



Fostering School Success: Unveiling the Effective Strategies of Florida's Top Principals

The 2023 Florida TaxWatch Education Roundtable Discussion
Summary and Findings



Florida
TaxWatch

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Piyush Patel
Chairman of the Board of Trustees

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Dear fellow taxpayer,

Research has consistently shown that, next to teachers, principals have the most significant impact on student academic achievement when it comes to in-school factors. Having an effective principal has the same impact as a student having an additional three months of learning per year.¹ The principal's role as a school's instructional leader and the individual most responsible for fostering a positive learning environment is getting more attention from lawmakers and policymakers. High quality principals transform mediocre schools to great schools, and ineffective principals risk diminishing the quality of the education delivered.

On May 18, 2023, Florida TaxWatch convened a roundtable of Florida TaxWatch's prestigious Principal Leadership Award winners to discuss the philosophies, strategies, and leadership required to bolster the achievement of at-risk students. Quality education is important in the development of productive, self-sufficient, well-informed citizens as well as a powerful tool for dismantling poverty. As Florida competes in the global economy and seeks the highest quality of life for its residents, placing the right leadership in schools is crucial.

Moderated by Janice Palmer, Senior Vice President, Government Affairs and Public Policy, at Helios Education Foundation, the roundtable discussion touched upon attracting and retaining high-quality teachers; developing teachers; building a productive school environment; building relationships with stakeholders beyond the building; and managing time and personnel. All of these characteristics are essential for the academic success of our children, our future workforce, and our state's health and prosperity.

Florida TaxWatch is pleased to present this summary report, and we look forward to discussing its conclusions and recommendations with policymakers in advance of the 2024 legislative session.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Dominic M. Calabro".

Dominic M. Calabro
President & CEO

¹ Jason A. Grissom, Anna J. Egalite, & Constance A. Lindsay, "How Principals Affect Students and Schools," The Wallace Foundation, February 2021.

Letter from the Moderator

Colleagues,

Thank you for the opportunity to moderate the 2023 Principal Leadership Award Roundtable, presented by Florida TaxWatch, which provides the insights shared within this report. This award, the first of its kind in the U.S., has recognized nearly 80 principals since its inception in 2013.

What makes these awards so special is that there is not an application process. Rather, the data tells the story of extraordinary gains in Title 1 schools for the selection of these principals and then we had the opportunity to hear the human side that's behind the data. Being honored for your work is always gratifying; even more so when unsolicited.

In sharing their insights, the hope of the principals recognized by Florida TaxWatch is that it can help school leaders across the state improve policies and practices to boost student achievement, especially for students of color and students from low-income backgrounds.

This report makes one thing clear – leadership matters when it comes to quality teaching and strong student outcomes. The principals featured here are dedicated to building a culture rooted in trust, engaging with their students, setting high expectations and using data to gauge progress toward meeting them, and supporting teachers as they strive to meet diverse student needs.

The report also underscores that positive change is possible in high-need schools, and that this change requires committed and sustained leadership at the district and school levels. Effective principals need support to create a collaborative culture, engage with students and families, and play an active role in developing and implementing a robust curriculum.

Demand for educated talent in Florida has never been greater. Meeting that demand requires an unprecedented push for student success, especially for students who have historically been left behind. School principals play a pivotal role in creating an environment where more students can thrive, so it is critical that programs like the Principal Leadership Award continue, and more importantly, that the insights and lessons from the winners be shared as broadly as possible.

Sincerely,



Janice Palmer
Senior Vice President, Government Affairs and Public Policy

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Education Foundation

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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.² 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 an impactful leader. Many other factors contribute to such turnarounds, but leadership is the catalyst.³

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, determined by a unique, data-driven methodology.

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. Using this data, Florida TaxWatch calculates student learning gains for math and reading by grade and by school year.

In May 2023, Florida TaxWatch hosted a two-hour roundtable with the latest PLA winners to discuss the philosophies, strategies, challenges, and best practices of effective principals. The PLA-winning principals are identified in the appendix. Moderated by Florida TaxWatch board member Janice Palmer, Senior Vice President, Government Affairs and Public Policy, at Helios Education Foundation, the participants discussed the following topics:

- Attracting and retaining high-quality teachers;
- Developing teachers;
- Building a productive school culture;
- Building relationships with stakeholders beyond the building; and
- Managing time and personnel.

