



Wisconsin  
Evaluation  
Collaborative

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# Wisconsin Principal Evaluation and Professional Learning Study: Part I



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# Information

## About the Wisconsin Evaluation Collaborative

The Wisconsin Evaluation Collaborative (WEC) is housed at the Wisconsin Center for Education Research (WCER) at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. WEC's team of evaluators supports youth-serving organizations and initiatives through culturally responsive and rigorous program evaluation. Learn more at <http://www.wec.wceruw.org>.

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## Section I

# Introduction

# Introduction

Principal leadership is a pivotal factor for school performance. Research points to the influential role principals play in shaping productive school organizations by setting and monitoring expectations, maintaining a rigorous curriculum, building a shared mission and vision, supporting educator development, and distributing leadership, among other roles (Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Leithwood et al., 2004; Kruger et al., 2007; Quinn, 2002). Given the importance of principal leadership, programs at the federal, state, and local levels (e.g., [Title II, Part A of the Every Student Succeeds Act](#)) and funded by philanthropic organizations (e.g., [The Wallace Foundation](#) school leadership and principal pipeline work) have supported identifying, developing, and retaining school leaders. Despite increased attention to school leadership, principal professional learning still represents an area of limited attention in research and program evaluation. Studies connecting principal evaluation to professional learning are rarer still.

The Wisconsin Principal Evaluation and Professional Learning Study is designed to understand how principals are evaluated and supported within the context of the Wisconsin Educator Effectiveness System five years after statewide implementation. This study adds to a growing evaluation research base on the principals' role in the state Educator Effectiveness System, which includes their responsibility for engaging in and overseeing teacher evaluation within their schools as well as participating in their own leadership performance evaluation. One study demonstrated evidence of concurrent validity of principal evaluation ratings (Jones, Gillman, Kimball, & Rainey, 2017) based on teacher survey responses on perceptions of principal effectiveness and principal supervisor ratings of principal performance. A second study focused on principal

evaluation results as a measure of principal quality to examine equitable distribution of leadership (Jones & Gilman, 2018a). Using results from the Wisconsin Educator Development Support and Retention (WEDSR) Survey, a third study examined principal perceptions of the teacher evaluation process and evaluator training provided to them (Jones & Gilman, 2018b). Importantly, the study found that principals who reported receiving training on teacher feedback were more confident the process would result in improved instructional practice. Collectively, these studies provide evidence of principal evaluation measurement quality, potential use of results to inform questions of educational equity, and suggest how training may improve principals' role in teacher feedback. A fourth, longitudinal study, explored how school leadership and district practices emphasized a learning-centered approach to teacher evaluation ([Wisconsin Teacher Learning-Centered Evaluation Study](#)). The current study draws on the structure and lessons from the Teacher Learning-Centered Evaluation Study.

## Figure I

### Major Activities in the Principal Educator Effectiveness System



Source: Department of Public Instruction User Guide for Principals, Principal Supervisors, Coaches (2018)

Principal evaluation in Wisconsin mirrors the statewide teacher evaluation process. The Department of Public Instruction (DPI) intentionally developed the Educator Effectiveness (EE) System with similar processes for teachers and principals in order to align improvement efforts. As shown in Figure I above, principals develop and monitor goals, meet with their evaluator to discuss goals and observations, and receive feedback from evaluators and peers on their professional practice. The principal evaluation process is set up to be cyclical with, at minimum, one summary year and two supporting years. Districts have discretion to conduct the evaluation cycle on a shorter time frame by applying a one year or two year cycle.

The Wisconsin EE System policy guide and related user manuals provide information on required processes and local flexibilities. Districts have discretion to use the state-adopted principal professional practice model or an alternate model approved as equivalent. About 60% of Wisconsin districts use the state-adopted leadership framework, the Wisconsin Framework for Principal Leadership (WFPL). The WFPL was developed by Wisconsin educators and other stakeholders (e.g., professional association staff and higher education faculty) through a process facilitated by the Wisconsin Center for Education Research. Most districts selecting an equivalent model use the School Administrator Performance Evaluation System (SAPES) developed by the Cooperative Educational Service Agency (CESA) 6. Principals in the SAPES model participate in most of the same evaluation activities as with the state model. The primary differences include use of an annual survey of teachers, students, or parents/caregivers to help educators identify goals, and use of the leadership framework based on the work of James Stronge (Stronge, et al., 2013).

Both the DPI and CESA 6 models emphasize a learning-centered approach to evaluation that includes five principles: 1) a context of trust that encourages risk-taking and learning from mistakes; 2) a common model of effective practice (i.e., WFPL, CESA 6 SAPES) to center conversations about school leadership and inform professional learning within and outside the evaluation context; 3) educator-developed goals that are regularly referenced to frame the evaluation process; 4) cycles of continuous improvement guided by specific and timely feedback to drive practice; and 5) integration of evaluation practices with other school and district improvement strategies.<sup>1</sup>

We designed the study to address the following question: *How are Wisconsin school districts supporting principal leadership development within and outside the context of the Educator Effectiveness System?* The study is based on interviews with principals from 18 districts across the state. The focus is on understanding how districts implemented evaluation and development processes, and the contexts within which these were more or less likely to support principal development and organizational improvement.

