

# What do We Know about School Principals?: Lessons from the Case of Chile

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Summarized by Federico Sucre



In recent years, the importance of school leadership has become more relevant due to the broad international tendency toward policies that favor decentralization. These policies have awarded greater powers and responsibilities to schools and, at the same time, have motivated a growing demand for accountability, pushing these schools to achieve certain goals and standards in limited time periods. Today, like never before, school principals are held responsible for the success or failure of their schools, even in matters over which they have little influence.

In Chile, there has been a recent trend towards the empowerment of school principals. In the last five years, Law 20.501 –Law for Quality and Equity in Education (LCE)– was passed, establishing selection mechanisms that contribute to a more appropriate performance in the managerial role, strengthening the status and powers of principals.<sup>i</sup> This law enhances the importance of principals

and holds them accountable for the results achieved by the schools. The objective of the law is to make principals educational leaders within their school communities, relying on their ability to make a positive impact in favor of quality.

Taking into consideration the findings presented in the book *What Do We Know about School Principals in Chile?*, it is possible to make six assertions about the critical role of principals for school success.

### First assertion:

**Principals are generally old and are mostly women; they differ significantly depending on the types of institutions they lead; they are firmly dedicated to their role as managers; and –despite not receiving high wages– they are vastly satisfied with their work.**

When comparing Chilean principals with their Latin American counterparts (see **Figure 1**), they stand out because of their older age, which surpasses the regional average by 8 years on average (53 versus 45 years old).<sup>ii</sup> Nearly two-thirds of Chilean

PREAL Policy Briefs provide non-technical summaries of key topics in the field of education policy. In this edition, Federico Sucre summarizes the six statements suggested by José Weinstein and Gonzalo Muñoz in the introduction to the book: *What Do We Know about School Principals in Chile?* The book includes article contributions from 21 authors that synthesize the results of recently developed research on school principals in Chile. The findings presented below contain important lessons for the rest of Latin America. The book *What Do We Know about School Principals in Chile?* is available in Spanish [here](#).

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principals are older than 51, and one in five is older than 61.<sup>iii</sup> This trend of advanced age is more prevalent in state schools than in private schools, and is of particular concern among rural schools. Moreover, it is generally associated with a protracted career as a principal, as well as with an extended period of seniority in the schools where they currently teach – two areas in which Chilean principals rank highest in Latin America.

This age trend is an example of how difficult it has been to update school management in recent decades, but above all, it poses the challenge of replacing these positions in the near future. In other words: who will replace many of the current principals in the next five or ten years? Are there sufficient and qualified candidates to fill the needs that lie ahead, particularly in the most remote and impoverished areas?

From a gender standpoint, there is a clear preponderance of female over male principals (55% versus 45%) in Chile. This follows the trend in the region, where the proportion of women in this position is even higher overall. It is interesting to observe that this gender distribution is not homogeneous: there is greater male representation in the public sector than in the private sector, as well as in rural schools, technical-vocational schools, and adult schools. By contrast, establishments offering special education or early childhood education are almost exclusively led by females.

**Figure 1: Characteristics of School Principals in Latin America**

		Argentina	Ceará/ Brasil	Chile	Colombia	Ecuador	México	Perú	República Dominicana
N° de directores en servicio por nivel	Primaria					85%	56,5%	74,0%	
	Secundaria					15%	28,7%	24,1%	
	Media o Media Superior						14,8%		
	Total	27.863		8.431	8.447 <sup>10</sup>	29.857	159.032	34.484	10.052

Dependencia administrativa	Educación pública		2723	48,80%		79%	85%	83%	52%
	Educación privada			51,20%		21%	15%	17%	48%

Zona	Urbana		64% <sup>11</sup>	67%	60,4%	62%		38%	
	Rural		36% <sup>11</sup>	33%	39,6%	38%		62%	

Sexo	Mujeres	83%	76% <sup>12</sup>	55%	35% <sup>14</sup>	55,2%	43%	38,5%	60% <sup>15</sup>
	Hombres	17%	24% <sup>16</sup>	45%	65% <sup>17</sup>	44,8%	57%	61,5%	40% <sup>18</sup>

