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How Much Influence Do Teachers Have in Their Schools? It Depends on Whom You Ask

A growing body of research suggests that school management models emphasizing teacher influence in school governance have a range of benefits, including increased teacher job satisfaction, more-effective organizational learning, and improved academic performance.[1] However, research also suggests that teachers and principals have different views of teacher influence in schools, with principals perceiving higher levels of teacher empowerment than teachers themselves.[2] Much of this research has been based on local or regional samples—not a nationally representative group of educators.

Data from the RAND Corporation's web-based American Educator Panel (AEP) surveys provide greater insight into teacher and principal perceptions of teacher influence in school decisionmaking.

A Large Gap Exists Between Teacher and Principal Perceptions of Teacher Influence

AEP responses reveal a substantial gap between principal and teacher perceptions of teacher influence in schools (Figure 1). As in previous studies, principals are significantly more likely to agree that teachers have influence in their schools than are teachers.

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[1] Billingsley and Cross, 1992; Bowden, 2002; Harris, 2011; Hallinger and Heck, 2010; Harris and Muijs, 2002; Heck and Hallinger, 2009; Marks and Louis, 1997; Marks and Louis, 1999; Louis, Dretzke, and Wahlstrom, 2010; Rinehart and Short, 1994.

[2] Akert and Martin, 2012; Desimone, 2006; Keiser and Shen, 2000; Noel et al., 2009.

The AEP asked a nationally representative sample of teachers and principals to rate the extent to which they agree with the following statements:

• Teachers are involved in making important decisions at my school.

• Teachers have a lot of informal opportunity to influence what happens at my school.

• Teachers feel comfortable voicing their concerns.[1]

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[1] For teachers, the third statement was phrased as "I feel comfortable voicing my concerns." The four-point scale included "Strongly Disagree," "Disagree," "Agree," and "Strongly Agree" response options. These questions are based on the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research's *5Essentials Survey* (University of Chicago, 1994).

For example, more school leaders (96 percent) than teachers (58 percent) report feeling that teachers are involved in making important school decisions. In addition, almost all school leaders (98 percent) agree or strongly agree with the statement that teachers have a lot of informal opportunity to influence what happens at their school—a much higher rate than we found for teachers (62 percent).

Almost One-Third of Teachers Report Being Uncomfortable Voicing Concerns

Without feeling comfortable voicing their opinions, teachers are far less likely to exert influence in school decisions. A sizable portion of teachers (31 percent) report that they are not comfortable voicing concerns in their schools. Meanwhile, most school leaders (97 percent) report that teachers in their schools are comfortable voicing concerns.
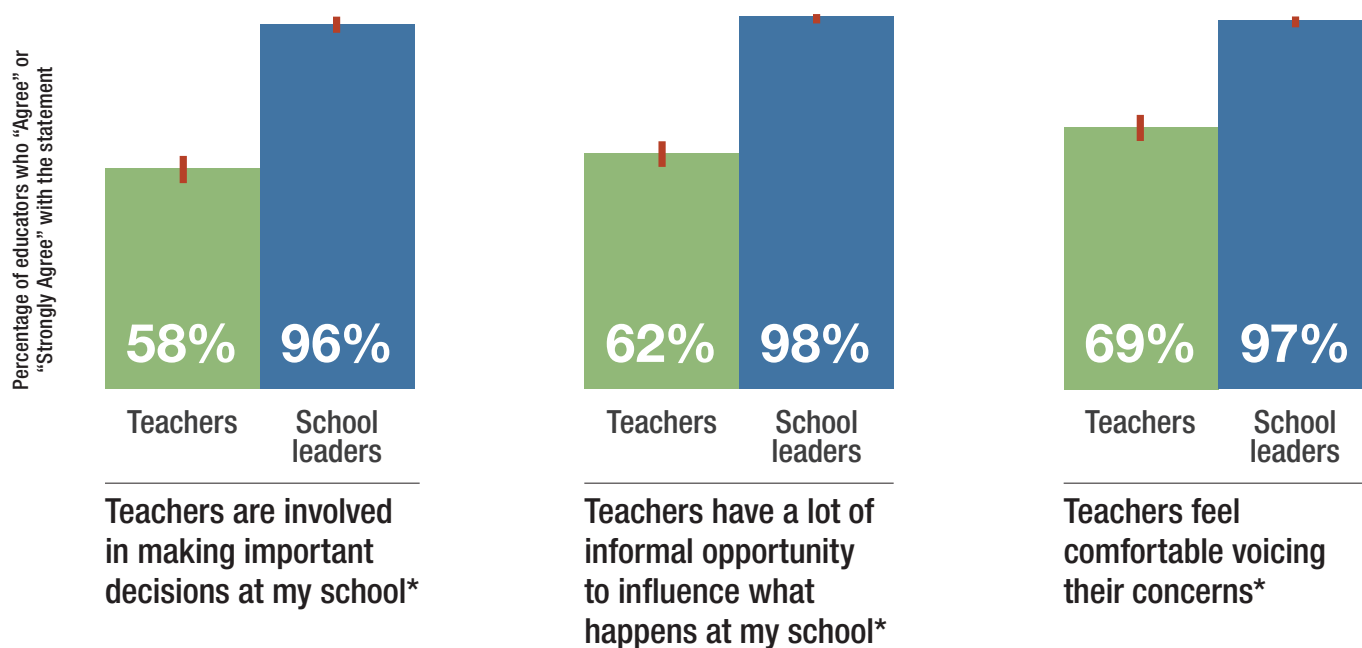
Differences in Teacher and Principal Perceptions Exist in All Types of Schools

The teacher-principal divide remains even after we controlled for school and district demographics. Furthermore, differences do not vary significantly across schools of different types (size, grade level, poverty level, urban/nonurban location).

