

Leaders in Teaching Research Note: Evidence on supporting effective secondary school leadership

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Prepared by the Learning Generation Initiative

Key messages

These key messages highlight important points from the summary of research this note provides on evidence of effective school leadership at secondary level. The note draws on studies across a range of contexts and from a variety of methodologies, including academic research, program evaluations and grey literature.

- Despite increasing evidence on the importance of school leaders, their role is often neglected in both policy and practice. As a result, secondary school leaders can be ill-equipped for their roles, lacking the necessary training, skills, and support required to lead teaching and learning.
- Emerging research suggests that the following approaches can be effective at improving education outcomes: better understanding and utilization of student-level data, especially learning data; support for teacher development through instructional leadership and motivation; promoting female leadership; and ensuring strong professional development for all school leaders.
- Many school leaders still indicate a lack of knowledge on how to better use the data for efficiency and one-off trainings are not sufficient. **School improvement plans (SIPs)** are a tool which can support leaders to use data for school improvement.
- Evidence shows that effective use of SIPs requires sustained engagement and support for school leaders using them.
- SIPs may shift power dynamics and the locus of decision making (especially if parents and communities are involved), creating resistance from school leaders or challenges where parent and community capacity is low and goes unaddressed.
- SIPs can be perceived as creating additional workload to existing responsibilities and not as a tool to support school leaders' work. To help address this, studies from high-income contexts suggest follow up is needed and plans that include very specific language on what exactly needs to be accomplished and who will accomplish it. It is also recommended that no more than two to five goals be included to ensure leaders are not overwhelmed by the number of actions or disheartened by lagging results. If the SIPs include data collection at the school level, sharing collection responsibilities among staff can help alleviate overload.
- Many school leaders end up spending the bulk of their time focusing on administrative tasks. However, with increasing evidence on the impact of school leaders on teacher practice, the prioritization of **instructional leadership** is being promoted.
- School leaders who have received formal training in instructional leadership spend more time encouraging and guiding their teachers, leading to positive impacts of teaching performance.
- Instructional leadership practices can include serving as a role model, providing consistent professional development opportunities, supporting creativity and innovation, ensuring that all teacher needs are met and supported, and communicating school-wide visions and goals. Supervising teacher lesson planning and delivery as well as monitoring student learning are key.

- Some evidence suggests that school leaders need direct training (as opposed to cascade models) to improve instructional leadership practices, and one study found greater impact when school leaders work together with actors at different levels of the system.
- Harnessing intrinsic motivation for school leaders is also important for helping them encourage and support **teacher motivation**. Evidence shows that the reduction of administrative work and access to data and peer learning communities can support school leader intrinsic motivation.
- Promoting **female school leadership** is critical in light of the serious barriers keeping women from taking leadership posts. This is even more pressing as emerging evidence suggests students in female-led schools perform better than those in male-led schools and female teachers report higher use of instructional leadership.
- Providing targeted opportunities at different stages, such as recruitment or training, can ensure that women are able to enter and stay in the profession. Networks of female school leaders can provide ongoing peer support, act as role models, and work with community leaders help to normalize women's leadership.
- Policy strategies such as baseline quotas and incentives (career guarantees for accompanying spouses and housing and transportation support), can be used promote equal opportunities for women to lead.
- Many school leaders enter their roles without training and serve as school leaders without professional development opportunities. Yet, **professional development support** is necessary for preparing school leaders to provide support for teacher development and enact their wider responsibilities.
- Emerging evidence suggests that professional development support for school leaders should include content that is focused on the school leader's role in student success and a mode of delivery that couples practice-based content with individualized coaching support.

Introduction

This note is intended to support the Leaders in Teaching (LiT) program by providing a summary of the latest literature on important aspects of secondary school leadership in education to inform the program's Lead pillar activities, particularly the leadership capacity development for Regional Education Offices (REOs) and National Education Leadership Institute (NELI) training for Senior High School Heads. The note collates evidence on several key drivers of effective school leadership. It primarily focuses on secondary school leaders in Sub-Saharan Africa but includes strong examples from other contexts and education levels. This note focuses on school leaders' use of data, specifically through school improvement plans, instructional leadership, supporting teacher motivation, promoting women as school leaders, and school leaders' professional development. It concludes by summarizing key messages.

