

Florida TaxWatch

EDUCATION LEADERSHIP ROUNDTABLE SUMMARY REPORT

JULY 2018



IN CONJUNCTION WITH THE

TAXWATCH
PRINCIPAL
LEADERSHIP
AWARDS

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David Mann
Chairman of the Board of Trustees

Dominic M. Calabro
President & Chief Executive Officer

Dear Fellow Taxpayer,

Research has consistently shown that after teachers, principals have the most significant impact on student achievement when it comes to in-school factors. The principal's role as a school's instructional leader and the individual most responsible for fostering a positive climate is getting more attention from lawmakers and policymakers.

On April 20, 2018, Florida TaxWatch convened a "blue ribbon" panel of educators, business leaders, and current and former state legislators in Orlando to discuss ways to improve the overall quality of pre-K – 12 education by improving the leadership qualities of our principals. Participants in this roundtable discussion included the Chair of the State Board of Education, one current and one former member of the House of Representatives, a number of community and business leaders, and 12 current and former winners of TaxWatch's prestigious Principal Leadership Award.

Moderated by former Senate President and Chief Financial Officer Jeff Atwater, the panel discussed obstacles to effective school leadership; ways to attract and retain high-quality teachers; professional development for principals; how to get the most from teachers; and principal autonomy.

TaxWatch is pleased to present this summary report, and we look forward to a continued discussion with Florida lawmakers and policymakers during the 2019 legislative session and beyond.

Sincerely,

Dominic M. Calabro

Dominic M. Calabro
President & CEO

INTRODUCTION

Among all school-related factors that contribute to what students learn at school, leadership is perhaps second only to classroom instruction. Furthermore, the impact of leadership tends to be the greatest in schools where the learning needs of students are most acute.¹ The greater the challenge, the greater the impact an effective principal can have on student learning. There are virtually no documented instances of troubled schools being turned around without intervention by a powerful leader. Many other factors may contribute to such turn-arounds, but leadership is the catalyst.²

In 2013, Florida TaxWatch established its prestigious Principal Leadership Awards (PLA) Program to recognize and reward Florida's highest-performing principals whose schools draw from predominantly at-risk populations, yet whose students consistently outperform those in schools with comparable populations. TaxWatch annually recognizes the top three elementary, top three middle, and top three high school principals.

This program, the first of its kind in the U.S., uses the Florida Department of Education's Florida Value-Added Model (FL-VAM) common school component estimates, which describe the amount of learning that is typical for students in each school that differs from the statewide conditional expectation and indicates the total contribution of the school to greater than or less than predicted student achievement. TaxWatch calculates student learning gains for math and reading by grade and by school year.

In April 2018, TaxWatch convened a 90-minute education roundtable in Orlando to discuss ways to improve the overall quality of pre-K – 12 education by improving the leadership qualities of our public school principals. Joining the nine current PLA-winning principals were three former PLA-winning principals, the Chair of the State Board of Education, one current and one former member of the Florida House of Representatives, and a number of business and community leaders from across the state. A full list of participants is included in Appendix A.

Moderated by former Chief Financial Officer and Senate President Jeff Atwater, the participants discussed the following topics:

- Obstacles to effective school leadership;
- Ways to attract and retain high-quality teachers;
- Professional development for principals;
- How to get the most from teachers; and
- Principal autonomy.

1 Kenneth Leithwood, Karen Seashore Louis, Stephen Anderson and Kyla Wahlstrom, "How Leadership Influences Student Learning," The Wallace Foundation, 2004.

2 Kenneth Leithwood, Alma Harris, and David Hopkins, "Seven Strong Claims About Successful School Leadership," *School Leadership and Management*, Vol. 28, No. 1, February 2008.

Although not for attribution, the strategies discussed by the participating principals to effectively lead their schools have been summarized here by TaxWatch, along with a review of educational literature and research studies that support these strategies. TaxWatch has also identified a number of “takeaways” for consideration by policy makers and education professionals. A draft copy of this report was provided to the participating principals and other experts for feedback to make sure TaxWatch accurately captured the discussion.

