

Rate the leader: A different perspective on principal evaluation



Evaluating principals is hard.

School principals have a wide range of responsibilities, and what they do to meet them can vary enormously from day to day and even hour to hour. Evaluating their performance can be challenging, because it is difficult for someone from a district central office to observe much of their work. Moreover, although principals are a key lever in improving student outcomes, measuring that influence is hard because it is indirect, operating through factors such as school climate, teacher turnover, and the development of teacher skills.¹



Staff feedback might contribute to a richer understanding of school leaders' performance.

Teachers and other school staff who interact with principals daily have a perspective that may complement views of the district central office. Many occupations use “360 degree” evaluations to provide feedback from the people who work around an employee, including managers, peers, and direct reports. Some states such as [Massachusetts](#) and [Minnesota](#) already use this type of evaluation for school leaders and have developed their own surveys to incorporate teacher input in principal evaluation. Many schools and districts also administer staff surveys for purposes other than staff evaluation, such as to better understand school culture.



360 degree evaluations

Evidence from DC suggests that principals can make a difference in school culture.

In partnership with the District of Columbia Public Schools, we set out to examine whether existing school culture surveys might provide information that could be useful in assessing the performance of school leaders. **Staff reported on subdomains of instructional culture such as learning environment, leadership, and professional development.**



Examining **data from two teacher surveys** that the district uses, the study found:

- **Changes in school culture are related to changes in school leadership**, suggesting principals can measurably affect school culture. After school leadership changes, staff survey responses also change, particularly in categories directly related to principal performance, such as leadership.
- **After a school gets a new principal**, staff survey responses to questions about school culture change more immediately and substantially than the school's academic performance (a metric often included in principal evaluation).



- Teacher survey domains have small to moderate associations with supervisor ratings of principals, suggesting that these **teacher survey domains are measuring concepts related to what supervisors measure** when evaluating principals.



Our findings suggest that **school culture surveys** used by many districts across the country can provide a **valuable additional perspective**, from teachers and other staff, on a principal's performance.

Learn more about the potential role of staff surveys in school leader evaluations in the [full REL Mid-Atlantic report](#).

Endnote

¹ Burkhauser, 2017; Leithwood et al., 2004.

References

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