

Excerpt

The School Principal as Leader: Guiding Schools to Better Teaching and Learning (The Wallace Foundation, 2013), 8–9.



[The Wallace Foundation research](#) and work on school leadership since 2000 suggests that principals must become “leaders of learning who can develop a team delivering effective instruction” This skill set entails five key, interrelated responsibilities. One responsibility is “creating a climate hospitable to education in order that safety, a cooperative spirit and other foundations of fruitful interaction prevail.”¹

More than a decade of research confirms that effective principals ensure that their schools allow both adults and children to put learning at the center of their daily activities. Such “a healthy school environment,” as Vanderbilt researchers call it, is characterized by basics like safety and orderliness, as well as less tangible qualities such as a “supportive, responsive” attitude toward the children and a sense by teachers that they are part of a community of professionals focused on good instruction.²

Is it a surprise, then, that principals at schools with high teacher ratings for “instructional climate” outrank other principals in developing an atmosphere of caring and trust? Or that their teachers are more likely than faculty members elsewhere to find the principals’ motives and intentions are good?³

One former principal, in reflecting on his experiences, recalled a typical staff meeting years ago at an urban school where “morale never seemed to get out of the basement.” Discussion centered on “field trips, war stories about troubled students, and other management issues” rather than matters like “using student work and data to fine-tune teaching.” Almost inevitably, teacher pessimism was a significant barrier, with teachers regarding themselves as “hardworking martyrs in a hopeless cause.”⁴

1. The Wallace Foundation, *The School Principal as Leader: Guiding Schools to Better Teaching and Learning Report*, The Wallace Foundation, 2013, 6.
2. Ellen Goldring, Andrew C. Porter, Joseph Murphy, Stephen N. Elliott, Xiu Cravens, *Assessing Learning-Centered Leadership: Connections to Research, Professional Standards and Current Practices*, Vanderbilt University, 2007, 7-8.
3. Karen Seashore Louis, Kenneth Leithwood, Kyla L. Wahlstrom and Stephen E. Anderson, *Learning From Leadership: Investigating the Links to Improved Student Learning: Final Report of Research Findings*, University of Minnesota and University of Toronto, 2010, 81.
4. Michael S. Knapp, Michael A. Copland, Meredith I. Honig, Margaret L. Plecki and Bradley S. Portin, *Learning-Focused Leadership and Leadership Support: Meaning and Practice in Urban Systems*, University of Washington, 2010, 1. Citing Kim Marshall from “A Principal Looks Back: Standards Matter,” *Phi Delta Kappan*, October 2003, 104-113, and noting Marshall is also cited in Charles M. Payne’s *So Much Reform, So Little Change: The Persistence of Failure in Urban Schools*, 2008, 33-34.

To change this kind of climate — and begin to combat teacher isolation, closed doors, negativism, defeatism and teacher resistance — the most effective principals focus on building a sense of school community, with the attendant characteristics. These include respect for every member of the school community; “an upbeat, welcoming, solution-oriented, no-blame, professional environment;” and efforts to involve staff and students in a variety of activities, many of them schoolwide.⁵

5. 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, 59.