

# Should principals stop visiting classrooms?

By Valerie Strauss, Updated: January 8 at 4:00 am

Principals are above all supposed to be [“instructional leaders”](#) but exactly what that means — or how to be effective in that role — isn’t entirely clear. Cognitive scientist Daniel Willingham looks at the research on what makes for an effective instructional leader in the post below. Willingham is a professor and director of graduate studies in psychology at the University of Virginia and author of [“Why Don’t Students Like School?”](#) His latest book is [“When Can You Trust The Experts? How to tell good science from bad in education.”](#) This appeared on his [Science and Education blog](#).

By Daniel Willingham

What does it mean for an administrator to be an *instructional leader*? As often as this phrase is repeated, you’d think there would be well-researched techniques with proven effectiveness. There is no shortage of authors offering protips: Amazon has over a thousand titles that include the phrase.

But there is less research on the topic than you’d think, and much of it (e.g., May, Huff, & Goldring, 2012) actually shows a weak or non-existent relationship between student achievement and the priority administrators place on instructional leadership (as opposed to other aspects of a principal’s job, e.g., close attention to administrative matters, inspirational leadership, focus on school culture, etc.).

A [terrific new study](#) by Jason Grissom, Susanna Loeb, and Ben Master shed light on the role of instructional leadership. It’s the method that sets this study apart. Instead of simply asking principals “how important is instructional leadership to you?” or having them complete time diaries, researchers actually followed 100 principals around for a full school day, recording what they did.

The researchers also had access to administrative data from the district (Miami-Dade County in Florida) about principals, teachers, and students that could be linked to the observational data. The outcome measure of interest was student learning gains, as measured by standardized tests.

The results showed that principals spent, on average, 12.6 percent of their time on activities related to instruction. The most common was classroom walkthroughs (5.4%) and the second was formal teacher evaluation (2.4%).

Some school characteristics were associated with variations in the amount of time principals devoted to instructional leadership. More time was spent in schools with lower-achieving students, with students from lower-income homes, and with a higher percentage of students of color.

As to the primary question of the study, time spent on instructional leadership was NOT associated with student learning outcomes.

But once “instructional leadership” was made more fine-grained, the picture changed.

Time spent coaching teachers—especially in math—*was* associated with better student outcomes. So was time spent evaluating teachers and curriculum.

But informal classroom walkthroughs—the most common activity—were *negatively* associated with student achievement. This was especially true in high schools.

In a follow-up analysis, the researchers evaluated these data in light of what the principals said about how teachers view classroom walkthroughs. The negative association with student achievement was most evident where principals believed that teachers did *not* view walkthroughs as opportunities for professional development. (Other reasons for walkthroughs might be to ensure that a teacher is following a curriculum, or to be more visible to faculty.)

Although the researchers suggest that their results should be considered exploratory, they do suggest a general principle of instructional leadership that fits well with one overarching principle of learning: feedback is essential. Instructional leadership activities that offer meaningful feedback to teachers may help. Those that don't, will not.

Grissom, J. A., Loeb, S., & Master, B. (2013). Effective instructional time use for school leaders: Longitudinal evidence from observations of principals. *Educational Researcher*, 42, 433-444.

May, H., Huff, J., & Goldring, E. (2012). A longitudinal study of principals' activities and student performance. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, 23, 417-439.