To select study participants, we drew on the principal version of the WEDSR survey, which aims to assess how teachers and administrators experience the educator evaluation process in their schools and districts. We selected from principals who volunteered on the survey to provide follow up information on their evaluation experiences. We sought principals from different districts across the state and who had different impressions of principal evaluation utility, and the principals were grouped in top quintile and bottom quintile groups based on a set of survey items related to their evaluation experiences. Principals in the top quintile group responded more positively to questions of evaluation implementation, integration and impact compared to principals in the bottom quintile group. Ultimately, the selection criteria resulted in 18 principals from 10

<sup>1</sup> See teacher or principal evaluation user guide for elaboration on 5 principles and related research: <https://dpi.wi.gov/sites/default/files/imce/ee/pdf/principalprocessmanual.pdf>



of the regional Cooperative Educational Service Agencies.<sup>2</sup> Appendix A includes additional detail on the sampling approach and the interview protocol used in the study.

We next describe study findings on how principal evaluation is conducted; how the process informs principal professional learning; the extent to which principal evaluation activities align with and support district and school priorities; and identify other professional learning principals engage in. The study concludes with a discussion of implications for local and state stakeholders and suggestions for how principal evaluation can better represent a professional learning system.

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<sup>2</sup> Districts in Wisconsin are grouped into Cooperative Educational Service Agencies (CESAs) based on their location. There are 12 CESAs across the state. CESAs provide a range of outreach services and supports to school districts in each region.

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## Section 3

# Findings

We report next on study findings in three areas: 1) local evaluation processes, 2) how principal evaluation systems inform principal professional learning and organizational improvement strategies, and 3) other professional learning in which principals are engaged.

## Local Principal Evaluation Processes

We first wanted to learn about the basic aspects of the principal evaluation process as experienced by the principals. Specifically, we asked principals to describe the information they received about their evaluation process from their district, what the process entailed, observations of their professional practice and other evidence collection, feedback received from their supervisors, and use of the relevant principal framework standards.

### District Educator Effectiveness Information

According to the principal evaluation [manual](#) and the Educator Effectiveness policy [guidance](#), principals are to be provided information about the evaluation process at the beginning of their Educator Effectiveness cycle. This information is intended to help them understand the evaluation goal setting process, data, feedback discussions, and use of results<sup>3</sup>.

Many principals described district information at the beginning of the evaluation cycle as largely informal, with considerable variation by district. The information was not typically shared through a separate orientation meeting, but instead was conveyed through frequent and informal interactions between the principals and their supervisors. This finding might be explained by variation in supervisors' and principals' experience with the system since the 2014-15 state implementation and their familiarity with the required steps. Principals shared the different ways in which they understood their district's evaluation expectations and were familiar with the main features of the local principal evaluation process. Two principals,

however, said that their district administrators barely engaged with them on any principal evaluation discussions and did not conduct evaluation procedures with fidelity. In some cases, principals mentioned that while the evaluation process for teachers and principals should be nearly identical, their supervisor did not pursue all of the required elements, as we learned further through evaluation process descriptions.

### Evaluation Process

Basic steps for principal evaluation were similar across districts. With a couple of exceptions, the process involved the following: a self-review using the principal professional practice framework; goal-setting for leadership practice and school learning objectives (SLOs)<sup>4</sup>; observations conducted by the principal's supervisor (commonly the superintendent); and conversations between principals and their supervisors about principal practice. In some cases, these conversations occurred multiple times over the course of the year.

Some degree of variation in these steps and components were observed based on the district and their selected Educator Effectiveness model. For instance, principals in districts using the CESA 6 SAPES model described using a documentation log<sup>5</sup> and teacher or school stakeholder survey. The state principal evaluation model does not require a documentation log or stakeholder survey. Regardless of the model, the EE System is designed for the principal evaluation process to mirror the teacher process, which study participants affirmed. As one principal said, "Basically we have the same criteria as set for our teachers – completing a self-review, establishing SLOs, and then the observations."

3 The main requirements are the same for districts using the CESA 6 EP/SAPES principal evaluation model. The SAPES guidebook is linked for reference: <https://epsupport.cesa6.org/hc/en-us/articles/216118327-SAPES-Guidebook->

4 A School Learning Objective is a required component of an administrator's annual Educator Effectiveness Plan (EEP). See <https://dpi.wi.gov/ee/training-tools/ee-tools/writing-quality-student-school-learning-objectives>.

5 Although the state model does not require a documentation log per se, artifacts are expected to be collected and used to provide evidence of practice in relation to the WFPL components as well as to inform feedback. Surveys are optional.

Overall, most participants saw the potential value in the principal evaluation process. As one principal stated,

“...I know [with] evaluations, it’s always something people dread. But if people see the meaning behind them, that they are useful and just that expectation to do them, people who are really growth-minded appreciate them and appreciate the structure that’s in place and how to use it, and I think it’s a good process [that] really allows you to reflect and move forward.”

Principals with positive opinions of the process in their school or district referred to it as “fair” or “transparent” and indicated that participation was “collaborative” and “reflective.” According to one principal, for example, it was “fully laid out for us exactly what the evaluation process will look like.” Additionally, several mentioned that they meet with their supervisors to review data as part of their evaluation. Another observed that when the system was first launched, implementation focused primarily on paperwork, and that “... has gotten much less, and now it’s truly about having the conversations with the supervisor, whether that’s the teachers and I or my superintendent and myself. It’s the process and the conversations that are much more meaningful.”

