



## TRANSCRIPT

# How Do Principals Influence Student Achievement?

## NARRATOR

On April 24th, 2019, Dr. Elaine Allensworth of the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research spoke to a convening of state education leaders on her research funded by the Institute of Education Sciences on how principals influence student achievement. This video is a summary of her presentation, including a pause for discussion of case studies. Watch for this signal on the screen. It means it is time to pause the video for the case study discussion. You can download a snapshot of the research and the case studies using the information below. Dr. Allensworth begins with some background on the study.

## DR. ALLENSWORTH

Everyone knows that school leaders are vitally important for school improvement. There are really no qualitative studies that find schools improving without strong leaders. We know this, and yet it's really hard to say what it is about school leadership that's really important. There're so many, so many aspects to this job, right? It's a really big job. What is it that really matters? We know that instructional leadership is really important. We've heard a lot about that, but we've also had research in recent years that says, "Hey, wait a minute. What about organizational management? We've kind of forgotten about that," and that's also critically important. And when we think about instructional leadership, well, what does that actually mean? Does that mean choosing the curriculum for your school? Does it mean teacher evaluation, working one-on-one with individual teachers, doing walkthroughs of classrooms? Or does it mean setting the context of the school so that you can have strong instruction, right? Getting teachers working together and not actually doing that one-on-one work with teachers.

So we wanted to know, what is it that is most important? All of it is important in some way, right? But what is it that you want to make sure you're keeping your focus on and thinking about all these other pieces of leadership that's supporting that? And then we wanted to know, well, does this matter at all types of schools? We did this big study in Chicago. We had hundreds of elementary schools and about a hundred high schools. Chicago is a district that has been increasing the number of schools, so we have more and more schools over time. We have all of this survey data, we have student test results. We use the students' test results to identify which schools were improving compared to which schools were not improving. We looked from 2007/08 school year to the 2013/14 school year.

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But we knew that wasn't going to be enough, so we also decided we would go and visit schools and find out what was happening. We didn't want to go to schools where we knew there wasn't a lot happening, right? Where teachers did not think that their principals were strong instructional leaders. We wanted to know what would really distinguish schools where principals were working on instructional improvement, working with teachers on instructional improvement. We wanted to know what would distinguish those that showed big improvements in learning gains compared to those that were not really moving, and so that's what we did. And then we chose 12 schools for our case studies. We only chose neighborhood schools, and the district is 85 percent free and reduced-price lunch and 85 percent underrepresented minority, and the neighborhood schools are generally over 90 percent free and reduced-price lunch. Six high schools, six elementary schools.

In Chicago, most elementary schools are K-8 schools, so they include the middle grades. We found schools that consistently reported that their principals were strong instructional leaders. We only looked at schools that had the same leaders in place for several years and then we identified those with strong improving test scores, and there were a lot of them in this group because they all had strong instructional leaders, and then we identified those that did not have improving test scores over time. And then went and talked to the school leaders and talked to the school staff, including the teacher leaders in the school and other teachers.

So, I'm going to jump right into our findings. So many ways that principals could be working on school improvement. What we found most differentiated which schools improved from those that didn't improve was the school climate. The schools with strong and improving school climate were the schools that had improving test score gains, and that was the strongest path from principal leadership to student learning gains, was through a strong school climate. So where students and teachers feel safe, supported, and where there are high-academic expectations, those are the schools with a strong learning climate.

And then, we dug a little further, and we found that principals that showed improving learning gains, what we saw in their schools was that there was teacher influence, active teacher leadership in the school working to have a strong climate that's supportive for all teachers, all students in the school, and that's where we get the biggest learning gains. So we saw this was the strongest path and sometimes we brought instruction in and we found that instruction fits very neatly right here so that when you have a stronger learning climate, you have stronger instruction and then you get higher learning gains. This is only the main path; there are other paths.

Sometimes people ask us, "Well, is this true everywhere? Is it true in elementary schools and in high schools?" Yes, we see the same thing in both elementary schools and high schools. A lot of times people say, "Well, what if schools already start out with high achievement, right? Or start out with strong learning climates? Then can we get onto the process of learning, right? Does it not matter anymore?" Actually, what we find is, further improvements in safety and expectations actually are associated with even stronger learning gains, even in schools that start out strong, and a lot of times they decline, right? And so when you have declining

climate, you end up having a decline in achievement, right? So we actually found it mattered no matter what, even in very strong, high-achieving schools.

And then people say, “Well, what about other pieces of organization, parent involvement, instruction, things like that? Does that mean those don’t matter?” No. Again, we’re looking just at the strong path from the principal to the learning gains, right? But all those other things matter, especially in that they can support strong learning climate. And then people say, “Well, could the ordering go in the other way?” Maybe when you have strong achievement growth, then people feel happier about the school, strong learning climate, like that. And what we found is that the evidence is much stronger, and when you see gains here on the left, you’re more likely to see gains on the right.