Please note that this report is not intended to represent a comprehensive review of, or a “deep dive” into, the above topics. It is, however, intended to be a starting point for further discussion and examination of what these principals are doing to make their schools so successful, and what policymakers can do to begin to institutionalize these effective leadership practices.

TaxWatch is pleased to present a summary of this discussion, “takeaways” for consideration for Florida’s education policymakers and professionals, and a summary of available research in support of those takeaways.

OBSTACLES TO EFFECTIVE SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

Summary

Discussion focused on the amount of time these effective principals spend in their office versus the amount of time spent in classrooms, hallways, and other parts of the school. It was the consensus of the participating principals that visiting classrooms should be “Priority 1.” Once a principal gets in their office in the morning, the paperwork, phone calls, and visits from parents and teachers make it difficult to leave.

Principals need to know what is going on in the classroom, and the best way to do this is to structure their day to give them time to visit classrooms. Teachers have a better opportunity to see and interact with the principal in the classroom than in the principal’s office. The feedback received by teachers from the principal in the classroom has a positive impact on instruction and student learning, and helps create a positive learning environment. Being in the classrooms, for example, during statewide testing permits the principal to see if the teachers need any help and to make sure the testing environments and conditions are ideal.

The participating principals emphasized the importance of relationships, which can best be developed by being in classrooms and hallways. Students, particularly in high schools and large urban schools, need to know who the principal is. Being in classrooms and hallways provides opportunities for principals and students to develop good relationships.

It is important that the teachers understand that principals visiting the classroom serves more than just an evaluative function. The participating principals believe that visiting classrooms is an important part of teachers’ growth models, helping teachers to learn and grow as well.

Literature Review

The nature of a principal’s duties requires them to spend a considerable amount of time on their non-instructional responsibilities. As a result, it is easy for principals to become office-bound. Perceptions of disconnect are compounded when principals do not visit classrooms regularly. Teachers perceive that principals’ infrequent visits demonstrate that other priorities outweigh the value of maintaining a classroom presence.³

3 Olaf Jorgenson and Christopher Peal, “When Principals Lose Touch with the Classroom,” *Principal*, March/April 2008.

Regardless of why principals lacked presence in classrooms, teachers consistently shared their belief that administrators' absences limited their credibility among the faculty.⁴

Research suggests the best administrators spend an immense amount of time developing, improving, and investing in relationships, and that these positive relationships are the heart of what makes a school extraordinary. To build relationships with people and positively shape school culture, it is necessary for the school leader to be visible in the school and community.⁵

A University of Washington study found that effective principals work relentlessly to improve achievement by focusing on the quality of instruction. They help define and promote high expectations; they attack teacher isolation and fragmented effort; and they connect directly with teachers and the classroom.⁶

To be successful, a principal should be where the action is, which is where the students are --- in the classrooms, on the playground, in the cafeteria, and around the campus. Only by observing teachers and students in their element can one truly understand their experiences, feel their existence, and know the goings-on of the entire school. And there is no substitute for that knowledge.⁷

Takeaways

Effective principals remain visible and approachable through the school day. They are the first and last person that the teacher sees on a regular day. They greet their students at the school door, and move with the student body throughout the school day.

Effective principals maintain an active presence in the hallways, classrooms, cafeteria, study halls, etc.

ATTRACTING AND RETAINING HIGH-QUALITY TEACHERS

Summary

Discussion focused on how these effective principals go about recruiting and retaining high-quality teachers. The techniques and strategies discussed by the participating principals to attract high-quality teachers to urban schools and schools in underserved communities, and then to retain them, reflect the need to provide resources and support and to build trust.

