REVIEW OF *LACKING LEADERS* AND *GREAT PRINCIPALS AT SCALE*

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Summary of Review

These two reports focus on the need for more effective principals to improve school quality. Each includes a sensible discussion of workplace conditions affecting the principal pipeline and contributing to leadership effectiveness. *Great Principals at Scale* recommends better school and district alignment of goals and strategies, along with district-provided support structures and greater local autonomy for principals. *Lacking Leaders* examines the hiring practices in five school districts and identifies ineffective hiring practices as contributing to a pipeline problem; it argues that attracting the best candidates will require additional remuneration, greater autonomy over staffing decisions, and increased district-level collaboration. The headline policy recommendation is to increase salaries $100,000 above current levels to attract more effective principals into the pipeline. No research in the report, however, justifies the size of the salary recommendation or demonstrates salary as the most important factor influencing principal recruitment, selection, or retention. Also, while both reports focus on the principal as the primary source of leadership in schools, neither considers other important sources of leadership. Both reports suggest leadership and management skills found in many organizational settings outside of education are easily or directly transferable to education. This suggestion, however, underestimates the human context of teaching and learning. These and other limitations undermine the usefulness of the reports' resulting recommendations.

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I. Introduction

The school principal pipeline, which covers recruitment, selection, placement, professional development and ongoing district-level partnership, is an important research area for policy makers looking for ways to improve the educational experiences of children. And, there is research that indicates that effective school leadership contributes to overall school quality and student learning.[1] Both reports reviewed here adopt the view that principal effectiveness is a strong factor influencing student achievement scores yet overstate the relative importance of principals in the overall picture of what contributes to student achievement. By taking this approach, both reports adopt a flawed view of effective school leadership, which they base on how well students achieve on high stakes tests. External factors (class, SES, poverty rates, and composition of schools settings) greatly outweigh school related factors in explaining student achievement[2] and attempts to attribute variations in student achievement to teachers and principals are flawed at best, and at worst misrepresent the nature and quality of work performed by principals.[3]

The Fordham Institute report, *Lacking Leaders: The Challenges of Principal Recruitment, Selection, and Placement,*[4] is written by Daniela Doyle and Gillian Locke, senior investigators at the Public Impact, with a Foreword by Chester Finn and Amber Northern. Public Impact is a national education policy and management consulting firm, whose stated mission is to "dramatically improve learning outcomes for all children in the U.S., with a special focus on students who are not served well."[5]

Lacking Leaders begins with the perception that increased workplace demands on principals ("the job is grueling" [p. 9, *LL*]) requires greater autonomy and higher salaries to attract talented people into the profession. Greater autonomy is defined as increased authority to hire, fire, and reassign teachers and staff, while higher salary equals a $100,000 raise. While these assertions have a common sense tone, none of the empirical research presented in the report explains what makes their work harder or compares principals' salaries with other professions. Instead, the report actually examines recruitment, selection, and placement practices at five large school districts, and highlights the areas in which improvement is needed. The basic claim is that principals need better pay, more autonomy, and better working conditions.

Great Principals at Scale: Creating District Conditions that Enable all Principals to be Effective is written by Gina Ikemoto, Lori Taliaferro, and Benjamin Fenton (all from New Leaders*)* and Jacquelyn Davis (The Bush Institute). [6] New Leaders is a national nonprofit that according to its website "develops transformational school leaders and designs effective leadership policies and practices for school systems across the country."[7] The report begins with a summary of a New Leaders prepared literature review on principal effectiveness, which is used as a guiding framework to solicit input from experts and stakeholders over the course of two 2-day meetings. The outcome from the literature review and meetings is four guiding principles or strands for improving the effectiveness of principals.

Both reports suggest that education failure, framed in terms of poor academic achievement, is the result of ineffective principals. Weak applicant pools, self-serving recruitment and selection strategies, and misaligned administrative support systems are then described as the root causes of a leadership "crisis" in need of reform. In much the same way that a business would be expected to "increase profits or profitability," the metric of school success is student achievement and the principals' effectiveness is best understood in relation to raising student test scores. The language of effectiveness is also about managing the "talent," more of a sports or entertainment metaphor, which inevitably requires greater autonomy for principals to hire, fire, and reassign teachers (and by implication, reduce the power of those who advocate for greater teacher autonomy and professionalism). The language in the reports points to the importance of branding schools based on student achievement. Branding implies that schools or districts market themselves by drawing attention to student achievement outcomes.

