

Florida TaxWatch

EDUCATION LEADERSHIP ROUNDTABLE SUMMARY REPORT

JULY 2020



IN CONJUNCTION WITH THE

TAXWATCH
PRINCIPAL
LEADERSHIP
AWARDS

★



106 North Bronough Street, Tallahassee, FL 32301 floridatxwatch.org o: 850.222.5052 f: 850.222.7476

Senator Pat Neal
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 May 14, 2020, Florida TaxWatch held a virtual roundtable discussion composed of nine current winners of TaxWatch's prestigious Principal Leadership Award to discuss ways to improve the overall quality of pre-K–12 education by improving the leadership qualities of our principals.

Moderated by our Vice President for Research Bob Nave, 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 its recommendations, and we look forward to a continued discussion with Florida lawmakers and policymakers in advance of the 2021 legislative session.

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 turnarounds, 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. Each year, Florida TaxWatch 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. Florida TaxWatch calculates student learning gains for math and reading by grade and by school year.

In May 2020, Florida TaxWatch convened a ninety-minute virtual roundtable with this year's winners to discuss ways to improve the overall quality of pre-K–12 education by improving the leadership qualities of our public school principals. The nine winning principals, along with several Florida TaxWatch staff, are identified in the appendix. Moderated by Florida TaxWatch's Vice President of Research Bob Nave, 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.

Although not for attribution, the strategies discussed by the winning principals to effectively lead their schools have been summarized herein, along with a review of educational literature and research studies that support these strategies. This report compares the strategies employed by this year's winners and roundtable participants to those employed by 2018 and 2019 participants to begin to identify best practices, and identifies a number of "takeaways" for consideration by policy makers and education professionals. A draft copy of this report was provided to the winning principals for feedback to make sure TaxWatch accurately captured the discussion.

Please note that this report is 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, rather than represent a comprehensive review of, or a "deep dive" into, the above topics. 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.

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

² Ibid.

OBSTACLES TO EFFECTIVE SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

Summary

Discussion focused on time management for these active principals. Specifically, they focused on the time spent in the office doing paperwork and other management-focused tasks versus out in the classrooms, the halls, and being hands-on and interactive with the students and teachers. The principals concluded that one of the biggest obstacles in their workday was finding the time to do everything they want to do and more. It becomes easy to get trapped in the office and let the teachers and other faculty deal with everything else, but for these principals, being out in the classrooms is a “number one priority.”

Similar to the past two roundtables, the 2020 winning principals start their day early in their office before students get to campus, and then are out helping with traffic, helping in the classes, and interacting with their students and teachers in the hallways. Although there can always be many interruptions, effective principals work hard to find a balance. Having an “open door” policy for parents is important, and so is knowledge of the neighborhood and surrounding community. Every school has its own circumstances and it is important to be able to adapt and excel in each situation.

“Balancing the expectations of the office along with balancing the expectations of an instructional leader is the biggest obstacle...”

These principals capitalize on being flexible with their schedules. Principals are not able to maintain the same daily routine when different parents, students, and teachers have questions and take time out of the day differently. When their mornings become filled with time spent in the office, they make the extra effort to get into the classrooms in the afternoon, rather than wait and try again the next day. 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.³

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. One of the primary ways principals can impact student achievement is by improving teacher effectiveness.⁴ Unfortunately, only ten percent of principals feel they are focusing the amount of time they would like to or need to on instructional leadership.⁵ It is important for these principals to know what is going on in the classroom. Perceptions of disconnect are compounded when principals do not visit classrooms regularly, and teachers perceive that principals’ infrequent visits demonstrate that other priorities outweigh the value of maintaining a classroom presence.⁶

Maintaining some sort of schedule so every teacher and every class is visited regularly is critical to the development and impacts a principal can create. Their teachers understand that principal visits are not “gotcha” visits to catch them doing something wrong but are designed to help their development and to be a presence for the students. A good leader has impact when he/she is able to develop their staff and to give them honest and critical feedback. 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. Research has shown that effective principals work relentlessly to improve achievement by

3 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.

