PRINCIPAL TALENT AS SEEN THROUGH TEACHERS' EYES

By Gary Gordon, Ed.D.

AUGUST 2013

GALLUP®

For more information:

Visit education.gallup.com

Follow @GallupEducation on twitter

Contact Education@gallup.com

PRINCIPAL TALENT AS SEEN THROUGH TEACHERS' EYES

By Gary Gordon, Ed.D.

AUGUST 2013

A scenario plays out in school districts across the nation: Two schools with similar student demographics and resources perform differently on measures of student achievement, and district leaders speculate about what makes the difference. Increasing evidence underscores the conclusion many district leaders arrive at: It's the principal.[1] Additional research spanning more than 20 years suggests that principals affect student achievement indirectly through the culture, climate, and engagement of the school.[2]

TEACHERS' WORKING ENVIRONMENT

Two large samples of teachers' opinions provide troubling insights into the work environments of U.S. schools in 2012. The MetLife Survey of the American Teacher found teacher satisfaction at its lowest level in 25 years, decreasing 23 percentage points since 2008.[3] The Gallup-Healthways Well-Being Index surveyed 170,000 Americans in 14 occupation groups, including 9,467 K-12 teachers. Teachers placed eighth of the 14 occupation classifications on the Work Environment Index. When asked if their "supervisor treats me more like a partner than a boss," teachers ranked sixth. In response to their "supervisor always creates an environment that is trusting and open"[4] and "my opinions seem to count," teachers ranked last place among the 14 employee groups.[5]

These results are disconcerting because poor working conditions and low teacher engagement make it hard for schools to implement the Common Core State Standards, improve student achievement, and close the gaps in learning among student groups.[6] While the instructional leadership model — defined as principals prioritizing classroom observations, giving directive feedback,

and model teaching — is popular, Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, and Anderson in a 2010 landmark study suggest the importance of the context in which schools use these strategies: "Classroom practices occur within larger organizational systems which can vary enormously in the extent to which they support, reward, and nurture good instruction. School leaders who ignore or neglect the state of this larger context can easily find their direct efforts to improve instruction substantially frustrated."[7]

Teachers' working environments and, more specifically, their engagement affects student engagement and achievement. Principals, as the direct managers and leaders of schools, play a critical role in framing the school climate and teachers' engagement. Various studies demonstrate relationships between teachers' working environments, employee engagement, and student achievement.[8,9] Gallup's extensive study of employee engagement points to the direct supervisor as having the greatest effect on employees' engagement and performance on various outcomes.[10] Unknown was whether PrincipalInsight — Gallup's assessment of school leadership talent — could identify school leaders who would create higher levels of teacher engagement.

PRINCIPAL TALENT AND TEACHER ENGAGEMENT

While previous Gallup research has found a relationship between principal talent and higher teacher and supervisor ratings of principals,[11] a 2012 study investigated the relationship between principal talent and teacher engagement. The participating principals completed a talent assessment, PrincipalInsight, before being appointed as leader of a school, and teacher engagement was measured as

part of a teacher survey — the Gallup Q[12] — near the end of these principals' third year in the role.

Participating principals represented various schools. Data were usable for 91 principals, coming from nine districts, six states, and with more than 4,500 teacher ratings. The percentage of students receiving free or reduced lunches ranged from 96% to 2%, with a median of 38%. The Gallup Q[12] employee engagement survey measured teachers' engagement — the involvement in, enthusiasm for, and commitment to their work.[12]

THE FINDINGS

Gallup researchers found that principals with higher scores on the PrincipalInsight assessment before appointment as principals were more than 2.6 times as likely to have teacher engagement scores in the top half of the Q[12] distribution for this sample of school three years later.[13] Put another way, hiring a principal with a PrincipalInsight score at or above the mean score more than doubles the likelihood that teachers will be more engaged three years into principal's leadership at the school.