Signing bonuses and salary supplements are important and effective in recruiting young teachers to teach in urban schools and schools in underserved communities. These are schools that receive little, if any, resources from parents. These schools are also less likely to get the A+ funds⁸ which can be used to purchase educational equipment or materials, because they are more likely to have low overall school grades. As a result, teachers are forced to purchase a lot of things out of their own pockets.

4 Olaf Jorgenson and Christopher Peal, "When Principals Lose Touch with the Classroom," *Principal*, March/April 2008.

5 Sue A. Rieg and Joseph F. Marcoline, "Relationship Building: The First "R" for Principals," Eastern Education Research Association Conference Paper, February 2008.

6 Bradley S. Portin, Michael S. Knapp, Scott Dareff, Sue Feldman, Felice A. Russell, Catherine Samuelson and Theresa Ling Yeh, *Leadership for Learning Improvement in Urban Schools*, University of Washington, 2009,

7 Peter A. Hall, "Voices from the Field: The Principal's Presence and Supervision to Improve Teaching," retrieved from <http://www.sedl.org/pubs/sedl-letter/v17n02/principal.html>, May 18, 2018.

8 Schools are eligible for A+ Funding under the state's School Recognition Program if they: (a) Sustain high performance by receiving a school grade of "A;" or (b) Demonstrate exemplary improvement due to innovation and effort by improving at least one letter grade; or (c) Improve more than one letter grade and sustain the improvement the following school year; or (d) Are designated as Alternative Schools that receive a school improvement rating of "Improving" or improve at least one level.

It is important to tell these young teachers up front before being hired what to expect and what they will encounter. After they are hired, the principal must get them to see the culture he/she is trying to create and how it will support and develop the teachers. When teachers see this, they tend to stay.

Although signing bonuses and salary supplements are important and effective in attracting young teachers to teach in urban schools and schools in underserved communities, they may not be enough to compensate for the burn-out many teachers experience because of the little support they receive from school administrators.

The importance of investing in teachers and developing them professionally cannot be overstated. It was the consensus of the participating principals that the school must invest in teachers and develop them professionally if keeping them is important.

Teachers want to feel appreciated and the incentive and bonus programs provided by the Florida Legislature help to do that. Although these financial incentives and bonuses do help to retain quality teachers, the current incentive guidelines make it impossible to come up with one formula that motivates all teachers. Principals need the flexibility to award raises and bonuses based on what the school thinks is best.

It is important that principals look for every opportunity to give teachers more money. One of the participating principals paid for teachers to take the SAT exam again so those with improved scores would be eligible for funding bonuses up to \$7,200 under the Florida Best and Brightest Teacher Scholarship Program.⁹ A non-principal participant suggested the use of direct support organizations to generate private/business funds to help fund the incentives and provide resources.

It is important to note that the best teachers are not necessarily those that score well on the SAT exam. Rewarding teachers for SAT scores may only be rewarding the brightest, but not necessarily the best. Passion, drive, and resiliency will produce the most successful teachers.

It is important to find what teachers are passionate about and align their instructional duties with those interests. For example, a principal may hire a teacher in one discipline because there is an opening, but then the principal finds out that is not what the teacher really wants to teach. Once the principal puts the teacher where they want to be, they are more likely to stay.

Literature Review

Based upon a review of an extensive body of research on teacher recruitment and retention, the Learning Policy Institute has identified five major factors, and related policies, that influence teachers' decisions to enter, stay in, or leave the teaching profession.¹⁰ Three of the five --- increasing their compensation, improving their working conditions, and providing support to develop them professionally --- were strategies identified by the participating principals.

9 Teachers who have been evaluated as 'highly effective' pursuant to section F.S. 1012.34., and who have achieved a composite score at or above the 80th percentile on either the SAT or the ACT based on the National Percentile Rankings in effect at the time the classroom teacher took the assessment, are eligible for scholarships up to \$7,200.

