

Florida TaxWatch

EDUCATION LEADERSHIP ROUNDTABLE SUMMARY REPORT

SEPTEMBER 2019



IN CONJUNCTION WITH THE

TAXWATCH
PRINCIPAL
LEADERSHIP
AWARDS

★



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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 24, 2019, Florida TaxWatch convened a "blue ribbon" panel of educators, business leaders, 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 include a former member of the House of Representatives, a former Deputy Commissioner of the Florida Department of Education, a number of community and business leaders, and seven current and former winners of TaxWatch's prestigious Principal Leadership Award.

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 during the 2020 legislative session and beyond.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "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 2019, Florida 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 seven current and former winners of TaxWatch's prestigious Principal Leadership Award were three other principals, a former member of the House of Representatives, a former Deputy Commissioner of the Florida Department of Education, and a number of community and business leaders from across the state. A full list of the participants included (Appendix A).

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 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 compared the strategies employed by the 2019 roundtable participants to those employed by 2018 participants to begin to identify best practices. 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.

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.

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. The need for “balance” was discussed. The principal must balance the time spent in their office with the time spent in the classrooms and in the hallways.

Like the 2018 roundtable participants, the 2019 participating principals start their day in their office and then get out in the hallways and classrooms. 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. Having an “open door” policy for parents is important, and so is knowledge of the neighborhood and surrounding community.

“The era of being in an office is long gone... long gone.”

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. Maintaining a walk-through³ schedule so every teacher and class are visited regularly is important. 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.

The principal must come in early and stay late because, during the day, the principal must be visible. Work is done during non-working hours (nights and weekends). With cell phones the principal is always accessible to teachers, parents, colleagues, the District, etc.

“Visibility is the key to success.”

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

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

4 Ibid.

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 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.
- Effective principals maintain an active presence in the hallways, classrooms, cafeteria, study halls, etc., because that's where the students are.

ATTRACTING AND RETAINING HIGH-QUALITY TEACHERS

Summary

Discussion focused on how these effective principals go about recruiting and retaining high-quality teachers. Whereas compensation was discussed at length by the 2018 roundtable participants, 2019 principals emphasized the importance of a school's culture in recruiting young teachers to teach in urban schools and schools in underserved communities. The importance of "consistency" cannot be overstated.

Consistency is huge in building a culture. The participating principals emphasized the value of being able to hire the people they want and who want to be at the school. Principals want to hire teachers who understand that work is not over when the students go home and who will stay late when needed.

Low turnover rates help establish a family culture. Through consistency, principals and teachers develop a mutual trust. Teachers come to understand that the principal is there to help them and assist in their development. One way in which principals go about building trust is by providing new teachers with coaches and mentors. Every principal has a "go to" teacher that can go in and help new teachers.

"The culture that you develop in your building is everything... culture is what drives your success."

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.

One of the participating principals spoke about recruiting teachers and staff at a new school where the school's culture is developing. Making sure teachers and staff understand 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. The principal must demonstrate a presence and be a leader. In contrast, principals at established schools often rely on the "old guard" to show new hires how it is. At a new school, it's up to the principal to do that.

"You can't just sit in your office and tell everybody what you expect. You've got to go do it. Once they see you in the trenches with them, the culture begins."

A school's reputation and word of mouth from a school's teachers (e.g., at workshops, etc.) are important ways to attract quality teachers to a school. 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. New teacher programs, like the one in Osceola County, and Broward County's New Educator Support System (an in-house teacher academy), were offered as examples of effective teacher support programs.

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 it is important that the principal show appreciation and support in any way possible.

"Our actions speak louder than words."

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.⁸ Two of the five --- improving their working conditions, and providing support to develop them professionally --- were strategies identified by the participating principals.

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.⁹

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.¹⁰

8 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.

9 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.

10 Tray Geiger and Margarita Pivovarov, "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.

School leadership and administrative support is often the top reason teachers identify for leaving or staying in the profession, or in a given school, outweighing even salary considerations for some teachers.¹¹ 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.¹²

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

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. School districts like Miami-Dade offer Principal Induction Programs to help develop new principals. School districts provide leadership training for assistant principals and teachers through an abundant number of workshops for teachers to attend. This is especially true during summer months. Many districts provide stipends for principals to attend these workshops.