4 Ikemoto, G., Taliaferro, L., & Adams, E., “Playmakers: How Great Principals Build and Lead Great Teams of Teachers,” 2012, New York, NY: New Leaders, Inc.

5 Hess, F.M. (2013, May), “Principals: Don’t Settle for Rolling the Boulder,” *Phi Delta Kappan* 94(8), 22-26.

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

focusing on the quality of instruction. Effective principals help define and promote high expectations; they attack teacher isolation and fragmented effort, and they connect directly with teachers and the classroom.⁷

Time management is inherently an obstacle to all principals. Identifying the best ways to use this time and effectively delegate authority and influence is a key task to help promote positive student outcomes. Research has shown that when principals utilize teacher leadership to improve student achievement and the school learning climate, then these principals can more effectively focus on professional development and school program coherence.⁸ These findings correlate with other areas discussed in this report as well.

The principal must come in early and stay late because, during the day, they must be visible often. Work is done during non-working hours (nights and weekends). With cell phones and other smart devices, the principal is always accessible to teachers, parents, colleagues, the District, etc. Successful principals are principals that manage their time efficiently and are seen throughout their community.

Takeaways

- Effective principals remain visible and approachable through the school day. They are the first and last person that the teachers and students see on a regular day. They come in early and stay late because, during the day, the principal must be visible.
- Much of their work is done during non-working hours (nights and weekends). With cell phones the principal is always accessible.
- The flexibility of these principals allows them to excel on the go. By remaining visible and approachable to the faculty and students, these principals can understand the dynamics and culture of the entire school.
- Every year that Florida TaxWatch has visited the winning schools, the parents, students, and faculty emphasize how their principal makes the effort to know and interact with every student in their community.

ATTRACTING AND RETAINING HIGH-QUALITY TEACHERS

Summary

Discussion focused on how effective principals recruit and retain high-quality teachers and how that has changed in recent years due to smaller hiring pools. In 2018, the roundtable participants discussed how compensation was a key issue and, although it still is now, principals have shifted their focus to where they can make a more direct and immediate difference.

Like the 2019 participants, a major factor in retaining high-quality teachers comes from creating a culture around the school and valuing teachers for their immense roles they play in these students' lives. The winning principals come from schools of all sizes and urban or rural settings. How they go about recruiting teachers changes based on their location and situation. In all cases, having a recruitment plan is necessary for the proper preparation.

A school's reputation and word-of-mouth from a school's teachers (e.g., at workshops, etc.) tend to be common ways to attract quality teachers to a school. High-quality teaching is the most important in-school factor related to students'

⁷ 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.

⁸ Sebastian, James, Allensworth, Elaine, Huang, Haigen, "The Role of Teacher Leadership in How Principals Influence Classroom Instruction and Student Learning," American Journal of Education, Oct. 2016.

academic success, and low-income students benefit the most when taught by skilled teachers.⁹ A survey of 108 nationally representative school districts done by the Center for American Progress that looked at human capital systems showed most school districts use hyperlocal and passive recruitment strategies, meaning they do not actively seek out new candidates from across the country.¹⁰ In terms of resource allocation, an average school district has 1.8 employees assigned to recruitment and a student population of 3,721. Fewer than half of districts travel to colleges or universities to recruit at job fairs and other events. Among districts that travel to colleges and universities to recruit at job fairs and other events, only 22 percent travel outside of the state in which the district is located.¹¹

Once the principal gets the new teachers in the school, the emphasis shifts to developing them. Budget permitting, some principals have had success placing a second, more-seasoned, teacher in the classroom with a new teacher.

The winning principals emphasized the importance of helping teachers adapt to new environments. A point was made that many of the new teachers at these schools come from an array of backgrounds, and not always education. Being proactive and helping these new teachers learn how to best teach students of all different backgrounds not only helps students learn more effectively but creates a culture of development and learning between the teachers and management. 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.¹² These factors are: salaries and other compensation; preparation and costs to entry; hiring and personnel management; induction and support for new teachers; and working conditions. All five were discussed in some degree by the principals, while improving working conditions, and providing support to develop them professionally were more focused on by the winning principals.

