Leadership for Foundational Learning in Africa: Evidence and Considerations for the Future

Key elements of school leadership that drive foundational learning

Reorienting toward instructional leadership:

shifting the role of school leaders from management and administration to leading learning in school through the mentoring and coaching of teachers and using data to monitor student learning.

Promoting teacher leadership and learning:

facilitating teacher-led continuous professional development in schools, empowering subject leaders, and promoting peer-to-peer learning and support models.

Learning through practice-based models:

pre- and in-service training and professional development for school leaders that includes context-specific and not just academic approaches and selecting the best headteachers to act as system leaders, coaching their peers.

School leadership's impact on student outcomes

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, the world was facing a crisis in education, with many students not learning basic numeracy and literacy skills (World Bank et al., 2022). While many factors contribute to student outcomes, evidence suggests that improvement in learning rarely occurs in the absence of effective school leadership. Within schools, school leaders help shape the climate and conditions in which learning and teaching occur. Outside of schools, school leaders act as intermediaries, with parents and the community, and with district and regional leaders.

A UNESCO review of leadership policies and practices found that effective school leadership is the key to large-scale sustainable education reform (UNESCO, 2016). There is also evidence to suggest that strong leadership has a direct impact on learning outcomes. One study found that leadership accounted for a 27 percent

increase in student learning gains, second only to classroom teaching (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008). In another study spanning 65 countries, students in schools with the top-performing 25 percent of school leaders had the equivalent of three additional months of learning per year compared to students in schools with the bottom-performing 25 percent of school leaders (Leaver et al., 2019). Evidence suggests that the influence of school leadership on student outcomes is even stronger during times of disruption. In Haiti, after Hurricane Matthew in 2016, in schools that experienced the most extreme infrastructural damage, stronger school management practices were associated with higher Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) scores (Adelman & Lemos, 2020). Research from high-income countries suggests that school leadership matters most in the schools that serve the most underprivileged students (Branch et al., 2012).

Leaders leverage the community to ensure inclusion during times of disruption

One of the key findings from research on school leadership practices in Rwanda during the COVID-19 school closures and reopening revealed that leaders leveraged their communities to ensure that the pandemic did not exacerbate the existing inequalities. More than half of all school leaders collaborated with community groups, and 97 percent used engagement with community leaders as a way to minimize dropouts and support vulnerable students. Ninety-two percent of school leaders said they believed that their community members could work together during COVID-19, and 84 percent said they believed their community trusted them.

Q. School Leaders:
What strategies have you put in place to minimize dropout and support vulnerable students to transition back to school? (Please select all that apply, N=97)

Working with community leaders	97%
Household visits from myself or teachers	87%
Campaigning via Radio/TV/Social media	23%

In one case study, a school worked with a local disability group to identify additional forms of support for children with disabilities from their school. Another school coordinated with "reading campaigners" and parent committee members to encourage learners to read and to ensure that they had resources to learn (Al-Fadala et al., 2021).

Effective school leaders also strongly impact improvement in teacher practices through **instructional leadership** (OECD, 2016). Evidence suggests that in order to improve instructional leadership, school leaders should provide mentoring and instruction support for teachers, monitor student learning and school improvement, and buffer potential work distractions for teachers (Day & Sammons, 2014). School leaders can also promote **teacher leadership**. A recent systematic review found that teacher leaders are more likely to invest in their professional development growth and school improvement efforts, which leads to gains in student learning (Schott et al., 2020).

Reorienting and supporting leaders to effect change

Despite increasing evidence of the importance of school leaders, their role has often been neglected in both policy and practice. As a result, school leaders are often ill-equipped for their roles, lacking the necessary training, skills, and support required to support the progress of teachers and students. In 14 Francophone African countries, almost 30 percent of early-grade students were in schools where the school leader had not received any professional development (CONFEMEN, 2020). Additionally, many school leaders end up spending the bulk of their time focusing on administrative tasks, with often less than 25 percent of their time spent on managing activities related to quality teaching and student learning (Adelman & Lemos, 2020). Redefining the responsibilities of school leaders to ensure that they have the time, the support, and a greater capacity to focus on these activities is important to improving student learning and teacher practices, particularly at the foundational levels.

Middle-tier leadership—from the district and regional levels—can be particularly important in contexts where school leaders are inexperienced or lack professional development. Middle-tier leaders can be positive change agents who support school leaders, teachers, and their schools by providing system alignment and instructional guidance, encouraging innovative practices and use of evidence (especially to support those who need it most), and promoting professional collaboration within and across schools (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2020; Education Development Trust & UNESCO, 2023; Childress et al., 2020).

Leadership programs in sub-Saharan Africa

Countries in sub-Saharan Africa increasingly recognize the power of leadership—especially for foundational learning—and are innovating to support leadership development within their own contexts. This section highlights examples of promising leadership programs across sub-Saharan Africa.