Edad	Promedio de edad	47,5	41 <sup>19</sup>	52,1	53	49,6	s/i	s/i	s/i
Fuente		DINIECE 2008	INEP/ Prova Brasil 2011	Base de idoneidad docente 2012, Ministerio de Educación	Anexo 3A de la resolución 166 2011, Sector Oficial Ministerio de Educación Nacional	AMIE (Archivo Maestro de Instituciones Educativas) del Ministerio de Educación (2011 - 2012)	DGPyEE Inicio 2013- 2014	Censo 2013, Ministerio de Educación	Dirección de Recursos Humanos y Dirección de acreditación y categorización de centros (privados), 2013, Ministerio de Educación

Chilean principals are also characterized by their high dedication to their work. They are usually hired full time, do not have other jobs, and dedicate little time to teaching in the classroom. We do not always see this professionalization of school management in other countries in the region. According to Javier Murillo, 90% of Chilean principals dedicate more than 40 hours per week to their schools, while only 30% of Latin American principals overall dedicate the same amount of time.<sup>iv</sup>

In terms of salary, Chilean principals normally receive an hourly wage 20-25% higher than that of classroom teachers, but given their full-time contracts, the total income they receive is even greater. The *average* wage earned by principals working in the public sector is similar to that earned by those in the subsidized private sector, but the range of these wages is much lower in the former.<sup>v</sup>

In any case, the difference between the principals of public and subsidized private schools goes beyond salary. There are two

recruitment systems that operate in parallel (with different levels of formality and competition), and there is a range of duties assigned to principals that is significantly greater in the private sector.

Chilean principals have a relatively high satisfaction with their work. In fact, when asked if they would like to be assigned to other schools, less than 10% of Chilean principals said yes – a much lower percentage than the average in Latin America overall–. These high levels of satisfaction are apparent in most of the areas addressed (salary, relationships with students and parents, professional development opportunities, among others).<sup>vi</sup>

**Second assertion:**  
**Principals have had long training periods, but these processes have not had a clear orientation towards the skills required to perform management functions, have not corresponded to the various stages of their careers, and have not been sufficiently regulated in terms of quality.**

The training process for Chilean principals has extensive formal periods that almost exclusively occur at universities. After completing their undergraduate teaching degrees, seven out of ten principals completed a specialized post-undergraduate training program of a year’s length or more, and 44% of principals have a master’s degree. This extensive training is particularly apparent in the public sector –where nine out of ten principals have some post-graduate training– whose

recruitment processes encourages principals to pursue these programs.<sup>vii</sup>

The length of the training that many principals have undergone does not, unfortunately, correspond to the opportunity or the quality of these processes. While there is a known framework of behavioral and practical skills that principals should develop, this has not been the priority benchmark in their training. In addition, there is no adequate distinction between the types of training required during the different stages of the process – pre-service, orientation, and professional development–, as we observe a marked predominance of training in pre-service above the other areas, as well as a significant absence of orientation activities.<sup>viii</sup> In analyzing the life stories of school principals, the weight of direct learning from peers and on-the-job experiences is instrumental in the perception that principals have of their own training, but have only been minimally acknowledged by the predominant formal training systems.<sup>ix</sup>

Assuring the quality of training programs offered to both current and future principals is an ongoing issue. There is a wide variety of courses and training programs that are offered to aspiring (or current) principals. But these are not based on well-defined standards and criteria to

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assure appropriate quality, nor is there a system of monitoring and supervision to ensure that these standards are being met.<sup>x</sup> Thus, the time, energy, and money that many principals (and their employers) invest in advancing their training are not producing the desired results in the majority of cases.