The strategies discussed by the roundtable participants for effectively leading their schools have been summarized herein, paired with educational research that supports these strategies. This report compares the strategies employed by this year's roundtable participants to those employed by preceding participants to identify best practices and "key takeaways" for consideration by policy makers and education professionals. A draft copy of this report was provided to the roundtable participants for feedback to ensure Florida 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. Florida 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.

² Jason A. Grissom, Anna J. Egalite, & Constance A. Lindsay, "How Principals Affect Students and Schools," The Wallace Foundation, February 2021.

³ Ibid.

Attracting and Retaining High-Quality Teachers

Roundtable Summary

The principals recognized by Florida TaxWatch rely upon strong relationships with teachers to help retention. In part, relationships are built upon personal interactions, such as morning greetings or conversations about their lives beyond the building. Much of their relationship, however, is dependent upon how principals support each teacher's role in the classroom.

Effective principals empower their teachers to do what they do best: teach. They encourage shared decision-making in choices that influence students and the direction of the school. They provide instructional support in the classroom—whether through direct participation or by providing time with coaches, interventionists, teaching aids, or well-prepared substitutes—which better equips teachers to secure student learning gains and avoid burnout. For new teachers, principals often try to find a mentor to help them acclimate to the school as well.

"They have to know that you support them, that you have their back."

Similarly, healthy relationships with teachers support the attraction of more teachers. Within social circles, meetings, and job fairs, teachers share their experiences with each other. One principal shared that teachers from a neighboring county took a pay cut to work at her school because they thought she was more likely to listen to their opinions and help them meet their professional goals.

"Your best salesmen are the teachers themselves that work for you. They are going to tell the other teachers in the district and surrounding districts, 'hey, you want to work here!'"

Some of the principals expressed difficulty finding new teachers. To increase the talent pool, one principal shared that she encourages community members, such as involved parents or prior students, to consider the teaching profession. Some schools receive support from their district. For example, the Miami-Dade school district runs a teacher apprenticeship program, a teacher residency program, and teacher academies within high schools to expand its local teacher workforce.

"I am almost as likely to be checked out while buying Christmas gifts for my children by one of my own teachers as I am almost anyone else."

Some of the principals worry about keeping education an "exciting" profession. Principals worry that low salaries, long hours, and lack of respect turn potential candidates away from teaching careers. One principal noted that recent salary increases in Florida are positive steps forward but worries that a growing number of competing job opportunities continues to threaten the growth of the teacher workforce.

Supporting Research

Nationwide and across industries, employers have struggled to find and keep talent, and the field of education is no exception. In Florida, school districts reported 4,440 teacher vacancies on September 1, 2022.⁴ Principals must make teaching at their schools worthwhile in order to attract and retain high-quality candidates.

Based upon 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.⁵ Three of the five—improving teachers' working conditions, providing support to new teachers, and ensuring a pathway to employment—were strategies identified during the PLA Roundtable.

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.⁶

The perception of a school's administration not only impacts whether a teacher stays at a school but sometimes whether they stay within the profession. Factors such as the administration's leadership and the amount of support the administration provides are often the top reason teachers identify for leaving or staying in the profession, outweighing even salary considerations for some teachers.⁷ Teachers who left hard-to-staff schools claimed limited opportunities for personal growth and limited supports to improve emotional, environmental, and instructional wellbeing affected their choice.⁸

Salary and compensation are also often cited as a primary influence driving teachers' choice of workplace but tend to be beyond the control of the principal. Within the past couple of years, the Florida legislature has sought to raise teacher salaries. In 2022, Florida's approved budget increased the average teacher starting salary to \$48,000 for the 2022-23 school year. In 2023, Florida's budget included an additional \$252 million, compared to the year prior, to continue increasing teacher salaries.⁹

Key Takeaways

- Effective principals build bonds of trust and create a positive school culture and climate that ensure 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 address teachers' classroom needs to help prevent burnout.

4 Florida Department of Education, Identification of High Demand Teacher Needs for 2023-24.

5 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.

6 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. See also, Tray Geiger and Margarita Pivovarova, "The Effects of Working Conditions on Teacher Retention," April 2018.

7 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.

8 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>, July 11, 2021.

9 Office of Governor Ron DeSantis, "Governor Ron DeSantis Approves Record Increase in Teacher Pay and Signs the Nation's Most Comprehensive Package of Legislation to Support Teachers," May 9, 2023.

Developing Teachers

Roundtable Summary

"If we are going to make change, it is on the back of our teachers...inspiring them to know that they are the change agent, greater than the negative impacts we face every day."