Conversely, other principals had a more negative view of how their district engaged with them in the principal evaluation process. Often, these principals were in districts where system implementation appeared weaker, based on responses on the WEDSR survey (those in the bottom quintile group). In some cases, the principals reported that teacher evaluation took precedence over principal evaluation. For example, one principal stated that the teacher evaluation system was “very structured,” whereas the principal evaluation system is “uncharted.” A different principal said the focus in their district is on teacher evaluation, and by comparison principal evaluation is “very, very informal.” Others indicated that their superintendents were minimally engaged in the principal evaluation process and provided little feedback on principal performance.

One principal, in describing the lack of evaluation interactions with their supervisor, stated that the superintendent did not implement the system with fidelity, “need[ed] training on it,” and “didn’t have a clue on what they are supposed to be doing.” Another principal noted that in their district there have been four superintendents in

seven years, and that this turnover had made the principal evaluation process “haphazard.” Additionally, this principal explained that the evaluation represents “an afterthought,” and that there is not any “intentional” planning or discussion.

### Principal observations and evidence collection

Observations are a key source of information to help provide evidence of leadership practice as well as context for feedback. In contrast to teacher observations, which primarily occur during classroom activities, principal observations can occur in different venues. In our study, principals shared that their observations did indeed occur in different settings, tended to be less formal than classroom observations for teachers, and varied in frequency.

Principals who reported being observed regularly indicated that their supervisor conducted observations in multiple settings. These included weekly staff meetings, Professional Learning Community (PLC) meetings, or other similar team meetings. Others noted that their superintendent observed them during formal and informal walk-throughs, planned and unplanned visits, or announced and unannounced observations. In one school, the principal stated that the visits “are basically unannounced, just observations he does when he comes and visits our school, and he’s a pretty frequent visitor. We are pretty comfortable with just letting him observe us anytime.” In another school, the superintendent shadowed a principal for a couple of hours when the principal was working with staff content groups, as well as during grade-level staff meetings.

Several principals in bottom quintile districts stated that they were never formally observed. For one, the observation took place in the principal’s office at the end of the school year, and the principal received only a list of bullet points on what was observed, without feedback or improvement suggestions. Another reported receiving no observation or feedback. Another had an end-of-year evaluation that did not include a pre- or post-observation meeting, which led the principal to feel that the superintendent was missing important aspects of leadership practice. These principals mentioned that they ended up working with colleagues (other principals, assistant principals, or associate principals), ostensibly to fill gaps left by a lack of direct superintendent support and feedback.

Proximity and district size could help explain the frequency and nature of the observation process, as principals who worked in or near the same building as the superintendent reported having more frequent and informal observations and conversations compared to those whose schools were farther away from the superintendent.

Other evaluation evidence referenced included school improvement plans (SIPs) and district plans. One principal explicitly discussed connecting SLOs and PPGs to the SIP, and another discussed using various metrics, as well as the district's strategic and growth plans, in data review exercises. Principals in some smaller districts indicated that they don't typically engage in much documentation or evidence; as one noted, "we don't need a lot of documents... [the superintendent] sees me every day so we can work out any issues."

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**"I always tell my teachers now, I worked hard for 16 years as a teacher, but I don't ever think I did the right work. I have no idea if I did the right work. Which, for principals, that's a good sounding board. I know we say, 'hey, you're doing a good job, great job.' But what specifically? I know I don't have all the skills – what are some of those things I could improve on?"**

### Principal

Several principals noted that they had issues around the practical utility and reliability of evidence sources and system measures. One principal asked, rhetorically, "do the artifacts you submit really show an adequate picture of what you do within a day or within your job?" Another was concerned about writing an SLO but not having control over it, because what occurs in the classroom is "ultimately in the hands of the teachers."

## Table I

### Areas of Principal Feedback Focus

FEEDBACK AREA	SPECIFIC EXAMPLES	ACTIONS OR SUGGESTED CHANGES BASED ON FEEDBACK
Communication	Support in dealing with miscommunication to parents	"My superintendent explained that if this type of situation comes up again, here's how we need to handle it, here's how we'd need to do this differently"
	How better to communicate with staff through either meetings or written materials	Sent a communication survey to staff to gauge how often staff was reading newsletters and memos.
	How to soften communication tone when talking with parents; interactions with parents around discipline are too "blunt and direct"	Suggestion to "hear the parents out, give them the satisfaction of listening and promising to reconsider, even if I don't change my decision."
Teacher performance and support	Feedback on a meeting in which the principal and a teacher discussed a jointly-created improvement plan	"How I presented myself, how clear I was, things that I said that helped move the conversation forward."
	Working on best practices in Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)	Reminding teachers about best practice strategies they worked on, specifically related to student engagement
School Learning Objectives	Focusing on building goal	"Targeting the building SLO to a specific grade level was helpful"
Leadership Practice	Feedback on distributed leadership	"To continue to try to practice distributive leadership as much as possible."

