

# RESEARCH UTILIZATION BRIEFS:

## ASSESSING LEADERSHIP EFFECTIVENESS



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Effective leadership is essential to teacher quality and student success (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson & Wahlstrom, 2004), and improving school and district leaders' practice has become a key strategy in districts' and states' approaches to school improvement (Orr, 2009). Well-designed assessment processes can be powerful and constructive in identifying leaders' strengths and weaknesses and encouraging them to focus on the actions likeliest to bring about better teaching and learning. Moreover, quality assessments are fundamental to improving leadership preparation. While the education field has developed a strong understanding of leadership for learning, it has been slower than many other fields in developing and widely adopting valid and reliable ways to assess the performance of its leaders.

### THE CURRENT ASSESSMENT CONTEXT

The extent to which current leadership assessment practices relate to principals' practice and whether they relate to accepted leadership standards, and what the supervisor has as useful data besides achievement test scores to assess principals' performance, varies widely. In most districts, principals develop a set of goals and then meet annually with a supervisor who determines whether or not their work has been satisfactory. Unfortunately, the assessments used to make such determinations are often weakly tied to either leadership standards or opportunities for professional growth. In fact, a recent review of existing assessment processes and instruments in use in 44 districts and states concluded that most assessments in use today are not as focused on the leader's role in supporting student learning as they should be, nor are they effective in gathering reliable facts about how leaders' behaviors are or are not promoting the learning agendas of schools and entire districts (Goldring, Cravens, Murphy, Elliott,

Carson, & Porter, 2008). Moreover, it was found that nearly half of the commonly used leadership assessments fail to provide leaders with clear feedback on what they could be doing more or better to improve teaching and learning. Additionally, there were often inconsistent connections between such assessments and the mentoring and professional development designed or provided to assist leaders in improving their practice.

### RESEARCH ON EFFECTIVE ASSESSMENT

According to a recent report released by The Wallace Foundation (2009), research on effective leadership assessment suggests that high-quality assessments have a number of common features:

- They measure what they are designed to measure;
- They are consistently applied and tested for fairness;
- They are seen as an ongoing process for professional growth, not just a "tool" or an isolated event;
- They are based on the best available evidence, often from multiple sources;
- They reinforce the organization's core goals;
- They provide actionable feedback on what matters most; and
- They help build a culture of continuous improvement.

Additionally, when these features of effective leadership assessment are applied to the field of education, two other considerations emerge: the focus of the assessment and the connection between the assessment results and professional development.

### ASSESSING LEADERSHIP EFFECTIVENESS

Within the last few years, a number of district and state processes have been re-designed and new assessment tools and practices have emerged, several of which were

developed with funding from The Wallace Foundation as part of their decade-long initiative to promote and sustain improved education leadership. The Ohio Leadership Advisory Council's Leadership Development Framework is a good example of an assessment process that supports a coherent and cohesive leadership development system focused on the role of leadership in improving instructional practice and student learning. The Delaware Performance Appraisal System, or DPAS-II provides another excellent example of a state-wide assessment system that connects leadership standards with leadership evaluation and professional growth.

Additionally, several new instruments have been developed, including the Vanderbilt Assessment of Leadership in Education (VAL-ED) and the School Leadership Preparation and Practice Survey (SLPPS). Unlike other existing assessments, both the VAL-ED and SLPPS are anchored to a solid research base and have undergone several years of development, validation and field-testing to ensure their reliability. Although developed for different purposes (VAL-ED was designed as a 360° assessment to evaluate leadership effectiveness for district or state evaluation purposes, whereas the SLPPS was designed to inform leadership preparation programs about the performance of their graduates), both instruments focus on behaviors associated with learning-centered leadership.

#### **IMPLICATIONS FOR PREPARATION**

Leadership assessment is an important but until recently a largely under-developed aspect of the framework needed to support excellence among our nation's principals. Just as rigorous assessment is essential for improving leadership practice, it is also fundamental to improving leadership preparation. Education leadership preparation programs need valid and reliable information on how their preparation programs contribute to the quality and effectiveness of their graduates, particularly as they become educational leaders, in order to assess and improve their programs. Specifically, leadership preparation programs need to be able to continuously follow up their graduates, compare their findings over time, and share in a joint inquiry on leadership preparation program improvement and effectiveness.

It is significant that the field now has a growing number of evaluation tools that can be used for both purposes. For further information about VAL-ED, visit [www.vanderbilt.edu/lsi/valed/featured.html](http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lsi/valed/featured.html). For more

information about the SLPPS, visit [www.ucea.org](http://www.ucea.org) or send an email to [SLLPS@utah.edu](mailto:SLLPS@utah.edu).

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This brief, developed by Michelle D. Young, is part of a Research Utilization Brief series co-sponsored by UCEA and The Wallace Foundation. The intent of the series is to highlight and share recent empirical research regarding effective leadership preparation and development, particularly research commissioned by The Wallace Foundation, with faculty, staff and leaders at the program, institutional and state levels, as it is these individuals who are in positions to use this research to make positive changes.

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