10 Anne Podolsky, Tara Kini, Joseph Bishop, and Linda Darling-Hammond, "Solving the Teacher Shortage How to Attract and Retain Excellent Educators," Learning Policy Institute, September 2016, retrieved from <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/solving-teacher-shortage-brief>, May 21, 2018.

Compensation for public school teachers is traditionally established through salary schedules that are fixed and increase based upon educational attainment and years of experience. There is substantial evidence that salaries do play an important role in attracting and retaining teachers. Teachers are more likely to quit when they work in districts with lower wages. Better pay is also what would bring them back to the classroom. Of public school teachers who left the profession in 2012 and said they would consider returning, 67 percent rated an increase in salary as extremely or very important to their decision to return.¹¹

Research suggests that signing bonuses or reimbursements for moving expenses affect initial employment decisions of prospective teachers, but do not impact the relative costs and benefits of remaining a teacher. Loan forgiveness programs only alter the labor market decisions of teachers who have outstanding student loan debt and have not yet received the maximum allowed amount of loan forgiveness. Although retention bonuses should affect short-term employment choices of teachers, to the extent the retention bonuses are viewed as temporary, they will have limited impacts on the long-run supply of teachers since they will have only modest effects on the present value of life-time earnings.¹²

The Harvard Graduate School of Education (2013) reviewed evidence from six recent studies of what fuels high rates of teacher turnover in schools that serve large numbers of low-income students of color. These studies collectively suggest that teachers who leave high-poverty schools are not fleeing their students, but rather the poor working conditions that make it difficult for them to teach and their students to learn.

Together, these studies find that the working conditions teachers prize most --- and those that best predict their satisfaction and retention --- are social in nature and include school leadership, collegial relationships, and elements of school culture.¹³

A recent study of teacher attrition in Arizona found that schools where teachers rated their working conditions as more satisfactory had lower attrition rates. It is important to note that these were schools with higher rates of low-income and/or minority students. This finding supports the hypothesis of working conditions being a mediating factor in the interplay between school demographics and teacher attrition.¹⁴

School leadership and administrative support are often the top reasons teachers identify for leaving or staying in the profession, or in a given school, outweighing even salary considerations for some teachers.¹⁵ Research shows that personal growth and the ability to receive support from administrators regarding emotional, environmental and instructional support had an impact on a teacher's decision to stay or leave in hard-to-staff schools.¹⁶

11 Anne Podolsky, Tara Kini, Joseph Bishop, and Linda Darling-Hammond, "Solving the Teacher Shortage How to Attract and Retain Excellent Educators," Learning Policy Institute, September 2016, retrieved from <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/solving-teacher-shortage-brief>, May 21, 2018.

12 Li Feng and Tim R. Sass, "The Impact of Incentives to Recruit and Retain Teachers in "Hard-to-Staff" Subjects," *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, October 2017, retrieved from <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/pam.22037>, May 23, 2018.

13 Nicole S. Simon and Susan Moore Johnson, "Teacher Turnover in High-Poverty Schools: What We Know and Can Do," Project on the Next Generation of Teachers, Harvard Graduate School of Education, August 2013, retrieved from <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/6210/6fb22387ad72a41d26403ec6851b2f0fd71c.pdf>, June 4, 2018.

14 Tray Geiger and Margarita Pivovarova, "The Effects of Working Conditions on Teacher Retention," April 2018, retrieved from www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13540602.2018.1457524, May 25, 2018.

15 *Supra*, see footnote 11.

16 Amy L. Hughes, John J. Matt, and Frances L. O'Reilly, "Principal Support is Imperative to the Retention of Teachers in Hard-to-Staff Schools," *Journal of Education and Training Studies* Vol. 3, No. 1; January 2015, retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1054905.pdf>, June 4, 2018.

*Takeaways**

The importance of investing in teachers and developing them professionally cannot be overstated. Effective principals recognize the importance of a collaborative principal-teacher relationship and a shared vision, and they understand the impact their support has on their teachers.

Effective principals provide opportunities for teacher collaboration and input into decisions.

