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## [School leadership](#)

### [School management](#)

**Strengthening school leadership to improve teaching and learning is one of the strategies put forward to achieve target 4.c of the Education 2030 Agenda, which addresses the need to increase the supply of qualified teachers (UNESCO, 2016; United Nations, 2015). Studies have shown that school leadership has the second-largest in-school impact on student learning outcomes, behind only classroom teaching (UNESCO, 2018; VVOB, 2018). Through a managerial lens, school leaders can also help achieve target 4.a – provide safe, non-violent, inclusive, and equitable learning environments. In addition, by establishing a clear vision and promoting a positive culture, they can propel their schools to achieve targets 4.1 (equitable and quality education for all) and 4.5 (eliminate gender disparities and allow equal access to education for all vulnerable populations).**

## **What we know**

School leadership aims to get the best out of teachers and students. It can fall under either transformational or instructional/pedagogical leadership (Day and Sammons, 2014; UNESCO, 2018). Transformational leadership pertains to big-picture vision and structural reorganization, while instructional leadership refers to establishing the importance of teaching and learning to improve outcomes (Day and Sammons, 2014; OECD, 2016). School leadership roles include responsibilities that encompass both leadership (such as goal-setting or teacher evaluation) and management duties (resource management, teacher deployment) (UNESCO, 2018; Vaillant, 2015). Those in management roles establish day-to-day organization in a school while also providing control and oversight to teachers and students (Day and Sammons, 2014; UNESCO, 2018). While principals take on many of these tasks, school leadership can also include senior teachers, community members, other school administrators, and government officials (Spillane, Paquin Morel, and Al-Fadala, 2019; UNESCO, 2019b). School leaders also play a key role in developing community and family participation within the school (UNICEF, 2009).

School leaders establish the culture and organization necessary for schools to provide quality teaching and therefore have an indirect, but important, effect on student learning (OECD, 2016; UNESCO, 2018; World Bank, 2018). Studies have found that school leaders who provide better management services have a positive correlation to student outcomes (Bloom et al., 2014; Leaver, Lemos, and Scur, 2019). Other data has shown that principals that provide more instructional leadership increase teacher collaboration and sense of purpose (OECD, 2016). By providing effective guidance, training, and working conditions to teachers, school leaders and managers create the best possible environment for learning (Jensen, Downing, and Clark, 2017; UNESCO, 2019a).

School leaders may have very different amounts of power and authority based on the governance structure in a country (OECD, 2016). There are large variances globally in the extent of

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decentralization that has occurred within education systems, resulting in the development of different leadership methods (Vaillant, 2015). Some countries have empowered schools and local school leadership, running on a system of school-based management (Garcia Moreno, Gertler, and Patrinos, 2019; Yamauchi, 2014). These systems, with independent budgets and staffing decisions, allow greater autonomy for school leaders (Garcia Moreno, Gertler, and Patrinos, 2019; Vaillant, 2015). Other countries have more centralized systems in which school leaders directly follow guidance from ministries of education (UNESCO, 2019a; Vaillant, 2015).

## Challenges

**Lack of established qualifications for school leaders.** Many countries lack formalized policy guidance on the requirements to become a principal or head teacher (Tournier et al., 2019; UNESCO, 2019b). In these cases, school leadership positions often go to senior teachers who may lack training or preparation for these roles (Education Commission, 2019; UNESCO, 2019b). Some countries appoint school leaders as political favours or with little transparency in the selection process (Tournier et al., 2019). Such issues can lead to the appointment of inexperienced and untrained leaders, which seriously hampers the effectiveness of schools and can have a negative impact on student learning.

**Lack of incentive to become a school leader.** School leadership is a demanding profession, especially in contexts where resources are limited. The responsibilities transferred to schools under decentralization have considerably increased the activity portfolio of the school head. He or she must be able to manage the human, material, and financial resources of the school, to plan and manage the school improvement plan, but also to bring together actors within and around the school through the development of partnerships (Vaillant, 2015). Principals and other school leaders tend to work longer hours and have more responsibilities than teachers, but often receive little extra pay or other tangible incentives (OECD, 2020; Tournier et al., 2019; UNESCO, 2018). In many countries, a school leadership role represents a final position for senior teachers and offers little career mobility (OECD, 2019; Tournier et al., 2019). These factors can dissuade highly motivated teachers or other quality candidates from seeking school leadership positions.

**School leaders can become full-time managers.** While instructional and pedagogical training is a key aspect of the job, many countries still use principals as simple administrative managers. A large part of their job is accountability reporting, which adds to the pressure of the work (Education Commission, 2019; UNESCO, 2018). School leaders in centralized systems can be submerged with top-down tasking or seeking approval from local or national authorities (UNESCO, 2019a). This lack of instructional leadership can lead to less teacher innovation and collaboration, and potentially affect student learning outcomes (Day and Sammons, 2014).