Why school leadership matters for education outcomes

A UNESCO review of leadership policies and practices found that effective school leadership is key to large-scale sustainable education reform (UNESCO, 2016). While many factors contribute to education outcomes, evidence suggests that school leadership can improve teacher practices and student outcomes (Herman et al., 2017; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006). One study found that leadership accounted for a 27 percent increase in student

learning gains, second only to classroom teaching (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008). Having an effective school leader was also found to increase students' results by as much as two to seven months within a single school (Branch et al., 2013). 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). Despite this evidence, we know that many school leaders spend the bulk of their time focusing on administrative tasks. One study in Latin America and the Caribbean found that less than 25 percent of school leader time was spent on managing activities related to quality teaching and student learning (Adelman & Lemos, 2021).

Despite increasing evidence on the importance of school leaders, their role is often neglected in both policy and practice. Studies from the Global South emphasize the fact that many school leaders receive inadequate training and support – some as little as two days per year (Education Commission, 2019; Mangaleswarasharma, 2017; Vaillant, 2015). As a result, school leaders can be ill-equipped for their roles, lacking the necessary knowledge, skills, and professional competences required to lead schools.

Growing evidence points to strengthening pre- and in-service training programs for school leaders to ensure they feel equipped to lead and manage the many tasks they face. Yet, the success of school leader training depends on many factors, such as program design and implementation quality. Emerging research suggests that the following leadership training components can be effective at improving education outcomes: 1) better understanding and utilization of student-level data, especially learning data; 2) support for teacher development; and 3) coaching as a complement to traditional training models (Sampat et al., 2020). Given the importance of these elements on the impact of school leadership, this note explores each in the following sections. The first section focuses specifically on the use of School Improvement Plans (SIPs) as a tool to support school leader's use of data. The focus on SIPs was chosen given they are a core component of the Leaders in Teaching program. The second section explores school leader support for teacher development through instructional leadership and supporting teacher motivation and equity. Finally, the third section reviews evidence for enablers of strong school leader professional development, including coaching. For more information on coaching for school and middle leaders, please refer to: 'Leaders in Teaching Research Note: Evidence on coaching & mentoring for education leadership.'

Using School Improvement Plans to leverage data for improvement

When school leaders are empowered to lead school decision-making, learning outcomes can improve significantly (Bloom et al., 2015; Dhuey & Smith, 2018). Decentralized decision-making alongside system-wide accountability can provide supported autonomy for school leaders. Within decentralized systems, feedback mechanisms are driven by the generation and use of school-level data (McIntyre et al., 2021). Data-driven tools can enable more efficient tracking of learning and school performance and support school-led transformations. One commonly used tool to promote school-level data use is a school improvement plan (SIP) which maps school-specific planning to goals and trackable indicators. This section focuses on the enablers and inhibitors of SIPs to support school leaders in using data for improvement. For a more in-depth exploration of this topic, please refer to 'Leaders in Teaching Research Note: School leader use of data for school improvement.'

SIPs are often used to create a framework with clear expectations and benchmarks that encourage schools to focus on areas such as effective teaching methods and curriculum design. SIPs are usually produced annually or over several years in regular school review cycles. They can help identify areas of improvement and set goals, implement strategies to achieve plans, provide continuous monitoring, and assess outcomes, usually through key

performance indicators. SIPs utilize various sources of data at the student level (e.g., enrollment, dropouts, test scores, gender, disability); teacher level (e.g., attendance, gender, qualifications); and school level (e.g., facilities, staffing), and district level (e.g., performance against standards and comparison with other schools). Some SIP processes are used to bring together different education stakeholders (mostly regional or district leaders and school leaders but sometimes parents and community members) to agree, track, and revise their school goals. If not involved in development, SIPs are often shared with other stakeholders such as parents and community members (Chiong & Pearson, 2023).

