GLOBAL EDUCATION MONITORING REPORT

2025

REGIONAL EDITION ON LEADERSHIP IN EDUCATION

Latin America

Lead for democracy

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Sustainable Development Goals

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Global Education Monitoring Report

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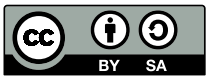

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The Education 2030 Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action specifies that the mandate of the *Global Education Monitoring Report* is to be 'the mechanism for monitoring and reporting on SDG 4 and on education in the other SDGs' with the responsibility to 'report on the implementation of national and international strategies to help hold all relevant partners to account for their commitments as part of the overall SDG follow-up and review'. It is prepared by an independent team hosted by UNESCO.

The *Global Education Monitoring Report* team is responsible for the choice and the presentation of the facts contained in this book and for the opinions expressed therein, which are not necessarily those of UNESCO nor of its funders and do not commit the Organization. Overall responsibility for the views and opinions expressed in the Report is taken by its Director.

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SHORT SUMMARY

How do school principals in Latin America distribute their leadership roles and responsibilities?

School leaders are not, and cannot be, heroes. The concept of distributed leadership has gained prominence over the last quarter century and shifts the focus from individual acts to the dynamics of social interaction within schools. It acknowledges that school success hinges on collaborative relationships and shared responsibilities. As schools' educational goals become increasingly complex, a single leader cannot possess all necessary competencies. Principals must empower their teams by distributing leadership functions and decision making authority, fostering an environment of trust, inclusion and innovation.

Two in three

principals in Latin America say that they promote teacher collaboration.

This regional edition accompanies the 2024/5 *Global Education Monitoring Report* and documents ways in which such practices are rooted in Latin America. Although the term 'distributed leadership' is not widely used in policy documents, the region's educational culture places a strong emphasis on democratic school management. This manifests in various engagement structures, such as management teams, teacher collectives, community councils and student governments. Parents' engagement in school-level decision making varies significantly between countries.

Engaging the entire school community in shaping the school's direction strengthens participation, empowerment and democratic values. While not synonymous with democratic leadership, distributed leadership significantly contributes to democratic practices and values, a vital consideration in the region.

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Since wars begin in the minds of men and women, it is in the minds of men and women that the defenses of peace must be constructed

Foreword

At a time of increasingly complex educational challenges, the traditional notion of a lone, heroic school leader is simply no longer tenable. This report, *Lead for Democracy*, highlights a fundamental truth: schools and communities thrive when leadership is distributed. It is through the combined experience of teachers, students, families and community members that we are able to set and attain shared goals, fostering environments of trust, inclusion and innovation.

This research brings to the fore the power of distributed leadership, a concept that, while not always explicitly named, is deeply rooted in the educational culture of Ibero-America. This commitment to collaboration is reflected in the region's diverse participation structures, from school management teams to student bodies, as well as in the high levels of mandatory involvement of teachers, students and families.

However, notwithstanding this strong foundation, the report also uncovers a critical divide. Although distributed leadership is practised, it is not always consistently encouraged by governments. This disconnect between practice and policy, together with deficient training and centralized decision-making, limits the potential of collaborative leadership. This is particularly troubling given the fundamental role of schools as spaces for civic education and the promotion of democratic values.

This report is a call to arms. We must close the gap between theory and practice, ensuring that policies, training programmes, decision-making processes and selection mechanisms are aligned with the principles of distributed leadership and the body of evidence in this area. By empowering school communities and fostering a culture of collaboration, we can unlock the full potential of our schools to educate and inspire future generations. This report offers valuable insights and recommendations for policymakers, educators and other key stakeholders, paving the way towards a more collaborative and democratic future for quality education in Ibero-America.

Stefania Giannini
Assistant-Director of Education, UNESCO

Mariano Jabonero Blanco
Secretary General, Organization of Ibero-American States for Education, Science and Culture (OEI)

About the Organization of Ibero-American States

The Organization of Ibero-American States for Education, Science, and Culture (OEI) is the largest multilateral cooperation organization among Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking countries in Ibero-America. Founded in 1949 and headquartered in Madrid, the OEI works directly with the governments of its 23 member countries, designing programs and projects to strengthen public policies in education, science, and culture.

