

Executive Summary

Study Purpose

Washington state's revised teacher and principal evaluation system (TPEP) represents a substantial change in state education policy. Implementing an ambitious evaluation system has impacted educators across the system, but nowhere more intensely than at the school level. This study builds on existing work by focusing on school leadership as key to successful TPEP implementation. In this report we provide practical examples of how school leaders¹ learn to productively support the professional growth of teachers. The goals of the research are to:

- Improve our understanding of the issues school leaders face in engaging with teaching staff on TPEP
- Explore the ways in which TPEP can prompt professional learning for principals and assistant principals and support increased leadership capacity
- Learn strategies for how principals navigate the workload under TPEP, both for those who are the sole evaluator in a building, and for principals who share evaluation responsibilities
- Explore issues of equitable access to supports and resources for school leaders in the implementation of the evaluation policy

Mixed-Methods Design

To address these questions, we employed a concurrent mixed-methods research design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011) using a three-pronged approach that included database analysis, surveys, and case studies. We compiled and analyzed statewide administrative data for school principals and assistant principals to provide background information on their distribution across schools and their characteristics. This dataset was used to help inform the design for our two other methods: an online survey of a statewide sample of principals and assistant principals, and case study work from a strategic sample of 11 schools. The statistically representative survey offers a broad source of information concerning TPEP implementation efforts and challenges. The primary qualitative strategy involved 43 semi-structured interviews with principals, assistant principals, teacher leaders, and district staff.

Characteristics of the School Administrator Workforce

State administrative datasets were used to describe the characteristics of the principals and assistant principals. In this analysis we find:

- In 2017-18, nearly nine of every ten principals (89.6%) were White, a statistic that is identical to the proportion of principals who were White in 2010-11.

¹ Throughout this report, we refer to principals and assistant principals as “school leaders.” We note that other school staff (e.g., classroom teachers, instructional coaches, etc.) also often serve in leadership roles, but this study specifically focuses on principals and assistant principals.

- Statewide, 43% of schools have a principal (either full-time or part-time) who is the sole school administrator in the building. Approximately half (51%) of schools with a solo principal are elementary schools, 18% are middle schools, and 26% are high schools.
- School size is an important factor in determining whether schools are staffed with an assistant principal. However, when examining schools with enrollments of 400 to 499 students, there is evidence that district fiscal capacity may be a factor influencing whether schools are staffed with an assistant principal.
- From 2010-11 to 2017-18, the number of full-time equivalent (FTE) principals increased 7.63%, and student enrollment increased by 7.59%, nearly identical to the growth rate in principal FTE. However, the number of FTE assistant principals increased by 38.6% during this same time period. The number of FTE assistant principals at the elementary level nearly quadrupled over this eight-year time period.

Findings

Our findings are organized around six key topics: (1) school leaders balancing responsibilities, (2) supporting the professional growth of teachers, (3) school level contexts and supports for TPEP, (4) district level contexts and supports for TPEP, (5) state level policies, supports and sustainability, and (6) suggestions from the field: principals and assistant principals share their strategies. Key findings for each of these topics is provided below:

School Leaders Balancing Responsibilities

- School leaders must manage tensions between their responsibilities for instructional leadership with other important duties, especially concerning issues of student discipline that compete for their time and attention.
- The median number of total staff evaluated was 31 for principals and 30 for assistant principals. Solo principals and elementary principals have somewhat larger numbers of staff to evaluate.
- About half of elementary principals have more than one evaluator in their building, compared with about three quarters of secondary principals. Eighty percent of principals report that having additional administrative staff was very useful.
- While the majority of school leaders agree that TPEP is useful, the majority also find that it is too time consuming. Only 5% of school leaders believe that time spent on TPEP is not a concern at all.

Supporting the Professional Growth of Teachers

- More than three-quarters of school leaders agree that they have better interactions with teachers because of TPEP, and that TPEP is used to help shape professional development offerings.

- School leaders who have deep knowledge of the instructional framework can readily engage with teachers in substantive ways, especially in districts that have made significant investments in professional learning about TPEP.
- School leaders use strategies such as walk-throughs, peer observations and professional learning communities to support teachers' continual professional learning, including aspects related to student and professional growth goals.
- Meeting the needs of beginning teachers is an ongoing concern of school leaders, particularly with respect to addressing the depth and breadth of work included in the comprehensive evaluation in a manageable and productive way.

