What Effective School Principals Do

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Synthesis Report

RESEARCH REPORT

How Principals Affect Students and Schools

A Systematic Synthesis of Two Decades of Research

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Commissioned by
Wallace

- The Wallace Foundation commissioned us to systematically review what the field has learned empirically about the connection between school principals and student achievement over the last 20 years

- Two years of work to synthesize the best available evidence

www.wallacefoundation.org/principalsynthesis
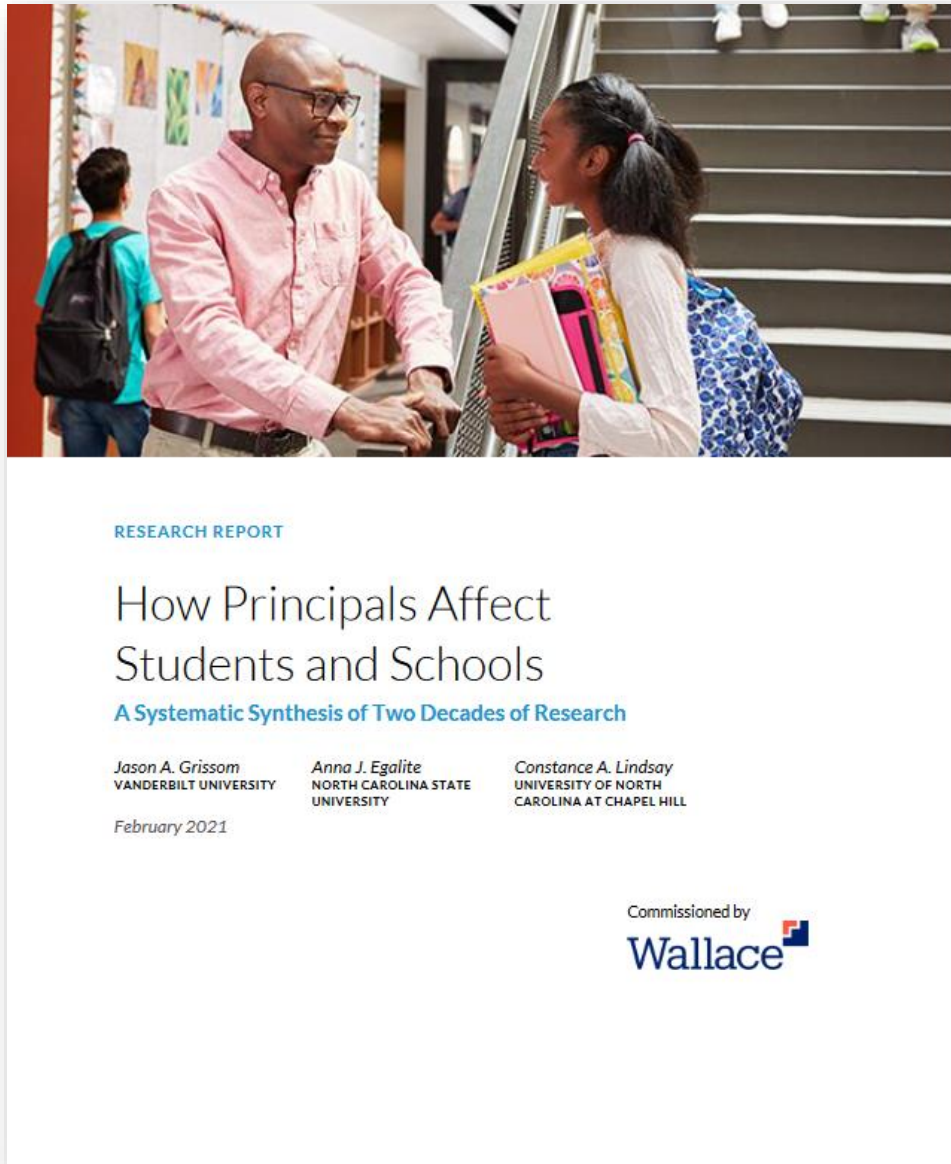
Today

1. What did we learn?

2. What do our conclusions mean for school leadership practice?

3. What direction do our conclusions suggest for decision-makers in educational leadership?

Two Primary Research Questions

1 How much do principals contribute to student achievement and other school outcomes?

2 What matters in the role of principal? What are the skills and practices of effective principals?

- Systematic search of research databases (4,832 studies)
- Screened for relevance, rigor, and appropriate methods
- Coded and synthesized results (219 studies)

A note on our research base

- All of the studies we reviewed were conducted in the United States, but we expect that much of what we learned translates to other contexts

- Also, although we focused specifically on principals, our results are perhaps better conceptualized as applying to leadership teams in schools

What Did We Learn?

