, principals work to develop an organization in which teachers and students feel valued and supported (Jacobson et al., 2007), build a climate of trust (Tschannen-Moran, 2014; Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015), and cultivate overall awareness of the community as they embrace responsive leadership practices based on the broader community (Klar & Brewer, 2014).

***Facilitating productive collaboration and professional learning communities***

Strategies that promote teachers authentically working together with systems of support to improve their practice and enhance student learning. Similarly, principals affect learning outcomes by creating and maintaining a culture that supports professional learning and collaboration. Through their beliefs and actions, principals shape conditions and internal organizational structures that promote teacher learning and reflection, align professional learning with school goals, build trust (Youngs & King, 2002), and allocate resources to support professional development (Borko et al., 2003). However, professional development alone falls short of improving teaching and learning at scale (Elmore, 2004). Increasing teacher capacity through professional development may be more successful when paired with opportunities to engage in collaboration with colleagues (Stosich, 2016). Principals can foster a culture of learning by providing frequent, formal, focused opportunities for collaboration around instructional improvement. Strong principal leadership that supports teacher collaboration produces schools with a stronger sense of collective efficacy (Goddard et al., 2015).

### *Managing personnel and resources strategically*

Processes around strategic staffing and allocation of other resources. The biggest factor in this area is hiring high quality staff (Engel & Finch, 2015; Perrone & Meyers, 2023) and providing common planning time for teachers through effective scheduling and finances that allow for authentic teacher collaboration, to plan lessons that are data driven (DuFour & Fullan, 2013; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Sun et al., 2016).

### **Method**

#### *Sample*

This study gave a 50-question survey to teachers in 50 elementary schools in four different States in the United States, from June 2021 through December 2023. Twenty-five of the schools are labeled affluent schools where >75% of their students are not receiving free and reduced lunch (HPES) and 20 of the schools are low socioeconomic schools where >75% of the students are receiving free and reduced lunch. Free and/or reduced lunch is based on family income (BRTS). Twenty-five of the affluent schools based on State Assessments over the previous three years are considered high performing elementary schools. In addition, 25 of the low socioeconomic schools scored better than the State average on their State Assessments. Thirteen, recently received Blue Ribbon School Awards and are nationally recognized as the highest performing low socioeconomic schools in the nation. In total,  $n = 916$  teachers were surveyed. HPES had  $n = 405$  respondents and BRTS  $n = 511$  teachers were surveyed. The number of years that the principals in each school had been serving in their buildings was between five and eight years. In addition, it is important to note that the average year that each school leader had spent in their building in each of the two categories are: in BRTS 6.4, HPES,

7.60. All of the schools had enrollments between 300 and 450 students. The average enrollment in each category was: BRTS 392, HPES, 424.

### Sources of Evidence

All 50 of the elementary schools were considered high performing, a 6-point Likert-type scale was used for each question. The survey results were transferred from Qualtrics to SPSS. Mean, standard deviations, and scale reliabilities (Cronbach's alpha) were computed for all variables measured by the teacher survey. In order to answer the research question, a multi-variant regression was ran between the mean scores of school leaders in all four schools. Correlations were calculated using SPSS, MANOVA, and a multi-variate regression.

### Reliability & Results

To report the results, a Cronbach's alpha was conducted to measure the reliability of the survey. Tests were run on respondents' answers in each of the four categories of questions, from each of the four types of schools. All survey questions derived from the 655 teachers surveyed. Table 1 shows the results. As this table indicates, the scale exceeds accepted minimum standards of reliability ( $R > .70$ ; Nunnery & Bernstein, 1994). Mean responses to the scale ranged from the lows of 4.75 to 5.92, the standard deviations of responses were all relatively low (.866 to 1.876), indicating a substantial agreement among respondents' scores.

Table 1

*Mean, Standard Deviation, and Scale Reliability of the 50-Question Survey*

School Leaders	M	SD	R	N of Items
Engaging in instructionally focused interactions with teachers (E)				
BRTS	5.65	1.095	.77	48

HPES	5.75	.866		
Building a Productive School Climate (B)				
BRTS	5.92	1.344	.76	52
HPES	4.75	1.265		
Facilitating productive collaboration and professional learning communities (F)				
BRTS	5.23	1.155	.75	52
HPES	4.85	1.257		
Managing personnel and resources strategically (M)				
BRTS	4.72	1.205	.72	48
HPES	5.15	1.876		

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*Note.* Table 1 presents the Mean scores of Blue Ribbon Title Schools (BRTS) and High performing elementary schools (HPES), the Standard Deviation, and the reliability score of the survey from the Chronbach alpha test.

Below describes the results of the correlation coefficients (Table 2) or ( $r =$  scores). R scores that = 0-.19 is regarded as very weak, 0.20-0.39 as weak, 0.40-0.59 as moderate, 0.6-0.79 as strong and 0.8-1 as very strong correlation.

### ***Engaging in instructionally focused interactions with teachers***

This section had 12 questions. Teachers were asked about the quality of feedback their school leaders gave them on teacher evaluation, if the school leader had a clear expectation of what quality education is and communicated it to the teacher, could fairly and adequately measure the effectiveness and improvement of instruction, and could use data to drive instructional improvement. The effect that the principal's ability to engage in instructionally



focused interactions with teachers showed a strong impact on student achievement. In (BRTS) the positive impact on student outcomes was ( $r = .80$ ) and in (HPES) the impact was ( $r = .78$ ).

### ***Building a productive school climate***

This section had 13 questions. Teachers were asked questions regarding their level of trust for the school leader, whether or not that had a say in the decision making processes, the overall school climate of the building they worked in, and how collective the decision making process was between students, teachers, parents, and community, as well as the effectiveness of the shared vision and whether or not there are practical steps to move the school towards it. The effect that the principal's ability to build a productive school climate showed a very strong correlation in (BRTS), ( $r = .87$ ). It had a moderate impact in (HPES), ( $r = .52$ ).