School Level Contexts and Supports for TPEP

- The extent to which staffing resources, including assistant principals, counselors, deans of students, and teacher leaders are available can make or break the fidelity of TPEP implementation. Elementary principals generally have fewer supports compared to secondary principals, while solo principals have proportionately fewer of all types of supports.
- Principals who build and leverage the capacity of their school leadership team are in a better position to address the range of leadership work and push instructional improvement more effectively. This work includes aligning and integrating other improvement initiatives in a coherent way.
- More than half of school leaders indicate that rater reliability was an obstacle to TPEP implementation, and particular concerns were voiced about variation in scoring within buildings and across the district.
- The majority of school leaders feel that TPEP has positively impacted instructional quality, student learning outcomes, and teacher professional collaboration. However, nearly half (45%) feel that TPEP had no impact on teachers' skills to meet the instructional needs of students from diverse cultural backgrounds.
- About a third of school leaders believe that they do not receive adequate supports to work with teachers on TPEP-related activities. School leaders reporting this lack of support also indicated greater dissatisfaction with their ability to focus on instructional leadership, address student discipline, interact with families, and spend informal time with students.

District Contexts and Supports for TPEP

- The majority of principals, and an even larger proportion of assistant principals, find their district professional development to be useful, especially in collaboration with other school leaders. Most school leaders expressed a desire for additional training and opportunities for professional growth related to TPEP.
- School leaders mention rater reliability, collaboration, strategies for making the process manageable, feedback on their own performance, framework training, and

help with goal setting for teachers as examples of the kind of training they want. Additionally, a sizeable portion of school leaders believe they need to improve in delegating responsibilities, family engagement, and managing their overall workload.

- Most school leaders find the feedback they receive on their own evaluation to be helpful. However, 30% of principals and 36% of assistant principals report that supports for working on their own evaluation are not available.
- Districts can play an important role in mediating the evaluation process for principals and assistant principals and streamlining the process. Districts can also provide consistency in implementation while giving school leaders flexibility to adapt to individual needs, and help align TPEP with other improvement initiatives to create coherence.

State Level Policies, Supports and Sustainability

- The majority of school leaders agree that the change in administrative code allowing scores from the comprehensive evaluation to carry over to the focused evaluation prompted teachers to stretch themselves professionally. However, most school leaders did not believe that this change resulted in a reduction in the workload.
- About three quarters of school leaders agree that teachers who receive a 3 on their comprehensive evaluation should have the opportunity to earn a score of 4 on subsequent focused evaluations.
- The majority of principals and assistant principals believe that school leadership is a good career choice, at least for now. A smaller proportion of principals (13%) and assistant principals (6%) state that they are considering retirement in the next three to five years. For approximately 30% of the principal workforce TPEP has made them considering leaving their position as a school leader, and that percentage hasn't changed much in the last few years.
- School leaders view adequate staffing and time for professional development as critical for the sustainability of TPEP. This includes addressing the unequal distribution of assistant principals and other support staff, and tackling the impact of changes since the McCleary decision that have resulted in diminished time for professional development to support teacher collaboration and other aspects of the evaluation process.

Suggestions from the Field: Principals and Assistant Principals' Share Their Strategies

As part of this study, principals and assistant principals provided a wealth of ideas regarding the strategies they use as instructional leaders to meet the obligations of the evaluation, while simultaneously negotiating other aspects of their jobs.

- School leaders identify the ability to effectively delegate responsibilities as the most important strategy for navigating their workload. Delegating responsibilities may involve sharing the work with the school leadership team, an assistant principal,

