



POLICY BRIEF 2: SCHOOL PRINCIPALS IN HIGHLY EFFECTIVE SCHOOLS – WHO ARE THEY AND WHICH GOOD PRACTICES DO THEY ADOPT?

Key findings

- **Highly effective schools are twice as likely to have a female principal than average and low effective schools.** The Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES) and education authorities at all levels should promote qualified women to become principals, also given their under-representation within this profession.
- **Principals in highly effective schools emphasize teacher support and collaboration.** Principals in highly effective schools report higher levels of collaboration and engagement with teachers and teacher involvement in decision-making processes, in line with the MoES Primary School Fundamental Quality Standards. Teachers and students' responses corroborate these findings.
- **Principals and teachers in highly effective schools give more feedback to parents on student assessments and progress.** Without such cooperation between families and schools, children are unlikely to learn and realise their full potential.
- **Effective principals foster trust, respect, and innovation within their schools.** If embedded in a collaborative learning culture, these behaviors and practices enhance schools' ability to embrace innovations, such as the primary curriculum reform Lao PDR has embarked on.

Context

Lao PDR has made steady progress in expanding access to education in recent decades, yet many children still leave primary education without being able to read, write, or perform simple numerical calculations.^{1,2} Despite this learning crisis, some schools outperform others, even in the most disadvantaged areas. By identifying these “positive deviant” or “highly effective” schools and the good practices underlying their success, important lessons can be drawn.

Positive Deviance Research

The *Positive Deviance Research* investigates grassroots solutions to help improve the quality of education in the country. Based on analysis of student assessment data that estimated school effectiveness while controlling for student, household, and community contextual features, a sample of 120 schools was selected with an even distribution of high (40), average (40), and low (40) effectiveness. Highly effective schools exhibit student achievement levels that are substantially above the expected level given their contextual features. Less effective schools have contextual characteristics similar to highly effective schools, yet they achieve lower student outcomes. The sampled schools were then visited to conduct surveys with school principals, teachers, students, Village Education Development Committee members, and District Education and Sports Bureau staff.

Research findings

School principals in highly effective schools: Who are they?

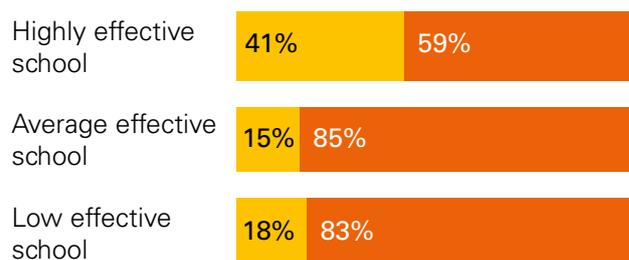
Highly effective schools are twice as likely to have a female principal than average and low effective schools. In line with a growing body of international research evidence,^{3,4} this analysis found that effective schools are significantly more likely to be headed by female principals compared with average and low effective schools. 41 per cent of principals in highly effective schools are female,

compared with just 15 per cent in average effective schools and 18 per cent in low effective schools (see *Figure 1*).

Figure 1. School principals, by school category and gender

n=118 school principals

● Female ● Male



Only about a quarter of principals in the sample of schools are female. Principals are more likely to be female in larger schools and in schools with higher concentrations of Lao-Tai children. This raises the question of whether gender itself does have a causal effect on school effectiveness. However, despite differences in community characteristics, the analysed schools were selected based on contextual characteristics and are therefore relatively comparable.

The analysis suggests that women-led schools have more effective management practices and create better teaching and learning environments. For example, students studying in schools led by female principals report that their teachers are significantly more likely to check their work, assign homework, and teach until everyone understands, relative to students in schools led by male principals. Teachers in schools with female principals confirm these results, and report more active engagement with their students. Differences reported by students and teachers in female-led schools are quite large (roughly 0.30 standard deviations), and they are significant even when controlling for student, teacher, and community background factors like school size, socioeconomic status, and ethnicity.

The significantly larger share of female principals in highly effective schools demonstrates their leadership potential for improving student learning in schools across the country. Given their under-representation as school principals, the MoES may consider promoting more qualified women to principal positions.