Effective principals build bonds of trust and create a positive school culture and climate that ensures a reduction of teacher attrition in hard-to-staff schools.

Effective principals tell their new teachers up front before being hired what to expect and what they will encounter.

Effective principals find out what teachers are passionate about and align their instructional duties with those interests.

**NOTE: Teacher compensation is set by the school district and is generally beyond the control of the school's principal. For this reason, TaxWatch offers no takeaways related to compensation.*

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR PRINCIPALS

Summary

Discussion focused on what can be done to support the development of effective principals and to help better prepare someone to eventually take their place. The participating principals expressed support for a recurring state appropriation for professional and leadership development.

One network of public charter schools has developed a leadership program, taught by principals, for assistant principals. The principals determine which best practices and experiences are shared and develop the instructional modules. The limited availability of funds has limited the application of this leadership program.

The participating principals believe that because middle and high schools are different than elementary schools, it is important to expose assistant principals and principals to different settings and get them out of their comfort zones. Elementary school administrators should be given the opportunity to intern at middle and high schools, and vice-versa.

It was the consensus of the participating principals that hiring someone who had earned their leadership credentials in the business world (e.g., retirees or people from other careers) as a principal would not be effective. There is a distinct difference between someone coming in with alternative certification and someone with teaching certification. There is a whole new skill set they need to learn. The principal needs to have an active role in teaching in order to build relationships and deliver meaningful feedback to the teachers. Someone coming in from business sector as a principal would have little credibility with teachers and would have difficulty providing effective feedback due to lack of experience and/or expertise in the area of educating students. Teaching must be viewed as a profession that requires a specific skill set, much like an accountant, doctor, or lawyer.

Literature Review

Contemporary models of school reform acknowledge the principal as the key to school success. The modern principal can no longer function simply as a building manager, tasked with adhering to district rules, carrying out regulations and avoiding mistakes. Principals today must be instructional leaders capable of developing a team of teachers who deliver effective instruction to every student.¹⁷ Strong collaboration and instructional skills are critical.

Developing these collaboration and instructional skills, building trust with new faculty members, setting the vision for improvement, and engaging staff in change management activities, requires a concerted effort over an extended number of years. While highly effective principals create significant changes each year, it takes an average of five years to put a mobilizing vision in place, improve the teaching staff, and fully implement policies and practices that positively impact the school's performance.¹⁸ One problem is that many principals do not make it five years, at least not in that role at that school.

A 2014 study in Texas found that just over 50 percent of newly-hired principals stay for three years and less than 30 percent stay beyond year five.¹⁹ School leaders who lack the ongoing support and development required to maintain and foster sustained commitment are more likely to leave the profession. According to a National Center for Education Statistics 2013 report, principals who reported receiving no professional development during the previous year left their school 1.4 times more often than principals who had some form of professional development.²⁰

Takeaways

Effective principals engage in peer networks where principals can learn from other principals the art and practice of leading schools. "Shadowing" permits an observing principal to see how another principal interacts with school personnel and the public, deals with problems, and responds to crises. The practical wisdom and experiences of more-experienced principals permits less-experienced principals to learn in a real school setting.

17 Wallace Foundation, "The School Principal as Leader: Guiding Schools to Better Teaching and Learning 2013, retrieved from <http://nwcc.educationnorthwest.org/sites/default/files/research-brief-leadership-qualities-effective-principals.pdf>, June 21, 2018.

18 School Leaders Network, "CHURN: The High Cost of Principal Turnover," 2014, retrieved from http://iowaascd.org/files/7014/5978/0122/principal_turnover_cost.pdf, June 4, 2018.

19 Fuller, E., Young, M., "Tenure and Retention of Newly Hired Principals in Texas. Texas High School Project: Leadership Initiative Issue Brief 1, Department of Educational Administration, The University of Texas at Austin, 2009, retrieved from http://iowaascd.org/files/7014/5978/0122/principal_turnover_cost.pdf, June 4, 2018.