Two Major Conclusions

1. High-quality school leadership is essential, with important measurable impacts on what students learn at school.

2. High-quality school leadership practice has at least four major components.

Conclusion 1: High-quality school leadership is essential, with important measurable impacts on what students learn at school.
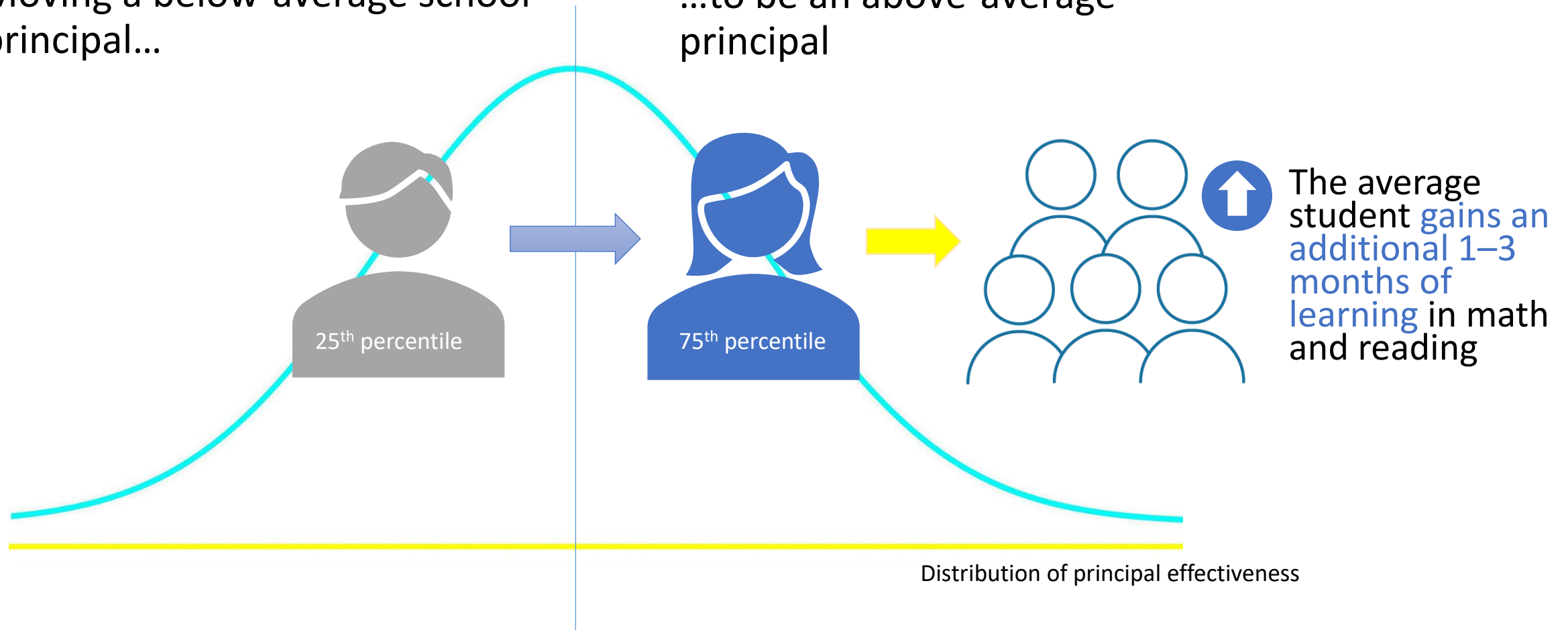
How do we know?

- We identified 6 high-quality studies using longitudinal administrative data from states or large school districts.
  - Together, studies use data from more than 22,000 principals

- Following many principals and schools over time, these studies use advanced statistical methods that can tease out principals' effects on student achievement growth from other school or community factors.