The relationship between principal talent and teacher engagement is important for two reasons. The findings provide evidence that some principals have the potential for naturally creating higher levels of employee engagement. This provides a partial explanation as to why some schools feel distinctive, why teachers and students perform differently in these schools compared with similar schools, and why Gallup finds wide variation in employee engagement levels among individual schools in the same school district. The results also offer additional evidence of principals' ability to shape employees' engagement. Influencing employees' engagement is important because of the effect it has on student engagement and achievement.[14]

Q[12] ITEMS

Gallup researchers compared the teacher responses of principals scoring above and below the PrincipalInsight mean score and found that teacher responses for principals scoring at or above the PrincipalInsight mean showed meaningful differences for seven of the 12 Q[12] survey items and the overall satisfaction item. Three of the other five items showed significant but not meaningful differences for teachers with higher-scoring principals. The reverse — principals with scores below the PrincipalInsight mean scoring meaningfully higher on a Q[12] item — did not occur for any items.[15]

FIGURE 1: Q[12] ITEMS WITH MEANINGFUL DIFFERENCES FOR HIGHER-SCORING PRINCIPALS

Q04. In the last seven days, I have received recognition or praise for doing good work.

Q11. In the last six months, someone at work has talked to me about my progress.

Q07. At work, my opinions seem to count.

Q06. There is someone at work who encourages my development.

Q08. The mission or purpose of my organization makes me feel my job is important.

Q05. My supervisor, or someone at work, seems to care about me as a person.

Q09. My associates or fellow employees are committed to doing quality work.

Q00. On a 5-point scale, where 5 means extremely satisfied and 1 means extremely dissatisfied, how satisfied are you with your school as a place to work?

As Figure 1 shows, teachers with principals scoring at the PrincipalInsight mean or higher see the teaching environment differently — and more supportive — than teachers with lower-scoring principals. The first item — receiving recognition or praise — presents a paradox. Recognition and praise has the lowest mean for teachers with both groups of principals. Yet, receiving recognition or praise displays the largest difference between teachers with higher- and lower-scoring principals. Although higher-scoring principals give more recognition to their teachers, they may need to provide and encourage even more recognition.

Teachers with higher-scoring principals have a different work environment than teachers with lower-scoring principals. Teachers with higher-scoring principals have periodic conversations with their principal or colleagues about their progress and someone is involved in and encourages teachers' development. Teachers' opinions are heard and, most importantly, considered in these schools. Rather than a trivial statement, the school's mission has meaning and lends importance to the day-to-day work of teachers with higher-scoring principals. Teachers with higher-scoring principals also have someone at school who cares about them as a person — not just as an employee or colleague — and they work with teachers who are similarly committed to quality work. Lastly, teachers with higher-scoring principals have higher levels of overall satisfaction with their school as a place to work.

OTHER PRINCIPAL BEHAVIORS

Teachers also rated their principals on 32 additional items. Teachers rated principals who scored higher on the talent assessment significantly higher on 27 items that Gallup groups into seven constructs:

- **Goals and Expectations** — Principals have high expectations, set goals for the school, and present a vision for the school.

- **Teacher Support** — Principals work hard for the teachers, are available more often to teachers, and encourage innovations.

- **Teacher Growth** — Principals are in the classrooms more often, help teachers use their strengths, and treat teachers as individuals.

- **Student Focus** — Principals like being with students, are liked by students, understand what is best for students, and make decisions based on what is best for students.

- **Recognizing Success** — Principals celebrate successes, encourage teachers to celebrate, and believe that recognizing successes improves performance and the school.

- **Optimism or Positive Outlook** — Principals are optimistic about the future, see problems as opportunities, and believe success can come from negatives.

- **Parent Engagement** — Principals make parents feel like part of the school, get parents to support teachers, and help parents and teachers focus on what is right for students.[16]

Teachers with principals scoring higher on PrincipalInsight are more engaged, and they recognize specific principal behaviors that contribute to teacher success. Higher-scoring principals have goals and expectations for themselves and every member of the school community. These goals and expectations focus on students' success and provide a conceptual picture of what the school can become. These principals support, grow, and recognize teachers in specific, important ways that lead to accomplishing the outlined goals. Higher-scoring principals are available more often and they encourage change, accommodate individual differences of teachers, and celebrate individual and school successes. Higher-scoring principals bring a more positive outlook to the school that is contagious and uplifting, and teachers perceive them as more likely to engage parents in ways that benefit students.

BOTTOM LINE

Selection of the right principals is one of the most important decisions school district leadership can make.