20 Bitterman, A, Goldring, R, & Gray, L., "Characteristics of Public and Private Elementary and Secondary School Principals in the United States: Results from the 2011-12 Schools and Staffing Survey NCES 2013-313," U.S. Department of Education, Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, 2013, retrieved from http://iowaascd.org/files/7014/5978/0122/principal_turnover_cost.pdf, June 4, 2018.

GETTING THE MOST FROM TEACHERS

Summary

Discussion focused on how to get the most from teachers and how to develop their skill sets. The participating principals believe that when teachers know that a principal cares about them and will support them, the teachers will “run through walls” for the principal. It is important that the principal gets to know their school, gets to know their teachers, gets to know their strengths and weaknesses, gets to know themselves, and gets to know where their resources are.

Collaboration between the principal and teachers in both curriculum and professional development is important. Having teachers look at the data and develop common (collaborative) instructional strategies yields high learning gains and helps get both teachers and students in a “growth mindset.”

Professional development should be tailored to each school and making teachers part of the professional development process is an effective strategy. Professional learning communities can be an effective way to get buy-in from the teachers. Teachers can do the research and develop the modules, which are then taught to each other in teams.

Literature Review

Research on principal leadership indicates that principals are most effective when they focus on instructional improvement, share decision-making with teachers, and encourage teachers to work together actively toward instructional improvement.²¹ This collaboration has shown to improve teacher efficacy, improved attitudes about teaching, a greater understanding of students, and higher levels of trust.

Teachers and principals are not the only beneficiaries of increased collaboration. A 2007 survey of 452 elementary school teachers in 47 schools in one large midwestern school district found that, after controlling for student characteristics and school social context, teacher collaboration for school improvement was a significant positive predictor of differences among schools in student achievement.²²

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) can be effective tools for school improvement, requiring principals and teachers to collaborate and work together. Effective PLCs tend to share five characteristics or features that often intertwine or operate simultaneously:

- Shared values and vision that emphasizes a focus on student learning;
- Collective responsibility for student learning that helps to sustain commitment and puts collegial pressure on colleagues to engage, learn, and improve;
- Reflective professional inquiry that manifests through conversations about important issues, the application of new knowledge, and the identification of solutions to support students and their needs;

21 Marks, H. M. & Printy, S. M., “Principal Leadership and School Performance: An integration of Transformational and Instructional Leadership,” *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 39(3), 2003, retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED528704.pdf>, June 5, 2018.

22 Goddard, Y. L., Goddard, R. D., & Tschannen-Moran, M., “A Theoretical and Empirical Investigation of Teacher Collaboration for School Improvement and Student Achievement in Public Elementary Schools,” *Teachers College Record*, 109(4), 2007, retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED528704.pdf>, June 5, 2018.

- Collaboration that moves beyond superficial interactions of help, support, or assistance; and
- An emphasis on group and individual learning where teachers develop as colleagues and professionals, but also maintain an orientation toward inquiry and its benefits for improving their own practice and the practices in their school.²³

Principals facilitate the core elements needed to sustain PLCs by sharing leadership and by building leadership capacity on a school-wide level. Effective principals help to ensure quality learning opportunities by:

- Shaping a vision of academic success for all students based on high standards;
- Creating a climate hospitable to education so that safety, a cooperative spirit, and other foundations of fruitful interaction prevail;
- Cultivating leadership in others so that teachers and other adults assume their parts in realizing the school vision;
- Improving instruction to enable teachers to teach at their best and students to learn to their utmost; and
- Managing people, data and processes to foster school improvement.²⁴

A principal's social interactions can facilitate the development of trusting relationships, collaboration, and a diffusion of expertise and knowledge. They can also buffer teachers from district policies and fast-paced changes that disrupt school improvement continuity.²⁵

Takeaways

Effective principals provide leadership opportunities that are aligned to the school's vision and mission; identify leadership opportunities that teachers can effectively manage; and provide support as teachers engage in leadership practice so that they can grow and expand their capabilities.