### Feedback from evaluation interactions

One of the primary ways evaluation may contribute to professional learning is through performance feedback (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996; Danielson & McGreal, 2000). Accordingly, we asked principals to describe examples of feedback they received from their supervisor through the evaluation process. Most described receiving verbal rather than written feedback and felt that the feedback was generally supportive of their professional practice. One principal, for example, described the feedback they received as "very guided...versus corrective" – in other words, it was delivered as part of a conversation instead of just telling the principal what to do. Table I summarizes four main areas of feedback that principals reported receiving most often.

In addition, one principal commented on the utility of feedback from surveys (rather than from a supervisor) as part of their use of the CESA6/SAPES evaluation model. These survey results came from a culture survey and a survey involving staff feedback.

As with the other facets of the system, principals from districts with lower scores on the three survey categories reported less frequent and less helpful evaluation feedback. In some cases, principals said that they never received any feedback at all, and one mentioned having to lean on the CESA due to a lack of internal feedback from the superintendent. The lack of feedback was particularly frustrating because this principal felt like there was “no chance to improve practice.” Another indicated that it was “not as controlled as what we do with teacher EE,” and a different principal said that it was “really few and far between,” which was apparently typical in that principal’s district. Finally, one principal mentioned that,

“I always tell my teachers now, I worked hard for 16 years as a teacher, but I don’t ever think I did the right work. I have no idea if I did the right work. Which, for principals, that’s a good sounding board. I know we say, ‘hey, you’re doing a good job, great job.’ But what specifically? I know I don’t have all the skills – what are some of those things I could improve on?”

Lack of feedback represented a missed opportunity to support principal growth. As one principal noted, “The stuff we are doing is solid, there is merit to the educator effectiveness piece, it’s just we have to have a superintendent or district office personnel that are bought into and understand this and can give feedback.”

### Use of Principal Framework

We also asked principals how they used the WFPL professional practice rubric or the CESA 6/SAPES principal leadership standards in their evaluation activities. Several principals described the framework or standards as a driver of professional development, SLOs, and PPGs. For instance, one said that “when trying to be a better instructional leader and things like that, it’s embedded in those standards, and that’s the stuff that we go out and seek out” for professional development. A principal whose district did not have a principal evaluation process in place found the standards helpful for professional growth.

In addition, in some districts, the evaluation process itself involved the framework/ standards or specific language from them. In one, the superintendent included the standards on an evaluation form and recorded evidence, concerns, and suggestions for each; in another, according to a principal, “We use it for the scoring. Pretty much all I do comes up in the scoring. Every component comes up in our discussion when he goes through it with me, some more and some in less detail.”

Other principals talked about the framework’s influence on goal-setting; one stated that “...they tie the leadership domains into that evidence, and they ask us to collect artifacts that would point to our growth or our work as a leader as well as how we used our positions as leaders to move those different areas.” According to another, “We have to go through each [CESA 6] EP standard, and we have to choose one that we feel we are excelling at and just briefly write up how we are going about and what we are doing to feel that way. And we have to choose one area of growth and comment on that.” Further, one principal described giving a staff survey in which the questions were taken from the language in the standards.

Consistent with the variability we found in process and feedback, some principals do not frequently reference the principal framework or standards. One principal was not in a summary year and so did not really review the standards. Another mentioned not using it during the year, and only really did so as “bookends, [at the] beginning and end of the year.” Others spoke about the relevance and usefulness of the standards rather than the literal reference to the framework during practice:

“It [the framework] influences how I talk to parents, how I conduct myself in meetings, how I’m talking individually with a teacher, whether to encourage leadership or to correct and re-direct a teacher action. Those are probably in... my foundation of how I became an administrator. So that’s how I look at it. It’s not like I pull it out and think, ‘Okay, now I need to be more fiscally involved in the school.’ I don’t do that.”

## Professional learning and strategic alignment

As indicated above, the extent to which principal supervisors engaged in the evaluation process with their principals had a large influence on principal perceptions of system utility. In this section, we examine responses related to how principals found use in the evaluation process for their own learning as well as with helping them focus on school and district priorities.

### Professional learning

Among those affirmatively responding that the evaluation process helped inform their professional practice, a common response was that their evaluations helped provide a structure to think about leadership practice and how they were supporting teachers. Another common theme involved the system helping principals stay focused and creating some accountability for them to engage in important practices.

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**“My building goal (SIP) is aligned to my SLO and to the district improvement plan. We had WestEd leadership come in and lead PD for principals and APs, focused on PLCs. This was a yearlong process we engaged in. Teacher SLOs need to be aligned with building goals, including the SIP... I review and approve all teacher SLOs and PPGs, we make sure they’re aligned. “**

### Principal

Principals who indicated regularly engaging with their supervisors in the evaluation process reported a number of positive learning experiences. When asked whether the process impacted their professional learning, one commented,

“Gosh, I believe so. For example, communication. You need to develop rapport with people, I have worked on this and the evaluation has helped. It has also encouraged me to do more school-wide PD with staff. I got each staff member a subscription to Ed Leadership. It is a good resource for PD. We have an article share each month, each picks an article to read and discuss. We just did one on new teacher orientation. ‘Do we do the seven things the article recommends?’ I asked the staff.”