In high-income countries, research suggests that the quality of a SIP is positively associated with student performance (Caputo & Rastelli, 2014; Chiong & Pearson, 2023; Fernandez, 2011; Huber & Conway, 2015). A study from the US found that even when controlling for additional factors, (e.g., per-student spending, student demographics, school level, and teacher qualification) there is a strong correlation between the quality of a SIP and student performance in math and English (Fernandez, 2011). A 2023 literature review on SIPs in high-income countries summed up the following five components of an effective plan: compelling mission and vision statements, specific and articulate goals and approaches, evidence-based content on the goals and approaches, data-driven and defined monitoring and evaluation processes with performance measures and timelines, and alignment between annual and multi-year plans (Chiong & Pearson, 2023).

While SIPs are often used to improve ongoing school management and accountability, many interventions that encourage the use of improvement plans do not focus on the sustainability of the plan or how to ensure school leaders have continuous support to use it. Several studies on the use of SIPs by school leaders found little to no impact on the behavior changes for school leaders after implementing a plan (Aturupane et al., 2022; Blimpo et al., 2015; Lassibille, 2016; Muralidharan & Singh, 2020). This is not surprising given very few school management interventions to date in low- and middle-income countries focus on the capacity of school leaders (Anand et al., 2023). In a recent Global School Leaders survey, 94 percent of school leaders indicated having a SIP, yet only 27 percent reviewed the SIP with their teachers, and less than half used student results to modify the SIP during the year (Priya & Sampat, 2021.)

Results from a study in Madagascar found that improved management techniques, including the use of school improvement plans, only improved when both school *and* district leaders were targeted (Lassibille, 2016). The program examined management techniques across six areas: pedagogy, student learning, instructional time management, administration, data, and local partnerships. Treatment groups included i) district leaders ii) district and sub-district leaders, and iii) district, sub-district, and school leaders. The intervention was designed to better understand how those at the middle-tier could enhance school leaders' management practices, and if training only those at higher levels, with the intention that information would be cascaded down, was enough to directly impact school leaders' behaviors and practices, or if each level of the management chain needed direct interventions. Beneficiaries at each level independently received tools, report cards, time for meetings to develop the school improvement plan, and training. Neither of the first two intervention groups (either just district leaders or the district and sub-district leaders) had any impact on school reform, **suggesting that school leaders need direct interventions to improve practices, and cannot solely rely on the support from those above them in the system, at least not initially.** The author speculated that **leadership change takes time and is most impactful when personnel from different levels in the system work together to address school reform**, instead of in isolation (Lassibille, 2016).

However, even when school leaders are provided support to use SIPs, other factors can influence the impact of SIPs. A 2007-2011 Ministry of Education decentralized school management and improvement plan program for school leaders and community members in The Gambia found no conclusive results on student performance, and only modest gains in student and teacher absenteeism after the program ended. Program beneficiaries received cascaded training on community participation, learner's welfare and school environment, curriculum management, teaching and learning resources, teachers' professional development, and leadership and management to develop a school improvement plan, with guidance from trainers and supervisors within the Ministry (Blimpo et al., 2015). Because the program aimed to create greater ownership of school improvement processes between school leaders, teachers, and community members, some level of decision-making shifted from school leaders to the community. However, the majority of school leaders (76 percent) disagreed with this approach due to capacity issues. The authors concluded that **in contexts where local capacity is already low (as measured by adult literacy rates) and does not get addressed, school management interventions, including SIPs, that involve parents and the community may actually be counterproductive** (Blimpo et al., 2015).

In India, despite the frequent use and timely submissions of school improvement plans, the program did not lead to more substantive changes in school functioning or student outcomes. The plans were supposed to help school leaders develop management targets and goals that they could incrementally achieve over three months. Evidence from the program indicates that **school leaders primarily viewed the program as a heavy workload and there was no follow-up to support continuous improvement or feedback** (Muralidharan & Singh, 2020). A study from Sierra Leone on the One Tablet Per School program, which focused on school leader data collection, but did not include SIPs, found that **delegating and sharing data collection responsibilities helped reduce the burden on any one person**, especially the school leader, and led to increased rates of data collection at the school level (McBurnie et al., 2021). Within high-income contexts, evidence on effective SIPs suggests **avoiding generalized language and focusing specifically on exactly what needs to be accomplished and who will accomplish it**. SIP experts recommend **no more than two to five goals to ensure people are not overwhelmed by the number of actions**, which inadvertently can create massive workloads, and to avoid demotivation if all results are not achieved (Chiong & Pearson, 2023).