II. Findings and Conclusions of the Reports

Lacking Leaders: The Challenges of Principal Recruitment, Selection, and Placement

This 46 page report (including Foreword and endnotes) examines principal hiring practices in five unnamed school districts from around the US, ranging in size from fewer than 50 schools with between 10-20 principal vacancies (2013-14) to more than 200 schools with more than 20 principal vacancies. Although no data on student race or ethnicity is provided in the report, data on free or reduced-price lunch (FRL) ranged from 64% to 80% and the rating of students' proficiency on state assessments in 2012-13 ranged from 48% to 71%.

The report asks three research questions: 1) How do these districts identify, recruit, select, and place high-potential principal candidates? 2) To what extent do these practices enable district to hire great school leaders? 3) What steps can districts take to ensure that districts engage the ablest individuals to lead their schools? Questions 3 looks at the placement process, of how principals are actually hired to fill vacancies at specific schools.

The report finds that districts are unable to recruit what it terms top-notch candidates because "inadequate pay and grueling work making the principalship a tough sell in many school districts, especially for experienced teachers" (p. 12, *Lacking Leaders*). A second finding is that budget constraints and the lack of success in hiring candidates external to the district leads some districts to "grow their own school leaders. Lastly, informal or passive recruitment practices overlook some high–potential principal candidates, which is especially worrisome in high-needs school districts.

The Report finds that efforts to standardize the principal selection processes have made personal relationships and "whom you know" within the district less important, highlighting the need to balance objectivity and discretion in the hiring process (p. 26, *LL*). The report also points out that current principal hiring practices fail to consider the importance of prior effectiveness as measured by student achievement scores (p. 20, *LL*). At the same time, the report presents the case for recruiting leaders from other employment sectors ("great leaders can succeed across sectors"), (p. 16, (*LL*) and argues that high quality managers and management skills can be found in many sectors, public and private. The research to support this position, however, comes from other sources describing the perceptions and practices of effective principals.[8]

> *Both reports overstate the central importance of leadership in the office of the principal and ignore the view that much leadership in schools is found outside of the principal's office.*

The third question addresses principal placement and "fit" and the report finds these processes are less formal and less rigorous than the selection process (p. 29, *LL*). "Principal placement largely lacks a clear and consistent process to assess candidates' fit" and "late hiring causes some candidates to drop out" (p. 27, *LL*).. The question of "fit" raises important concerns about the importance of school context. On the one hand, *Lacking Leaders* points to the importance of school context and the principal's "fit to location" for successful principal placement; on the other hand, it argues for a generic view of leadership competencies and looks for leaders from other organizational settings, with little or no educational or instructional experience.

Great Principals at Scale: Creating District Conditions that Enable All Principals to be Effective

This 34 page report "is a synthesis of input from research, experts, and stakeholders" (p. 6, *Great Principals at Scale*). According to the authors, "the project began with a thorough literature review of the conditions for effective leadership" (p. 8, *GPAS*), including an unpublished annotated bibliography prepared by *New Leaders*.

The research presents an overview of the conditions of effective leadership and what school systems need to do to enable principals to be effective (p. 9, *GPAS*). The review of literature and subsequent expert input results in a framework for effective school leadership based on "four sets of conditions that effective school systems need to implement to enable principals to be successful: *Strand 1)* Aligned goals, strategies, structures, and resources, *Strand 2)* Culture of collective responsibility, balanced autonomy, and continuous learning and improvement, *Strand 3)* Effective management and support for principals, and *Strand 4)* Systems and policies to effectively manage talent at the school-level (p. 9, *GPAS*). Each strand is then explained in greater detail with examples of what school districts need to accomplish in order to promote effectiveness.

The effective leadership strands are generic and similar to current national standards for administrative preparation and licensure.[9] There is no discussion of how the literature review was accomplished, what articles and reports were given the most importance, or how expert testimony was synthesized into the recommended actions. Readers are told only that two 2-day meetings were held in 2012 in which participants "engaged in a set of activities to identify, prioritize, and define the conditions based on the research and on their expert field experience" (p. 8, *GPAS*). A companion volume, *Great Principals at Scale Toolkit* [10] includes a rubric to assess the quality of implementation and a survey instrument on the perceptions of key staff members regarding district performance.