"In-house" proactive training is still important for new teachers that come from an educational background. Schools of education vary in how they prepare new teachers to teach, and not all of them may prepare teachers to educate students of all types of backgrounds. Creating a learning environment within faculty and staff and building a community that can help each other grow is incredibly important in producing a unifying culture for a school that makes teachers want to stay.

Making sure teachers and staff understand and buy into the school's mission and the principal's vision for achieving that mission is critical for success. The principal must stay consistent with that vision and (more importantly) lead by example. It is important for principals make clear their expectations for teachers while also realizing how much is demanded and needed from teachers already, so that teachers come to understand that the principal is there to help them and assist in their development.

"What you insist on is what people are going to give you."

Creating the culture and displaying the school's mission and values start from the top. As noted by one of the winning principals, it is important to make the extra step and effort to check in on teachers that may be struggling in some way. From principal to teacher to student, making people feel valued and cared creates a sense of unity and commitment that will help retain teachers and help them keep their passion for their students.

9 Eric A. Hanushek, John F. Kain, and Steven G. Rivkin, "Teachers, Schools, and Academic Achievement" (Cambridge: National Bureau of Economic Research, 1998).

10 Annette Konoske-Graf, [Lisette Partelow](#), and [Meg Benner](#), "To Attract Great Teachers, School Districts Must Improve Their Human Capital Systems," Center for American Progress, 2016.

11 Ibid.

12 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.

The Harvard Graduate School of Education reviewed evidence from six 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

Like most employees, teachers want to feel appreciated and valued. As a way to increase their value and commitment, studies suggest teachers should be involved in school leadership opportunities and there are also new models of leadership emerging.¹⁴ Modeled after colleges and universities, teachers should be involved in the same manner that professors are involved in decisions about curriculum, graduation requirements, scheduling, hiring of colleagues and administrators, finance, and use of space. These teachers are significant leaders to their students, and it is only fair to allow them to shift from employees to a managing partner of the school.¹⁵

The importance of investing in teachers and developing them professionally cannot be overstated. It was the consensus of these principals that the school must invest in teachers and develop them professionally if keeping them is important. Teachers want to feel appreciated and it is important that the principal show appreciation and support in any way possible.

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 build bonds of trust and create a positive school culture and climate that ensures a reduction of teacher attrition in hard-to-staff schools.
- Updating the methods of hiring and recruiting can lead to further outreach and a larger hiring pool. As other industries change the way they hire, education and school districts must change and adapt as well.

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. In past years, winning principals discussed different programs and workshops that help provide leadership training to new principals. Although these workshops are definitely good starting points to help new principals understand some of the ropes, the winning principals this year emphasized mentors, collaboration, and building connections as their main ways of development for exceptional leaders in their schools.

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.

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.

¹⁴ Paul Bland, Edwin Church, Mingchu Luo, "Strategies for Attracting and Retaining Teachers," *Administrative Issues Journal: Education, Practice, and Research*, Volume 4, Issue 1.

¹⁵ Ibid.

Principals today must be instructional leaders capable of developing a team of teachers who deliver effective instruction to every student.¹⁶ 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.¹⁷

Complicating this issue is the fact 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.¹⁸ 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.¹⁹

The winning principals emphasized how having strong mentors that allowed assistant principals and new principals to grow helped them develop more than anything else. Being put into uncomfortable situations was a necessity for them to grow. Allowing assistant principals to take big risks and then covering for them if they fail is critical to their professional development. Principals must give assistant principals the opportunity to be successful or to fail and then be supportive (but hold them accountable) when they do fail.

Improvement is an ongoing process. Often in the school setting, there is a difference between principal and teacher beliefs about principal leadership behavior.²⁰ An ongoing process of evaluation from a portion of faculty can help close the gap between faculty and principals. It is also recommended that principals in a district meet to share their transformational action plans with each other.²¹ Sharing information with similar peers improves feelings of disconnectedness that can occur and leads to the creation of new ideas.