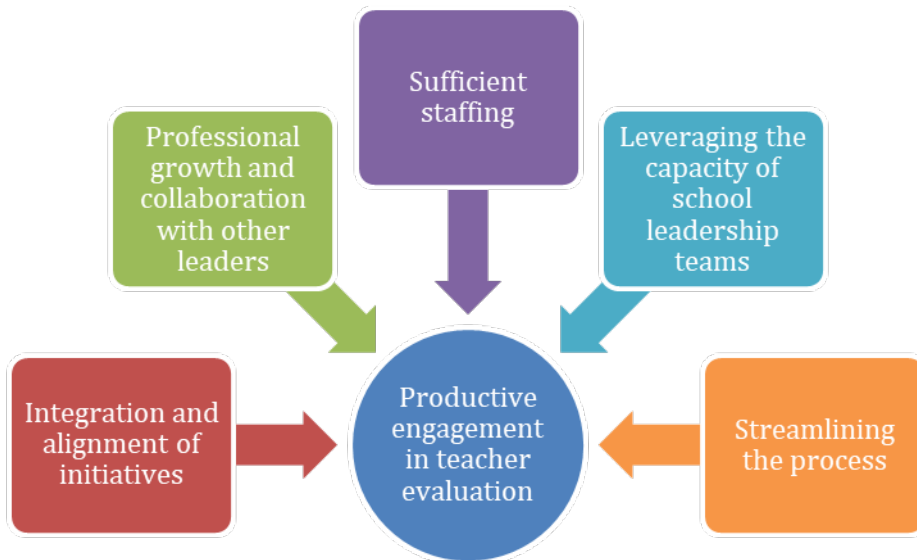
dean of students, administrative intern, instructional coach, teacher leaders, clerical staff and others.

- Other strategies that school leaders employ to manage the workload include longer hours, use of technological tools, proactively plan and spread work out over the year, collaborate, prioritize, and implement programs to reduce student discipline issues.
- In order to productively engage with teachers, school leaders set clear and realistic expectations, provide specific feedback focused on growth, and develop collaborative arrangements and opportunities for teachers to work on their areas of focus and their student growth goals.

Conclusions and Implications

While the contexts and conditions under which TPEP is implemented may vary considerably, we discovered some essential elements that influence the extent to which school leaders can productively engage in the evaluation process. These elements include leveraging the capacity of school leadership teams, opportunities for professional growth and collaboration with other school leaders, the integration and alignment of initiatives within the school and district, efforts to streamline the process, and adequate staffing to support the work. Figure 1 displays these elements.

Figure 1. Essential Elements for Productive Engagement in Teacher Evaluation



Leveraging the Capacity of School Leadership Teams

When school principals engage with others in their buildings to create and sustain a leadership team that is committed to continual improvement, and they are able to share responsibilities and expertise, the workload of the principal becomes more manageable and engagement with TPEP is more productive. Often assistant principals are key players, but there are a host of other staff, including deans, counselors, teacher leaders, clerical staff, and district leaders who may assume a variety of responsibilities for

leadership and provide support. Principals who are skillful at building trust and leveraging the specific skills of others report being able to focus more attention on issues of instructional leadership.

Professional Growth and Collaboration with Other School Leaders

School leaders need and want time and opportunities for professional growth. In particular, they would welcome opportunities to hone their skills on rater reliability, conducting observations, and time to work on their own evaluations. Those opportunities are sometimes possible when they can engage with the school leadership team and collaborate with others in the building. In addition to school-based collaboration, some districts provide opportunities for school leaders to engage and share ideas across schools and districts. While some support is available, most school leaders feel that there is a lack of time and attention for their own evaluations. The majority of school leaders identify collaboration with other school leaders to be useful for their own professional growth, while at the same time improving their abilities to meet the requirements of TPEP.

Integration and Alignment of Initiatives

When school leaders choose to see TPEP as a means for advancing the instructional priorities of the school, they view its implementation more positively and appear to be less frustrated with their leadership work. Sometimes how TPEP is perceived by school leaders is influenced by the approach the district has taken to the work, with some districts embracing TPEP as a growth model whose primary purpose is to support instructional improvement. This type of orientation can help create coherence for school leaders in how they approach their responsibilities. This can happen when school leaders are able to engage in conversations with school staff and make specific connections between the evaluation process and other school and district priorities. These school and district efforts can reduce the likelihood of viewing TPEP as a “hoop to jump through” instead of a strategy for supporting instructional improvement. That said, school leaders cite how an increase in other responsibilities, particularly with respect to student discipline, can present challenges to alignment and integration goals.