Mixed in the report are also recommendations from the expert work group, supporting particular ideas and explanations, one of which is about principal autonomy. Of the 21 names listed, only one affiliation is with a school. There are 7 school district people listed, but their specific position or background is unknown, which poses a serious credibility or "standing" problem.

The report states:

> According to our expert researchers and practitioners work group, the most important and most commonly lacking condition for principal effectiveness is the authority of principals to create appropriate staffing models for their school, including the ability to hire, promote, and dismiss teachers, school leaders, and other school-based staff (p. 27, *GPAS*; the statement also is highlighted on p. 11).

The source cited for this position is a 2012 New Leaders publication,[11] which in turn cites research by Jennifer Rice,[12] who in turn cites research by Tara Beteille, Demetra Kalogrides, and Susanna Loeb.[13] On perusing these studies/reports, a slightly different point is actually made, which suggests that effective principals are able to attract and retain effective teachers. None of the research studies cited actually claims that the ability to hire, promote, and dismiss is "the most important and most commonly lacking condition for principal effectiveness."

III. The Reports' Rationale for Its Findings and Conclusions

In *Lacking Leaders*, the overall rationale for understanding school leadership is managerial and the report recommends bringing effective leaders from other sectors, public and private, into the principal pipeline; it also argues that principals' effectiveness and hiring decisions should be based on student achievement, which in turn requires greater autonomy over personnel decisions and significantly higher salaries to attract the "right" people to the job.

Similarly, *Great Principals at Scale* adopts language which portrays schools as overly bureaucratic, ineffective, and inefficient. An unsupported claim of a "crisis in leadership" is expressed which is used to justify their school improvement efforts. The report bases district and school effectiveness largely on student achievement outcomes, and fails take into account or appreciate [14] the human systems that are present in schools.

IV. The Reports' Use of Research Literature

Lacking Leaders includes a list of references/endnotes, which are used to support the report's findings. Of the 43 endnotes, many with multiple citations, approximately 20 citations come from foundation sponsored reports (e.g., Broad Foundation, Wallace Foundation, Fordham Institute), 10 citations come from peer reviewed journals, 5 from books, and 8-10 from blogs and other online sources. Some of the citations used to explain principal contributions to student achievement are drawn from public policy and labor market literature. In general, these references overstate the contributions of principals to student achievement and understate the importance and relevance of external factors and conditions.[15]

Great Principals at Scale includes a review of literature and a reference list, some of which was done by New Leaders in preparation for the report. Of the 43 references in the report, 5 are from refereed journals, 5 are books, 7 cite foundations as authors (i.e., Wallace, Gates, Fordham), 15 are from university-based and/or stand-alone research centers, and the rest are from nonprofits (such as New Leaders). Many of the research studies prepared at universities are supported with foundation funding or commissioned by foundations. [16]

Neither report indicates that there is any debate over the use of value-added measures of teacher or principal effectiveness. As a result, both reports overstate the central importance of leadership in the office of the principal and ignore the view that much leadership in schools is found outside of the principal's office.

V. Review of the Report's Methods

Lacking Leaders is a case study of hiring practices at five school districts ranging in size from less than 50 schools to more than 200 schools. Overall, the report is easy to read and

the findings follow the questions and data collection. The methods section indicates that districts' willingness and ability to share relevant data about principal hiring practices and decisions vary considerably, thus making generalizations to other districts difficult.

Great Principals at Scale has a brief methods section, which states that the project began with a "thorough literature review of the conditions for effective leadership" (p. 8, *GPAS*). An unpublished annotated bibliography prepared by New Leaders is referenced as available upon request. The report itself is described as a "synthesis of input from research, experts, and stakeholder"(p. 6, *GPAS*). The report also lists an Expert Advisory Group with participants from three Tier 1 research universities, the Gates Foundation, two members from the Wallace Foundation, seven school districts, the National Governors Association, multiple non-profits, and one state department of education. Experts were brought together for two 2-day meetings in 2012, and along with America Achieves Fellows consisting of 22 principals and 12 district leaders, provided input to the literature review and synthesis that make up the report. A group of experts, including researchers is also cited as having provided a final review of the report. The report's method section does not explain how this group deliberated or agreed upon its final recommendations.

