

# School leadership and local learning contexts in South Africa

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## RESEP Policy Brief

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### 1. School leadership: Then and now

The role of the school principal in South African schools has evolved. No longer are they only seen as managers and administrators; they are also expected to be the standard bearers of teaching and learning activities at the school. South African secondary schools operate in varying socioeconomic conditions, and principals in these contrasting contexts are faced with challenges and tasks that may require differing school leadership and management (SLM) approaches. These challenges must be overcome while striving for quality educational outcomes.

Most of the research on SLM and educational outcomes in South Africa is based on small-scale studies and are descriptive in nature. Here, we used data from the 2015 Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), a nationally representative study of Grade 9 learners and their school environments.<sup>2</sup> Our aims were to compare the characteristics of SLM in no-fee, fee-paying, and independent schools<sup>3</sup> and to determine whether mathematics achievement gaps in different



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<sup>2</sup> This policy brief is based on research funded by the Economic and Social Research Council [grant ES/N01023X/1]. For the fuller paper on which this brief is based see Zuze T.L. and Juan A. (forthcoming) *School Leadership and Local Learning Contexts in South Africa*.

<sup>3</sup> No-fee schools are the most economically disadvantaged and resource-poor public schools that receive higher subsidies per learner from the state. Fee-paying schools are also public schools, but are generally better resourced. Independent (or otherwise referred to as 'private') schools tend to be well-resourced.

schooling contexts could be explained by the SLM qualities of a school. We measured SLM based on calculated indicators of a) instructional leadership, b) promoting an orderly and supportive environment, and c) the principal's experience and training. The findings are based on multivariate estimations using self-reports from the principal and two teachers from 292 secondary schools in South Africa. This methodology allowed us to determine the associations (but not any causal relationships) between SLM characteristics and mathematics across schools that are similar in ways such as resourcing or student wealth.

## 2. Key findings:

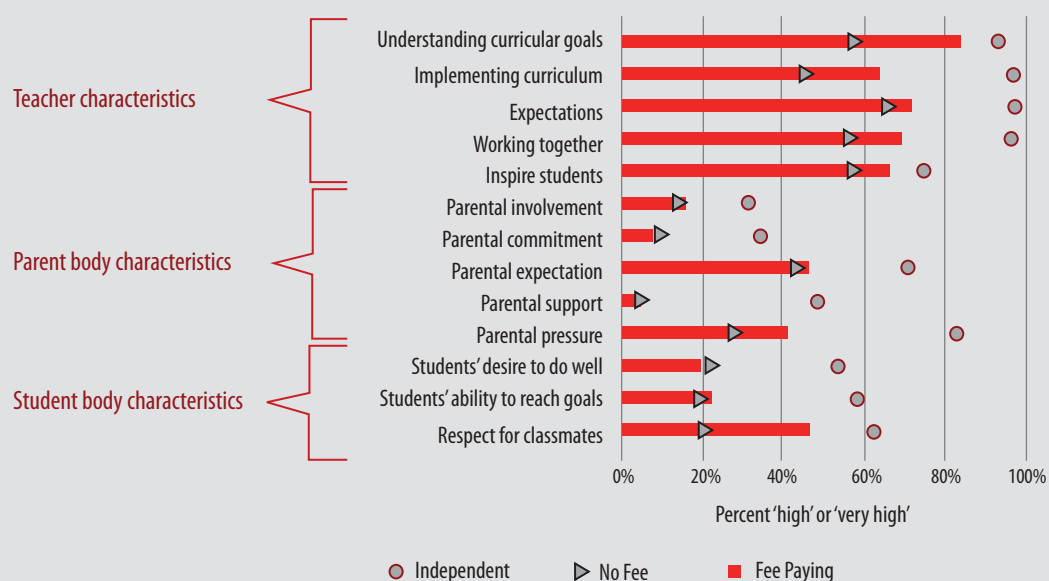
### 1. There are striking SLM differences between no-fee and fee-paying public schools and independent schools

Access to particular SLM environments largely depends on the type of school that a learner attended. Compared to public school principals, independent school principals reported that their teachers were more competent, their parents were more supportive, and that their students demonstrated greater readiness to learn and engage in school activities (see Figure 1).

