

The influence of headteachers on their schools

Introduction and background

There is a strong belief that good school leadership is essential for creating and sustaining good schools. The Department for Education (DfE) claims that leadership is one of the greatest influences on pupil outcomes. Researchers claim that leaders shape the school to improve pupils' outcomes, and the effectiveness of a school's leadership is one of the 5 areas assessed by Ofsted. This belief is reflected by the fact that the autonomy of school leaders in England is among the highest in the OECD, and the increasing number of academy schools over the past decade has given headteachers even greater freedom from central direction. Most headteachers in England can distribute resources as they wish, set teachers' pay and conditions, choose their school's curriculum, and set the length of a school day. However, the impact of headteachers on staff and pupils has never been quantified in England. This study from the Education Policy Institute (EPI) aims to close the research gap. It used national data on all pupils and headteachers between 2004 and 2019 to track 22,300 primary and 5,400 secondary headteachers and explore their impact on metrics such as pupil progress, teacher turnover and teacher absences.

Headteachers' influence on pupil attainment

- Central estimates of the influence of headteachers on pupil's progress are reported in this study as the effect size of a school switching from an average headteacher to a highly effective headteacher. An 'effective head' is defined as one in the 84th percentile of effectiveness, a 'median' or 'average' headteacher is one in the 50th percentile of effectiveness and a 'less-effective head' is one in the 16th percentile of effectiveness. According to these bandings, an 'effective headteacher' would be one who leads to more pupil progress than 84 per cent of headteachers, whereas a 'less effective headteacher' enables more progress than only 16 per cent of headteachers.
- Across the full sample of primary schools, switching from an average headteacher to a highly effective headteacher leads to pupils achieving an additional 0.12 standard deviations (sd) of attainment in their Key Stage 2 (KS2) assessments, on average. Using EEF conversion tables, that is approximately 2 months of additional progress.
- The effect size in secondary schools is 0.08sd, which represents around an additional month of progress or about one extra GCSE grade in a single subject.
- Relative to other interventions, these effect sizes are higher than those often reported for providing CPD to teachers and roughly similar to having an experienced teacher instead of a new graduate.
- Additional analysis of the data enabled researchers to look at effect sizes for the first 3 years of a headteacher's tenure at their schools and for all but the first 3 years. Effect sizes are consistently greater in the later years of a headteacher's tenure than in the earlier years. This suggests that the impact of a headteacher may increase over time and eventually be significantly greater than the 1-2 months of progress reported above. The difference appears greater in secondary schools.
- At primary schools, 5.7 per cent of the difference in pupil progress can be explained by differences between headteachers. For secondary schools, differences between headteachers explain 7.6 per cent of the differences in pupil progress.
- Researchers explored whether headteachers who are effective at improving attainment also tend to reduce teacher turnover and teacher absences, proxies for motivation. They found that headteachers who are less effective tend to increase annual teacher turnover in their schools, though the effect size is far smaller than the effect on pupil progress.
- Headteachers who are less effective at increasing pupil attainment are also less effective at reducing 4-year cumulative turnover in both primary and secondary schools.
- Effective headteachers appear to significantly reduce teacher absenteeism in secondary schools. Moving from a less effective headteacher to an average headteacher is associated with a 0.06sd reduction in the number of absences in secondary schools, which is an average of 10.7 days of absence. However, there is no consistent effect on teacher absenteeism in primary schools.
- High-performance primary and secondary schools tend to hire the most effective headteachers. For secondary schools, the schools with the highest performance appear to hire the very best headteachers.
- Overall, headteacher effectiveness varies little by school characteristics, i.e., schools with different levels of disadvantage and different governance structures do not attract more or less effective headteachers.
- Inner and Outer London have more effective headteachers in both primary and secondary schools compared to other regions, where headteacher quality is more evenly distributed. In secondary schools, London headteachers contribute about 0.05sd more than the regions with the lowest average quality, which is equivalent to 2/3 of a GCSE grade or 1 additional month of progress.
- More effective headteachers earn more. For example, in primary schools, a median headteacher earns around £2,000 more per year than a less effective one, whose annual salary is around £59,000. Similarly, in secondary schools, a less effective headteacher has an average salary of £86,500 per year while a median headteacher earns on average £89,500. It should, however, be noted that these are unadjusted correlations. For example, more effective headteachers are more likely to be found in London schools, where

national pay scales are higher, which may account for some of the difference.

- In both primary and secondary schools, more effective headteachers have more years of experience as headteachers and have more experience as headteachers in their current school.
- For both primary and secondary schools, having an additional 5 years of experience is associated with an increase of 0.1sd in headteacher effectiveness. This equates to an extra 2 months of progress for primary and secondary school students, or an increase of 1.25 GCSE grades for secondary school students.

attainment of this group but also the average attainment of the whole education system.

The influence of ethnicity and gender

- The analysis did not find any evidence that pupils from certain genders or ethnicities benefit more from having headteachers from the same gender or ethnic group. Neither was there any evidence that headteachers' characteristics influence the ethnicity and gender of their schools' workforces. However, these are the results most affected by small sample sizes in the study, so it is possible that the reason for the lack of meaningful effects is that a true effect exists but is small.

Implications

- The findings suggest that enhancing the quality of school leadership may be an effective means of improving school performance. There is a need to ensure that leadership improvement plans are properly evaluated.
- Headteachers' effectiveness increases with their experience as a headteacher and the time they spend as a headteacher at a particular school. School governors and Ofsted inspectors should therefore acknowledge that it may take years to realise the full improvement in results following a change in the headteacher of a school and support new headteachers accordingly. There is also a need to recognise the high cost of losing experienced and effective headteachers. Retention policy in recent years has tended to focus on early career teachers, but a greater focus on supporting headteachers to remain in post might pay off in better results for pupils and better teacher retention.
- It would be worth considering whether policies to encourage effective headteachers to move to the schools where they are most needed could help reduce the gap in attainment between disadvantaged and more affluent children. The government already provides financial incentives for early-career teachers to work in challenging schools through the levelling up premium payments, but it may be that encouraging school leaders to make those choices could have a greater impact.
- Multi-academy trusts (MATs) and local authorities (LAs) could consider how they might actively allocate headteachers within their group to achieve their goals. They could evaluate the potential impact of these movements based on the headteachers' effectiveness and might want to encourage their most effective school leaders to move to challenging areas where they are most needed.
- Although not analysed in this report, it is possible that disadvantaged pupils benefit more from having a high quality headteacher, as is the case for teachers. If this were true, a reallocation of effective headteachers to more disadvantaged schools would not only raise the

The full document can be downloaded from:

<https://epi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/The-influence-of-headteachers-on-their-schools.pdf>