Many district leaders are constructing a pipeline of school leaders who have gone through research-based assessments and demonstrated their talents to lead.[17] School district leadership investing in this pipeline are asking if these individuals can manage and lead people. Other school district leaders, however, are selecting principals based on criteria such as long tenure, who candidates know in the district, or who is available in the spring when district leadership must find a principal.

Leadership talent — the naturally recurring patterns of thought, feeling, and behavior that are productively applied in a role — are the critical intangibles that don't show up in a resume, in a college transcript, or during typical interviews. Talent is difficult to assess, but it trumps knowledge, skills, and experience. People can learn knowledge and skills if needed. People can create experience using meaningful developmental opportunities. But if a principal finds engaging the staff difficult, if teachers are not motivated by a principal's vision of what the school can become and buy into the accompanying expectations, and if principals don't support teachers or bring positivity and engaged parents to the school, neither teachers nor students will ever become what they could be.

A carefully designed selection process that includes scientific assessments of potential principals' talent to lead people can increase the odds of successfully finding the right principals for the right roles. Principals with natural talent for the job can influence higher teacher engagement. With increased teacher engagement, more schools will feel distinctive and perform differently because of the link between teacher and student engagement. Most importantly, students' lives will be changed because their principal has the talent to lead.

References

1   Louis, K.S., Leithwood, K., Wahlstrom, K. L., & Anderson, S.E. (2010). *Learning from leadership project: Investigating the links to improved student learning.* New York: The Wallace Foundation. Retrieved April 23, 2013, http://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/school-leadership/key-research/Documents/Investigating-the-Links-to-Improved-Student-Learning.pdf

2   Louis, K.S., Leithwood, K., Wahlstrom, K. L., & Anderson, S.E. (2010). *Learning from leadership project: Investigating the links to improved student learning.* New York: The Wallace Foundation. Retrieved April 23, 2013, http://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/school-leadership/key-research/Documents/Investigating-the-Links-to-Improved-Student-Learning.pdf; Johnson, S.M. (2006). *The workplace matters: Teacher quality, retention, and effectiveness.* Working Paper. Washington, D.C.: National Education Association. Retrieved April 23, 2013, from http://www.nea.org/assets/docs/HE/ mf_ wcreport.pdf; Heck, R., & Marcoulides, G. (1993). Principal leadership behaviors and school achievement. *NASSP Bulletin*, 77(553), 20-28; and Ostroff, C. (1992). The relationship between satisfaction, attitudes, and performance: An organizational level analysis. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 77(6), 963-974.

3   Markow, D., Macia, L., & Lee, H. (2013). *The MetLife survey of the American teacher: Challenges for school leadership.* New York: Metropolitan Life Insurance Company. Retrieved April 23, 2013, from https://www.metlife.com/assets/cao/foundation/MetLife-Teacher-Survey-2012.pdf

4   Lopez, S., & Sidhu, P. (2013, March 28). *U.S. teachers love their lives, but struggle in the workplace.* Washington, D.C.: Gallup. Retrieved April 23, 2013, from http://www.gallup.com/poll/161516/teachers-love-their-lives-struggle-workplace.aspx

5   Lopez, S., & Sidhu, P. (2013, August 1). *In U.S., newer teachers most likely to be engaged at work.* Washington, D.C.: Gallup. Retrieved April 23, 2013, from http://www.gallup.com/poll/163745/newer-teachers-likely-engaged-work.aspx

6   Connelly, G. (2012, June 26). *The intersection between the common core and school culture.* Bethesda, MD: Editorial Projects in Education. Retrieved April 23, 2013, from http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/transforming_learning/2012/06/the_intersection_between_the_common_core_and_school_culture.html; Ladd, H. (2009). Teachers' perceptions of their working conditions: How predictive of policy-relevant outcomes? Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute. Working Paper 33. Retrieved April 23, 2013, from http://www.urban.org/uploadedpdf/1001440-Teachers-Perceptions.pdf; Johnson, S.M. (2006). *The workplace matters: Teacher quality, retention, and effectiveness.* Working Paper. Washington, D.C.: National Education Association. Retrieved April 23, 2013, from http://www.nea.org/assets/docs/HE/ mf_ wcreport.pdf; and Ingersoll, R.M. (2003). *Who controls teachers' work? Power and accountability in America's schools.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