Effective principals foster a collaborative culture that puts the students' learning first, and turn a teacher's best practice into a schoolwide best practice.

Effective principals work to develop connections between teachers by encouraging open communication and guiding teachers to reflect critically on their own learning and teaching practices.

Effective principals build a positive school culture through participatory decision-making, collaboration, and shared instructional leadership.

23 Stoll, L., Bolam, R., McMahon, A., Wallace, M., & Thomas, S., "Professional Learning Communities: A Review of the Literature," *Journal of Educational Change*, 7(4), 2006, retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1111683.pdf>, June 5, 2018.

24 Wallace Foundation, "The School Principal as Leader: Guiding Schools to Better Teaching and Learning 2013, retrieved from <http://nwcc.educationnorthwest.org/sites/default/files/research-brief-leadership-qualities-effective-principals.pdf>, June 21, 2018.

25 David DeMatthews, Ph.D., "Principal and Teacher Collaboration: An Exploration of Distributed Leadership in Professional Learning Communities," *International Journal of Educational Leadership and Management*, Vol. 2 No. 2, July 2014, retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1111683.pdf>, June 5, 2018.

PRINCIPAL AUTONOMY

Summary

Discussion focused on whether these principals have sufficient autonomy to be an effective principal. Five of the participating principals serve at traditional public schools and seven are principals at public charter schools. It was the consensus of the principals that public charter school principals have greater autonomy and flexibility than their traditional public-school counterparts.

Being a public charter school principal allows the principal to work with more of a business mind set. The participating public charter school principals believe they have more control over their operating budget than do principals at traditional public schools and can operate more efficiently.

The participating traditional public-school principals expressed the need for greater flexibility in order to make decisions that are best for the school. These principals expressed a willingness to accept the ultimate responsibility for their decisions in exchange for the greater flexibility.

Literature Review

Experience with public charter schooling and other autonomous school reforms has shown that granting schools more flexibility can yield more innovation in school management, staffing, and instruction, bringing high-performing schools to neighborhoods that greatly need them.²⁶ Experience also shows that many schools often do not have the leaders, the staff, or the vision to make good independent decisions, and they just as often lack the ability to build that capacity. Decades of research on school autonomy show that without those tools, autonomy is unlikely to improve student achievement.²⁷

In 2005, the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) system began the Autonomous Management and Performance Schools (AMPS) initiative, which afforded principals in schools with low standardized test scores and low student achievement greater decision-making autonomy in budgeting, professional development, curriculum development and instruction, and scheduling.

A 2014 study by the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education found that participating CPS principals were more likely to exercise autonomy over the school budget and curricular/instructional strategies than over professional development and the school's calendar/schedule. Utilizing regression discontinuity methods, the study found that greater autonomy had no statistically significant impact on a school's average math or reading achievement after two years of autonomy, but there was evidence that autonomy positively affected reading proficiency rates at the end of the second year of autonomy.²⁸

In Florida, the Principal Autonomy Pilot Program Initiative (PAPPI), sponsored by Rep. Manny Diaz, Jr., provides principals of participating schools in participating school districts with increased autonomy and authority regarding allocation of resources and staffing. Participation is voluntary, but is limited to the school districts of Broward, Duval, Jefferson, Madison, Palm Beach, Pinellas and Seminole counties.

26 Erin Dillon, "The Road to Autonomy: Can Schools, Districts, and Central Offices Find Their Way?" Education Sector, 2011.

27 *Ibid.*

28 Matthew P. Steinberg, Ph.D., "Does Greater Autonomy Improve School Performance? Evidence from a Regression Discontinuity Analysis in Chicago," Education Finance and Policy, Volume 9, Issue 1, Winter 2014.