VI. Review of the Validity of the Findings and Conclusions

On the one hand, *Lacking Leaders* is a clear-cut research report that looks at recruitment, selection, and placement practices in five school districts. On the other hand, the foreword by Chester Finn and Amber Northern is less of a research report, and more of a general narrative of the central importance of principals to school achievement, the need for greater autonomy to hire and fire teachers and a suggestion to raise principal's salaries by $100,000. A recent article in *The Atlantic* cites the report's findings "that the way to attract and hold onto high quality school leaders is to give them more autonomy, administrative support, and a $100,000 raise."[17] And that's the problem. The Foreword grabs the headlines and makes policy recommendations that are not really included in or substantiated by the report's research on five school districts' practices related to principal recruitment, selection, and placement.

The report also ignores other selection considerations, such as whether people charged with hiring new principals, simply reproduce themselves, or instead look for qualities in their school leaders, which go beyond the skills and abilities that current practitioners bring to the table. The answer provided in the report is to seek out leadership and management skills across other employment sectors. The authors did not consider the possibilities of creating a small alternate route for principals, which could expand the pipeline by recruiting teacher leaders, applicants of color, and/or community advocates, who bring deep knowledge about families and communities, home languages, and under-served populations, into the school leadership positions. There is nothing particularly new in the literature review presented in *Great Principals at Scale* and much of the research on principal effectiveness has been reported elsewhere. The report continues the myth that effective schools are best judged by the test performances of students and that significant

variation in student achievement can and should be attributed to the principal and the principal's effectiveness on the job. Most of the variance in student achievement can be attributed out-of-school factors and to imply otherwise, is both an incorrect diagnosis of the schools and an incorrect prescription for what to do to improve schools. It is more important, however, to recognize that schools are complex human systems and that the four proposed strands of principals' effectiveness are only a small subset of the many competing metrics that need to be addressed. These unaddressed strands directly affect the lives of principals, teachers, students, parents, and other stakeholders. Thus, the results from hiring a "great" principal may be quite different, depending on whose values are prioritized in the selection process.

While the principal's job is defined as grueling, no research is presented to explain what actually makes the work grueling and whether the focus on principal effectiveness, as measured by student achievement, will actually make the work less or more grueling.

VII. Usefulness of the Reports for Guidance of Policy and Practice

Lacking Leaders has the potential for contributing to the larger policy issue of how to increase the supply of principals for the public schools. If there is a shortage, then what to do to enrich and increase the number of talented applicants needs to be informed by research. However, no data is presented in this report to justify the conclusions that increased principal autonomy to hire, fire, and reassign teachers, large principal pay raises, or the narrowing of the considerations in the hiring process.

Great Principals at Scale is more of a synthesis of existing literature and expert input, on the need for better goal alignment, collaboration, professional development, and autonomy on the job. It is unclear how the professional judgment panel prioritized these four strands from countless other possibilities. Many other important metrics for judging the effectiveness of school principals are completely ignored such as 1) reducing suspensions and expulsions, 2) ending bullying practices and introducing restorative justice, 3) promoting a culture of dialogue and deliberation, 4) creating hubs for integrated services to children and families.

The policy recommendations to support principals as instructional leaders (Strand 2) and granting principals more autonomy to "manage the talent" (Strand 4), translates into managing the teachers to produce high student test scores. The lack of consideration of the severe limitations of value-added principal evaluation models and the inability to ascribe causality to the resulting weak correlation coefficients renders the undergirding assumptions of the model inoperative. The language and recommendations contained in both reports consider principals as businessmen and ultimately fails to appreciate the importance of human relationships in teaching and learning.[18]

Notes and References

1 Pont, B., Nusche, D., & Moorman, H. (2008). *Improving school leadership, Volume 1: Policy and practice*. Paris: OECD.

2 Kahlenberg, R. (2012-2013, Winter). From All Walks of Life: New Hope for School Integration. *American Educator*, 2-14, 40.

3 Berliner, D. C. & Glass, G. (2014). *50 myths & lies that threaten America's public schools: The real crisis in education*. New York: Teachers College Press;

Glass, G. V. (2008). *Fertilizers, pills, and magnetic strips: the fate of public education in America*. Charlotte, N.C.: Information Age Publishing.