Studies show that an effective teacher is the most influential factor of student achievement. When principals emphasize the influence of teachers, teachers are inspired to believe in their own capabilities. This belief can increase teacher buy-in, making them more inclined to pursue professional development and to contribute to shared decision-making.

"Every year is a year you are learning and growing and progressing."

Effective principals provide all teachers—new and seasoned—with learning opportunities. Principals may connect their teachers to virtual classes, such as a Google certification course, to help them develop new skills that keep pace with changing technology and new curriculum expectations. Some principals offer “walk throughs,” allowing teachers to observe other classes and share their feedback. One principal described hosting a professional development “camp,” where multiple teachers lead different workshops for their colleagues. Not only does this provide teachers with choices from which to learn but it also empowers the teachers hosting the workshops with the opportunity to fulfill a leadership role that celebrates their strengths.

Many schools offer teacher mentorship programs to help onboard new teachers into a school. As newly certified teachers enter the classroom, they often rely upon more seasoned teachers to share advice about time management, curriculum, and behavior management. Principals choose mentors carefully to ensure that the mentors effectively model best teaching practices and will inspire rather than stifle new teachers trying to find a direction for their classrooms.

"I can teach you something. You can teach me something."

Effective principals encourage their mentors to learn from their mentees. New teachers often carry with them fresh ideas, tech savvy skills, and a better understanding of students’ current interests and preferred means of communication. The principals shared that, since the pandemic—a time where many schools relied upon new teachers to help develop engaging, online lesson plans—seasoned teachers seem more open to learning from new teachers.

Supporting Research

A principal's time in the classroom should be focused on enhancing the ability of the teachers to serve their students. 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.¹⁰ This collaboration has shown to improve teacher efficacy, attitudes about teaching, understanding of students, and levels of trust.

Teacher evaluations are unproductive without broader coaching and feedback. As principals conduct evaluations, the interactions must be deliberate. Focus upon high-leverage skills, the foundational skills teachers can yield on a daily basis, most greatly supports teachers and improves classroom instruction. Development of new skills requires monitored progress—measured by observations and valid metrics, such as formative assessments—and a commitment from the teacher, which may be influenced by their relationship with the principal. As principals guide the development of new skills, they should protect teachers' sense of autonomy.¹¹

Effective principals not only support teachers directly but also facilitate the teachers' abilities to support each other. Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) can be effective tools for collaboration and have bettered student learning outcomes in many schools. Effective PLCs tend to share five features that often 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.¹²

Principals facilitate the core elements needed to sustain PLCs by sharing leadership and by building leadership capacity on a school-wide level. Effective principals set the vision and activate the leadership of teachers, which helps the teachers to feel a sense of ownership in and loyalty to the school's direction.¹³

10 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://www.researchgate.net/publication/44832147_Principal_Leadership_and_School_Performance_An_Integration_of_Transformational_and_Instructional_Leadership, June 5, 2018.

11 Wallace Foundation, "How Principals Affect Students and Schools," February 2021.

12 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/EJ111683.pdf>, July 11, 2021.

13 Wallace Foundation, "The School Principal as Leader: Guiding Schools to Better Teaching and Learning 2013, retrieved from <https://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/pages/overview-the-school-principal-as-leader.aspx>, July 11, 2021.

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

Building a Productive School Culture

Roundtable Summary

"Every morning I would stand and greet every child."

Building a productive school culture starts at the front door. Many principals are the first face students see in the morning, sharing smiles, hugs, and words of encouragement to help students feel ready for the day. They prioritize learning students' names, recognizing students as valued members of the school community. Often, principals use their personal time to attend school functions and competitions, further building upon relationships with their students.

"At least six days a week, I am giving up my time to make sure I partake in my student events because when they know that you care, they go well beyond to try to achieve as much as they can."

The principals build an achievement-oriented climate by developing their teachers as data experts. As experts, teachers can use student data to inform lesson planning, choosing the pace and focused upon skills based upon their students' greatest needs. Teachers are also encouraged to host frequent data chats with students, helping students to set attainable goals and monitor progress. Not only does this keep students accountable for academic growth but often it also boosts their confidence because they can see the growth they already achieved to make it to their current level of performance.

"The kids have to know their data. The students have to know it is meaningful and you're not just a number, but you can actually move that number and have ownership."

The principals discussed facilitating teacher collaboration in addressing students' needs. In one secondary school, each student has a single action plan collectively created by all of their teachers. When teachers share student action plans, they can pursue complementary efforts in support of each student.

