

Assessing the Effectiveness of School Leaders: New Directions and New Processes

Assessing What Matters Most

Effective leadership is vital to the success of a school. Research and practice confirm that there is slim chance of creating and sustaining high-quality learning environments without a skilled and committed leader to help shape teaching and learning. That's especially true in the most challenging schools. The authors suggest consideration and discussion regarding a set of basic goals and criteria that research and emerging experience suggest could help promote a new, more effective direction in assessment. This report concludes by summarizing the potential benefits of a new direction in assessment both for leaders and those they affect, and the authors raise a number of questions that remain to be answered if such a new direction is to be effectively pursued.

Leadership Assessment: The Missing Components

Assessing leaders is not a new practice within schools and districts. In general leadership assessment follows locally determined, contract-driven review processes largely for personnel purposes. Typically, principals establish some set of goals through a form and process defined by their district. They then meet annually with a supervisor who determines whether or not their work has been satisfactory. Assessments are often weakly tied to leadership standards and opportunities for professional growth. And they may or may not focus primarily on the instructional aspects of a leader's performance.

A New Direction for Assessing School Leaders

From the research and work of The Wallace Foundation and its partners, the following attributes of quality leadership assessment emerge as central to setting a new direction for assessing school leaders. These attributes fall under two critical questions asking what should school leaders be assessed for and how should they be assessed so that the process enhances their effectiveness in improving learning.

New Tools for a New Direction

This paper has suggested that new principal assessment processes could powerfully catalyze and support learning-centered leadership in schools if they (1) focus squarely on the most important "driver" behaviors that improve instruction, (2) are anchored in accepted leader standards, (3) promote necessary school change rather than reinforce the status quo, (4) feature reliable and tested instruments, (5) are flexible enough to take different purposes and contexts into account, and (6) lead to appropriate professional development that addresses any weaknesses or concerns identified by the assessment process. The authors continue by describing a newly-published assessment process, the Vanderbilt Assessment of Leadership in Education (VAL-ED), which is among the first designed to apply all of those attributes to the assessment of school leaders.

Implementing a New Direction

This paper has argued that leader assessment is an important but largely under-developed part of the web of policies, practices and incentives needed to support our nation's principals. When used to enhance performance as well as ensure accountability, assessment can be a driving factor in helping leaders' develop the behaviors and skills that will improve learning for all students. We need to learn more about how leadership assessment can be used to provide measures of how well effective teams lead in the school. The varied contexts of leadership – urban, rural, suburban, elementary, and secondary – present another challenge for thinking about better assessment. The field needs to learn more about what is gained or lost when assessment tools are applied in those different contexts and how leadership assessment processes can account for the important contextual differences stemming from local need.

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