School boards selected for participation in PAPPi are exempt from the K-20 Education Code and State Board of Education rules, with certain exceptions.²⁹

PAPPi grants the principals of participating schools greater authority regarding staffing decisions, allocation of financial resources, and budgeting. Among other things, the principal of a participating school is granted greater authority to hire qualified instructional personnel or refuse placement or transfer of such personnel.³⁰ Participating schools must establish performance goals for increased student achievement.

The National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, based on interviews with the leaders of five highly successful charters, identified seven “autonomies” essential to success:

- freedom to develop a great team;
- freedom to manage teachers as professionals (including giving them merit-based raises);
- freedom to change curriculum and classroom structure;
- autonomy over scheduling;
- financial freedom;
- freedom of school boards to focus on education instead of politics;
- and freedom to define a school culture.³¹

Takeaways

TaxWatch acknowledges that the extent to which principals are given greater autonomy and flexibility to run their schools is largely beyond their control; however, research indicates that granting schools additional flexibility can be an effective strategy for encouraging innovation and change in educational practice. TaxWatch believes that the best decisions are those that are made closest to the students.

29 House of Representatives Staff Analysis, CS/CS/CS HB 287, Principal Autonomy Pilot Program Initiative, February 5, 2016.

30 *Ibid.*

31 Joe Ableidinger and Bryan C. Hassel, *Free to Lead: Autonomy in Highly Successful Charter Schools* (Washington, DC: National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, April 2010).

OBSERVATIONS

As part of the preparations for the annual Principal Leadership Awards ceremony, TaxWatch staff has visited each of the past 18 winners at their respective schools. These visits have afforded staff the opportunity to interview faculty, administrators, students, and parents about their principals, and to observe the principals as they go about their daily duties.

The 36 principals who have been selected by TaxWatch as Principal Leadership Award winners come from all parts of Florida --- from a small charter elementary school in coastal Franklin County to large urban high schools in Miami-Dade County. Although different in many regards, we noticed a great many similarities in how these principals run their schools. Among the comments heard most frequently during our interviews were:

- The principal knows the name of every student in the school;
- The principal is the first staff member students see each morning when they arrive at school;
- The principal stresses parental involvement, and has an open-door policy;
- The principal cares about each student, to the point where many students could easily recall one or more personal interactions with the principal that one would typically expect of a favorite teacher;
- The principal is involved and engaged in the classroom, often helping to teach classes;
- Data play a prominent role in developing learning curriculum; and
- The principal has created a collaborative environment where teachers feel their voices are heard and respected.

One cannot visit these principals' schools without getting the feeling that there is something different there. There is an overwhelming sense of community and shared vision. Through their active involvement and the development of effective working relationships, these principals have created environments in which every student can be successful. These principals have transformed schools with large populations of at-risk students into schools with student learning gains that far exceed those predicted by the state's value-added model. The observations and experiences shared by the participating principals represent more than just "takeaways" in a report --- they represent the foundation for a successful school and for creating an environment in which all students can be successful.

APPENDIX A

Roundtable Participants

Moderator

Jeff Atwater, Chief Financial Officer, Florida Atlantic University

Participants

Carlos Alvarez*, Principal, City of Hialeah Educational Academy

Maggie Bowles, Board of Directors, Florida Network of Youth and Family Services

Ron Brisé, Gunster Law Firm

Tom Crummy, Director of Market Planning & Development, Waste Management, Inc.

Byron Donalds, Florida House of Representatives

Renatta Espinoza*, Principal, Academy for Positive Learning

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As an independent, nonpartisan, nonprofit taxpayer research institute and government watchdog, it is the mission of Florida TaxWatch to provide the citizens of Florida and public officials with high quality, independent research and analysis of issues related to state and local government taxation, expenditures, policies, and programs. Florida TaxWatch works to improve the productivity and accountability of Florida government. Its research recommends productivity enhancements and explains the statewide impact of fiscal and economic policies and practices on citizens and businesses.

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