Streamlining the Process

School and district leaders often seek ways to create a predictable and reasonable workflow for the evaluation process. At the district level, changes are sometimes made to requirements of the process, including reducing the number of required classroom observations and focusing on key priorities, so that school leaders can better manage the workload. Some school leaders aim to create more clarity and predictability for the process, often scheduling elements of the TPEP process far in advance and managing time so that scheduled commitments can be met, even amidst tightly packed calendars and unpredictable demands on leaders' time. Many also delegate some responsibilities to their school leadership team to help support the overall work of the school.

Sufficient Staffing

Adequate staffing is arguably the most critical of all the factors that influence productive engagement in TPEP. The workload for principals is daunting, and the lack of time to effectively interact with teachers and support their needs is cited as a major concern. The capacity of principals to create effective school leadership teams is influenced by the practical matter of the amount of staffing available at the school, whether it be additional administrators or other support staff. Principals report that having additional administrative staffing is the most useful support with respect to TPEP implementation. Evidence suggests that districts have responded to this need given the dramatic rise in the number of assistant principals, especially in elementary schools. This rise in the number of assistant principals prompts the question of how those new to the duties of teacher evaluation can be supported. A lack of adequate staffing and supports is especially evident in two cases: the case of the solo principal and the case of the assistant principal.

The Case of the Solo Principal

The majority of schools in the state have more than one evaluator, and not surprisingly, the size of a school is an important determinant of whether or not a school has an assistant principal. Thus, principals in smaller, and typically elementary schools are often faced with the task of being the only individual charged with the responsibility for teacher evaluations, along with all other administrative duties. Solo principals usually have more evaluations to conduct, and frequently lack adequate support for ensuring that teacher evaluations receive the requisite attention and care. Solo principals also have fewer opportunities to collaborate with peers and engage in professional learning that can support their capacity to do the job. As a result, solo principals are more likely to report that they need additional professional development related to TPEP.

The Case of the Assistant Principal

Similar to solo principals, assistant principals also often expressed concerns about the lack of opportunities to collaborate and engage in their own professional learning with their peers. In particular, assistant principals may not be given adequate time to work on issues of rater reliability and share strategies for effectively engaging with teachers. The lack of support is of concern given the increase in the number of assistant principals who are new to the role and may be more likely to need support in the early years of their administrative career.

Equity of Access

Throughout this report, we detailed examples of variation in the level of staffing support and the availability of other key resources necessary for successful TPEP implementation. One major concern is in the inequitable distribution of assistant principals. Approximately half of elementary schools with student enrollments of 400-499 have an assistant principal, while the other half are staffed with solo principals. We found a potential relationship between district wealth and administrative staffing in these

schools, and other evidence of workload inequities for solo principals. The issue of equitable access to supports is also present for some assistant principals, particularly with respect to availability of professional development. Additionally, concerns are mounting with respect to the reduction of the amount of time available for teacher collaboration, which is partly attributable to changes in the school funding system.

Another noteworthy equity issue is the concern that while TPEP is generally perceived as useful and has a positive impact on the quality of instruction, the evaluation process does not seem to have the same impact on teachers' capacity to meet the instructional needs of students from diverse cultural backgrounds. While this has been a focus in the state's recent framework trainings, this area may require greater intentionality on the part of the school leaders in working with teachers to develop appropriate instructional practices to address the needs of diverse student learners.

Sustainability

A number of factors are influencing the long-term sustainability of TPEP with respect to the principals' responsibilities. These include the rise in student discipline issues and expectations, the number of initiatives, programs, and other administrative duties of school leaders, and the lack of time to invest in instructional leadership with their teachers and engage in professional learning for themselves. The sheer workload of many school leaders impacts their perspectives on how useful TPEP is and their views of the likelihood that they will continue in their role as a school leader. This implies that adequate and equitable staffing resources are needed. Recent changes in administrative code sought to further advance a growth orientation but do not appear to reduce workload. Overall, principals appreciate the focus on professional growth that is intended by the evaluation process, but they also worry that without adequate resources and a sustained commitment to a growth perspective, the process will become less meaningful and more compliance-oriented.

In summary, the educator evaluation system in Washington state represents an ambitious statewide endeavor that requires significant investments of time and human resources in order to accomplish its goals. It is possible for TPEP to address the dual purposes of instructional improvement and accountability in a rigorous and sustainable way. However, continual attention must be paid to the supports and working conditions that are essential to make the promise of this initiative a reality in every school and for every educator.