

EFFECTIVE SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

Effective school leadership is when a principal **sets and communicates an inspiring vision** for the school, serves as an instructional leader who **helps teachers grow**, runs an **efficient operation**, builds **trusting relationships**, and develops a strong sense of **school community**.

Every condition of a thriving school runs through leadership, and it starts with vision. Effective leaders **establish, clearly communicate, and model an inspiring vision** for their school, and the modeling matters as much as the message. When leaders themselves demonstrate the kind of teaching and learning they hope to see, bringing the vision to life in staff meetings, professional development, and their own daily work, teachers begin to take creative risks, and the vision becomes something the whole building owns.

This is why it is so important that leaders are also **instructional leaders**: they know what excellent instruction looks like, keep a pulse on how teachers are doing and where there's room to grow, and can model, coach, and give feedback on great teaching themselves. They are **present and visible**, conducting regular classroom walkthroughs and working on the ground alongside teachers rather than directing from the office. This earns them respect and keeps them connected to what's happening in the building. And they **lead with data and transparency**: using academic data as well as student, staff, and family surveys to guide decisions, following up to probe concerns more deeply, reviewing walkthrough trends for instructional priorities, and refining the systems they've built.

Underneath it all are relationships. Strong leaders know their people personally, identify their strengths, and position each person where those strengths serve the school best, and they hire people who are strong where they themselves are not. They treat teachers and staff as **human beings first, communicate consistently and honestly**, and **build the trust** that lets a school take on hard things together.



Educator perspective:

What does this condition look like in practice?

- **A leader who is present and visible** — in classrooms and hallways, working alongside teachers
- **Supportive feedback models** for continuous improvement
- **Efficient systems and operations management** that promote clarity, safety, and effective use of resources
- Intentional development of **positive working relationships** with staff, students, families, and community members
- **A network of support** fostered within and around the school
- **Strong, transparent use of data** that is shared openly and informs leadership's prioritization and decision-making
- **Informed and transparent decision-making** that prioritizes student needs and staff buy-in



How do other Thriving Schools conditions intersect with Effective School Leadership?

Leadership is the condition that makes the others possible. Leaders carve out the **time and structures** that sustain a Culture of Collaboration, **set and protect the vision** behind Ambitious Instruction, **direct budgets** to ensure Resource Alignment to the most important initiatives, **build teacher capacity** for Engaging and Relevant Educational Experiences, and **set the tone** for an Inclusive and Supportive School Culture. The trust they build pays dividends across all of these conditions, from community partners showing up with resources to teachers staying through difficult changes. But the relationship runs the other way too: no leader can carry a school alone, and **the strongest leaders empower teachers to lead**, so the school's success doesn't depend on any one person.

How do outside-of-school factors play a role?

Leaders need support too. Just as teachers grow with strong coaching, **principals grow when the district pairs them with supervisors who act as thought partners**, providing direct, effective feedback with the best interest of the leader and the school at heart. Districts also shape this condition through how they **recruit, develop, and retain school leaders**, and **community partners extend** what any one leader can build alone.

"You can have a vision all day long, but if you are not a strong instructional leader, a lot of [the framework] doesn't come into play. In order to grow teachers, we have to have that instructional knowledge ourselves, we have to be involved in that collaboration process — we have to be in the trenches of what makes it all happen."

- MNPS principal

Measurement and evaluation:

How do schools know what's working?

- **School culture and climate survey data** provides responses from teachers and staff that help evaluate how educators and support staff report on their own experience of being led. This helps indicate how leaders are supporting educators and making school-wide decisions that ultimately impact students.
- **Regular communication with families** can help a school leader understand how families prefer to be communicated with, how to engage and leverage families' strengths in the most meaningful ways, and how to adjust school structures and supports to best meet the needs and desires of families.
- **Teacher retention** is a strong indicator of leadership quality, since teachers tend to stay where they are well led, respected, and supported.

Explore other Thriving Schools Conditions: [CULTURE OF COLLABORATION](#) | [RESOURCE ALIGNMENT](#) | [INCLUSIVE AND SUPPORTIVE SCHOOL CULTURE](#) | [AMBITION INSTRUCTION](#) | [ENGAGING AND RELEVANT EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES](#) | [THRIVING SCHOOLS FRAMEWORK](#)