**Third assertion:**  
**Principals are pressured to achieve measurable results by employers who usually do not provide the necessary support to achieve those results. This pressure is channeled through various strategies in which principals try to involve the teaching staff, a group with which they have a good working relationship overall, but which demands greater technical-pedagogical support.**

The work of principals is not carried out autonomously, but rather is subordinate to the guidelines given to them by their employers. The employers set certain goals to be achieved, as well as provide –or do not provide– certain resources for the goals to be carried out. It is

difficult to imagine a case in which principals are able to attain sustainable success over time without the guidance and the technical, financial, and political support of their employers (public or private). For there to be a display of managerial leadership by school principals, it takes factors such as the creation of networks between school leaders, the diagnosis and monitoring of school and learning processes, training and ongoing development for teachers and principals, or the implementation of an adequate incentive system for principals.<sup>xi</sup>

Employers require principals to achieve certain outcomes, two of the most important being sustainment (or increase) of enrollment at the institution, and the achievement of certain scores on standardized tests. There are many distinct strategies that urban school principals implement to achieve these two goals. These strategies require an *orchestrator role* on the part of the principal, who must articulate the set of processes and internal and external actors involved in the management of the school, which –furthermore– makes it unfeasible to visualize the principal as someone who can focus exclusively on classroom activities and technical support for teachers.<sup>xii</sup>

The strength of the leadership in the school is decisively tied to the relationship principals establish with their faculty. Existing data about this link shows important strengths, but also areas of risk. On the one hand, teachers

generally appreciate their principals, which shows there is confidence in significant personal qualities (honesty, commitment, respect) and in their work as major leaders in the school. On the other hand, teachers see shortcomings in terms of principal’s lack of knowledge in technical-pedagogical subjects, and their limited development of practices related to classroom instruction (for example, classroom observation and feedback to teachers).<sup>xiii</sup>

**Fourth assertion:**  
**Principals can make a difference in learning outcomes of students, which is why it is critical for them to develop “soft management” skills, and above all, to achieve a positive impact on the work of teachers in the classroom (who mediate the relationship between the principal and students).**

The school is an institution based on the values of cooperation and service, and with a high emotional involvement of its members. In the school culture, adequate “soft management” skills, as well as transformational leadership from the principal, affects the learning of students.<sup>xiv</sup> Hence, it is important that principals have an influence on the creation of a school climate focused on academics, with high standards and expectations by teachers with respect to student performance. The performance of students is connected with the

managerial leadership and school climate.<sup>xv</sup> Even when working in contexts of socioeconomic disadvantage, there is a synergy between these three dimensions in schools that achieve high performance.

It is possible to operationalize the influence of school management on student outcomes by building models that identify the variables of managerial leadership that have the greatest impact on the pedagogical work of teachers, and consequently, on the students. One example is the model developed by Professor [Kenneth Leithwood](#), which is based on the identification of four strategic dimensions (setting directions, developing people, redesigning the organization, and managing instruction). Seen from a different perspective, the impact of principals on teaching occurs by influencing the motivation of teachers, by changing their working conditions, and by improving their abilities and competencies. This latter dimension is the one principals in primary schools are less able to “mobilize.”

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The available literature has highlighted the importance of the definitions of the various types and styles of leadership that principals can develop, as well as on the study of the impact they can have on student outcomes. Several studies show that the influence of managerial leadership increases when principals successfully affect the perception of collective efficacy among teachers of the educational establishment, and when the students are mobilized to follow academic goals.

**Fifth assertion:**  
**Policies aimed specifically at principals are very recent and there is a long history that has assigned principals a predominantly administrative and secondary role. In Chile, policies have been modified so that principals exercise a role of pedagogical leadership in schools, with a resulting increase in their powers vis-a-vis the teachers and in their accountability for the results achieved.**

The movement towards the educational empowerment of principals in Chile came just five years ago. The role of the director went from an intermediate position in a civil servant career within the Ministry of Education to a terminal position in the school. There was also a shift from regulated training which operated as a filter for access to higher positions, to a wide variety of training opportunities that are decided upon by the individuals themselves and which do not

necessarily have direct consequences on their careers.

In the impulse of managerial leadership, there has been a combination of provision of greater powers to the principals with a requirement to be accountable for the main results of the school. But the new leadership role represents not only a transformation of the link towards the top (with the employer) but also towards the bottom (with the teachers). Hence, these greater powers involve a substantial change in the entrenched concept of professional autonomy of teachers, who until recently were seen as “lords and masters” of the classroom, and now have orientation and technical-pedagogical supervision from the management of the school.

