
Principal Evaluations Based on Test Scores Don't Increase Test Scores



People may assume that state policies require supervisors to observe principals and then provide feedback. In reality, most states instead require principal evaluations to take into account students' academic (test-score) growth. As of 2022, 18 states used an observational approach as compared to 27 states that mandated the inclusion of measures of student test-score growth.

But focusing on test scores is not a good way to improve test scores. This approach has had no impact on students' reading or math scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), according to a new [study](#) published in the peer-reviewed journal *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* and conducted by [Sung Tae Jang](#) of The University of Hong Kong and NEPC Fellow [Jaekyung Lee](#) of the University at Buffalo, SUNY.

By contrast, observations followed by feedback had a small to moderately positive effect on eighth-grade NAEP reading scores for students in

all major racial/ethnic groups: Black, Hispanic, and White students. The researchers noted that they focused on eighth grade because it is “an important period of transition that can act as a proxy for students’ college and career readiness.”

Principal observations and feedback appear to be particularly beneficial for Hispanic and Black students. Between 2007 and 2002, states that mandated the observation-feedback approach saw gaps between the scores of White and Black students shrink by an average of 4%, after researchers accounted for prior achievement and other relevant factors. The difference between the reading scores of White and Hispanic students decreased by 2%. The researchers observed no impact on math scores.

Jang and Lee suggest that test-score-based evaluations may be ineffective because the approach incorrectly presumes that an extrinsic motivation will lead principals to improve their schools. They also point readers to prior research indicating that accountability measures are more likely to work if they—unlike test score-based principal evaluations—increase students’ access to resources and content. This is especially true if the accountability measures aspire to increase equity.

By contrast, the researchers suggest that the feedback that follows observations may “enhance principals’ intrinsic motivation and ability to improve their culturally responsive and equity-oriented leadership practices.”

Changed outcomes are most likely to follow from changed practices. Principal motivation and increased capacity, they explain, “may affect proximal outcomes by promoting, for example, a learner-centered culture and teachers’ use of instructional practices that can address gaps in learning opportunities and schooling experiences, thereby impacting the academic achievement of Black and Hispanic students.”

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