# OECD MULTILINGUAL SUMMARIES

*Education and Training Policy*
**Improving School Leadership**
**Volume 1: Policy and Practice**

*Summary in English*

As countries strive to reform education systems and improve student results, school leadership is high on education policy agendas. But in many countries, the men and women who run schools are overburdened, underpaid and near retirement. And there are few people lining up for their jobs.

What leadership roles are most effective in improving student learning? How to allocate and distribute different leadership tasks? How to ensure current and future school leaders develop the right skills for effective leadership? These are questions facing governments around the world.

This report is based on an OECD study of school leadership policies and practices around the world.

Offering a valuable cross-country perspective, it identifies four policy levers and a range of policy options to help governments improve school leadership now and build sustainable leadership for the future.

# Why school leadership matters

School leadership has become a priority in education policy agendas internationally. It plays a key role in improving school outcomes by influencing the motivations and capacities of teachers, as well as the school climate and environment. Effective school leadership is essential to improve the efficiency and equity of schooling.

As countries are seeking to adapt their education systems to the needs of contemporary society, expectations for schools and school leaders are changing. Many countries have moved towards decentralisation, making schools more autonomous in their decision making and holding them more accountable for results. At the same time, the requirement to improve overall student performance while serving more diverse student populations is putting schools under pressure to use more evidence-based teaching practices.

As a result of these trends, the function of school leadership across OECD countries is now increasingly defined by a demanding set of roles which include financial and human resource management and leadership for learning. There are concerns across countries that the role of principal as conceived for needs of the past is no longer appropriate. In many countries, principals have heavy workloads; many are reaching retirement, and it is getting harder to replace them. Potential candidates often hesitate to apply, because of overburdened roles, insufficient preparation and training, limited career prospects and inadequate support and rewards.

These developments have made school leadership a priority in education systems across the world. Policy makers need to enhance the quality of school leadership and make it sustainable. The OECD has identified four main policy levers which taken together can improve school leadership practice:

## 1. (Re)define school leadership responsibilities

Research has shown that school leaders can make a difference in school and student performance if they are granted autonomy to make important decisions. However autonomy alone does not automatically lead to improvements unless it is well supported. In addition, it is important that the core responsibilities of school leaders be clearly defined and delimited. School leadership responsibilities should be defined through an understanding of the practices most likely to improve teaching and learning. Policy makers need to:

- *Provide higher degrees of autonomy with appropriate support*

School leaders need time, capacity and support to focus on the practices most likely to improve learning. Greater degrees of autonomy should be coupled with new models of distributed leadership, new types of accountability, and training and development for school leadership.

- *Redefine school leadership responsibilities for improved student learning*

Policy makers and practitioners need to ensure that the roles and responsibilities associated with improved learning outcomes are at the core of

school leadership practice. This study identifies four major domains of responsibility as key for school leadership to improve student outcomes:

- − Supporting, evaluating and developing teacher quality: School leaders have to be able to adapt the teaching programme to local needs, promote teamwork among teachers and engage in teacher monitoring, evaluation and professional development.

- − Goal-setting, assessment and accountability: Policy makers need to ensure that school leaders have discretion in setting strategic direction and optimise their capacity to develop school plans and goals and monitor progress, using data to improve practice.

- − Strategic financial and human resource management: Policy makers can enhance the financial management skills of school leadership teams by providing training to school leaders, establishing the role of a financial manager within the leadership team, or providing financial support services to schools. In addition, school leaders should be able to influence teacher recruitment decisions to improve the match between candidates and their school's needs.

- − Collaborating with other schools: This new leadership dimension needs to be recognised as a specific role for school leaders. It can bring benefits to school systems as a whole rather than just the students of a single school. But school leaders need to develop their skills to become involved in matters beyond their school borders.

- *Develop school leadership frameworks for improved policy and practice*

School leadership frameworks can help provide guidance on the main characteristics, tasks and responsibilities of effective school leaders and signal the essential character of school leadership as leadership for learning. They can be a basis for consistent recruitment, training and appraisal of school leaders. Frameworks should clearly define the major domains of responsibility for school leaders and allow for contextualisation for local and school-level criteria. They should be developed with involvement by the profession.

## 2. Distribute school leadership

The increased responsibilities and accountability of school leadership are creating the need for distribution of leadership, both within schools and across schools. School boards also face many new tasks. While practitioners consider middle-management responsibilities vital for school leadership, these practices remain rare and often unclear; and those involved are not always recognized for their tasks. Policy makers need to broaden the concept of school leadership and adjust policy and working conditions accordingly.

- *Encourage distribution of leadership*

Distribution of leadership can strengthen management and succession planning. Distributing leadership across different people and organisational

structures can help to meet the challenges facing contemporary schools and improve school effectiveness. This can be done in formal ways through team structures and other bodies or more informally by developing ad hoc groups based on expertise and current needs.