- In all six studies, students learned substantially more in both math and reading when the school had an effective principal.

# Magnitude

Moving a below-average school principal…

…to be an above-average principal

25th percentile

75th percentile

The average student gains an additional 1–3 months of learning in math and reading

Distribution of principal effectiveness

Leaders' effects are:

- Large in magnitude

- Large in scope
  - Principals' effects are felt by all students in a school

- Not just limited to achievement
  - Also find significant effects on student absenteeism, teacher working conditions, and teacher retention (especially among effective teachers)
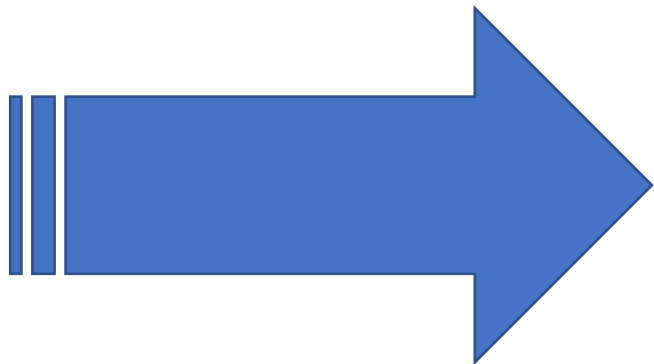
It is difficult to envision an investment with a higher ceiling on its potential return than a successful effort to improve school leadership.

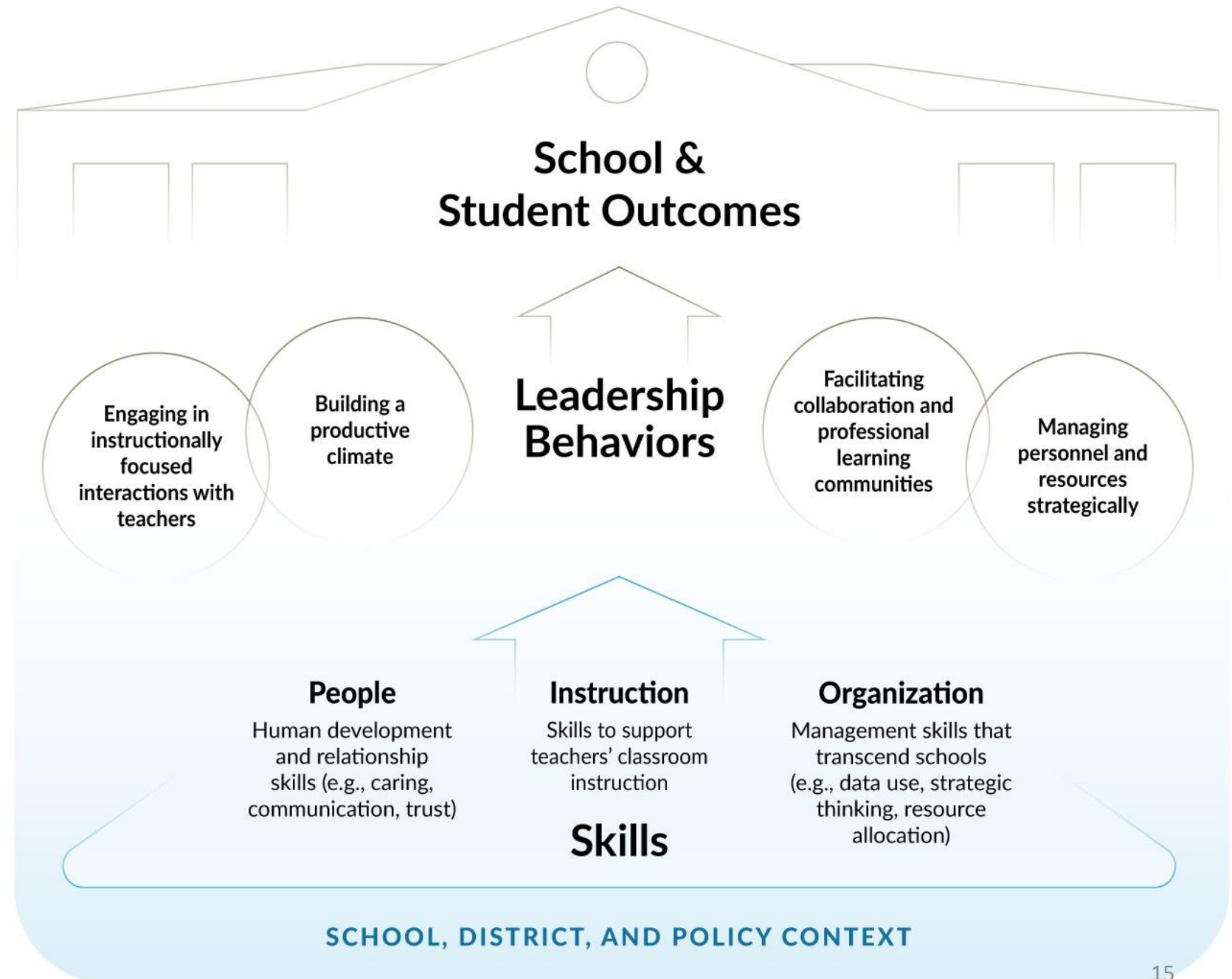<u>Conclusion 2</u>: High-quality school leadership practice has at least four major components.