Another stated,

“I think it really gives me a framework and keeps me focused on the importance of the vertical work in my role. If it wasn’t there, I think it would be a little bit easier to step away or shift away. Not that I would intentionally do it. The way our EE process is, and the evidence and data we review as leaders really helps us coordinate, the elementary coming into the middle school, and then me working with the high school to determine, okay, am I setting my students up for success in the high school by the work I’m trying to do here in the middle school.

It’s nice to get feedback from your evaluator, especially for me as a relatively new principal. I don’t know everything, [and I] have areas of growth that I target. I’m self-reflective. It’s helpful to have evaluators who were former principals.”

Not surprisingly, principals in the bottom quintile group who indicated that their district leaders invested little time and effort in the evaluation process tended to find the process less useful as a professional learning experience, and felt there were other more valuable uses of their time. The following comments were illustrative of this mindset:

“It doesn’t [provide a professional learning opportunity] but it should ... that is directly related to who’s actually using the program to get me feedback or using the program on that end; it should be, everything is set up, it should be an awesome program.”

“I don’t feel like any of our leaders have had a large group discussion with us about [professional learning] ... We have brought it up as principals about how do we extend our learning into certain areas or how do we grow our professionalism, but sadly, I feel like it’s a little bit not one of the fires that needs to be put out. There’s other things that maybe take precedence or priority.”

## Strategic alignment

As articulated in guidance provided by DPI for growth focused educator evaluation, learning-centered evaluation is not only self-directed, tied to individual learning goals, and informed by feedback, but also contributes to organizational improvement. Organizational improvement may be supported by aligning human resource systems to leadership standards (Heneman & Milanowski, 2004; Kimball, 2011; Gates et al., 2019) and by leveraging the evaluation process to build upon organizational goals, such as those anchoring district and school improvement plans.

Principals in our sample shared many examples of how their local educator evaluation system (particularly SLOs and PPGs) contributed to efforts to address school and district goals, including the following:

“The expectation is that my SLO is written around some of that evidence and data. And then when we go through My Learning Plan, they tie the leadership domains into that evidence, and they ask us to collect artifacts that would point to our growth or our work as a leader as well as how we used our positions as leaders to move those different areas.”

“I haven’t quite finalized my SLO, but I’m leaning toward the SLO being around coaching cycles, effective coaching cycles with teachers to improve student learning. And that would be pointed primarily at the number of Ds and Fs in our math and literacy classes.”

“My building goal (SIP) is aligned to my SLO and to the district improvement plan. We had WestEd leadership come in and lead PD for principals and APs, focused on PLCs. This was a yearlong process we engaged in. Teacher SLOs need to be aligned with building goals, including the SIP... I review and approve all teacher SLOs and PPGs, we make sure they’re aligned.”

Although most principals tended to mention that they aligned their own goals to the school improvement plan, connections between the principal evaluation process and district improvement strategies were not necessarily intentional:

“The superintendent does not make any connection between...there’s no expectation from the superintendent that we connect those two things. Our plan, our PPG, our SLO are really tied into our building-level work as opposed to being district-level work. That’s somewhat the nature of our district – we’re not a very top-down district. We have goals, but there’s a lot of flexibility within there as to how it looks. So, we’re not expected to have a PPG or an SLO that ties into a district priority... We work very closely together. So, they’re almost naturally aligned, but it’s not intentionally done. “

“I am not sure, specifically, but the school goals and my SLO and PPG are related, like improving ACT scores. One thing we worked on is positive school culture by using universal language. This doesn’t directly show up [isn’t a specific focus] in my evaluation but it is related to what I am scored on, communication. “

“Not totally sure, my work is supportive of district goals so in that way the evaluation process is indicative of where they want the district to go. “

### Use of Educator Development, Support and Retention survey results

As another potential opportunity to strategically leverage learning through the evaluation system, we asked principals whether they or their district used results from the WEDSR Survey conducted by SREed at UW-Milwaukee to support strategic planning. As described above, this statewide survey includes items and scales that relate to local (school and district) Educator Effectiveness System implementation, and can inform both educators’ perceptions of the evaluation as well as school working conditions and job satisfaction.

Less than half of the principals we spoke with said that they used WEDSR survey results. One principal who had incorporated WEDSR results into their evaluation shared that these data were helpful in reflecting on how teachers perceive Educator Effectiveness, and how communications can be improved. Another stated that he used the results to ensure that the teachers understand the EE process and identify teacher concerns. For example, he shared that time was an issue for staff, so they have “tried to provide more time within our school year for staff to reflect on their practice.”

Several principals discussed that when they reviewed the WEDSR survey results, they focused on the teacher comments related to feedback. One noted that his/her teachers were “supportive of the feedback they are getting.” Another shared that teachers felt they were “not getting enough specific feedback;” as a result, the principal is “trying to give better, more specific feedback.”

Among principals that did not use WEDSR results, reasons included not having access to the reports, low teacher response rates, or a general perception that they were “surveyed out” and did not encourage their teachers to respond. A suggestion that came out of conversations with principals about the WEDSR survey results is the ability to customize reports, for instance by adding or removing schools based on the schools assigned to a principal.