Florida's Turnaround Leaders Program was mentioned as an effective program designed to prepare leaders to improve student achievement and turn around chronically underperforming schools in Florida. Participating principals participate in:

- a series of quarterly seminars led by turnaround experts, each focused on a particular skill set critical to the success of a turnaround leader;
- online leadership course work;
- a year-long practicum where small teams work at a low-achieving school to complete leadership tasks under the guidance of expert mentor principals; and
- a full-time, six-month internship to take on major leadership responsibilities at a low-achieving middle grades or high school.¹³

It was the consensus of the participating principals that it is important to expose assistant principals and principals to different settings and get them out of their comfort zones. 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 when they do fail.

11 *Supra*, see footnote 11.

12 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.

13 Southern Regional Education Board, "Florida Turnaround Leaders Program," retrieved from www.sreb.org/florida-turnaround-leaders-program, July 22, 2019.

One topic that generated considerable discussion was the idea of moving highly-effective principals to other failing or struggling schools. It was the consensus of the participating principals that this practice should be avoided. The perception that changing administration will produce immediate results is misguided --- a new principal will not be able to work miracles overnight. Changing the culture at failing or struggling schools will take a minimum of two years. The teachers at the school came to work for the former principal and will push back or resist the culture change and trust the new principal is trying to develop. It is important that the new principal take time to observe operations at the school before making changes.

Participating principals discussed the support provided by other principals. "Sending out the bat signal" triggers response and support from other principals and District/charter school company staff. More formal support mechanisms such as educational transition offices are extremely helpful, particularly for new principals, in meeting the organizational and professional challenges facing principals.

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.¹⁴ 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.¹⁵ 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.¹⁶ 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.¹⁷

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.

14 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.

15 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.

16 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.

17 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.

- The practical wisdom and experiences of more-experienced principals permits less-experienced principals to learn in a real school setting.
- Moving highly-effective principals to failing or struggling schools should not be undertaken with the expectation that cultural change will occur rapidly.

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 participating principals understand what teachers need. It was the consensus of the participating principals 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 and spend time with their teachers. It is important to make sure new hires “fit” with the principal and other teachers. Developing a “family atmosphere” is considered to be important in getting the most from teachers. The participating principals eat lunch with their teachers and go to considerable lengths to show their appreciation. Performing tasks for the teachers (e.g., making photocopies, etc.) so the teachers can remain in the classroom helps to show appreciation for their hard work.

“If I tell them to move a mountain, they’ll say ‘how far?’”

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.¹⁸ 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.¹⁹

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;

18 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.

19 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.²⁰

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.²¹

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.²²

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.

20 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.

21 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.

22 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 principals have sufficient autonomy to be an effective principal. Of the participating principals, seven are principals at traditional public schools and three are principals at public charter schools. Like the 2018 roundtable participants, it was the consensus of the 2019 participating principals 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.

It was the consensus of the traditional public school principals that "site-based management" has gone away over the last few years, and that Districts provide more oversight of traditional school principals than charter school principals. The traditional public school principals were given greater autonomy if they were successful.

Like the 2018 roundtable participants, the participating traditional public-school principals expressed the need for greater flexibility 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.

"The District office can in no way understand the personalities of each individual school like the principals can."

Participating 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? Two areas were identified most frequently: compensation and school safety. The participating principals expressed the desire to be able to increase salaries for teachers and staff. Many of the school staff must work more than one job to make ends meet.

Since last year's tragic and senseless shooting at the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, the issue of school safety has moved front and center and has posed a whole host of new issues for principals. It was the consensus of the participating principals that funding for school security should be based on the needs of the building and not number of students, and that they should be given the autonomy to make their schools as safe as possible. The first task of the principal has become making all the students feel safe.

"...school safety is dramatically underfunded."

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.²³ 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.²⁴

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

24 Ibid.

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.²⁵

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. School boards selected for participation in PAPPI are exempt from the K-20 Education Code and State Board of Education rules, with certain exceptions.²⁶

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.²⁷ 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.²⁸

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.

25 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.

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

27 Ibid.

28 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).

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

As part of the preparations for the annual Principal Leadership Awards ceremony, TaxWatch staff has visited each of the past 27 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 45 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. As a result of these visits, and with the completion of education roundtables in 2018 and 2019, TaxWatch has identified a number of “best practices” that are common among the participating principals. Among these are:

- Effective principals know the name of every student in the school;
- 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.

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

Roundtable Participants

Moderator

Bob Nave, Vice President for Research, Florida TaxWatch

Participants

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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.

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