*Compared to public school principals, independent school principals reported that their teachers were more competent, their parents were more supportive, and that their students demonstrated greater readiness to learn and engage in school activities.*

We found that better SLM was related to access to higher quality physical and human resources, but there were some exceptions. There were some instances where the quality of school leadership in better-resourced, fee-paying schools more closely resembled poorly-resourced, no-fee public schools than it did independent schools (for example in the relationship between discipline, safety and achievement). However, when it came to instructional leadership, patterns for fee-paying and independent schools were very similar.

Although the motives for principals' length of stay at a school are likely to be different, there were wide gaps between public and independent schools in this area. In independent secondary schools sampled in TIMSS, 80% of principals had worked at the current school for up to 10 years. In contrast, 80% of principals in secondary public schools (no-fee and fee-paying) had been at the same school for up to 17 years.



**FIGURE 1: TIMSS Indicators of SLM (principal perceptions) by school type**

Source: TIMSS 2015, authors calculations.

## 2. **Academic achievement was worse in unsafe and violent schools**

School safety and discipline mattered more for academic achievement in public schools than in independent schools. No-fee and fee-paying public schools with a more functional environment had higher average achievement scores in mathematics than similar schools with less safety and order. This echoes previous studies about the importance of ensuring basic functionality in challenging educational environments.<sup>4</sup> It also supports related research about the benefits of scripted lessons as well as regular monitoring and assessment of teachers in poor schools, all of which rely heavily on a structured and orderly environment.<sup>5</sup>

*Schools with a more functional environment had higher average achievement scores in mathematics than similar schools with less safety and order.*

## 3. **A principal's professional experience was more important for achievement in independent schools than in public schools**

The work experience of a school principal paid greater achievement dividends in independently managed schools than in public schools. We found that students in independent schools benefited from principals who had a tenure of more than 6 years at the school, relative to shorter periods of time. These factors remained important, even when the quality of the school and a student's background were accounted for. This suggests either that these principals were higher quality candidates or that they possessed greater autonomy over hiring and firing. The independent nature of these schools may enable these principals to have more influence at the classroom level in terms of teacher practice.

The link between professional experience and learner achievement was not found in public schools<sup>6</sup>, however, it is known that other factors, such as union affiliation, influence professional appointments in schools.<sup>7</sup> Union pressures would be less of a factor in independent schools, which could explain the significance of a principal's work experience in these settings.

## 3. In summary

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1. How South African schools are led varies greatly by school type, and the relationship between SLM and academic achievement depends on the socioeconomic status of schools and students.
2. The type of SLM reflected in independent schools suggests that autonomy may be linked to better practices or that the quality of principals in these schools is substantially better.
3. There were few associations found between SLM characteristics and students' mathematics achievement in no-fee schools.

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4 Christie P, Butler D and Potterton M (2007) *Ministerial Committee on Schools that Work*. Report for the Minister of Education, 12 October. Pretoria: Department of Education.

Ngcobo T and Tikly LP (2010) Key dimensions of effective leadership for change: a focus on township and rural schools in South Africa. *Educational Management, Administration and Leadership* 38(2):202–228.

5 Hoadley U and Galant J (2015) The organisation of schools that succeed against the odds. *South African Review of Education* 21(2):29–52.

6 Principal credentials in the international literature are typically not linked to learner achievement

7 Msila V (2014) Teacher unionism and school management: a study of (Eastern Cape) schools in South Africa, education and management. *Administration and Leadership* 42(2):259–274.

4. Although a strong leader is important, effective leadership relies on support from multiple role-players both within the school and beyond. Because of the role that heads of department play in managing instruction, they need to be the focus of future research.
5. Principals can influence the culture of the school, but their leadership style can also be a response to external pressures from parents and other role-players.

#### 4. Implications for further research

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1. *Future policy efforts into improving school leadership requires that more evidence-based research is conducted first.* Currently no causal evidence exists on linkages between SLM and student achievement in South Africa – merely associations. Future research should evaluate management and leadership programmes with greater rigour, establishing clearer causal relationships before drafting new policies or implementing large-scale programmes.
2. *It is critical to identify why few associations were found between SLM characteristics and student achievement in no-fee schools.* Research should establish whether this is due to a lack of variation in SLM practice, a general lack of variation in student achievement in these schools or binding constraints that inhibit SLM characteristics from being translated into achievement outcomes.
3. *Future research should look beyond achievement to explore how SLM relates to other educational outcomes such as social skills, attitudes, and values.* Although the specific link between school leadership and achievement outcomes is an important one, there are many other ways that SLM improves the academic outlook of learners.