## Principal professional support and learning outside the EE system

We also asked principals how they were supported outside of the formal evaluation process and about other professional learning they pursued. For some, additional support came from inside the district through a mentor or support group. Principals shared that they valued these internal supports because they allowed for regular check-ins, email chains, opportunities to circulate questions, and getting feedback quickly. One principal mentioned feeling supported when their district prioritized hiring a data analyst responsible for providing principals with data reports “at the drop of a dime.” Principals also mentioned feeling supported when district goals are developed by and with other principals.

Principals also identified activities and professional learning opportunities from outside the district that help them feel supported in their work. Specific examples included participating in conferences, athletic conference-wide meetings, professional associations, PLCs with other principals in the area, and leadership academies that allow them to work on a topic and immediately apply lessons learned back in their district. One commented about PLC time with area principals, “...I can throw out a question to my fellow conference principals and we chat about it and everybody gives their own opinion about it, and we help each other out.”

In looking for support, either within or outside of their school district, principals often cited their building goals as driving their search. Additional supports mentioned include:

- Partnering with local technical college and staying up to date with what is happening at the college
- Participating with the Research to Practice grant through DPI and learning about research-based practices to implement as a leadership team within their school.
- Connecting with colleagues around the nation using Twitter. Looking for links to articles, videos, webinars, and other more condensed learning opportunities.
- Leveraging resources on DPI website, which “... actually has some great webinars and simple tools on their website, but for some reason, not everybody thinks of going there.”
- Engaging in book studies, such as one based on Visible Learning
- Listening to podcasts, for example *Transformative Principal*
- Using district-provided PD funds – \$2,000 towards University courses

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## Section 4

# Discussion and Next Steps for the Study

This study was designed to better understand how principal evaluation is implemented within a sample of Wisconsin public schools, and how principals are supported in the state's Educator Effectiveness (EE) system within their local context. Below, we summarize key themes from the study and suggestions for promising practices, along with questions for district leaders and other stakeholder reflection on areas in which to strengthen principal learning through evaluation.

### Formal versus informal evaluation

For many principals in the study, the EE system includes elements of both a formal process focused around key milestones (goal setting, goal discussions, observations and feedback) as well as informal events and processes. Formal milestones were reported by principals as occurring at roughly the expected time during the state-suggested EE timeline. Much more frequent – and in many cases valuable – aspects of principal evaluation happen in a less formal manner as well.

Although most interactions were seen as informal, it doesn't mean that the principals were not engaging in their own evaluation activities or that the process was less meaningful. As we found, most principals still had performance-related conversations with their supervisors, and still set and engaged in Professional Practice and School Learning Objective goals that related to their school or district priorities. In some cases, however, the superintendent had few interactions that the principals characterized as evaluation interactions. Some of this lack of engagement may relate to greater attention paid to teacher evaluation.

### Focus on teacher evaluation

Given that teachers work directly with students and the education system has more teachers than school leaders, it is not surprising that many districts may focus more on teacher evaluation than on principal evaluation. Further, due to the complexity of principal leadership roles, some district leaders may downplay principal evaluation to avoid overburdening principals. In districts with lower results on the principal surveys, some principals said that their district's emphasis was on teacher evaluation and the principal evaluation process did not have the same intensity.

### Feedback and conversations

In districts that appear to prioritize principal evaluation, feedback was perceived as helpful to their practice. Additionally, principals in these districts provided a number of examples of how their evaluation process and related discussions reinforced school and district improvement priorities. Principals appreciated the feedback and cited examples of how it informed their professional learning. Those who did not receive regular feedback expressed regret about missing the opportunity to get a different perspective. Our study provides evidence that principals want and need feedback about their leadership practice. Such dialog has the potential to help them improve.

### Principal engagement in their own evaluations

Principals across our sample engaged in their own evaluation to some extent, with clearer emphasis and impact in cases where districts were more committed to principal evaluation. This practice was in part a reflection of their interest in supporting their school goals and learning; it was also a way for them to show that principals, like teachers, were going through similar evaluation processes.

### Superintendent engagement

As discussed above, although principals may engage in their own principal evaluation activities, including goal setting for their practice and the School Learning Objective, their superintendents may downplay or avoid principal evaluation. Comments from some principals in the bottom quintile group explained that the process was limited or not done with fidelity; that superintendents were unclear about or unaware of their responsibilities; or that little information was shared with them about what to do or expect. When asked to describe their district principal evaluation process, one mentioned only completing a short self-assessment – “no evaluation, no nothing.”

It is possible that superintendents who are not engaged do not place value in personnel evaluation in general or they have not embraced a learning approach to principal evaluation due to their own negative evaluation experiences as principals. It could also be that some superintendents frequently communicate expectations and tasks with their principals and believe that is a substitute for feedback in the evaluation context. Additionally, there are many responsibilities that vie for district leader attention, such

# PROMISING PRACTICES

## Implementation Fidelity

Implementation of the principal Educator Effectiveness process with fidelity (goal setting, regular check-ins, multiple feedback opportunities representing a continuous-improvement process)

## Stakeholder Surveys

Use of stakeholder surveys (teacher, student, caregiver) to inform principal goals and performance feedback

## Supervisor Training

Principal evaluation process training for principal supervisors

## Coaching Training

Feedback and coaching training for principal supervisors

## Use of Frameworks

Use of principal evaluation professional practice frameworks (WFPL and SAPES) to inform other aspects of the principal pipeline and human resource systems (preservice training, recruitment and selection, professional development, recognition)

## Alignment

Alignment of the principal evaluation process with school and district improvement priorities

as school board demands, stretching limited budgets, community relations, and growing mental health and substance abuse challenges within their communities, which can lead to limited time for evaluation activities. Given these competing priorities or other reasons, these districts have yet to realize the potential of principal evaluation and professional learning to strengthen school leadership and, by extension, teaching practice, in their districts.