A recent experimental study in Argentina suggests that school leadership interventions involving SIPs might require longer timeframes to show results. The program split schools into two groups, either receiving a diagnostic feedback report on the previous year's math and reading scores or a performance management training which included access to an online school improvement plan, in addition to the feedback report. The diagnostic report included the school's average score in each grade, the change in score by year, and comparisons to the average school in the area. Those in the management training group received 11 workshops over two years, led by the lead researchers. In the first year, the workshops focused on how to conduct classroom observations and provide teacher feedback, and the second year focused on effective teaching practices in math and language. The workshops also supported school leaders in developing a school improvement plan. During the intervention, there were no significant improvements in school performance and marginal improvements in school leaders increasing data access and sharing knowledge with parents and the community. However, at a two-year follow-up, the performance management schools showed halved dropout rates, increased pass rates, and reduced repetition rates, indicating that **change from leadership interventions, including SIPs, might not be observed until much later** (de Hoyos et al., 2020).

Supporting teacher development through instructional leadership and motivation

Teachers need support to ensure they can do their job effectively, overcome challenges, and stay motivated to come to school and teach. Evidence shows that school leaders are critical in supporting teacher development and motivation (Aslam & Rawal, 2019; VVOB Education for Development, 2018) which greatly influences student outcomes. This section reviews evidence on school leader support to teacher development through instructional leadership and teacher motivation, which have been shown to impact teacher practices.

Improving teacher practice through instructional leadership

The promotion of instructional leadership has risen in recent years as increasing evidence has shown that school leaders strongly impact improvement in teacher practices (OECD, 2016). Results from a small qualitative study in Ghana found that in schools where school leaders had received training and practiced instructional leadership, teaching and learning were more likely to improve (Donkor & Asante, 2016). Similar results have been found in several studies of secondary-level education systems across the African region (Anyanwu & Julius, 2018; Emiru, 2020; Musumi & Mkulu, 2020).

Evidence suggests that effective instructional leadership includes providing support for school and teaching improvement, promoting professional collaboration within and across schools, brokering knowledge to promote the use of evidence, providing local instructional direction and system alignment, testing innovations and scaling up promising practices (Education Development Trust & UNESCO IIEP, 2023). To improve instructional leadership, research shows that **school leaders should provide mentoring and instruction support for teachers, monitor student learning and school improvement, and buffer potential work distractions for teachers** (Day et al., 2020). Furthermore, **district support** can help school leaders strengthen instructional leadership by facilitating collaboration and creating opportunities for schools to make better use of data for instructional purposes (Mastercard Foundation, 2020).

A quantitative study from Ghana found that when secondary school leaders **supervised teacher lesson planning and delivery** there was a significant and positive impact on teacher's performance (Ampofo et al., 2019). In Kenya, a study of secondary school leaders who exhibited instructional leadership behavior were **more supportive of teachers and provided guidance on how to maintain high performance**. As a result, students' achievement improved. This was correlated significantly with the presence, guidance, motivation, and shared school vision by school leaders (Machoya et al., 2014).

Evidence shows that if school leaders have received proper training and are actively using instructional leadership practices, there should be **an increase in clear communication and encouragement, access to regular training opportunities and feedback, and frequent meetings with students, parents, and other community members, which generally leads to those schools performing better** (Anyanwu & Julius, 2018; Emiru, 2020; Musumi & Mkulu, 2020).

Furthermore, school leaders can be instrumental in promoting school equality and equity, with evidence showing positive impact on how vulnerable children receive instruction (Spillane et al., 2019). However, more research on how leadership can better enable teachers and teaching quality for inclusion is needed in low- and middle-income countries, with only a handful of case studies suggesting that strong leadership structures are crucial to fostering inclusive learning environments (Coburn, 2003; Gurr, 2023; Hilal & Akar, 2023). For example, in Kenya, a school

leader challenged the conventional leadership norms of hierarchy and authoritarianism in overseeing teachers. Instead, they promoted autonomy and collaboration, empowering teachers to jointly lead innovations. This approach aimed to ensure that every child in the school had equal opportunities to learn and participate in various school activities (Wanjiru, 2021).

