

# A Brief Overview of Principal Evaluation Literature

**Implications for Selecting Evaluation Models**

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INTEGRATED LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVE

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**Karen Kearney, MA, is the Project Director of the Leadership Initiative at WestEd, formerly the California School Leadership Academy. Kearney directs all aspects of the initiative, which focuses on the role of the principal, superintendent, and teacher leaders in comprehensive school restructuring.**

**Nancy Sanders, Ph.D., is a professor and educational policy consultant, who directs large, multi-year federal research grants; advises on state policies about standards, assessments, and accreditation; and designs and teaches university degree and certification programs.**

Project Director, Karen Kearney, Leadership Initiatives at WestEd

Editing and Design, WestEd

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WestEd, 730 Harrison Street, San Francisco, CA 94107

# A Brief Overview of Principal Evaluation Literature

## Implications for Selecting Evaluation Models

This overview serves two purposes. First, it presents key points from a comprehensive review of the literature<sup>(i)</sup> on principal evaluation that describes and summarizes two types of publications:

- \* Scholarly publications, defined as primary-source descriptions of empirical research that have been peer-reviewed and published in academic journals, commonly referred to as “scholarly literature,” and
- \* Professional publications that provide data, policy analysis, recommendations, and professionally grounded models and instruments, published in practitioner-oriented journals or as institutional reports.

Second, it broadly frames what to consider in selecting principal evaluation models.

### Publications Reviewed

Eighty publications regarding principal evaluation were identified for this review using a variety of online search strategies. Of 68 publications that met criteria for analysis, 28 scholarly publications represent the current empirical research about principal evaluation methods and their effects. Forty professional publications provide descriptive data, policy analyses, professional opinions, and secondary reviews of research.

Coding the content and comparing findings across these publications identified specific empirical findings and policy recommendations. The major findings and recommendations were analyzed and cross-referenced to national psychometric standards

for personnel evaluation in order to address key issues of validity, reliability, fairness, utility, and feasibility.

### Research Findings Reported in Scholarly Publications

Current practice of principal evaluation is largely a local responsibility conducted by district administrators who have little or no specific policy guidance or training.

- \* Evaluation practices vary greatly within and across schools and districts.
- \* Evaluation practices reflect individual evaluator perspectives and qualifications, general district requirements, and time constraints.
- \* Evaluation practices appear to be largely decoupled from state and district goals for school improvement and increased student learning.
- \* Professional standards, such as state standards and the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) Standards, are generally cited as “guidance” but evaluations vary in how explicitly they are aligned with professional standards.
- \* Little empirical evidence or data are available about technical quality and effectiveness of current evaluation models and instruments.
- \* Current principal evaluation appears to fulfill bureaucratic district requirements and provide limited individual feedback rather than being used for decisions about district support, job continuation, or professional advancement.

A few scholarly publications describe empirical research on the effects and effectiveness of principal evaluation as a factor in changing principal knowledge and behavior.

- \* Evaluation models and instruments have been found to have moderate effects on principal knowledge, perspectives, and practices.
- \* Research studies describe different conceptual perspectives on the purposes and processes of principal evaluation, highlighting the lack of professional agreement on what should be evaluated and how.
- \* Research studies use different measures to investigate effects on principals' knowledge and behavior, making it difficult to compare findings across studies.
- \* The effects of specific models and instruments are highly context-dependent.

While there is some evidence of evaluation effects, there is no compelling evidence that any single model or instrument is effective and generalizable for all uses or across different contexts. The relationship between empirical literature and proposals for changing practices is always problematic because of the limitations inherent in conducting empirical research, such as extensive time required to conduct and publish research; fast-changing policy environments that diminish relevance of specific topics; and unrealistic expectations that research can demonstrate generalizable, causal relationships that will solve problems of policy and practice.

In spite of these limitations, the scholarly research identifies three critical features of evaluation systems to improve principal practice:

1. Clear purpose and processes of evaluation that are closely aligned with the mission and goals of the state and district and with professional standards, particularly emphasizing leadership for learning (instructional leadership),
2. Effective implementation strategies, including evaluator training and follow-up, and
3. Ongoing review of technical qualities and effects of the evaluation model and instruments.

