

# The Policies and Practices of Principal Evaluation

**Executive Summary**

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INTEGRATED LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVE

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The call for improved student achievement has led politicians and educators to look at principal effectiveness as a critical lever in transforming education results. This new policy environment magnifies the importance of being able to accurately, effectively, and fairly assess the level of a principal's performance as a means to increase principal effectiveness. The purpose of this review is to present what research does and does not say about principal evaluation systems. Sixty-eight sources, mostly published since 1990, include 28 peer-reviewed and non-peer-reviewed primary-source research studies and 40 secondary sources focused on principal evaluation systems. Together, the publications describe what is known about policies and practices that contribute to comprehensive, effective principal evaluation, and they highlight key points that may provide guidance to practitioners and policymakers charged with evaluating principals. Analysis of existing primary-source studies indicates that while important and informative work has been done, research on the subject of principal evaluation lacks volume and depth.

## Part I: Primary Sources

Researchers reviewed 28 primary-source research studies focused on principal evaluation systems by looking at the methodology of the research and the context or setting of the studies. The researchers organized the primary sources into four major themes: implementation, instrumentation, portfolio-based evaluation, and component analysis. For each of the themes, researchers identified key points made in the primary-source studies.

### Implementation Studies

Fifteen studies centered on the implementation of principal evaluation policies, systems, protocols,

and processes. These studies reveal the following key points:

- Most district-developed principal evaluation systems lack information or evidence of validity and reliability.
- The alignment between district evaluation systems and professional standards is mixed among districts.
- Methods and tools used to evaluate principals vary widely.
- A growing number of district evaluation systems are beginning to emphasize instructional leadership practices.
- Consideration of environmental contexts and circumstances is important when devising and implementing principal evaluations.
- Principals' evaluators must be properly trained in the district's evaluation process and must consistently and effectively apply that process with all principals.
- Perceptions regarding the purposes, processes, and outcomes of evaluation often vary between principals and superintendents.
- Principals often perceive their evaluations as the product of political influences and subjective opinions by community members and district office supervisors.
- There are differences between the performance domains that superintendents deemed important and the content of the actual principal evaluation instruments districts use.
- Superintendents attributed higher levels of importance to the evaluation process than principals did, except when the process was a product of collaboration between principals and superintendents and when evaluation standards and expectations were made explicit.

- The quality of the process used to evaluate principals is more important than the evaluation content.
- Principals are most likely to perceive evaluations favorably when they are linked to school, district, and personal/professional goals.

### Instrumentation Studies

Seven studies focused on the development and/or validation of various principal evaluation instruments. These studies did not include instruments that have been developed and tested by individual school districts, state licensure instruments, or administrator preparation program assessments. These studies reveal the following key points:

- Valid and reliable evaluation instruments were limited in number and sophistication.
- The Vanderbilt Assessment of Leadership in Education (VAL-ED) evaluation instrument provides evidence that can be used for formative and summative purposes, can measure leadership development over time, and is context sensitive.

### Portfolio-Based Evaluation Studies

Three studies examined the uses and characteristics of portfolios in principal evaluation through qualitative interviews of principals and district office supervisors. These studies reveal several key points:

- The use of portfolios as component parts of principal evaluation systems is relatively rare.
- The research provided shows no evidence that the use of portfolios impacts principal behavior, teaching practices, or student performance.
- Portfolios are time-consuming to develop and maintain, but they appear to be helpful

as mechanisms to stimulate self-reflection among principals.

- Most portfolio assessments have not been tested for psychometric properties.
- Portfolios appear to be especially useful for archiving documents pertaining to principal performance.

### Component Analyses Studies

Three studies focused on analyzing one or more component parts comprised in principal evaluation systems and were categorized as component analyses. These studies reveal the following key points:

- The quality of principal evaluation systems may be enhanced through the collaborative involvement of multiple stakeholders in developing psychometric properties.
- Multilevel analysis of principal behaviors in concert with the participation of multiple stakeholders strengthens the quality of principal evaluation by accounting for variations in school factors and contexts.
- Structural modeling analyses may improve understandings regarding the impact of principal behavior on students, teachers, and the school.

## Part II: Secondary Sources

Forty publications identified in this review were categorized as secondary sources. Analysis of these sources indicated that multiple themes and perspectives were represented with various frequencies across the range of publications. A single source often included more than one theme or perspective. Secondary-source literature was organized broadly into four perspectives: 1) status of principal evaluation systems, 2) critical descriptions and commentaries about principal evaluation systems, 3) recommendations and suggestions

relating to the process and/or content of effective principal evaluation systems, and 4) descriptions of best practices in principal evaluation.

