

The Policies and Practices of Principal Evaluation: A Review of the Literature

This comprehensive literature review provides insights into what we know about principal evaluation as derived from a set of primary and secondary sources from reputable publications. Researchers analyzed 68 documents, published from 1980 through 2010, to identify themes and perspectives from the literature that might be useful to practitioners and policymakers working to improve district principal evaluation systems. While the empirical research on this topic is thin, primary-source publications provide information on the following key areas of principal evaluation: system implementation, evaluation instruments, portfolio-based evaluations, and several specific evaluation components. Secondary-source publications provide descriptions that target the status of principal evaluations in states and districts, commentaries about principal evaluations, descriptions of best practices, and recommendations for improving principal evaluation policies and practices.

The purpose of this report is to review and relate what research does and does not say about principal evaluation systems. Sources include peer-reviewed and non-peer-reviewed research studies focused on principal evaluation systems that highlight what is known about policies and practices that contribute to comprehensive, effective principal evaluation. Analysis of existing primary-source studies indicates that while important and informative work has been done, research on the subject of principal evaluation lacks volume and depth. Therefore, in addition to primary sources, this review also examines secondary sources drawn from professional literature to supplement the thin empirical research base.

This review of literature describes key points of what is known of the policies and practices of principal evaluation, as derived from a set of primary sources and secondary sources found in a variety of reputable publications. The body of literature on principal evaluation is surprisingly thin. Both primary and secondary sources are limited in number and distributed broadly across topics. Publications focused on principal evaluation vary widely in their purposes, topics, and methodologies. Thus, the field lacks a strong theoretical base or an empirically sound rationale for principal evaluation as a mechanism for advancing individual or organizational effectiveness. The literature also leaves open the question of what impact, if any, stronger principal evaluation systems and practices may have on increasing effective leadership, strengthening teaching, reaching school improvement goals, or enhancing student growth.

This literature review can only illuminate published information and limited findings on the topic. However, key points derived from primary and secondary sources can provide general insights into improved practices that may fit the varied contexts of districts and schools and that can be implemented well and tested thoroughly in district and school improvement efforts. With broader implementation of these practices, questions about what principal evaluation systems and procedures work best and how they advance individual and organizational development can be examined in the future.

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