Our synthesis of the research suggests that principals need a broad base of skills for school success.

People

Human development and relationship skills (e.g., caring, communication, trust)

Instruction

Skills to support teachers' classroom instruction

Skills

Organization

Management skills that transcend schools (e.g., data use, strategic thinking, resource allocation)

These skills support 4 domains of high-leverage behaviors or practices.

Engaging in instructionally focused interactions with teachers

Building a productive climate

Leadership Behaviors

Facilitating collaboration and professional learning communities

Managing personnel and resources strategically

People
Human development and relationship skills (e.g., caring, communication, trust)

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Skills to support teachers' classroom instruction

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Skills

Principals who consistently engage in these behaviors see more positive outcomes.

School & Student Outcomes

Leadership Behaviors

- Engaging in instructionally focused interactions with teachers
- Building a productive climate
- Facilitating collaboration and professional learning communities
- Managing personnel and resources strategically

People
Human development and relationship skills (e.g., caring, communication, trust)

Instruction
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Skills

SCHOOL, DISTRICT, AND POLICY CONTEXT

Engaging in instructionally focused interactions with teachers

Building a productive climate

Leadership Behaviors

Facilitating collaboration and professional learning communities

Managing personnel and resources strategically

Engaging in instructionally focused interactions with teachers

Effective leadership teams use data to support teacher instruction.

1. Conducting high-quality teacher observations based on clear instructional standards or expectations
   - Standards give principals and teachers common language for talking about instruction

2. Analyzing student learning data

3. Using evidence to inform feedback, coaching, and professional learning to build teacher capacity
   - Leadership teams build systems for frequent, actionable feedback grounded in evidence
   - Teacher needs drive professional learning opportunities

Both are important evidence sources!

Building a productive climate

Effective leadership teams build school climates where everyone's focus is teaching and learning.

- Key climate markers
  - Trust
  - Sense of efficacy and academic optimism
  - Orientation toward organizational learning and continuous improvement

- Leaders' climate work is multifaceted and context-specific but includes:
  - Ongoing, evidence-based diagnosis of the school's climate needs
  - Caring, recognizing, and valuing
  - Building trust via transparency
  - Empowering teachers
  - Engaging families and other partners in the work of the school

Facilitating collaboration and professional learning communities

Effective leadership teams help teachers work together intentionally.

- Evidence shows that teachers grow and students learn more when teachers work together authentically to improve practice and support student learning, guided by data.

- Leaders take proactive steps to help teachers work together
  - Establishing common goals for collaboration
  - Setting aside time (or structuring time) for collaboration
  - Training on and modeling collaboration (it does not happen by accident)
  - Emphasizing collaboration as a part of the school's work culture

Managing personnel and resources strategically

Effective leadership teams manage their resources towards their goals.

