

# Research review: how can leaders facilitate improvements in teaching and learning?

When it comes to how well learners learn, it is most often the actions of the classroom or workshop practitioner that come under the spotlight. But what about middle and senior leaders? Do their actions also have a direct impact on increased achievement? Recent research suggests they do. A literature review carried out on behalf of LSIS set out to identify exactly what is involved.

While one study found the overall effect size of leadership on learner achievement to be ‘small but educationally significant’ at 0.25, a second, large scale meta-analysis showed that particular behaviours by leaders led to more powerful outcomes. In particular, engaging directly in teachers’ professional learning had an effect size of 0.84 – ‘a large and educationally significant impact’.

Effect sizes explained	
Effect size	Interpretation
<0.2	No effect or a weak effect
0.2-0.4	Small but educationally significant effect
0.4-0.6	A moderate educationally significant impact
>0.6	A large educationally significant impact

## The leadership practices that make the difference

The review found four leadership characteristics and activities were key:

- developing people
- managing the teaching and learning programme
- setting directions, and
- establishing effective relationships.

### Developing people

The most important thing that leaders did to support learning in their institutions (effect size 0.84), according to the review, was to involve themselves in the professional learning and development of their staff. One study suggested that ‘developing excellent teaching and maintaining that excellence usually involved a great deal of talking about teaching’ which involved:

- keeping abreast of current education, research and theory
- exposing staff to those ideas and systematically engaging them in discussion, and
- encouraging staff to read about effective practice.

Distributing leadership – in this review meaning involving staff in decision-making – was also linked to improving learner achievement. In the words of one of study, this was because “staff accept that they are accountable for the quality of their work”.

### Managing the teaching programme

Direct involvement in teaching and learning by leaders was central to ensuring enhanced achievement for learners. One study calculated the effect size to be 0.42 (i.e. moderately significant). It included:

- making regular classroom visits
- providing formative and summative feedback to teachers
- having direct oversight of the curriculum
- collecting and analysing learner feedback
- ensuring teachers were resourced with adequate equipment and materials, and
- understanding both the current practice of individual staff and departments as well as their planned trajectory for the future.

### Setting directions

Holding strong ideals and being clear about the direction an organisation is moving in were found to be linked to learner outcomes and had an effect size of 0.25 (i.e. a small but significant effect). Translating the vision into a strategy and specific goals was important too. Effective leaders also made their expectations clear to staff by setting out action plans and using targets to make sure planned changes occurred swiftly to minimise disruption for learners.

### Relationships

Central to relationship building was establishing and keeping open effective lines of communication. This meant leaders:

- were easily accessible to staff
- developed effective means for teachers to communicate with one another, and
- maintained open and effective lines of communication with all staff in the organisation.

## Take action

**If you are in a leadership role, to what extent do you:**

- engage directly in teaching and learning-focused CPD with groups of practitioners, for example, by modelling, team teaching and joint planning?
- broaden your sources of intelligence about colleagues’ development needs and the quality of professional relationships (for example, observing classes as the basis for professional discussions with staff).

### Evidence source

What do institution leaders do that is effective in facilitating quality improvements in teaching and learning. A literature review conducted by the Centre for the Use of Research and Evidence in Education on behalf of LSIS. [View here](#)

*The reviewers initially identified 205 abstracts which they narrowed down through a set of inclusion/exclusion criteria to six robust studies that provided detail on what constituted effective leadership for teaching and learning.*