The Learning Policy Institute interviewed other principals on professional development and published their findings on what these principals found to be the most helpful. Among these professional development methods, highlights include: district-run programs that feature strong mentors and internships; professional development that provides flexibility to accommodate difficult schedules; formal and informal relationships with colleagues that provide growth and support, and professional development that is tailored to address specific needs and contexts of the school.²²

In 2011-2012, The Wallace Foundation launched a Principal Pipeline Initiative in an effort to maximizing principals' effectiveness in their respective districts. After six years, the pipeline proved successful in the six districts in which it was tested, and identified a few key components that were put in place to lead to their success: high-quality pre-service training for aspiring principals; data-informed hiring; and well-aligned support and evaluation of principals, especially

16 Wallace Foundation, "The School Principal as Leader: Guiding Schools to Better Teaching and Learning 2013.

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

18 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.

19 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.

20 M. B. Morris, "Teacher and Principal Beliefs About Principal Leadership Behavior," University of Southern Mississippi, 2011.

21 Ibid.

22 Stephanie Levin, Kathryn Bradley, Caitlin Scott, "Principal Turnover: Insights from Current Principals," Learning Policy Institute, July 2019.

newcomers to the job.²³ Connections between principals and districts appeared to be crucial for the guidance of many of these principals. Although there is competition between schools, every educator wants to do what is best for the students in order to help them grow and be successful.

“I’ve learned more from other principals than I’ve learned from anybody.”

Takeaways

- Effective principals expose their assistant principals to different settings and get them out of their comfort zones.
- Effective principals allow their assistant principals opportunities to be successful or to fail and are then supportive when they do fail.
- Improvement never stops. Having a continual review plan from certain faculty can help benefit the principal and identify issues about which they may not have known.

GETTING THE MOST FROM TEACHERS

Summary

Discussion focused on how to get the most from teachers and how to develop their skill sets. As former teachers, the winning principals understand what teachers need. It was the consensus of these winning principals that, when teachers know that a principal cares about them and will support them, the teachers will “run through walls” for the principal. Great principals are willing to make changes to their routines and days in order to better help their faculty, whether it is something as simple as leaving the door open in the office for walk-in questions, or scheduling extra time to meet and focus on constructive improvements.

It is important that the principal gets to know and spend time with their teachers. New teachers need to feel that they are leaders and bring their own skill set to the table, and an equal dynamic helps create a better fit rather than only a boss managing his/her staff. It is important to make sure new hires “fit” with the principal and other teachers. 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.²⁴ This collaboration has shown to improve teacher efficacy, improve attitudes about teaching, and foster a greater understanding of students and higher levels of trust.

Providing in-house support for new teachers through extra meetings, extra help, and more is important to help these newer teachers understand what is expected from them. The winning principals eat lunch with their teachers and go to considerable lengths to show their appreciation. Performing tasks and helping mitigate other challenges for the teachers (e.g., making photocopies, working with parents, etc.) so the teachers can remain in the classroom helps to show appreciation for their hard work.

Principal leadership styles have a direct impact on teacher motivation. Teachers report higher levels of autonomy, relatedness, and competence under principals that reach out for input in a more democratic style of leadership, rather than in an authoritarian or hands-off approach.²⁵

23 The Wallace Foundation, *Principal Pipelines: A Feasible, Affordable, and Effective Way for Districts to Improve Schools*, April 2019.

24 Marks, H. M. & Printy, S. M., “Principal Leadership and School Performance: An Integration of Transformational and Instructional Leadership,” *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 39(3), 2003.

25 Shepherd-Jones, Anna R, “Perceptions Matter: The Correlation between Teacher Motivation and Principal Leadership Styles,” *Journal of Research in Education*, v28 n2 p93-131 Fall 2018.

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.²⁶

Teachers become very involved in the decision-making and curriculum where they are permitted, and when a teacher's recommendation is adopted, they feel more passionate and involved to help implement it and make it successful. Principals ask their teachers which programs or textbooks can be improved and how improvements can be made. Although the principal has the final say, they let their teachers be leaders in order to maintain their motivation.

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 put 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;
- 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.²⁷

"I really want my teachers to run through a wall for their students."

Takeaways

- Effective principals provide leadership opportunities that are aligned with 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.

26 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.

27 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.