## Findings and Recommendations in Professional Publications

The professional literature highlights the importance of principal evaluation in changing practice from the historical emphasis on managerial responsibilities to more recent expectations that principals are instructional leaders who are responsible and accountable for student learning.

- \* Policymakers are looking for strategies, resources, and policy levers to improve principal practice in support of education goals.
- \* The rationale for current policy emphasis on principal evaluation comes in part from strategies of systemic alignment to achieve federal, state, and district policy goals.
- \* Evaluation practices can be used to communicate and (re)enforce clear, consistent expectations of principals, particularly about recent expectations of leadership for learning (instructional leadership).
- \* Evaluation can be used formatively to target resources and improve specific leadership practices.
- \* Models of evaluation that are currently being advocated in the literature propose differing purposes for personnel evaluation and use competing conceptions of effective leadership practices, making it difficult for policymakers and practitioners to choose among alternatives.
- \* The policy literature emphasizes the importance of professional standards that are research-based to guide leadership practice and evaluation. Most states have formally adopted or adapted the ISLLC Standards in state standards to emphasize principals' responsibilities for improving schools and increasing student learning. Evaluation criteria need to be clearly connected to professional standards.

## Implications for Policy and Practice: Selecting Evaluation Models

Expectations of principals have shifted from managerial responsibilities toward greater responsibility and accountability for teaching and learning. The research literature describes a gap between principal evaluation as currently practiced and principal evaluation that is aligned with state and district

expectations of principals. The literature does not identify easy choices among alternative models of principal evaluation. The findings from existing research indicate that significant resources are required to carry out high-quality principal evaluation that will support changing education leadership practices. At this point in time, choices among specific evaluation models can only be described as trade-offs among different purposes, content, and processes used.

The Integrated Leadership Development Initiative's Effective Principals Evaluation Project <sup>(2)</sup> is developing guidelines for states and districts to consider in selecting evaluation models, including alternatives such as the development of evaluation by states and/or school districts or purchasing commercial models and products. Resources for principal evaluation research, policies, and practices are available at <http://www.schoolsmovingup.net/effectiveprincipals>.<sup>(3)</sup>

### Development Model or Commercial Model

At one end of the continuum, investing in state and local development of evaluation systems and instruments builds capacity and supports system alignment. Based on the limited evidence available, it appears that state or local development of evaluation instruments and systems contributes to positive attitudes, fidelity of implementation, and local capacity to align resources that improve leadership practice. When evaluation is developed and conducted as part of systemic changes in schools, the costs in time and resources may be substantial but somewhat masked as they are integrated within other general district activities and budgets.

On the other end of the continuum, commercially available products are also expensive but may be a viable option for timeliness, developing and documenting evidence of technical quality, the ability to contract for training and assistance, and comparability across states and districts. Product alignment with state and district goals is indirect, through broad conceptual models and professional standards, but may be customized with additional investment. In addition to providing known content

and processes, commercial products may provide cost estimates that are more concrete than those of developmental models.

The literature findings and two models described here are limited to those reported in scholarly and professional literature. The literature does not provide estimates of cost or cost-benefit analyses to compare choices. Preliminary recommendations from this review of the literature indicate that states and districts should carefully consider their purposes and resources for principal evaluation before deciding on a strategy.

### References and Notes

1. Davis, S., Kearney, K., Sanders, N., Thomas, C. & Leon, R. (2011 June). *The policies and practices of principal evaluation: A review of the literature*. San Francisco, CA: WestEd.
2. The Integrated Leadership Development Initiative (ILDI) is a statewide cross-agency collaborative focused on developing accomplished school and district leaders in California. The Effective Principals Evaluation Project is supported by the California Comprehensive Center at WestEd, with ILDI partners.
3. ILDI produced this webpage and resources for practitioners, policymakers, and others interested in improving principal evaluation systems.







730 Harrison Street  
San Francisco, California 94107-1242  
Tel: 415.565.3000 | Toll-Free: (1-877) 4-WestEd