4 Doyle, D.. & Locke, G. (2014). *Lacking Leaders: The Challenges of Principal Recruitment, Selection, and Placement*. Washington, DC: Thomas B. Fordham Institute. Retrieved September 5, 2014, from http://edexcellence.net/publications/lacking-leaders-the-challenges-of-principal-recruitment-selection-and-placement.

5 Information on Public Impact is found on the organization's website, http://publicimpact.com/about-public-impact/employment-opportunities/.

6 Ikemoto, G. Taliaferro, L., Fenton, B., & Davis, J. (2014, June*). Great principals at scale: Creating District Conditions that enable all principals to be effective*. Dallas: The Bush Institute; New York, NY: New Leaders. Retrieved September 5, 2014, from http://www.bushcenter.org/alliance-reform-education-leadership/great-principals-scale.

7 Information about New Leaders is available on the organization's website, http://www.newleaders.org.

8 Grissom, J. & Loeb, S. (2011). Triangulating principal effectiveness: how perspectives of parents, teachers, and assistant principals identify the central importance of managerial skills. *American Education Research Journal, 48* (5), 1091-1123. Retrieved September 5, 2014, from https://cepa.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/Triangulating.pdf.

The specific instructional activities, including teacher coaching, evaluation, and developing the school's educational program predicted positive student achievement gains in another study. Also see,

Grissom, J. et al. (2013). Effective instructional time use for school leaders: Longitudinal evidence from observations of principals. *Educational Researcher 42* (8), 433-444.

9 Interstate School Leadership Licensure Consortium – ISLLC (2008) *Standards and Educational Leadership Constituent Council (ELCC) Standards*.

10 Ikemoto, G. Taliaferro, L., Fenton, B., & Davis, J. (2014, June). *Great principals at scale Toolkit*. Dallas: The Bush Institute; New York, NY: New Leaders. Retrieved September 5, 2014, from http://www.bushcenter.org/sites/default/files/gwbi-greatprincipalsatscale-toolkit.pdf.

11 The citation on page 27 in the report is:

New Leader. (2012). *Playmaker: How great principals build and lead great teams of teachers*. New York, NY: Author. Two of the authors of Playmaker (Ikemoto and Taliaferro) are also authors of this report.

12 Rice, J. K. (2010). *Principal effectiveness and leadership in an era of accountability: What research says*. Washington, DC: Center for Analysis of Longitudinal Data in Education Research (CALDER).

13 Beteille, T., Kalogrides, D., & Loeb, S. (2009). *Effective schools: Managing the recruitment, development, and retention of high-quality teachers,* CALDER Working Paper 37. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute.

14 Vickers, G. (1995). *The art of judgment: A study of policy making.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

15 *Lacking Leaders* reports: "Approximately one-fourth of a school's impact on academic achievement can be attributed to the school leader, second only to school teachers," citing:

Marzano, R., *et al.*, (2005). School Leadership That Works: From Research to Result. Aurora, CO: Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning.

Stating that principals account for approximately 25% of the schools impact on student achievement is misleading. Since school-related factors account for only 10%- 20% of the total variance in student achievement, it is more accurate to say that principal effectiveness accounts for 2.5% - 5% of the variation in student achievement and that this finding holds when comparing the least and most effective principals.

16 For example, research prepared by the University of Minnesota's Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement and the University of Toronto's Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, Learning from Leadership Project, and Investigating the links to Improved Student Learning: Final Report of Research Findings, are identified on the cover page as "Commissioned by The Wallace Foundation." Retrieved September 5, 2014, from http://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/school-leadership/key-research/Documents/Investigating-the-Links-to-Improved-Student-Learning.pdf.

17 Urist, J. (2014, June 24). Should principals be treated like CEOs? *The Atlantic* (online edition). Retrieved September 5, 2014, from http://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2014/06/should-we-be-treating-principals-like-ceos/373246/.

18 For a recent critique of this view education as a business, see:
Kirp, D (2014 August 17). Teaching is not a business. *The New York Times*, SR4. Retrieved September 5, 2014, from http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/17/opinion/sunday/teaching-is-not-a-business.html.

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