- Strategic staffing and allocation of other resources
  - Strategic management of the budget
  - Strategic allocation of time to pursue school goals (e.g., instructional)
  - Strategic management of personnel

- Personnel management especially important
  - Data-rich hiring processes that privilege teacher effectiveness information
  - Equitable placement → ensuring low achievers have best teachers
  - Strategic retention that focuses on keeping high-performing teachers
    - And perhaps not keeping consistently low-performing teachers

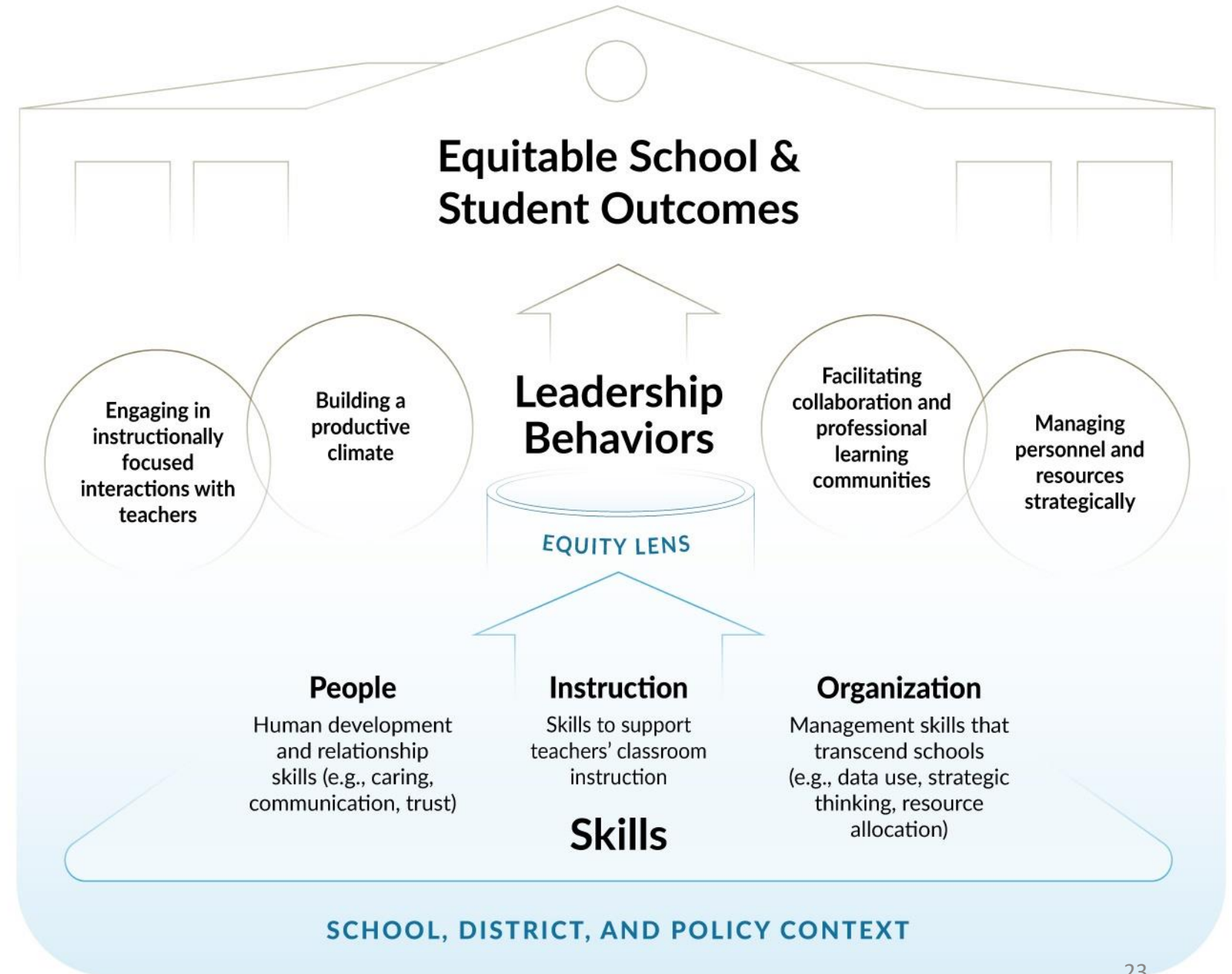# A framework for principal learning
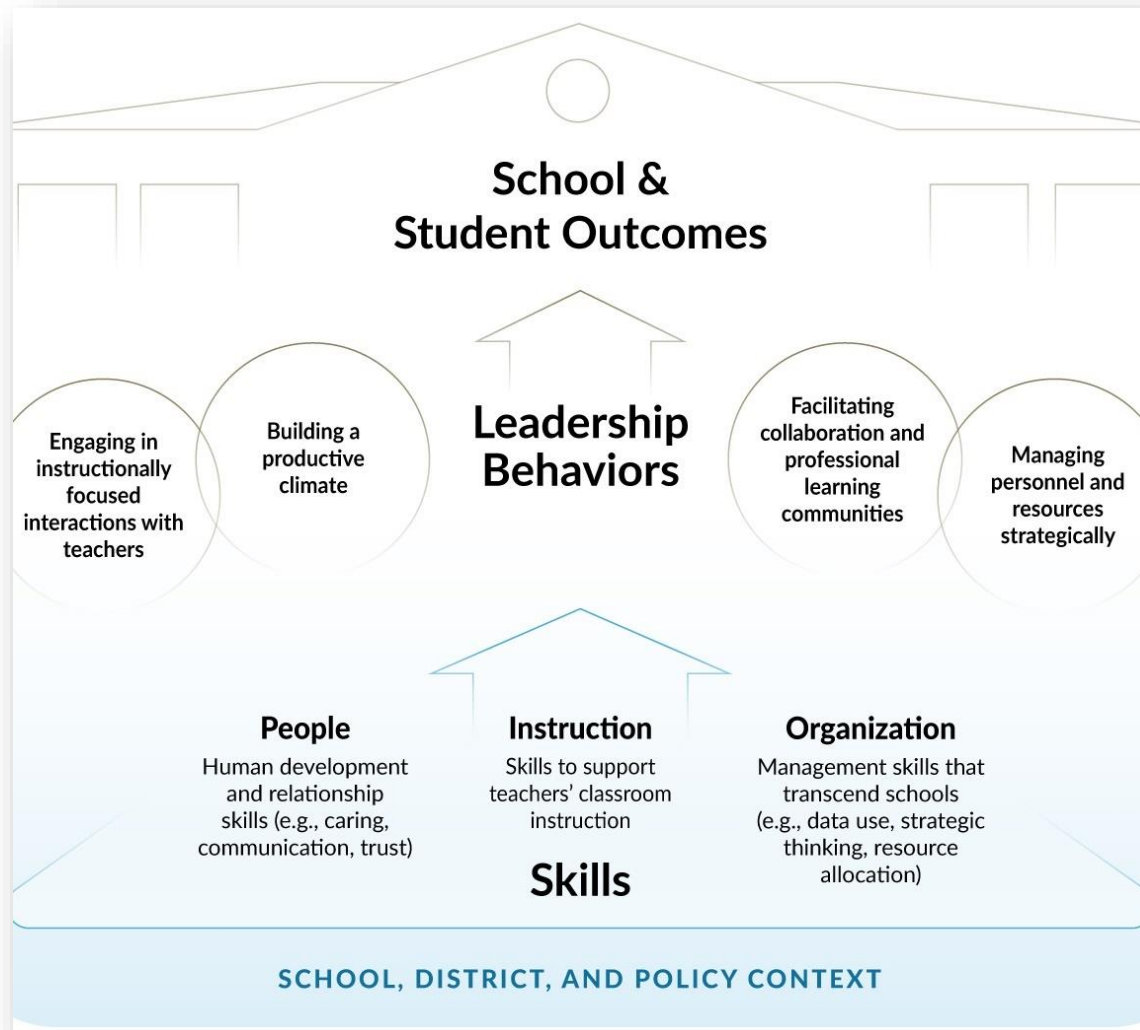
- School leaders need many tools in their toolkit