**Lack of data on school leadership.** There is a lack of basic data about school leadership, such as qualifications or turnover. There remains a lack of integrated and comparative research in terms of effective school leadership policies and practices globally (Spillane, Paquin Morel, and Al-Fadala, 2019; UNESCO, 2018). This proves especially true in low- and middle-income countries, as much research focuses on high-performing systems and high-income countries (Day and Sammons, 2014; Jensen, Downing, and Clark, 2017; OECD, 2016, 2020). This dearth of research stems from a lack of both established policies and data collection, with much of the available information self-reported in documents such as the survey accompanying the Programme for International Student Assessment test (Leaver, Lemos, and Scur, 2019; UNESCO, 2018). All of these issues make developing effective, evidence-based strategies for school leadership extremely difficult in low-income countries.

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## Equity and inclusion

**School leaders are vital to promoting equity.** School leaders drive the culture and focus of schools, and can be instrumental in promoting school equality and equity (UNESCO, 2017). They have an enormous impact on how vulnerable student populations receive instruction (Spillane, Paquin Morel, and Al-Fadala, 2019; UNESCO, 2018). By properly selecting and training teachers and instilling an equitable environment, school leaders can greatly enhance vulnerable students' learning outcomes, especially in disadvantaged schools (UNESCO, 2017; Vaillant, 2015; VVOB, 2019). However, challenges including poor training or heavy administrative burdens can hinder this.

**Leadership demographics.** Globally, the proportion of men in school leadership and management positions is higher than within the general teaching force (GEM Report Team, 2018; OECD, 2020; UNESCO, 2018). When women do attain leadership positions, these tend to be in primary or smaller schools rather than larger secondary or tertiary institutions (UNESCO, 2018, 2019b). Due to the ability of female principals and leaders to help encourage girls to stay in school, this lack of female leadership can have detrimental effects on learning equity (UNESCO, 2019b).

## Policy and planning

**Develop national standards for school leadership.** To better develop expectations for school leaders, policy-makers can establish codified standards, expectations, and recruitment strategies (Day and Sammons, 2014; OECD, 2020; UNESCO, 2018, 2019a). High-performing systems tend to integrate leadership standards and recruitment into their overall vision and goals for improving schools and learning outcomes (Jensen, Downing, and Clark, 2017). By developing transparent recruitment processes that seek candidates with the required skill sets, systems can set school leaders up for success (OECD, 2020; UNESCO, 2019b). Such measures help establish school leaders as an important part of the education system instead of merely viewing school leadership as a routine managerial task.

**Develop a leadership career path.** To attract and retain the best leaders, principal and other leadership positions should not simply be coronations for senior teachers at the end of long careers. Instead, policies should establish leadership or administrative career paths with a clear progression that is separate from classroom teachers. This can incentivize performance and motivate ambitious leaders (Tournier et al., 2019). To better promote professional development practices and incentivize professional growth, such training can be linked to certifications or career milestones (UNESCO, 2019a). Research from the United States on the development of systematic processes for the strategic management of school leaders at district level points to school improvement and improved scores in mathematics and reading (Gates et al., 2019).

**Provide training and professional development opportunities.** School leaders need proper initial training and continuous professional development to succeed (OECD, 2020; UNESCO, 2018, 2019a). As with in-service teacher training, continued training is key for principals and other school leaders (OECD, 2016; UNESCO, 2018; VVOB, 2019). Such training should promote leadership techniques, pedagogical and instructional guidance, and the vision and overall goals of the school system (Jensen, Downing, and Clark, 2017; Schleicher, 2012; UNESCO, 2019a, 2019b). Research has found that principals participating in instructional leadership training are then more engaged with teachers at their schools (OECD, 2016; VVOB, 2020). This type of training and development is especially vital as more systems move towards decentralization, and the required responsibilities of school leaders change and expand.

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**Investigate the potential for distributed leadership.** Research shows that when leadership is not based on a single individual, the potential for improvement and innovation at the school level is increased. Such distributed leadership allows for delegating tasks among the different school actors and alleviates the workload of the school head. It also helps to involve teachers more actively in the management and functioning of the school, and to diversify their career opportunities (Breakspear et al., 2017).

**Promote mentoring and relationship-building between school leaders and teachers.** School leaders play an important role in mentoring, which is key to improving teacher motivation, especially for new teachers (Tournier et al., 2019). While standards and training goals for school leaders remain context specific, policies should encourage all school leaders to establish and build relationships with their teachers (OECD, 2020). This comes not only through improving pedagogical techniques but also through seeking teacher input in decision-making, understanding their needs, and building trust (Day and Sammons, 2014; Tournier et al., 2019; UNESCO, 2018). Such actions can help in the day-to-day administration of schools, but they can also increase teacher motivation, collaboration, and sense of purpose (OECD, 2016; Tournier et al., 2019). School leaders (and schools) also benefit from building relationships outside of the school community and being part of networks, clusters, and professional learning communities (VVOB, 2018).

#### Plans and policies

- Rwanda: [Teacher development and management policy](#) (2007)
- Cook Islands: [Governance, planning, and management](#) (2016)

#### Tools

- UNESCO-IIEP; International Academy of Education. [Recruitment, retention and development of school principals](#) (2005)
- VVOB. CPD diploma courses for school and sector leaders ([Part 1](#) [Part 2](#) [Part 3](#)) (2019)

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