## Missed opportunities

The limited attention to principal evaluation in some districts, combined with principals' desire for constructive feedback, represented missed leadership development opportunities. As demonstrated by those who had more frequent interactions with their supervisors, feedback was appreciated and helpful. Additionally, a number of participants cited examples of how the evaluation process, including the Professional Practice Goals and School Learning Objectives, contributed to their school improvement priorities. In other cases, principals came up with ways to obtain feedback from other sources.

This study affirms that principals want opportunities to receive feedback and improve their practice. Even those in schools that had negative perceptions about their district's implementation still saw value in the process and thought it could be of benefit. Therefore, with some dedication to resetting the principal evaluation process, districts have a great opportunity to create new learning opportunities for their school leaders.

Our discussions with principals led to the identification of several promising practices: implementation fidelity, stakeholder surveys, supervisor training, coaching training, use of frameworks, and alignment (defined in Sidebar).

Additionally, the study demonstrates how the principal evaluation process provides opportunities for strategic organizational improvement. Examples include leveraging the process to focus on school and district priorities and taking advantage of WEDSR survey reports and local surveys to generate actionable data. These data, when combined with principal and teacher evaluations focused on learning, may help school and district leaders create coherence with improvement efforts.

### Reflection Questions

As school districts, DPI, professional organizations, and service agencies consider the state of principal evaluation and professional learning, the following are some questions to consider that emerge from this study:

- How can school districts, DPI, professional organizations and service agencies leverage findings from this study to further cultivate a learning-centered principal evaluation process across the state?
- How well do principal preparation programs develop future principals as evaluators and coaches of teachers as well as active participants in their own evaluations? Similarly, how do superintendent preparation programs develop future district leaders to be effective evaluators and coaches of principals?
- What examples or experiences would help district leaders embrace the potential of rigorous principal educator effectiveness processes?
- What training and supports will assist principal evaluators and principals to maximize the potential of a learning-centered principal evaluation process?
- How can principal evaluation be an integral part of district improvement strategies?
- How does/can principal evaluation support the Wisconsin principal pipeline? How can principal evaluation and professional learning support building and retaining effective leaders for Wisconsin schools? Connections to pre-service? Induction/mentoring? Retention strategies?

### Next Steps for the Study

Six years into the statewide implementation of the Educator Effectiveness System, the Wisconsin Principal Evaluation and Professional Learning Study examined how principals are evaluated and supported by their districts. Our study engaged 18 principals in discussions about their districts' principal evaluation processes, their feedback experiences, the relevance to their school and district priorities, and influences on their professional learning. Principals in districts with more engagement in principal evaluation expressed that the experience was positive, while those in districts with less engagement spoke of missed opportunities. Even those principals sharing negative experiences appeared ready and willing to engage in a more rigorous process that supports their learning.

Building on this study, we will conduct case studies in districts to learn more from principals, district leaders, and other school leaders about the nature of principal evaluation and the potential impact on professional learning and support for district and school improvement priorities.

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## Section 7

# Appendices



## Appendix A: Sampling Strategy and Interview Protocol

### Sampling

The sample was limited to districts whose principals responded to the survey (n = 250). We used scale scores from the WEDSR that measured three dimensions of principals' perceptions of their evaluation experience – implementation, integration, and impact – and then ranked the principals' scores on each dimension<sup>6</sup>. These three categories included core survey questions that specifically related to the principal evaluation process (Table AI).

**Table AI**

Principal Survey Items by Category

SUBSCALE	QUESTION
Implementation	My evaluator observed my professional practice.
	I met with my evaluator to review my professional practice.
	I received written feedback on my professional practice.
	I met with my evaluator to discuss my Educator Effectiveness Plan goals (SLO and PPG)
	I received verbal feedback on my professional practice.
Integration	My district takes advantage of the educator evaluation process to support principal learning.
	I used my EEP to help with implementing key aspects of our school improvement plan.
	I shared my EEP with school staff to help with EEP goal alignment around school priorities.
Impact	Feedback from my evaluator helps me improve my leadership practice.
	Feedback from my evaluator is provided in time for me to use it.
	The principal evaluation process helps me improve my leadership practice.
	The principal evaluation process helps me achieve school improvement goals.