- Building that toolkit requires focus for principal professional learning and support

- Best evidence we have from 200 published studies directs us to these focus areas
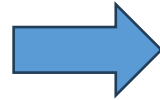
Taking an equity perspective

- We also highlight how principals can have impacts on key student populations, including low-income students and students with special educational needs

- Channels are both direct and indirect
  - Direct: Pursuing equity in student discipline
  - Indirect: Working with teachers to implement culturally responsive teaching practices, purposefully engaging a diverse range of families in the school's work

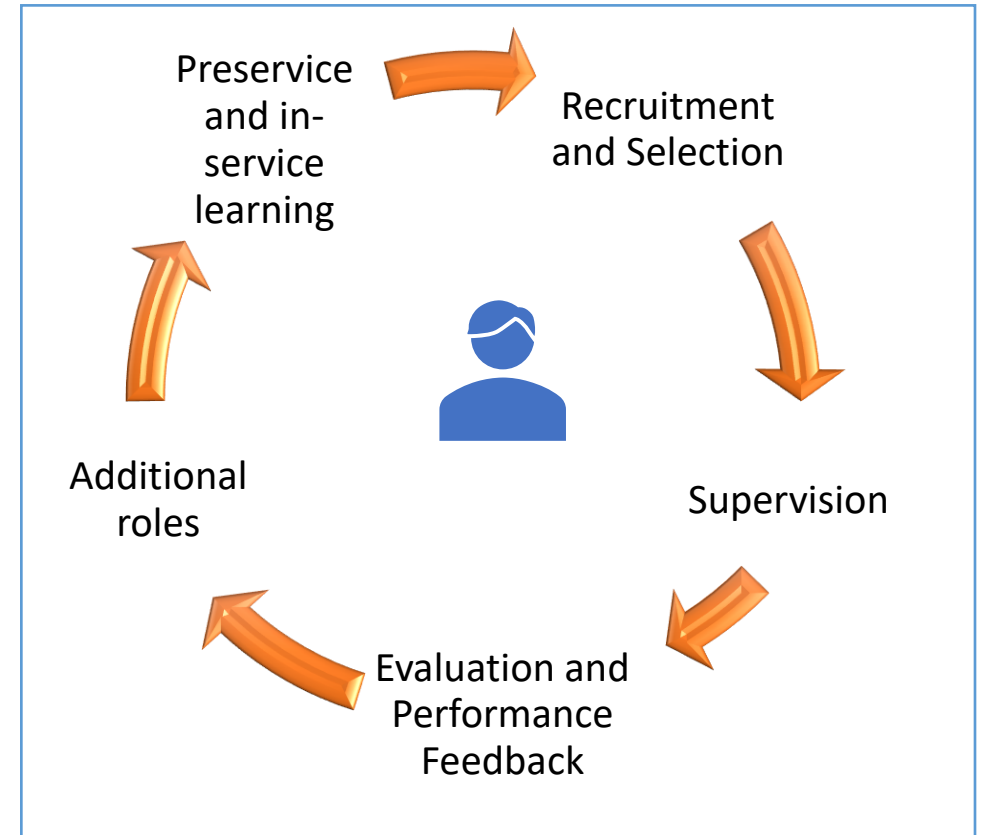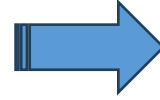- Suggests that approaching leadership work with an equity lens can promote more equitable school outcomes

Centering equity in school leadership

Equitable School & Student Outcomes

Leadership Behaviors

- Engaging in instructionally focused interactions with teachers
- Building a productive climate
- Facilitating collaboration and professional learning communities
- Managing personnel and resources strategically

EQUITY LENS

Skills

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SCHOOL, DISTRICT, AND POLICY CONTEXT

Using the framework to create leader support systems

Standards that establish <u>collective vision</u> for high-quality leadership

Preservice and in-service learning → Recruitment and Selection → Supervision → Evaluation and Performance Feedback → Additional roles →

Implications

1. **Invest in school leaders**

   We need renewed attention to and investment in strategies for cultivating, selecting, preparing, and supporting a high-quality principal workforce.

2. **Focus on high-leverage skills and behaviors**

   Preservice preparation programs, pipeline initiatives, and in-service learning can have more positive impacts by focusing on high-leverage skill and behavior areas.

3. **Support leaders to pursue equity**

   Principals can be effective and pursue equity at the same time—in fact, goals of "effective" and "equitable" often point to the same practices.

Questions and Discussion

Full report available at
www.wallacefoundation.org/principalsynthesis