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Justin Smith is assistant professor of economics at Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo, Ont. and co-author of a recent Canadian Journal of Economics article, “How important are school principals to the production of student achievement?”

Back to school time brings with it lots of excited questions for students and parents alike. What will the new teacher be like? What about classmates? Will the work be harder this year?

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But here’s a question that deserves greater attention: How strong are the principal’s managerial skills?

In addition to routine school administration such as assigning teachers and arranging schedules, a principal properly ought to be considered the CEO of their school. A great principal demonstrates all the attributes of a highly-skilled manager in setting expectations for both teachers and students, building a team, imposing a coherent philosophy on the entire institution and ensuring goals are met. While a single teacher may have a big impact on the students in his or her class, a principal has influence over every teacher throughout the school.

And a growing body of academic evidence reveals principals can have a noticeable impact on concrete indicators of student success, such as test scores, graduation rates and absenteeism. This suggests school boards should be paying more attention to principal recruitment, placement and tenure. We need to make the best use of our best principals.

In my own research with Elizabeth Dhuey of University of Toronto’s Centre for Industrial Relations and Human Resources, we’ve studied how individual principals affect student performance in British Columbia schools. Adjusting for socio-economic and other factors, we found a top-tier principal can boost math scores by an estimated eight to nine percentage points between grades four and seven, as
compared to a principal of just average ability. Reading scores get a slightly lower, but nonetheless significant, boost.

Other Canadian research has shown better principals can raise graduation rates by 2.5 per cent as well as improve Grade 12 English test scores. Evidence from Pennsylvania and Texas also show a strong connection between principals and student achievement.

But how do you spot a better principal? This is where things get a bit uncertain. A recent Florida study identified a principal’s “organizational management” skills – including things such as dealing with staff concerns, hiring personnel and networking with other principals – as being a crucial factor in the link between principals and student achievement. Some other studies reveal a big gain in performance due to years of experience as a principal, but this is not a consistent result. And while you might think time spent as a teacher prior to moving into the front office would be important to success, the evidence doesn’t support such a contention.

While there may not be one key qualification that allows us to identify the best principal (as with any manager), my work with Ms. Dhuey has found a significant ‘matching effect’ at work. In other words, it’s not just that some principals are inherently better than others for whatever reason, but some principals’ abilities are particularly well-suited to the needs of particular schools. Such a scenario aligns with the popular Hollywood trope of the tough principal whipping an out-of-control school into shape: think Morgan Freeman’s megaphone-wielding principal Joe Clark in Lean on Me. Clearly such a skill set would be misplaced in a school without a discipline problem.

What this suggests is that it school boards need to think more carefully about hiring and assigning principals. Simply moving principals around every few years, without considering how the principal fits in the school, may get in the way of making good matches. We need to be more deliberate in assessing the skills of principals and finding the right fit if we want to do the best we can for our kids.

The OECD has also recommended considering credentials other than a teaching certificate when hiring principals. While some knowledge of pedagogy is obviously important to success as a principal, there may be situations in which it makes sense to weigh managerial skills above teaching skills, It’s entirely possible the best candidate for principal in some circumstances may not be a teacher at all.

Of course, to put the right principal in the right school, people need to be attracted to the profession in the first place. Unfortunately it’s getting harder to recruit new principals, in part because of the perception the job involves a large increase in workload for a small increase in pay over teaching. Given the substantial impact a good principal can have on student achievement, raising principal salaries may thus be a relatively inexpensive way to improve student outcomes.

It’s time we recognized, and rewarded, the importance of principals to our schools.

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