### ***Facilitating productive collaboration and professional learning communities***

This section also had 13 questions. These questions centered on the effectiveness of collaboration time teachers get in schools. Teachers were asked whether or not they had adequate time to collaborate, did the school leader provide appropriate resources (substitute teachers, was the data presentable, organized, and appropriately desegregated) to make the collaboration time effective, and were decisions made by teachers from the collaboration appropriately supported by the school leader. The effect a principal has on facilitating productive collaboration and professional learning communities showed a moderately positive correlation on student achievement. For BRTS, ( $r = .59$ ) and for HPES, ( $r = .55$ ).

### ***Managing personnel and resources strategically***

This section had 12 questions. These questions centered on the school leader's effectiveness in hiring new staff, scheduling to support teachers job demands, support staff's effectiveness in supporting the classroom, utilizing the school budget to provide effective

resources, and overall support of the personnel in the building. The effect a principal has on managing personnel and resources strategically, showed a positive correlation on student achievement, but much weaker than the other four categories. For BRTS, ( $r = .38$ ) and HPES ( $r = .26$ ).

Table 2

*Correlation Analysis of School Leadership and Student Achievement (SA)*

Category	.2	.3	.4	.5	.6	.7	.8	.9	
1. BRTS (E)	.16	.02	.14	.12	.02	.04	.14	.80**	
2. HPES (E)		.15	.22	.15	.09	.13	.16	.78**	
3. BRTS (B)			.15	.16	.22	.15	.19	.87**	
4. HPES (B)				.20	.19	.27	.22	.52*	
5. BRTS (F)					.22		.18	.17	.59*
6. HPES (F)						.11	.22	.55*	
7. BRTS (M)							.20	.38*	
8. HPES (M)								.26*	
9. SA									

*Note.* Table 2 attempted to present the impact each category had on Student Achievement (SA) in the 25 affluent elementary schools (AES) and the 25 Low Socio-Economic Elementary Schools (LSEES). Also, \*\*  $p < .01$  & \*  $p < .05$  P < .01 \*\* P < .05 \*

**Discussion**

*According to teacher perceptions, are certain aspects of effective leadership more vital to the success of low socioeconomic elementary schools than others?*

Leadership effectiveness in all four categories is important to create a high-performing elementary school, regardless of the economic status of the student body. All categories showed a positive impact on student achievement, which is in line with previous research. Within the schools in this study however, the two categories teachers found most important were engaging in instructionally focused interactions with teachers (BRTS;  $r = .74$  & HPES;  $r = .78$ ). With regard to low-socioeconomic schools, it appears that the ability to build a positive school climate is the most important component to having a high-performing school that services a majority of capable low-socioeconomic students ( $r = .87$ ), according to the teachers surveyed in this sample. Also, based on this sample, it appears that effective school leadership is more vital in lower socioeconomic schools than affluent schools, to raise student achievement. We come to this conclusion based on the fact that in all four categories, school leaders in BRTS, scored higher than school leaders in HPES.

In most organizations, the most talented employees are rewarded with the greatest challenges and compensated accordingly. Students in low-socioeconomic categories continue to lag academically behind affluent students. Isenberg et al. (2022) found that low-socioeconomic students are less likely than affluent students to have effective teachers. All students must attend quality schools with effective educators. Closing skills, achievement, and opportunity gaps is nothing more than a cliché if policies do not attempt to get the most highly qualified educators to teach the most challenging students. This study shows causal evidence that having effective school leaders in elementary schools, especially Title 1 schools, is crucial.

### **State and Local Policy Implications**

State and local school decision-makers should abide by the following:

1. Develop a framework for what a quality school leader, specifically in a Title 1 school, looks like in order to identify the most qualified personnel to navigate these challenges.
2. Effective school leaders who meet the criteria should be given the task to lead Title 1 schools.
3. Moving ineffective leaders in other positions to leadership positions in Title 1 schools should not be an option, regardless of the political pressure decision-makers may face to do so.
4. Decision-makers should *significantly* compensate effective personnel in Title 1 schools. Doing so should be a priority so as to incentivize effective teachers and school leaders to work in lower-socioeconomic schools. These should be the highest paying jobs within our K12 system.

### **School Leadership Preparation Programming Recommendations**

In preparing leaders, significant progress is needed. Decision-makers of school leadership preparation programs may consider including the differences in school leadership in demographically different schools in their program standards (i.e., low-socioeconomic vs. affluent areas, rural, urban, small town, tribal, and suburban, to name a few). Perhaps most important in the effort to build future leaders, ample time should be dedicated to building a positive school climate and engaging in instructionally focused interactions with teachers.

### **Further Research**

A similar study surveying teachers on school climate may be of interest, considering that the leaders in BRTS had a significantly higher mean than leaders in HPES. This course of research could strengthen findings regarding a leader's ability to build a positive school climate

in a low-socioeconomic school. Also of interest for future research is determining the most critical aspects of building a positive school climate in low-socioeconomic elementary schools compared to more affluent schools. More studies comparing school leadership strategies in different contexts would also be valuable (effective school leaders in rural, urban, small town, tribal, or suburban areas). Is there a difference in the most important attributes of an effective school leader who services children within different school contexts?

### **Limitations**

The most significant limitation to this study is the authors only looked at teachers' perceptions and only compared economically diverse schools. Other factors such as race, gender orientation, language learners, and students with learning disabilities were not categories identified in the sample. These factors have a major impact; however, it was challenging to find comparable schools in these categories nationwide who would agree to participate in this sample.

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