Students at high risk schools often face stress in their personal life that can distract or impede them from achieving their academic goals. Effective principals keep their teachers aware of their students' hardships. They encourage teachers to treat students with patience and flexibility when appropriate while still maintaining high expectations and a sense of routine within the classroom. One principal noted that her school monitors behavioral data in order to identify—and if possible, remedy—non-academic needs, such as housing, food, or clothing. When social needs are addressed, students have an increased capacity to focus on their academic needs.

"We cannot control what they go home to, but we can control what they come into."

Supporting Research

Research suggests that 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.¹⁴

Effective principals do not expect their students to drop their personal life as they walk through the door. Sometimes, principals are even able to secure funding or resources that help satisfy student needs. Access to integrated student supports, such as counseling or medical care, has been linked to improved “attendance, behavior, social functioning, and academic achievement” in under-resourced, underserved areas.¹⁵

Creating an environment that encourages student achievement is crucial. Research shows that students tend to increase or decrease their academic efforts based upon the expectations they perceive.¹⁶ To help students meet high expectations, schools should foster a “growth mindset,” the understanding that students can work hard to improve their academic skills rather than be stuck with their first test scores.¹⁷ As the instructional leader, principals are responsible for setting this vision for the whole school.

Data is the crux for monitoring and understanding student needs, measuring the effectiveness of teaching practices, and informing the training of teachers. It also enables a measurable, goalsetting culture throughout the school. Principals should provide teachers with the professional development needed to wield data in their classrooms. Data beyond test scores, such as attendance records and extracurriculars, can also be utilized, helping to identify problems and opportunities outside of traditional instruction.¹⁸

Key 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 do not expect students to drop their personal lives when entering the classroom. They seek ways of alleviating the out-of-school stresses of students.
- Effective principals not only encourage the formation of positive relationships but equip their teachers with strategies to do so.
- Effective principals set high expectations for the schools and garner commitment from students, parents, and teachers.
- Effective principals make data-informed decisions and provide their teachers with the training to do the same.

14 Sue A. Rieg and Joseph F. Marcoline, “Relationship Building: The First “R” for Principals,” Eastern Education Research Association Conference Paper, February 2008. See also, Wallace Foundation, “How Principals Affect Students and Schools,” February 2021.

15 Learning Policy Institute, “Community Schools as an Effective School Improvement Strategy: A Review of the Evidence,” December 2017.

16 Hanover Research, “High Expectations and Student Success,” November 2012.

17 Hanover Research, “High Expectations and Student Success,” November 2012. See also, David S. Yeager, Paul Hanselman, Gregory M. Walton, et al. “A national experiment reveals where a growth mindset improves achievement,” August 2019.

18 Pathways to College Network, “Using Data to Improve Educational Outcomes,” Nature, 2007.

Building Relationships with Stakeholders Beyond the Building

Roundtable Summary

Parents and other caregivers are key partners in supporting student achievement and encouraging positive behaviors. The principals discussed the importance of keeping open and consistent communication with students' families. The principals indicated that morning greetings and learning the names of parents can go a long way.

"I do car duty everyday so that I can talk to the parents through the window."

The principals also discussed the importance of sharing good news with the students' families. Many of the principals keep active social media accounts that share their events, celebrations, and classroom activities with followers. Families may even share the social media posts with others, delivering a positive image of the school to community members and future families the school will one day serve.

By continually seeing the positive impacts of their schools, families are more likely to trust their schools to do what's best for their students. Consistent communication makes families more comfortable approaching their school with any concerns, which protects the school from gossip and the growth of an unknown problem. Sometimes, problems are inevitable, but when one of these principals has to overcome bad press, the foundation of good news helps families to maintain their trust in the school.

"[Use of social media] dispels myths about schools in areas that we serve...the myths of kids and what they do and what they are capable of...we have to have strong [public relations] campaigns to bust and break cycles."

Members of the community beyond students' families can also prove to be useful partners for the principals. One principal discussed the importance of knowing his town's local leadership, such as the mayor and commissioners. Local leadership can help connect the school and its families to resources. Principals can also build relationships with local institutions of postsecondary learning, opening the door to additional learning opportunities for their students. Sometimes, community members are drawn to become teachers due to the positive things they hear about their local schools.