Boosting teacher motivation and collaboration

Some of the most effective school leadership practices include monitoring, encouraging, and empowering teachers. When the opposite happens, lack of teacher motivation can sometimes result in unwillingness to participate, increases in teacher absence, time spent off task, and resistance to the system (Jackson, 2016). Thus, ensuring that teachers are motivated is of utmost importance to increasing student achievement.

In Ethiopia, a program found a significant positive relationship between leaders who **empowered others to lead and instituted cultures of collaboration** with teachers' job satisfaction in secondary schools (Tefaw, 2014). Similar results were found in Kenya, where school leaders' positive behaviors and practices - including, **acting as role models, encouraging creativity and innovation, attending to individual needs, and creating, modeling and communicating school-wide visions and goals** - had a significant effect on secondary school teachers' commitment to teaching (Sabwami, 2021). In Mozambique, a combination of leadership which empowered others and professional learning communities increased teacher commitment (Luyten & Bazo, 2019). Another study from Kenya suggests that school leaders who **consistently "recognize, praise, make effort to maintain close relationship, handle problems sympathetically, consult, make teaching and learning pleasant, accept suggestions and are confident in their teaching staff"** are likely to motivate the teaching staff to work hard towards the success of the students" (Kigosi et al., 2023). Studies from Tanzania, Egypt, and Nigeria concluded that the best-performing leaders were those who **focused on uplifting teachers through consistent professional development opportunities** (Ofoegbu et al., 2013; Salem, 2016; Urio, 2012).

A STiR Education review on the importance of intrinsic motivation highlights that **targeting intrinsic motivation for school leaders is also important when encouraging and supporting teacher motivation**. Yet, several enabling factors are required to do so. These include the **reduction of administrative work, access to data, improved decision-making, and peer learning communities** (Aslam & Rawal, 2019). In Nigeria, a study on a project that trained and equipped secondary school leaders to become master teacher trainers concluded that teachers who received this training eventually became more confident in their roles and acknowledged their contribution to student learning (Aslam & Rawal, 2019). Rwandan **school leaders who participated in peer learning communities (PLCs) believed that their attendance and knowledge gained in the PLCs had direct impacts on teacher intrinsic motivation**. School leaders mentioned increased autonomy and responsibility for teachers, increased collaboration, and teachers feeling more comfortable sharing opinions and receiving feedback. Teachers within these schools mentioned that they had improved relationships with their school leaders and began seeing them in a "supporting and counseling role" as opposed to their previous perceptions of school leaders as "dictators" or "police officers" (VVOB Education for Development & Education Development Trust, 2017).

Promoting equity in school leadership and facilitating strong professional development

In many countries women tend to represent the majority of the teaching workforce, yet they remain largely under-represented in leadership positions. Given this disparity and growing evidence suggesting that female leaders specifically have a positive impact on education outcomes, understanding how to promote equity in school leadership requires more attention from researchers, practitioners and governments. One approach is ensuring women have access to professional development opportunities. However, professional development is often lacking for all school leaders. We know school leaders need strong professional development to support teachers and learners and run their schools efficiently. They often take on many different roles in a school without the proper training to do so. Both pre- and in-service professional development is needed to help them manage and prioritize their responsibilities and provide the support they need to lead and sustain change in their schools.

Promoting the role of female school leaders

Emerging evidence points to a positive association between female leaders in education and student performance. Across 14 Francophone African countries, learning outcomes for primary school students were higher in female-led schools than in male-led schools (PASEC-CONFEMEN, 2020). This was also the case in Kenya, where oral reading fluency scores in English and Kiswahili were higher for students in female-led schools (Freudenberger & Davis, 2017). In a study spanning 48 countries, female school leaders were more likely to report using instructional leadership than men and indicated higher levels of support, collaboration, motivation, and encouragement for their teachers (OECD, 2020).