PRINCIPAL AUTONOMY

Summary

Discussion focused on whether principals have sufficient autonomy to be an effective principal. Of the winning principals, 3 are principals at traditional public schools and 6 are principals at public charter schools. Like the past two roundtables, the consensus among the participating principals was that public charter school principals have greater autonomy and flexibility than their traditional public school counterparts. The charter school principals are given virtually full autonomy over the operations of their school, as long as they stay within budget. The charter school principal is looked at as the school's CEO and primary decision maker. In terms of budget allocation, traditional schools tend to be given more autonomy in this area than they are given in instructional curriculum and hiring processes.

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.²⁸ 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 the correct tools, autonomy is unlikely to improve student achievement.²⁹

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.³⁰

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.³¹

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

29 Ibid.

30 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.

31 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.

In many cases, the school and the district have different views on what should be left up to the principal and what should be left up to the district. A study in Philadelphia selected principals who would receive greater autonomy to manage school operations, while others were promised greater district support to improve school functioning. Principals granted greater autonomy were more likely to change teacher professional development and curriculum and instructional strategies, while principals with longer tenures and more leadership training were more likely to implement organizational changes. Principals that were promised greater district support reported a misalignment between the school and district priorities.³²

This year's winning principals come from a range of different sized districts that affects their overall autonomy as well. Smaller districts can benefit from their size and allow traditional public schools more autonomy than in larger districts. A consensus among these principals was that as they learn and do well over time, more autonomy is helpful, and they are willing to accept the ultimate responsibility for their decisions.

In Florida, the Principal Autonomy Pilot Program Initiative (PAPPI), sponsored by then-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 was voluntary, and limited to the school districts of Broward, Duval, Jefferson, Madison, Palm Beach, Pinellas, and Seminole counties. School boards selected for participation in PAPPI are exempt from the K-20 Education Code and State Board of Education rules, with certain exceptions.³³

The purpose of the program is to provide a highly effective principal of a participating school with increased autonomy and authority to operate his or her school, as well as other schools, in a way that produces significant improvements in student achievement and school performance.³⁴ 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.³⁵ Participating schools must establish performance goals for increased student achievement.

The program has subsequently been renamed the Principal Autonomy Program and extended to all school districts. Principals who have participated in this initiative credit the program with helping to improve student achievement at their schools. The initiative has given several principals the opportunity to build leadership skills and begin to implement their own vision as to how their schools can improve.³⁶

Winning principals were asked if they had autonomy to do one thing now that they don't currently have autonomy to do, what would that be? The answers focused on two primary ideas: better compensation for faculty and staff; and building and upgrading different infrastructure to better help the students perform in their environments.

Many of these schools do not have all the luxuries and amenities that would really enable their students to perform and grow more than they already are. Proper science facilities, athletic fields, classroom furniture, new technology, etc., would all benefit the students. Ease of access to these types of facilities would help students mitigate some of the struggles they have to achieve their goals. The winning principals make it their priority to support their students in every way possible. It became clear that, if they had unlimited resources, they would all be used to benefit the students.

32 Steinberg, Matthew P., Cox, Amanda, "School Autonomy and District Support: How Principals Respond to a Tiered Autonomy Initiative in Philadelphia Public Schools," *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, Volume 16, 2017.

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

34 2019 Florida Statutes: K-12 Education Code, 1011.6202, Principal Autonomy Program Initiative.

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

36 Livi Stanford, "Florida's Principal Autonomy Initiative Showing Signs of Success," *refined*, August 17, 2019, retrieved from <https://www.redefinedonline.org/2019/08/floridas-principal-autonomy-initiative-showing-signs-of-success-2/>, June 23, 2020.

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.
- It may be unrealistic to expect principals to dramatically improve their schools and demonstrate student learning gains when most of the important decisions are made at the District level. If principals are to be held accountable for student learning, then principals must be given more control over what goes on in the schools.
- TaxWatch believes that the best decisions are those that are made closest to the students. Principals who have more autonomy to define their school's mission and vision, build their own culture, hire good teachers, fire mediocre teachers, and spend money in ways that are in the best interest of the students, are generally more effective than principals with more limited freedoms.