7   Louis, K.S., Leithwood, K., Wahlstrom, K. L., & Anderson, S.E. (2010). *Learning from leadership project: Investigating the links to improved student learning.* New York: The Wallace Foundation. Retrieved April 23, 2013, http://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/school-leadership/key-research/Documents/Investigating-the-Links-to-Improved-Student-Learning.pdf

8   Ladd, H. F. (2009). Teachers' perceptions of their working conditions: How predictive of policy-relevant outcomes? Washington, DC: Urban Institute. Working Paper 33. Retrieved from http://www.urban.org/uploadedpdf/1001440-Teachers-Perceptions.pdf; Ostroff, C. (1992). The relationship between satisfaction, attitudes, and performance: An organizational level analysis. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *77*(6), 963-974; Gallup. (2009). *Student and teacher engagement predictive study*. Unpublished raw data. Omaha, NE; and Louis, K.S., Leithwood, K., Wahlstrom, K. L., & Anderson, S.E. (2010). *Learning from leadership project: Investigating the links to improved student learning*. New York: The Wallace Foundation. Retrieved April 23, 2013, http://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/school-leadership/key-research/Documents/Investigating-the-Links-to-Improved-Student-Learning.pdf

9   Voight, A., Austin, G., & Hanson, T. (2013). *A climate for academic success: How school climate distinguishes schools that are beating the achievement odds (full report)*. San Francisco: WestEd. Retrieved April 23, 2013, from http://www.wested.org/online_pubs/hd-13-10.pdf; Sandoval, M.P. (2013). *School culture through the perspectives of student hope, engagement, and well-being*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Walden University, Minneapolis, MN; Willms, J.D. (2003). *Student engagement at school: A sense of belonging and participation*. Paris: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. Retrieved April 23, 2013, from http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/42/35/33689437.pdf; Willingham, W.W., Pollack, J.M., & Lewis, C. (2002). Grades and test scores: Accounting for observed differences. *Journal of Educational Measurement*, *39*(1), 1-37; Marks, H.M. (2000). Student engagement in instructional activity: Patterns in elementary, middle, and high school years. *American Educational Research Journal*, *37*(1), 153-184; and Finn, J.D., & Cox, D. (1992). Participation and withdrawal among fourth-grade pupils. *American Educational Research Journal, 29*(1), 141-162.

10   Gallup. (2013). *State of the American workplace: Employee engagement insights for U.S. business leaders*. Omaha, NE: Gallup. Retrieved April 23, 2013, from http://www.gallup.com/strategicconsulting/163007/state-american-workplace.aspx and Harter, J.K., Schmidt, F.L., Agrawal, S., and Plowman, S.K. (2013). *The relationship between engagement at work and organizational outcomes: 2012 Q¹² meta-analysis*. Omaha, NE: Gallup. (See this document for information on Gallup's most recent Q¹² meta-analysis.)

11   Badal, S. (2004). *PrincipalInsight: SRI Index development study*. Omaha, NE: Gallup

12   Gallup. (2012). *Principal talent and teacher engagement*. Unpublished raw data. Omaha, NE.

13   Ibid.

14   Seashore Louis, K.S., & Smith, B. (1992). Cultivating teacher engagement: Breaking the iron law of social class. In F.M. Newmann (Ed.), *Student engagement and achievement in American secondary schools*. (pp. 119-152). New York: Teachers College Press and Gordon, G. (2013). *School leadership linked to engagement and student achievement*. Omaha, NE: Gallup. Retrieved April 23, 2013, from http://www.gallup.com/strategicconsulting/163520/school-leadership-linked-engagement-student-achievement.aspx

15   Gallup. (2012). *Principal talent and teacher engagement*. Unpublished raw data. Omaha, NE.

16   Ibid.

17   Gordon, G. (2012). *The school leader pipeline: Student success and leadership succession*. Omaha, NE: Gallup. Retrieved April 23, 2013, from http://www.gallup.com/strategicconsulting/157748/school-leader-pipeline.aspx (See this document for a description of a principal pipeline.)

GALLUP®