School Principal training: What works?

Violeta Arancibia, Juan Baron, Barbara Hanisch

School principals impact students’ achievement through the monitoring of students’ achievement, providing instructional leadership to teachers, and management skills (Branch, Hanushek, & Rivkin, 2013; Leithwood & Mascall, 2008; Bloom, Lemos, Sadun, & Reenen, 2015). A large amount of research suggests several of the characteristics that make a school principal effective: someone who establishes clear goals and expectations, who manages the curriculum, provides teachers with professional development, among others (Böhlmark, & Grönqvistnand, 2012; Grissom, Loeb, & Y Master, 2013; Robinson, 2007). Despite this, it is less clear how education systems can support school principals to become more effective and maximize their impact on students’ achievement. This paper reviews the existing body of evidence with a focus on identifying effective interventions to improve school principals’ leadership, management skills, and effectiveness, in both pre-service and in-service programs for principals in developed and developing countries. The paper weights the distinct types of evidence, with special attention to causal evidence between school principal training and student learning outcomes, to identify the characteristics of programs that are more likely to support principals to become more effective. Among those, effective programs seem to be those that offer: in-service coaching, focus on curriculum and students’ academic performance, data-driven strategic planning, and that are modular, focus on developing one skill at a time, consider socio-emotional skill, offer trainees the space to practice newly-acquired skills, and provide continuous feedback for improvement. The findings of this paper are relevant for policymakers seeking to improve students’ learning outcomes via the importance of school principals. The findings in this paper will shed light on the characteristics of effective in-service and pre-service training programs for better training program design. Given the potential impact that effective principal training programs could have on over 3,000 or more students per principal trained, targeting schools’ principals could be one of the most cost-effective policy to improve student performance from a systems perspective.

References