Although women tend to make up the majority of the teaching workforce in many countries, they remain largely under-represented in school leadership. A recent report from UNICEF showed that the share of women among primary school leaders in six African countries is very low, ranging from 9 per cent to 21 per cent (Bergmann, Conto & Brossard, 2022). Research on this issue has grown substantially in recent years as countries look to increase the number of women in leadership positions, but more importantly to better understand why barriers remain.

In Tanzania, findings suggest:

“[A]t the individual level, **family responsibilities**, and rejecting the post due to **poor social services in rural areas**, deter women from taking leadership posts. At the organizational level, the **lack of transparent procedures for recommending, recruiting, and appointing heads** also contributes to poorer access for women. At the societal level, **negative perceptions and stereotypes of female leaders, conservative expectations** that women should be in the private domain, rather than in professional and public roles, and deep-seated beliefs in some rural areas pertaining to issues such as witchcraft, at times resulted in **physical risk and exploitation of female leaders**” (Mbpera, 2015).

A small qualitative study on female secondary school heads in Zimbabwe mentioned that female school leaders often felt little there was **little effort to include them in the communities where they worked** as well as **few training opportunities** to increase their skill sets (Dzimiri & Jita, 2022).

At the global level, unpacking female school leaders’ profiles (such as years of experience or education level) would contribute to a better understanding of how promotion happens. Yet, this requires **improving data (both**

census and assessments) availability and utilization on school leaders' gender to inform policy and interventions (Bergmann et al., 2022). Another approach that has been used to promote female school leadership involves **identifying female teachers interested in taking on leadership roles and ensuring that they have the support to participate in training programs** (Education Development Trust, 2022). In some instances, these training programs have specifically targeted aspiring female leaders to prepare them for the role and, as a result, developed **networks of female school leaders to provide ongoing peer support, act as role models, and work with community leaders to normalize women's leadership** (O'Neil & Plank, 2015). Additionally, **baseline quotas and incentives**, such as career guarantees for accompanying spouses and housing and transportation support, can be used to ensure that women have equal opportunities to lead (Naylor et al., 2019).

Strengthening professional development for school leaders

School leaders often lack leadership skills, as a significant portion transition into leadership roles from prior teaching positions without formal induction or additional training. For example, in Ethiopia, many school leaders do not receive any professional training when they take the position or during their tenure - with over 40 percent reporting never receiving any in-service training. This issue is compounded by the challenge of school leader appointments that are often not based on an individual's leadership qualities or previous leadership experience (Ministry of Education Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia & Global Partnership for Education, 2023).

A multi-country study exploring the relationship between school leader qualifications and student achievement, found that **prior experience in school management positions, targeted school leadership training, and peer community networks had small but statistically significant associations with student outcomes, whereas general level of education and years of experience had no impact**. The largest impact seen was related to training. Pre-service school leadership training led to an increase in reading and science scores (20.8- and 22.97-point increases respectively), and in-service training increased scores in math, reading and science (22.1-, 26.3-, and a 28.4-point respectively). For those who received both pre- and in-service training, the impact was the largest across all three subjects (25.7-, 27-, and 29.6-point increases) (Gümüş et al., 2024).

Internal monitoring results from the first two cohorts of the Instructional Leadership Institute in South Africa found that training for current and aspiring school leaders has had positive impacts on primary grades reading and math results across high- and low-performing schools, some of which showed pass rate gains of over 20 percentage points. A randomized control trial is currently being conducted on the third cohort to independently assess the program's effectiveness (EPH, n.d.).

Several leadership programs in the African region are finding ways to strengthen opportunities for those already in the system via continuous professional development. Examples include the Advanced Certificate in Education – School Management and Leadership in South Africa, and Leading, Teaching and Learning Together and Building Learning Foundations, both from Rwanda. Many of these programs provide certificate-level training to current school leaders to strengthen skills, coupled with mentorship and coaching support. These programs are designed so that school leaders who go through the programs can then share their learning with peers. Findings from these programs highlight that school leaders who have received these trainings work in schools where teaching practices and learning outcomes are improving (FCDO, 2021; Msila, 2012; Three Stones International, 2020; University of Cambridge, n.d.). For more information on these programs please refer to the "Leaders in Teaching Research Note: Evidence on coaching and mentoring for education leadership."