### **Status of Principal Evaluation Systems**

Five publications described what was going on in the field, generally, without judgment regarding effectiveness or quality. The publications reveal the following key points:

- The processes, policies, features, and foci of principal evaluation vary considerably across school districts.
- Evidence-based evaluation practices appear to be increasing in school districts, as is the use of professional standards to calibrate and establish evaluation goals and outcomes.
- Districts appear to be paying greater attention to school contexts and circumstances when establishing the criteria for, and assessing the outcomes of, principal performance.
- The use of evaluation for both summative and formative purposes is increasing among school districts.

### **Critical Descriptions and Commentaries**

Sixteen secondary sources presented descriptions of common principal evaluation practices, along with critical commentary. Publications illuminated problems and shortcomings in evaluation systems and implementation strategies and raised questions regarding the impact of these systems and processes on principal performance and important school outcomes. The publications reveal the following key points:

- District principal evaluation systems and policies tend to be locally developed and not well aligned with professional standards or the literature on leadership effectiveness.
- Research on principal evaluation systems and policies is sparse and has not been

of sufficient strength to provide a robust theoretical foundation.

- Most principal evaluation systems have not been tested for various types of validity or reliability.
- Principal evaluation systems and policies often fail to consider contextual variations, for example, differences in school levels or principal experience.
- Evaluation systems commonly rely on a single evaluator's judgment, rather than providing structured feedback from multiple stakeholders.
- Little is known about how, or how well, principal evaluation systems stimulate change in principal behaviors or have an impact on organizational effectiveness.
- Many principal evaluation systems rely too much on simple ratings, like checklists or brief narrative comments, that fail to provide deep, descriptive, or comprehensive analyses of a principal's strengths or areas that need further development.
- Many districts have begun to align evaluation systems to principles of instructional leadership, but many other districts continue to focus principal evaluations on management and operational tasks and duties, principal behaviors and characteristics, and preset performance criteria.

### **Recommendations for More Effective Principal Evaluations**

Thirty-three publications presented recommendations regarding the conduct or improvement of principal evaluation systems and procedures. The recommendations feature the following desirable attributes that should be included within evaluation systems:

- Evaluation should stimulate and guide a principal's professional development.

- Evaluation protocols should be aligned with important school and student outcomes.
  - Evaluators should acquire appropriate feedback from multiple stakeholders.
  - Evaluations are enriched and strengthened when evidence is collected through multiple methods.
  - Evaluation systems should be flexible enough to account for variations in school contexts and environments.
  - Principals should be engaged partners in the process of establishing evaluation goals and objectives and assessing their own performance.
  - Evaluation procedures and tools should be reliable and valid.
  - Evaluation systems should be based on established standards of administrative practice and on objective and measurable performance objectives.
  - Evaluation systems should be based upon a conceptual framework that includes research about effective leadership, effective organizations, and effective personnel evaluation.
  - Evaluation systems should consider incorporating performance-based rewards and consequences.
  - School district leaders should regularly assess the alignment between the district's principal evaluation system and the critical goals and needs of principals, the schools, and the district.
- Rigorous empirical evidence regarding best practices in principal evaluation is extremely thin so it is difficult to assert the effects of evaluation on important school outcomes; it is difficult to generalize effective principal evaluation practices found in one school district to all school districts.
  - The quality of the conduct of principal evaluation may be more important than its content; strong, trusting, and collaborative relationships between principals and their district office evaluators is especially critical to the success of the evaluation process.
  - Establishing a balance between the formative and summative functions of evaluation appears to result in greater principal buy-in and motivation regarding the evaluation process.
  - Principal evaluation systems appear to be most effective when they are based upon clear standards and expectations of performance and aligned with the key goals and needs of principals, schools, and districts.

## Descriptions of Best Practices in Principal Evaluation

Eleven publications presented examples of exemplary evaluation practices that exist in or are used by school districts. The publications reveal the following key points:

## Final Comments

This review of literature illuminates published information and findings on the topic of principal evaluation systems. The body of literature on principal evaluation is surprisingly thin. Both primary and secondary sources are limited in number and distributed broadly across topics. However, key points derived from primary and secondary sources can provide general insights into improved practices that may fit the varied contexts of districts and schools and that can be implemented well and tested thoroughly in district and school improvement efforts. With broader implementation of these practices, questions about what principal evaluation systems and procedures work best and how they advance individual and organizational development can be examined in the future.