In the last two decades, there has been a trend in favor of managerial leadership, showing the existence of a set of key milestones such as the legal definition of managerial work as “to direct and coordinate the institutional education project of the establishment”; the slow and gradual installation of mandatory contests for the director position in the municipal sector; or the recent attributions that allow principals to form their own management teams, and dissociate annually, for academic reasons, up to 5% of the teaching staff.<sup>xvi</sup>

#### Sixth assertion:

**We do not know enough about principals in Chile, and there is a need to address a wide research agenda. This must be enlightened by the ongoing international specialized discussion, but especially by the needs arising from the implementation of a firm and coherent policy towards these actors, which could significantly impact the quality of education as a whole.**

The information we have on the various aspects of the Chilean education system is clearly imbalanced, not only in terms of quality, but also in quantity and opportunity. Little or nothing is known about strategic matters such as learning in the technical and vocational sector, the

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characteristics of employers, or the impact of the Technical Educational Assistance (ATE in Spanish) in the school system. There is a need for more and better data to reach conclusions about school principals.

Thus, relevant issues remain in the shadows, such as the

professional careers of principals and their mobility within and between establishments (the true “principal career”); the effective use of the specific assignments that principals have (such as performance allocation); the promotion principals have made (if any) in favor of the participation of different sectors in the management of establishments (such as school boards); the status of principals in rural areas, with the position of *teachers in charge* in schools that only have one, two, or three teachers, and in the technical and vocational world; the actual operation of community committees in the selection process of municipal principals; or the results of different models of principal training. The systematic collection of this information would allow conducting higher-quality research on these themes; in return, such specialized research would allow us to assess whether the available information meets the criteria of relevance, timeliness, and usability.

While in Chile the “principal question” shows its initial progress, the international literature has been developed for decades, so there is significant accumulation of knowledge on the subject. Learning more about school principals is not an academic exercise; it is a necessity that will allow us to develop better policies focused on these strategic actors. These policies are crucial because they benefit not only the schools where principals work, but also the entire system.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>i</sup>Weinstein y Muñoz. *¿Qué sabemos sobre los directores de escuela en Chile?* Editado por J. Weinstein y G. Muñoz. Fundación Chile - CEPPE. 2012. p. 389. All references are from this book.

<sup>ii</sup>Murillo, Javier. “La dirección escolar en Chile: una visión en el contexto de América Latina”.

<sup>iii</sup>Fernández, Guazzini y Rivera. “Caracterización de los directores escolares en Chile”.

<sup>iv</sup>Murillo, Javier. “La dirección escolar en Chile: una visión en el contexto de América Latina”.

<sup>v</sup>Weinstein y Muñoz. “Cuando las atribuciones no bastan: liderazgo directivo y gestión pública o privada de escuelas en Chile”.

<sup>vi</sup>Murillo, Javier. “La dirección escolar en Chile: una visión en el contexto de América Latina”.

<sup>vii</sup>Muñoz y Marfán. “Formación de directores escolares en Chile: características y desafíos”.

<sup>viii</sup>Uribe y Celis. “Desarrollo de capacidades para un liderazgo escolar efectivo: del levantamiento de competencias al reconocimiento de buenas prácticas”.

<sup>ix</sup>Rodríguez, Simón. “Aprendizajes y trayectorias de formación de directores: un estudio sobre el desarrollo del liderazgo educativo en Chile”.

<sup>x</sup>Muñoz y Marfán. “Formación de directores escolares en Chile: características y desafíos”.

<sup>xi</sup>Raczynski, Dagmar. “Realidad de la educación municipal en Chile: ¿liderazgo del sostenedor municipal?”.

<sup>xii</sup>Weinstein, Muñoz y Marfán. “Liderar bajo presión: las estrategias gestionadas por los directores de escuela para alcanzar los resultados comprometidos”.

<sup>xiii</sup>Weinstein, Marfán y Muñoz. “¿Colegas y jefes? La visión de los docentes sobre el liderazgo directivo en Chile”.

<sup>xiv</sup>Majluf, Nicolás. “El impacto de la gestión sutil sobre el rendimiento escolar”.

<sup>xv</sup>Reeves, Matías. “Efecto del liderazgo directivo en escuelas con altos niveles de vulnerabilidad social”.

<sup>xvi</sup>Montt, Pedro. “Políticas educativas y liderazgo pedagógico en Chile: una lectura de dos décadas de desarrollo”.



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