- *Support distribution of leadership*

There is a need to reinforce the concept of leadership teams in national frameworks, to develop incentive mechanisms to reward participation and performance in these teams, and to extend leadership training and development to middle-level management and potential future leaders in the school. Finally, policy makers need to reflect on modifying accountability mechanisms to match distributed leadership structures.

- *Support school boards in their tasks*

Evidence shows that effective school boards may contribute to the success of their schools. For this to happen, it is crucial to clarify the roles and responsibilities of school boards and ensure consistency between their objectives and the skills and experience of board members. Policy makers can help by providing guidelines for improved recruitment and selection processes and by developing support structures to ensure active participation in school boards, including opportunities for skills development.

## 3. Develop skills for effective school leadership

Country practices and evidence from different sources show that school leaders need specific training to respond to broadened roles and responsibilities. Strategies need to focus on developing and strengthening skills related to improving school outcomes (as listed above) and provide room for contextualisation.

- *Treat leadership development as a continuum*

Leadership development is broader than specific programmes of activity or intervention. It requires a combination of formal and informal processes throughout all stages and contexts of leadership practice. This implies coherently supporting the school leadership career through these stages:

Encourage initial leadership training: Whether initial training is voluntary or mandatory can depend on national governance structures. Governments can define national programmes, collaborate with local level governments and develop incentives to ensure that school leaders participate. In countries where the position is not tenured, a trade-off must be found to make it worthwhile for principals to invest time in professional development.

Efforts also need to be made to find the right candidates.

- – Organise induction programmes: Induction programmes are particularly valuable to prepare and shape initial school leadership practices, and they provide vital networks for principals to share concerns and explore challenges. These programmes should provide a combination of theoretical and practical knowledge and self-study.

− Ensure in-service training to cover need and context: In-service programmes need to be seen in the context of prior learning opportunities for school leadership. Where there are no other initial requirements, basic in-service programmes should encourage development of leadership skills. In-service training should be also offered periodically to principals and leadership teams so they can update their skills and keep up with new developments. Networks (virtual or real) also provide informal development for principals and leadership teams.

- *Ensure consistency of provision by different institutions*

A broad range of providers cater to school leadership training needs, but the training they offer must be more consistent. In some countries, national school leadership institutions have raised awareness and improved provision of leadership development opportunities. In other countries, where there are many providers but no national orientations, it is important to have clear standards and ensure a focus on quality. Many governments have standards, evaluations and other mechanisms to monitor and regulate programme quality.

- *Ensure appropriate variety for effective training*

A broad body of knowledge supported by practice has identified the content, design, and methods of effective programmes. It points to the following key factors: curricular coherence, experience in real contexts, cohort grouping, mentoring, coaching, peer learning and structures for collaborative activity between the programme and schools.

## 4. Make school leadership an attractive profession

The challenge is to improve the quality of current leadership and build sustainable leadership for the future. Evidence indicates that potential applicants are deterred by the heavy workload of principals and the fact that the job does not seem to be adequately remunerated or supported. Uncertain recruitment procedures and career development prospects for principals may also deter potential candidates. Strategies to attract, recruit and support high-performing school leaders include the following:

- *Professionalise recruitment*

Recruitment processes can have a strong impact on school leadership quality. While school-level involvement is essential to contextualise recruitment practices, action is necessary at the system level to ensure that recruitment procedures and criteria are effective, transparent and consistent. Succession planning – proactively identifying and developing potential leaders – can boost the quantity and quality of future school leaders. Eligibility criteria should be broadened to reduce the weight accorded to seniority and attract younger dynamic candidates with different backgrounds. Recruitment procedures should go beyond traditional job interviews to include an expanded set of tools and procedures to assess candidates. Finally, those who are on the hiring side of recruitment panels also need guidelines and training.

- *Focus on the relative attractiveness of school leaders' salaries*

The relative attractiveness of salaries for school leaders can influence the supply of high quality candidates. Policy makers need to monitor remuneration compared to similar grades in the public and private sectors and make school leadership more competitive. Establishing separate salary scales for teachers and principals can attract more candidates from among the teaching staff. At the same time, salary scales should reflect leadership structures and school-level factors to attract high performing leaders to all schools.

- *Acknowledge the role of professional organisations of school leaders*

Professional organisations of school leaders provide a forum for dialogue, knowledge sharing, and dissemination of best practices among professionals and between professionals and policy makers. Workforce reform is unlikely to succeed unless school leaders are actively involved in its development and implementation through their representative organisations.

- *Provide options and support for career development*

Providing career development prospects for school leaders can help avoid principal burnout and make school leadership a more attractive career option. There are many ways to make the profession more flexible and mobile, allowing school leaders to move between schools as well as between leadership and teaching and other professions. Current country practice provides some examples to draw from, including alternatives to lifetime contracts through renewable fixed-term contracts and options for principals to step up to new opportunities such as jobs in the educational administration, leadership of groups or federations of schools, and consultant leadership roles.