

**TITLE** The Relationship Between Principal Leadership Practices and Student Achievement in Illinois Urban Secondary Schools

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**OBJECTIVE** The purpose of the study was to investigate the relationship between the leadership practices of urban secondary school principals and student performance measures.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The subjects in this study were principals and teachers from four urban school districts within the State of Illinois. Selected schools were from the urban school districts that served the largest percentages of low income students, and included both higher performing and lower performing secondary schools. Of the principals participating, 18 were from higher performing schools and 21 were from lower performing schools. Of the teachers participating, 97 were from higher performing schools and 122 were from lower performing schools. Principals completed the Leadership Practices Inventory and asked to randomly select teachers at their school to complete the LPI-Observer. The typical principal was female (56%), with 3-8 years in that role (64%), and 3-5 years in their current school (56%), with a specialist (51%) or master's degree (28%). Teachers, for the most part, were female (78%), with over 11 years as a teacher (41%) and 3-8 years at their current school (51%), and holding a bachelor (34%) or master's degree (48%).

## **KEY FINDINGS**

The frequency scores on all five leadership practices were high and relatively consistent, with Enable being ranked most frequently, followed closely by Model, then Encourage, Inspire, and Challenge. The frequency scores from teachers were uniformly lower than those of the principals but in the same rank order.

Individual leadership behaviors practices that were identified as strengths for these urban secondary school principals were Treats Others with Dignity, Sets Personal Example, Develops Cooperative Relationships, Clear About Leadership Philosophy, and Lets Others Know About Confidence. Based on the teacher's scores the strengths identified were: Treats Others with Dignity, Clear About Leadership Philosophy, Sets Personal Example, Develops Cooperative Relationships, Gives Appreciation, and, Praises People. These strengths were quite consistent between the perspectives of these two groups.

Paints the Big Picture, Searches for Innovation, and Publicly Recognizes Others were three specific leadership practices that principals in higher achieving secondary urban schools reported engaging in significantly more than did the principals of the lower performing secondary

schools. For observers (teachers), principals of higher performing schools seemed to engage in 17 individual practices more frequently than principals in lower performing schools.

Principals from higher performing schools had higher average frequency scores than their counterparts from lower performing schools in all five leadership practices; significantly so for Encouraging the Heart. This was also true from the perspective of teachers, with the absolute differences between the two school categories being greater than that found between principals. The leadership practices of Inspire, Challenge, Enable and Encourage were all significantly higher from the perspective of teachers in higher performing schools compared with teachers' perceptions at lower performing schools.

Moderate positive statistically significant correlations were found between an overall measure of leadership practices and student achievement measures from the principal's perspective but this was not statistically significant from the perspective of teachers.

The researcher notes:

An important finding in this analysis may have been the differences in Encouraging the Heart practices between high performing educators and low performing educators. The frequency of practices within the lowest achieving schools, in which the teaching and learning issues are the most complex, may be indicative that Encouraging the Heart practices were underutilized. The results of this specific analysis may give urban school leaders a new lens to reflect on their practices. Leaders must be able to view challenges through a variety of lenses in order to create a culture that maintains focus and accountability for collective results (Elmore, 2005). The complex conditions found in the very lowest achieving urban secondary schools may need greater structural support for engagement of Encouraging the Heart leadership practices (p. 155).

The researcher concludes:

The utilization of Kouzes and Posner's (2002) *Five Practices for Exemplary Leadership* in school organizations can influence how leaders directly impact student performance levels. The LPI is a viable tool for guiding principals on behaviors and practices that have been demonstrated as the most effective for developing organizational structures and processes (pp. 156-157)... Preparation programs must develop leadership capacities that highlight the application of the *Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership*, which are embedded in transformational leadership foundations. Principals must understand theoretically and practically how to adjust practices to meet changing organizational conditions (p. 159).