Kenya: Dignitas' effective leadership for early childhood education

Dignitas Project is a Kenyan nongovernmental organization that began working in 2007 with parents, teachers, and leaders in Mathare Valley, one of the oldest informal settlements in Nairobi, where communities have little access to public services, including education. In 2020, Dignitas launched a pilot program focused on leaders working on early childhood education. This program aims to holistically improve child development through three levers: instructional leadership, learner engagement, and school and classroom culture. The program was implemented in 61 schools with 179 school leaders. At baseline, only 13 percent of the teachers encouraged young learners to ask questions and interact with concepts, and only 14 percent of school leaders offered any type of classroom support to teachers, including coaching and feedback. Throughout the two-year program, school leaders participated in professional development workshops and coaching cycles which were aligned with topics associated with the three levers. By the end of the program, the school leaders had increased their scores in instructional leadership by almost 30 percentage points (to 55 percent). Young learners also saw gains in foundational numeracy, which increased from 6 to 17 percent, and in literacy, which increased from 1 to 2 percent (Dignitas Project, 2021).

Ghana: Ministry of Education Strengthening Teacher Accountability to Reach All Students (STARS) program

In Ghana, the Ministry of Education's STARS program aimed to improve student achievement by equipping primary school leaders with skills related to mentoring, motivating, monitoring, and supporting their teachers. In 2018, a randomized evaluation was conducted on 210 schools in 20 districts. The schools were sorted into three groups: one received support with providing targeted instruction ("teaching students at their level of knowledge, not their grade level," Beg et al., 2020), another received both targeted instruction and management training, and a third control group received neither intervention. Aspects of the program involved giving an hour of the school day to targeted instruction and increasing a school leader's time for classroom observation and feedback for teachers. The program increased students' math and English test scores by 0.4 additional years of learning per $100 (Beg et al., 2020). The program was scaled up nationally, as part of the Ghana Accountability for Learning Outcomes Project (GALOP), a multi-year government program designed to elevate the quality of basic education and strengthen equity and accountability in Ghana's education sector.

Côte d'Ivoire: Global Partnership for Education and the World Bank's "Mon enfant apprend mieux à l'école" (My child learns better in school – Reading for all program)

Launched in 2018 in 700 primary schools across six Côte d'Ivoire regions, the "mon enfant apprend mieux à l'école" program focused on improving foundational literacy and numeracy skills for young learners. Implementing this program involved ensuring that school leaders had a central role in developing more effective pedagogical practices and were trained on how to support teachers on a daily basis. The program used a training approach that started with national trainers who then trained regional leaders. All 700 school leaders were trained by regional trainers to support classroom teachers in implementing the program. In addition to the provision of training and coaching, school leaders' roles shifted from the primarily administrative tasks of collecting data and providing supervision to directly supporting and mentoring teachers. The program was a success, and reading and math scores rose, exceeding the national averages. The targeted primary schools saw their EGRA results reach 15.85 percent, compared to the national level of 12.90 percent. Early Grade Mathematics Assessment (EGMA) scores reached 50.36 percent in the targeted schools, compared to the national average of 38 percent (Zafeirakou, 2022; Yeo, 2022).

Rwanda: The Building Learning Foundations National Leaders of Learning program

In 2017, the Rwandan Ministry of Education and Rwanda Education Board launched the Building Learning Foundations (BLF) program to improve early-grade learning outcomes in math and literacy across all primary schools. In partnership with the Education Development Trust, one key intervention was the establishment of national leaders of learning and local leaders of learning in a program where high-performing school leaders act as middle-tier leaders to provide peer-led professional development. Five hundred national and local leaders, serving 3,200 school leaders and corresponding schools, developed professional learning communities alongside targeted one-on-one coaching sessions, supported by a practice-based accreditation model in partnership with the University of Rwanda College of Education. By 2021, the program had reached 2,650 head teachers, 13,250 school committee members, and 506 district- and sector-level educational officials.

The program's impact was significant, with the number of head teachers reaching competency standards and improving from 41 percent in 2018 to 98 percent by 2021. School leaders played a key role in supporting the improvements in teacher practice in the schools, helping to ensure that 90 percent of the teachers participated in school-based communities of practice. The effort contributed to, for example, a 22 percent increase in lower primary level math teachers reaching teaching standard benchmarks in just over a year (from 2019 to 2020). Pupil scores in early-grade English improved by 14 percent from 2018 to 2021 (Education Development Trust & UNESCO, 2023).

Evidence-based elements of school leadership training that improve student learning

Although limited, emerging evidence from research on leadership training programs in the Global South shows that the following elements have positively impacted student learning:

- Support for school and district leaders to use student-level learning data to drive school improvement planning.
- Focus on the school leaders' teacher development activities as the main channel through which they influence student math and literacy outcomes.
- Program delivery pairing practice-based content delivery with individualized coaching support.
- Work with district- and subdistrict-level leadership alongside school leaders.

The enabling factors—such as the design of a program, the quality of program implementation, and the supporting policies—certainly influence the impact that any school leader program will have on teacher practice and student learning.

More intentional and rigorous research is needed to understand the impact of different types of leadership training and professional development on student learning (Sampat et al., 2020).

Leadership for our future

Leading a school is increasingly challenging and complicated, as school leaders are expected to take on the roles of administrators, managers, pedagogical advisers, and classroom teachers, among others. Effective school leadership, with a focus on learning, can foster positive learning conditions, motivate and support teachers to apply strong pedagogical practices, and engage the wider community to support students. Schools with competent leaders have less student absenteeism, and students have more enjoyable instructional time and better learning outcomes (UNESCO, 2022). However, school leaders need professional development, support, and guidance to transform foundational learning.

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