Now, I’m going to dig into the case studies where we found out what was actually happening. These are all schools with strong leaders. There are good things happening in all of the schools. Some of the schools show big improvements over time while others didn’t. Before I get into the details on this, I’m going to let you guys take some time to look at two of the schools.

#### NARRATOR

Now, it’s time to pause the video for a discussion of the case studies. You can download the case studies using the information below. Choose either the elementary and middle school case studies, or the high school case studies. As you review the case studies, compare and contrast your cases on the dimensions shown on the screen. Pause the video now.

After reviewing the case studies, participants and Dr. Allensworth discussed the distinctions on the five dimensions between the growing schools—schools with strong leaders and strong or increasing test scores, and contrasting schools—schools that also had strong leaders, but where the test scores were continuously weak or declining. Here are the highlights of that conversation from each dimension.

#### PARTICIPANT 1

One stated that all of the teachers had mentioned different goals, whereas the other one, they collectively established their goals as groups and then brought them forward as a whole.

#### DR. ALLENSWORTH

We call it a tree versus a field of flowers, right? Everything branches from that tree and so it’s just much more coherent, and you can make connections across work that’s going on across the school in different teams versus everyone’s doing their own thing, and you’re not learning from each other, supporting each other in any way.

#### PARTICIPANT 2

Again, in the first one, the principal would analyze the data and then tell them. In the second one, it was they got together in their teams and analyzed and looked and decided.

PARTICIPANT 3

In one high school, the help or assistance to reach these goals happened at the end of the year, sort of panic and hurry up.

DR. ALLENSWORTH

Yes.

PARTICIPANT 3

Whereas in the other school, it seemed much more ongoing and not only that, it aligned to core standards and then they were always progress monitoring toward that.

DR. ALLENSWORTH

Everything's much more proactive, regularly looking at data. I mean, prevention is so much more effective than remediation.

PARTICIPANT 4

Foxglove, the principal is asking the teachers to do a lot of different things, so she's distributed a lot of responsibilities, delegated them, but it doesn't really constitute teacher leadership. It constitutes them doing a lot of different extra jobs. In the second element, in the second school, there is true teacher leadership because they're involved in decisionmaking and in setting goals. They're meeting together and solving problems together, so there's a huge difference between the two.

DR. ALLENSWORTH

Yes, they're working together around common goals with the authority to be able to do that.

PARTICIPANT 5

In the elementary case, the first elementary seemed to have an inferred blame culture where it was like, "Well, who's responsible for when something goes wrong?" And this kind of "pass the buck" mentality.

DR. ALLENSWORTH

Yeah.

PARTICIPANT 5

Versus the second elementary, the culture was referenced around relationships and being really focused on developing those relationships because it was a collective community investment around that culture and the success of those kids.

DR. ALLENSWORTH

“Opt-out” is where if you need help, you get it. So schools, teachers come up with systems together to support all students in the school. And so, looking at data, who needs help? Who’s falling behind in assignments? Who’s getting a D? Who did poorly on a test? And then they have structures that are set up and students are automatically enrolled in lunchtime tutoring. You’re automatically going to get a student advocate. They have systems that are set up, they know what to do, and then all teachers participate in those structures, right? So there’s the one school where teachers alternate doing the lunchtime tutoring, right? Or they have structures set up so that if a midterm report comes out, all students who get a D or F, there’ll be an advocate for them that will work with the teacher, work with parents, come together, find out what that student needs, right? No one’s falling through the cracks. You would have to opt-out of getting help, right? And teachers would have to opt-out of being part of the school system.

When we’re thinking about principals’ jobs, what makes the biggest difference? It’s creating the conditions for teaching and learning, right? And that means working on the school climate, the expectations, safety, and really keeping staff focused on the goals, focused on the data, ensuring universal support for everyone. All teachers, all students, okay? That’s what instructional leadership looks like.

There are no strong instructional leaders that aren’t also strong organizational managers, okay? You have to have a school that works, right? But where you see the big learning gains is where you have principals that really are focused on providing a climate that supports teaching and learning, where they really are supporting teaching and learning in the school, but they do that not by necessarily working with each individual teacher themselves. That would be impossible, although, you can get improvement for particular teachers in doing that, but getting teachers working together...and we see this in other people, we see this in the research all the time. It matters so much more how teachers are working together in a school than the individual qualities of the individual teachers in terms of how strong a school is in terms of learning gains.

NARRATOR

Dr. Allensworth’s presentation draws on this research. Thank you for viewing this presentation by Dr. Allensworth. For more information on this topic, please contact [RELWest@wested.org](mailto:RELWest@wested.org).