Currently, it has 19 national offices, in addition to its General Secretariat in Madrid. In 2024, it received the prestigious Princess of Asturias Award for International Cooperation "for its fruitful work in promoting multilateralism and for representing an important bridge in relations between Europe and Ibero-America."

The OEI views education, science, and culture as tools for human development and generators of opportunities for all. It embraces this commitment alongside its partners to achieve common goals: regional integration and cohesion, the strengthening of our democracies, and the well-being of our communities.

Acknowledgements

The *Global Education Monitoring Report* and the Organization of Ibero-American States for Education, Science and Culture (OEI) teams would like to acknowledge the support of numerous contributors to this regional edition.

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We gratefully acknowledge the guidance and support on the design of the report and especially on its messages and recommendations from four OEI Advisory Council members: Ricardo Cuenca (Professor at the National University of San Marcos and Researcher of the Institute of Peruvian Studies), Mariano Narodowski (Director of the Education Department at Torcuato Di Tella University), Renato Opertti (Professor at the Catholic University of Uruguay) and José Weinstein (Professor and Director of the Educational Leadership programme at Universidad Diego Portales).

We would like to express our gratitude to the researchers and experts who prepared country case studies and background papers, which are listed below, and those who shared their perspectives and inputs to the research.

We are also grateful to the Ceibal Foundation who contributed to the box on teacher evaluation and leadership in Uruguay.

Additional thanks go to Global School Leaders for their support in collecting testimonies from school principals included in this report.

The report was edited by Andy Quan. Finally, we wish to express our gratitude to the individuals and organizations who worked hard to support the translation, production, design, and printing of this regional edition.

COUNTRY CASE STUDIES

Unless indicated otherwise, the case studies are the source of all examples from the focus countries.

Argentina

Distributed leadership in education in Latin America: Argentina
Mariano Narodowski

Brazil

Distributed leadership in education in Latin America: Brazil – Ceará
Jaana Flávia Fernandes Nogueira

Distributed leadership in education in Latin America: Brazil – Joinville (Santa Catarina), Mato Grosso do Sul, and Piauí
Filomena Siquieira, Gabriel Santana Machado and Karoline Oliveira, and Lemann Center for Leadership for Equity in Education

Chile

Distributed leadership in education in Latin America: Chile
José Weinstein, Javiera Peña, Gonzalo Muñoz (Universidad Diego Portales) and Francisca Maldonado

Colombia

Distributed leadership in education in Latin America: Colombia
Cristhian James Diaz Meza and Wilson Acosta Valdeleón (CLED Universidad de la Salle), Pablo Torche (EDECSA), Jorge Esteban Castillo Peña and Óscar Julio Maureira Cabrera

Costa Rica

Distributed leadership in education in Latin America: Costa Rica
Claudia Limon Luna and Angel Dubon Marchelli

Honduras

Distributed leadership in education in Latin America: Honduras
Juan Carlos Llorente

BACKGROUND PAPERS

Distributed leadership in education in Latin America: Governance
Ricardo Cuenca (Universidad Nacional Mayor de San Marcos)

Distributed leadership in education in Latin America: Technology
Tamara Díaz Fouz, Anabel Martínez Valle y Juan José Leal Martínez (OEI)

Distributed leadership in education in Latin America: Monitoring and evaluation
Silvina Gvirtz (Universidad Nacional de San Martín) y Victoria Abregú (Universidad de San Andrés)

Distributed leadership in education in Latin America: Conceptualization
Renato Opertti. (President of the Advisory Council of the OEI and the Education Institute of ORT University of Uruguay)

Distributed leadership in education in Latin America: Professional development
Denise Vaillant (Education Institute of ORT University of Uruguay)

Distributed leadership in education in Latin America: Results of the survey of education ministries
José Weinstein, Javiera Peña (Programme of Educational Leadership , Universidad Diego Portales) and Francisca Maldonado (Universidad Argentina de la Empresa, UADE)

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KEY MESSAGES

School leaders cannot do everything on their own.