FIGURE 1

Teacher, School Leader Perceptions of Influence Differ Widely

Weighted Percentages of Educator-Reported Agreement with Statements Concerning Teacher Influence in Schools

Percentage of educators who "Agree" or "Strongly Agree" with the statement

| 58% | 96% |
| Teachers | School leaders |

Teachers are involved in making important decisions at my school*

| 62% | 98% |
| Teachers | School leaders |

Teachers have a lot of informal opportunity to influence what happens at my school*

| 69% | 97% |
| Teachers | School leaders |

Teachers feel comfortable voicing their concerns*

NOTE: Red vertical lines represent weighted 95-percent confidence intervals. Asterisks indicate that differences are statistically significant at the $p < 0.001$ level.

Why Might This Perception Gap Exist?

Several reasons exist for why perceptions of teacher influence differ widely between teachers and principals. First, teachers and principals might have different philosophies about how much teacher influence is sufficient. Teachers might feel stifled and frustrated by a perceived lack of leadership opportunities, while principals perceive that teachers already have ample opportunity for influence. Second, findings may indicate disparities in understanding of school governance priorities (for example, the two groups may have different definitions of what constitutes an "important" school decision). Finally, principals' predominantly positive responses may be based on a small subset of teachers who have formal or informal school-based leadership roles, rather than the larger group of teachers overall.

Where Do We Go from Here?

Regardless of the reasons for the disparity in perception, we contend that this persistent gap between teachers and principals signals an important disconnect that may foster professional stagnation and frustration. We encourage school leaders to critically examine the leadership opportunities they believe they are providing for their teachers and establish systems and structures that foster regular dialogue about important school decisions. School leaders also should explore ways to foster a culture of trust among school staff and leadership, so that teachers feel comfortable expressing concerns.

In addition, these findings warrant deeper investigation by educational researchers into the causes and consequences of the observed disconnects in perception, exploring the possible causes described in the previous section. Researchers also should consider the extent to which teachers are frustrated by limited opportunities to influence what happens in their schools or by a lack of comfort expressing concerns. The survey did not directly address teachers' overall satisfaction with the level of leadership opportunities and how this is related to general job satisfaction or perceived effectiveness.

How This Analysis Was Conducted

For each question, we collapsed responses recorded in a Likert scale into dichotomous indicators for whether the respondent expressed some degree of agreement (somewhat, strongly) or disagreement (somewhat, strongly). The primary analyses were conducted using weighted linear probability models to compare the responses of teachers and principals across the set of questions regarding teacher voice and influence in schools. To ascertain whether the differences in responses by role differ by school characteristics, we interacted the indicator for the respondent being a teacher with the appropriate school characteristic. We also conducted supplemental analyses that included additional school covariates and a vector of state fixed effects to better understand whether the associations found in the primary analysis were potentially confounded by characteristics of the schools or respondents. These weighted, multivariate linear probability models included a series of demographic control variables from the National Center for Education Statistics Common Core of Data.[1] For a full description of our analytic strategy, please see the Technical Appendix (RR-2575/1-BMGF, www.rand.org/t/RR2575z1).

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[1] These included school-level variables, such as urbanicity, percentage free and reduced-price lunch, percentage white, percentage black, percentage Hispanic, school size, and whether the school was an elementary school; district-level variables, such as percentage English language–learner students and special education students; and state-level fixed effects.

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About the AEP Data Note Series

The AEP Data Note series is intended to provide brief analyses of survey results of immediate interest to policymakers, practitioners, and researchers. If you would like to know more about the dataset, please see the Technical Appendix (RR-2575/1-BMGF, www.rand.org/t/RR2575z1) for more information on survey recruitment, administration, and sample weighting. If you are interested in using AEP data for your own analysis or reading other AEP-related publications, please email aep@rand.org.

About This Report

The American Educator Panels (AEP) are nationally representative samples of teachers and school leaders across the country.

This study was undertaken by RAND Education and Labor, a division of the RAND Corporation that conducts research on early childhood through postsecondary education programs, workforce development, and programs and policies affecting workers, entrepreneurship, financial literacy, and decisionmaking. This study was sponsored by The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, which focuses on ensuring that all students graduate from high school prepared for college and have an opportunity to earn a postsecondary degree with labor-market value. For more information, please visit www.gatesfoundation.org.

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