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Instructional Leadership, Teaching Quality, and Student Achievement

Suggestive Evidence from Three Urban School Districts

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Does providing instruction-related professional development to school principals set in motion a chain of events that can improve teaching and learning in their schools? The Instructional Leadership Study provides suggestive although not definitive evidence that it does. The study examines a theory of school change articulated by the Institute for Learning at the University of Pittsburgh. The IFL provides technical assistance to school districts, primarily through strategic planning, coaching, and professional development for district and school administrators; it has also enunciated a set of “Principles of Learning” about the ideas and practices that promote students’ academic achievement. According to the IFL’s theory, through leadership training, school principals learn about high-quality instruction and about actions that they can take to motivate and support their teachers. Principals then organize professional learning for their teachers and otherwise help teachers improve their classroom practices. With improved instruction, the theory maintains, student achievement will also improve.

To test this theory, the researchers recruited 49 elementary schools in three districts that had been working with the IFL for one to five years at the time the study began. The schools were located in Austin, Texas; Saint Paul, Minnesota; and Region 10 in New York City (which has since been reorganized). By design, all the schools served large proportions of economically and educationally disadvantaged students, and all the schools volunteered to participate in the study. The study focuses on elementary schools because the researchers reasoned that the principal’s role as an instructional leader would be especially pronounced in these settings. Principals and third- and fourth-grade teachers at the schools completed surveys that asked about the professional development activities with which they had been involved and about other matters. The research team also conducted observations in some 300 third-grade reading and math classes, and school-level data on the achievement of third-graders came from state Web sites. Data were collected primarily during the 2005-2006 school year; budgetary constraints precluded carrying out a second round of data collection that had been planned.

Statistically significant associations connected each pair of steps in the theory of action. Thus, principals who received more professional development were more actively involved in the professional development of their teachers. Teachers who got more professional development taught lessons that were of higher instructional quality. And schools where instructional quality

was higher also had students with higher academic achievement. Because the data were collected during the same time period, however, the time sequence of these phenomena cannot be established, and the absence of a counterfactual (evidence of what would have happened had the principals not received professional development in the first place) makes it impossible to conclude that one event caused another. While the results of this study are promising, a more rigorous evaluation is needed to establish with greater certainty that instruction-related professional development for principals makes a difference for teachers and students at their schools.