Principals in highly effective schools tend to be slightly younger. Principals in highly effective schools were on average 44 years of age, compared with 48 years in low effective schools. Older and more experienced school principals are likely to be posted to larger urban schools with fewer ethnic-minority students. But when controlling for differences in student background, the statistical analysis found that student achievement was higher in schools with younger school principals.

What do school principals in highly effective schools do differently?

Principals in highly effective schools emphasize teacher support and collaboration more than principals in low effective schools. The MoES Primary School Fundamental Quality Standards recognize the importance of teacher support and collaboration as key means for improving teaching and student learning.^{5,6} In line with these standards, this research shows that principals in highly effective schools report consistently higher levels of collaboration and engagement with teachers than those in low effective schools (see Figure 2). For example, 42 per cent of school principals in highly effective schools reported that they observe teachers often, compared with only 20 per cent in low effective schools. Nine per cent of school principals in low effective schools reported that they never observe teachers, compared with only 3 per cent in highly effective schools. Also, teachers in highly effective schools are more likely to be involved in decision-making processes pertaining to their schools, according to the principals. Teachers' responses also corroborate these findings, suggesting the existence of a collaborative learning culture in highly effective schools in Lao PDR.

Parent engagement is higher in highly effective schools. Principals and teachers in highly effective schools report providing significantly more frequent feedback to parents regarding student assessments and progress. These are encouraging practices, as research demonstrates that without such cooperation between families and schools children are unlikely to learn and achieve their full potential.^{7,8}

Figure 2. School principal engagement and collaboration indicators, by high and low effective schools

n=68 school principals

● Never/Disagree ● Some days/Agree ● Every day/Strongly agree



Effective principals foster trust, respect, and innovation within their schools. School principals in highly effective schools are significantly more likely to report that teachers feel comfortable asking other teachers or the principal for advice, and teachers treat each other with respect. They also report that teachers in their schools discuss learning from mistakes and failures more openly and more frequently – a feature that positively correlates with student achievement. Especially when embedded in a collaborative learning culture, these behaviours and practices are known to be important predictors of a school’s preparedness for change, alongside its ability to embrace innovations like the primary curriculum reform Lao PDR has embarked on.⁹⁻¹⁰

The bottom line

Principals in highly effective schools are significantly more likely to be female, thus shedding light on women’s leadership potential for improving student learning. Also, recognizing they are under-represented in the profession, the MoES and education authorities at all levels should consider promoting more qualified women to principal positions and to strive towards gender parity within the profession.

This research confirms the importance of skilled school principals to provide guidance and take responsibility for improving the learning of all students. School principals in highly effective schools achieve this by promoting collaboration, providing support to teachers, engaging parents as partners for improving student learning, and building trust and respect in schools and communities. These are key characteristics of a collaborative learning culture or a school as a learning organization that are known to positively influence schools’ ability to embrace innovations such as the new primary curriculum.

About the Data Must Speak (DMS) Positive Deviance Research¹¹

This research is part of UNICEF’s DMS initiative (co-funded by the Global Partnership for Education /International Development Research Centre Knowledge Innovation and Exchange (KIX) initiative, Hewlett Foundation, and UNICEF education thematic fund) and UNICEF Lao PDR’s efforts under the EU-funded Partnership for Strengthening the Education System in Lao PDR. The aim is to enhance the capacity of the Ministry of Education and Sports in data management and utilization for monitoring and planning. This research is part of the multi-year DMS Positive Deviance programme led by the UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti involving 13 other countries across Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

A Policy Brief Series

This policy brief is the second in a series that presents key research findings and aims to inform policy dialogue and decision making in Lao PDR and other interested countries. The first policy brief focused on teachers’ capacity. This second brief looks at school principals in highly effective schools – who they are and the practices they adopt.

Endnotes

1. UNICEF and SEAMEO, SEA-PLM 2019 [Main Regional Report: Children's learning in 6 Southeast Asian countries](#), Bangkok, Thailand: UNICEF and SEAMEO, 2020.
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5. Fullan, M., [The Principal: Three keys to maximizing impact](#), San Francisco, CA: Wiley, 2014.
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