Supporting Research

Family involvement and community partnerships hold the potential to improve students' attendance, academic achievement, and behavior. Family involvement is impactful at all levels of education, but the greatest gains are seen within elementary school. Research suggests the most crucial form of involvement is academic socialization, which is when families hold conversations with their students regarding academic expectations, educational values, and future aspirations; therefore, schools should equip parents with the information needed to hold such conversations.¹⁹

To realize the positive outcomes bestowed by family involvement, effective principals actively work to welcome participation and remove barriers to access.²⁰ Once families are in the building, they can participate in shared decision-making that helps educators better serve the students.

Families with greater involvement describe their schools as “empowering and welcoming.” A developing area of research, studies suggest the following as features that foster an environment facilitating family involvement:

- Positive and helpful office staff, especially during school registration and orientations;
- Teachers who put in extra effort, respond quickly, and develop positive rapport;
- Principals who display accessibility, visibility, and personal investment;
- Ongoing events and activities that engage students and families with the school community; and
- Supports designed for students' specific circumstances (special needs, gifted, transient, bullied, English language learners, etc.) and are communicated to families.²¹

Schools also benefit from activating community members beyond students' families. Community members, from political leaders to local businessmen, help principals better understand the populations they serve. Such partnerships can unlock new resources—such as advice, financial assistance, after-school programs, and internships—that can further advance student achievement.²²

Key Takeaways

- Effective principals prioritize connections with students' families by removing obstacles to contact and maintaining easy pathways for families to see what is happening within the school.
- Effective principals consider their school's relationship with the local community, focusing upon how they are perceived by the families they serve, the families they will serve, and potential partners, such as political or business leaders.

19 Miranda Avnet, David Makara, Karen H. Larwin, and Matthew Erickson, “The impact of parental involvement and education on academic achievement in elementary school,” *International Journal of Evaluation and Research in Education*, September 2019.

20 Ibid.

21 Alana Siegel, Monica Christina Esqueda, Ruth Berkowitz, and Kathrine Sullivan, “Welcoming Parents to Their Child's School: Practices Supporting Students With Diverse Needs and Backgrounds,” *Education and Urban Society*, January 2018.

22 School Community Network, “Handbook on Family and Community Engagement,” 2011.

Managing Time and Personnel

Roundtable Summary

Effective principals are seldom at their desks. They can be found in the classroom, offering extra hands when the school is short-staffed or providing feedback to their teachers. They can be found in public spaces, such as the cafeteria or the halls, building relationships with the students and advancing a healthy school culture.

"I personally do all three lunch duties every day... [and stand] in the halls every bell change."

A principal cannot be everywhere at once. To stay where the action is during the school day, principals often sacrifice personal time to catch up on paperwork and other administrative duties. They also rely upon their administrative teams to handle delegated responsibilities.

Principals carefully manage their teachers to optimize student gains. Principals identify their teachers' strengths and determine how to assign teachers in a way that best serves the whole school. Effective principals assign exceptionally effective teachers to the students who require the greatest reading and math gains to reach grade level performance. One principal shared that she even "loops" teachers—keeping teachers with the same set of students for several school years—to ensure seamless learning transitions for students with the greatest needs.

"I think the reality is the people are the most important piece of what we do."

As principals manage their time and personnel, they must consider the long-term needs of their school. Eventually, they will need new heads of departments, instructional coaches, and administrators. Many school leaders start as teachers. Long-term personnel needs may be considered as principals decide how to assign teachers to classrooms, which mentorships to establish, or which professional development workshops to offer to which teachers.

"Even as principals, we are not going to be in those school sites forever, so we have to build the capacity of those who we know can take our places."

Supporting Research

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. Effective principals do not let this happen. Studies show that teachers perceive infrequent visits by a principal as a demonstration that other priorities outweigh the value of maintaining a classroom presence.²³ Regardless of why principals lacked presence in classrooms, teachers consistently shared their belief that administrators' absences limited their credibility among the faculty.²⁴

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. There is no substitute for that knowledge.²⁵

Principals carry many duties, so to ensure better productivity and efficiency, many schools are leveraging additional staff members to reinforce the roles of principals. Assistant principals often collaborate with principals to complete administrative tasks, uphold leadership responsibilities, maintain a positive culture, and foster favorable working conditions for teachers. Many schools have begun instituting structures that diffuse leadership, such as hiring multiple assistant principals, establishing department chairs, and placing teachers into leadership positions. While diffusing leadership can help make responsibilities more manageable, principals must ensure each member of their team has the necessary training and skills to best serve their school.²⁶