We then separated the districts into quintiles for each category, with the goal of selecting a sample of districts that ranked in either the top quintile in all three categories or the bottom quintile in all three categories. The goal in doing

<sup>6</sup> Evaluators from the office of Socially Responsible Evaluation in Education (SREed) at UW-Milwaukee ran a Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) on the WEDSR principal survey to confirm the structure of three scales: Implementation, Integration, and Impact. The CFA used a mean- and variance-adjusted weighted least squares (WLSMV) estimator to account for the categorical nature of the questions in these scales. Factor scores were then computed for each of these scales and the additional scales in the principal survey for each principal. These factor scores are on a standardized scale with an average of 0 and a standard deviation of 1. These scores for all principals were then averaged to the district level.

so was to capture a variety of districts in our sample, which would provide a better picture of principal evaluation and support across the state. To achieve greater variety in terms of district size, geography, and demographics, we ultimately expanded the list of bottom quintile schools to those with two categories in the bottom quintile and one in the second-lowest quintile. Next, we restricted the list of districts to only those with principals who had volunteered to be contacted upon their completion of the survey. Participants included both principals whose districts adopted the state model of the Educator Effectiveness System and the model supported by CESA 6.

The next stage was to choose a mix of ten districts from each group (top and bottom quintile) based on size, geography, and demographic composition. We determined that we would contact one principal per district, aiming for a mix of elementary, middle, and high school principals within each group. If a district had only one volunteer, we would contact them first, randomly selecting another principal in the district as an alternate contact. If a district had multiple volunteers, we randomized potential contacts, but also took into consideration balance of school types (elementary, middle, or high school). Any volunteers not selected would be alternates. Ultimately, we were successful in obtaining participation agreement from 9 top quintile districts and 9 bottom quintile districts. Interviews with these 18 principals were conducted in October 2019 and form the basis for this study. Table A2 shows selected descriptive statistics for each group, Table A3 shows the types of schools whose principals we interviewed, and Table A4 shows the range of scores on each category for both groups.

**Table A2****Characteristics of Principal Study Districts**

QUINTILES	AVERAGE ENROLLMENT	% BY RACE				% ECONOMICALLY DISADVANTAGED		
		BLACK	HISPANIC	WHITE	OTHER	%SWD	% EL	
Top	2971.2	10.5%	19.2%	60.5%	9.8%	14.0%	49.4%	6.1%
Bottom	1660.1	1.4%	4.8%	87.6%	6.2%	15.1%	34.5%	2.1%

**Table A3****Types of Principals Interviewed**

QUINTILES	CESAS <sup>7</sup> OF INTERVIEW DISTRICTS	PRINCIPAL OF ELEMENTARY SCHOOL	PRINCIPAL OF MIDDLE SCHOOL	PRINCIPAL OF HIGH SCHOOL	PRINCIPAL OF MORE THAN 1 SCHOOL	STATE MODEL	CESA 6 MODEL
Top	1,2,4,5,7,8,10	5	1	2	1	6	3
Bottom	2,4,5,6,8,9,12	3	3	2	1	5	4

**Table A4****Ranges of Scores on Survey Question Categories**

QUINTILES	IMPLEMENTATION		INTEGRATION		IMPACT	
	LOW	HIGH	LOW	HIGH	LOW	HIGH
Top	0.75	2.32	0.72	1.40	0.77	1.33
Bottom	-1.20	-0.84	-2.03	-0.29	-2.15	-0.26

<sup>7</sup> CESAs 3 and 11 were the only CESAs out of the 12 that did not include a participating district.

As Table A2 demonstrates, the sample was limited to small to mid-sized districts. At this phase of the principal evaluation and professional learning study, we did not talk to principal supervisors or others who support principal leadership. Additionally, since the sample was limited to principals who volunteered, it could be that others who did not volunteer had more negative or positive experiences to share that may have changed the findings. While the sample helps provide a picture of principal evaluation practice across multiple regions, given these limitations, the results do not necessarily generalize to the districts as a whole or statewide. Subsequent phases of the study will include other district leaders and may include larger districts.

## Principal Interview protocol

Introduction: Thank you for taking the time to speak with me today. As I mentioned in my email, we are trying to gather information on local principal educator effectiveness process and how principals are supported in their professional learning.

Your responses to my questions will not be shared beyond the study team. We will analyze responses for common themes and unique practices across districts. Individuals will not be identified in any report. May I record our conversation for note taking purposes? I will delete the recording once I have verified my notes. Do you have any questions? Do I have your permission to proceed?

We first have some questions about the main features of your district's principal educator effectiveness process, which includes goal setting and execution, evidence collection and feedback.

1. What information does your district share with you about the principal evaluation process?
2. What are you focusing on with your School Learning Objective?
3. How does your SLO relate to your school improvement priorities?
4. What are you focusing on with your Professional Practice Goal?
5. Does your supervisor or other district leader conduct observations of your practice? How does that process work? (probe: who conducts observation? What leadership activities are observed?)
6. Can you share an example of feedback you get from your evaluator as part of the evaluation process?
7. How do you use the Wisconsin Framework for Principal Leadership (DPI professional practice rubric) or the CESA 6 EP principal leadership standards in your evaluation activities?
8. How does your district connect the principal educator effectiveness process to support school and district priorities?
9. How does the principal educator effectiveness process support your professional learning?

Other questions about professional learning:

10. What professional learning opportunities do you engage in? (probe within or outside of district)
11. What professional learning opportunities would assist you in your role as principal?
12. Have you had the chance to review your school's results from the Wisconsin Educator Development and Support Survey? (note: this is the teacher survey)
  - a. If yes, how does your school or district use the survey results?
13. What opportunities do you have (if any) to network or collaborate with other principals in your district or in other districts?
14. Is there anything else that you would like to add about your local principal evaluation process?

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