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

Typically, in preparation for the annual Principal Leadership Awards ceremony, Florida TaxWatch staff visits each of the principals at their respective schools. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, however, TaxWatch was forced to postpone the visits and in-person interviews with faculty, students, and parents about their principals as well as having to forego watching these principals go about their daily duties. Instead, TaxWatch held a virtual award ceremony and roundtable discussion to commemorate and identify these principals' best practices.

The 54 principals who have been selected by TaxWatch as Principal Leadership Award winners since the program's inception in 2013 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. As a result of these visits, and with the completion of education roundtables in 2018 and 2019, TaxWatch has identified several "best practices" that are common among the winning principals. Among these are:

- Effective principals are the first staff member students see each morning when they arrive at school;
- Effective principals stress parental involvement, and have an open-door policy;
- Effective principals care 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;
- Effective principals are involved and engaged in the classroom, often helping to teach classes;
- Effective principals use data prominently in developing learning curriculum; and
- Effective principals have created a collaborative environment where teachers feel their voices are heard and respected.

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 winning 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 - ROUNDTABLE PARTICIPANTS

Moderator

- Bob Nave, Vice President for Research, Florida TaxWatch

Participants

- Dominic Calabro, President and CEO, Florida TaxWatch
 - Simaran Bakshi, Wayman Academy of the Arts
 - Anthony Marucci, Somerset Academy Village
 - Laura Mendicino, Highlands Elementary School
 - Osvaldo Garcia, Passport Charter School
 - Barbara Sanchez, Lincoln-Marti International Campus
 - Sadie Milliner-Smith, J.E.B. Stuart Middle School
 - Teresa Santalo, iMater Preparatory Academy High School
 - Stewart Hancock, Lafayette High School
 - Marie Turchiaro, Palm Beach Maritime Academy
 - Chris Barry, Director of Communications and External Relations, Florida TaxWatch
-

ABOUT FLORIDA TAXWATCH

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.

Florida TaxWatch is supported by voluntary, tax-deductible donations and private grants, and does not accept government funding. Donations provide a solid, lasting foundation that has enabled Florida TaxWatch to bring about a more effective, responsive government that is accountable to the citizens it serves since 1979.

FLORIDA TAXWATCH RESEARCH LEADERSHIP

DOMINIC M. CALABRO	President & CEO
ROBERT WEISSERT, ESQ.	Exec. VP & General Counsel
ROBERT G. NAVE	VP of Research
KURT WENNER	VP of Research

FLORIDA TAXWATCH VOLUNTEER LEADERSHIP

SENATOR PAT NEAL	Chairman
SENATOR GEORGE LEMIEUX	Chairman-Elect
PIYUSH PATEL	Treasurer
JAMES REPP	Secretary
STEVE EVANS	Senior Advisor

RESEARCH PROJECT TEAM

ROBERT E. WEISSERT	<i>Executive Vice President & General Counsel</i>	
KIRBY ALLEN	<i>Research Analyst</i>	Author
CHRIS BARRY	<i>Director of Communications & External Affairs</i>	Design, Layout, Publication

All Florida TaxWatch research done under the direction of Dominic M. Calabro, President, CEO, Publisher & Editor.


The findings in this Report are based on the data and sources referenced. Florida TaxWatch research is conducted with every reasonable attempt to verify the accuracy and reliability of the data, and the calculations and assumptions made herein. Please feel free to contact us if you feel that this paper is factually inaccurate.


The research findings and recommendations of Florida TaxWatch do not necessarily reflect the view of its members, staff, Executive Committee, or Board of Trustees; and are not influenced by the individuals or organizations who may have sponsored the research.



Stay Informed

 floridataxwatch.org

 [@floridataxwatch](https://www.facebook.com/floridataxwatch)

 [@floridataxwatch](https://twitter.com/floridataxwatch)

 [@flitaxwatch](https://www.youtube.com/flitaxwatch)

Florida TaxWatch
106 N. Bronough St.
Tallahassee, FL 32301

o: 850.222.5052
f: 850.222.7476

Copyright © July 2020
Florida TaxWatch
Research Institute, Inc.
All Rights Reserved