Principals also need their teachers in the right places to maximize the growth of students. In high-growth schools, principals place their highest performing teachers with their lowest-achieving students. The pressures of standardized tests can negatively influence the placement of teachers. In an attempt to better test scores, some principals concentrate high-performing teachers in tested grade levels and low-performing teachers in the untested classes of K-2; however, congregating low-performing teachers into lower grade levels not only results in lower performance on classroom assessments but also impacts future high-stakes assessments given that students are starting their new grade levels with insufficient foundational skills.²⁷

Key Takeaways

- The most important work performed by a principal cannot be done from their desk.
- Effective principals remain visible and approachable throughout the school day, sometimes adopting additional roles when the school is short-staffed.
- Much of principals' work is done during non-working hours (nights and weekends).
- Effective principals identify the strengths of their staff in order to place employees in the positions where they are most needed.

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

24 Ibid.

25 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>, July 11, 2021.

26 Ellen Goldring, Mollie Rubin, and Marijesa Herrmann, "The Role of Assistant Principals: Evidence and Insights for Advancing School Leadership," Wallace Foundation, April 2021.

27 Jason A. Grissom, Anna J. Egalite, Constance A. Lindsay, "How Principals Affect Students and Schools: A Systematic Synthesis of Two Decades of Research," Wallace Foundation, February 2021.

Growing Insights of PLA

The 79 principals who have been selected by Florida 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 visits with winning principals and roundtable discussions, Florida 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;
- Effective principals have created a collaborative culture where teachers feel their voices are heard and respected; and
- Effective principals prioritize becoming a hub for the community and finding ways to engage students' families, whether it be providing babysitters during parent conferences or running a food pantry on campus.

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 a culture in which all students can be successful.

Continuing the Discussion

Superintendents

As the leaders of school districts, we encourage you to share this summary with your principals. By sharing these Florida-based success stories, we hope this report can help inspire and validate the ambitions of school leaders as well as encourage conversation and collaboration.

Government Officials and Policymakers

K-12 education is the foundation of workforce development. When residents have an education, they are more likely to maintain self-sufficiency, attract high-wage industry, and contribute higher earnings to the state's economy and tax revenue. Therefore, K-12 education is essential to the growth of Florida and the wellbeing of its taxpayers. Based upon our roundtable discussion, we encourage government officials and policymakers to consider the following observations as they seek the best educational outcomes for Floridians:

- An administrative team with effective training and sufficient funding helps principals juggle their various roles;
- Guidance, mental health services, de-escalation training, and relationship training can help at-risk students maintain their focus upon their studies;
- Developing teachers is a process, so retaining teachers—whether through salary, professional development opportunities, or an enticing school culture—saves a principal's time and maximizes the impact of their work;
- Students and teachers benefit from a collaborative environment and shared decision making; and
- Community grants that transform schools into resource hubs can help schools build relationships with families and reduce extraneous stress factors that distract students from studies.

Business Leaders

K-12 students are the future workforce. Supporting schools contributes to the availability and development of talent, especially within local areas. Businesses can support schools by providing advice, financial assistance, donations, after-school programs, internships, and career pipelines.

Non-Profits and Community Organizations

When students and their families face challenges beyond the school day, such as illness, homelessness, or poverty, the personal stresses can negatively impact student performance. To support student achievement throughout the education system, non-profits and community organizations can provide expertise and resources such as clothes, food, medical care, and referrals. When dispersed at the school, these resources may enable guardians to visit the school, opening the doors to greater influence upon their student's achievement.

Appendix

Moderator

Janice Palmer, Senior Vice President, Government Affairs and Public Policy, at Helios Education Foundation

Participants

Bruce Hightower, Principal at Rosenwald Elementary School

Lisa Lee, Principal at Richardson 6th Grade Academy

Michael Mahl, Principal at Palm Bay Elementary School

Matthew McLelland, Principal at Chiefland Middle High School

Dr. Bridgette Tate-Wyche, Principal at Miami Northwestern High School

ABOUT FLORIDA TAXWATCH

As an independent, nonpartisan, nonprofit taxpayer research institute and government watchdog, it is the mission of Florida TaxWatch to provide the residents 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 residents and businesses.

Florida TaxWatch is supported by voluntary, tax-deductible memberships and private grants. Membership support provides a solid, lasting foundation that has enabled Florida TaxWatch to bring about a more effective, responsive government that is accountable to the residents it serves since 1979.

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