However, even where professional development does exist for school leaders, it is often not effective at changing school leader behaviors or impacting teaching and learning. While there is little research on characteristics of high-quality professional development for school leaders in low resource contexts, a recent Global School Leaders review suggests that key components include **content that is focused on the school leader's role in student success and an approach that couples practice-based content with individualized coaching support.**

While professional development models tend to focus on training workshops, there has been an increase in innovative training and support mechanisms, and some evidence that coaching can complement traditional training. Much of the evidence on coaching comes from research on coaching for teachers, and the **use of coaching and mentoring** for school leaders remains relatively underexplored in the education literature for low- and middle-income countries (Anderson, 1989; Blackwood et al., 2009; Klar et al., 2020). Research from teacher coaching suggests that coaching should aim to be “individualized, intensive, sustained, context-specific, and focused” (Kraft et al., 2018). In both the research on teacher and school leaders, **peer learning for professional development** – particularly professional learning communities or communities of practice – are showing promising results, and mentoring or coaching are often included as part these models (Three Stones International, 2020; Tournier et al., 2023). For a deeper dive into the use of coaching for school leaders, please see the ‘Leaders in Teaching Research Note: Evidence of coaching and mentoring for education leadership.’

Conclusion

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. Evidence shows that effective school leadership includes a focus on leveraging data for school improvement, focusing on instructional leadership, promoting teacher motivation, and supporting gender equity in school leadership. Ensuring that school leaders themselves have the proper professional development is key to their leading successfully. The evidence around these practices for secondary school leadership is growing. Key takeaways for each include:

- Evidence shows that effective use of SIPs requires sustained engagement and support for school leaders using them.
- SIPs may shift power dynamics and the locus of decision making (especially if parents and communities are involved), creating resistance from school leaders or challenges where parent and community capacity is low and goes unaddressed.
- SIPs can be perceived as creating additional workload to existing responsibilities and not as a way to support their work. To help address this, studies from high-income contexts suggest follow up is needed and plans that include very specific language on what exactly needs to be accomplished and who will accomplish it. It is also recommended that no more than two to five goals be included to ensure leaders are not overwhelmed by the number of actions or disheartened by lagging results. If the SIPs include data collection at the school level, sharing collection responsibilities among staff can help alleviate overload.
- Instructional leadership practices can include serving as a role model, providing consistent professional development opportunities, supporting creativity and innovation, ensuring that all their teachers needs are met and supported, and communicating school-wide visions and goals. Supervising teacher lesson planning and delivery as well as monitoring student learning are key.

- Some evidence suggests that school leaders need direct training (as opposed to cascade models) to improve instructional leadership practices, and one study found greater impact when school leaders work together with actors at different levels of the system.
- Harnessing the intrinsic motivation of school leaders is also important to help them encourage and support teacher motivation. Evidence shows that the reduction of administrative work and access to data and peer learning communities can support school leader motivation.
- Providing targeted opportunities at different stages, such as recruitment or training, can ensure that women are able to enter and stay in the profession. Networks of female school leaders can provide ongoing peer support, act as role models, and work with community leaders to normalize women's leadership.
- Policy strategies such as baseline quotas and incentives (career guarantees for accompanying spouses and housing and transportation support), can be used promote equal opportunities for women to lead.
- Many school leaders enter their roles without training and serve as school leaders with limited professional development opportunities. Yet, professional development support is necessary for preparing school leaders to provide support for teacher development and enact their wider responsibilities.
- Emerging evidence suggests that professional development support for school leaders should include content that is focused on the school leader's role in student success and a mode of delivery that couples practice-based content with individualized coaching support.

Recommendations for Leaders in Teaching

The Leaders in Teaching program could consider several of the key messages from this note in implementing the use of School Improvement Plans and the leadership coaching component for regional education offices, including: ensuring SIPs have very specific language on what needs to be done and do not include more than give overarching goals; training other staff in the school to support data collection; providing sustained engagement and support for school leaders to monitor and adapt SIPs; communicating the importance of pedagogical or instructional leadership to school leaders and ensuring they know that their time should not be primarily focused on administrative responsibilities; providing targeted professional development opportunities to female teachers and school leaders at different stages, such as recruitment or training.

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