- By distributing leadership, school principals draw on the collective expertise of the school community to set and achieve common goals.

The concept of distributed leadership lacks universal recognition in Latin American policies.

- Only three countries explicitly refer to distributed leadership in legislation, regulations or policy. Participatory leadership is explicitly mentioned in eight countries. Democratic school management is a constitutional principle in Brazil.
- But distributed leadership practices do exist. The Diretor de Turma (class director) programme in the Brazilian state of Ceará has encouraged a stronger relationship between schools and families. School networks in Chile are meeting spaces for principals.

Distributed leadership is easier when power is delegated to schools.

- The Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Panama and Peru assign the lowest degree of autonomy to schools.
- Principals or senior management teams decide on teacher professional development in Argentina, Costa Rica and Peru, while teachers co-decide in Guatemala and Uruguay.

Distributed leadership requires shifts in organizational structures but also cultures.

- In traditionally vertical educational systems, implementing distributed leadership requires better coordination and policies supported by initial and continuing education programmes.
- School decision-making autonomy must be accompanied by collegial bodies, which ensure that decision-making power is not concentrated in the school principal.

Strong recruitment practices and training can emphasize distributed leadership.

- Out of 17 countries, 13 have public competitions for principal recruitment, although patronage remains present in some contexts.
- Only Chile, Colombia and Nicaragua promote distributed leadership or similar approaches in their training programmes for principals; overall, training remains theoretical and mostly provided by non-state actors.

Teachers in leadership roles need support.

- Two in three principals in the region say that they promote teacher collaboration, according to the 2019 Regional Comparative and Explanatory Study.
- Nearly all countries have organized structures of teacher participation, and all include teachers in school management boards.
- However, teachers do not often feel their perspectives are valued. In Colombia, technical support for teachers is limited to administrative interventions.

Distributed leadership is manifested through engaged students, parents and communities.

- The inclusion of students in school management bodies is mandated in 70% of countries, while policies or regulations on parental participation exist in 83% of countries.
- School communities participate in setting school improvement goals in Colombia, Cuba, Ecuador, El Salvador, Honduras and Peru.
- Almost all countries have organized structures of school community participation. Honduras and Mexico include trade unions; Argentina and Colombia include alumni representatives.

Distributed leadership can foster democratic values within and outside the school.

- In the five countries that took part in the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study, students more exposed to open dialogue, debate and critical thinking had higher civic knowledge levels and were more likely to believe in the value of democratic participation.
- As a democratic approach to school management, distributed leadership contributes to enhancing a sense of agency among all individuals leading to better outcomes and improved well-being.

Principals help shape the direction of their schools. But they lead in such different ways that there is no easy way to demonstrate how they impact education – which partly explains why that impact is frequently overlooked. Moreover, the concept of school leadership and perceptions of leaders' roles have been changing over the past few decades around the world (Gurr, 2023). School principals are expected to play less of an administrative function and more to have an impact on school 'results' (Pont, 2020). But while there has been a tendency to focus on measurable learning outcomes, there is a much wider range of outcomes to which schools can aspire: inclusion, peace, citizenship and mastery of digital technology tools are among many (**Box 1**).

BOX 1.

The regional editions of the 2024/5 *Global Education Monitoring Report*

The 2024/5 *Global Education Monitoring Report* focused on education leadership at the school, system and political levels. The common perception that leadership is important for schools has been captured in the quote that 'there is not a single documented case of a school successfully turning around its pupil achievement trajectory in the absence of talented leadership' (Leithwood et al., 2006; p.5).

But researchers trying to document the impact of leadership tend to focus on specific observable practices and measurable results, usually those emerging from standardized test scores (Grissom et al., 2021). In practice, leaders often affect several student outcomes – and do so indirectly by shaping the school's environment and culture. It is difficult to establish a direct causal link between actions that are difficult to observe and multiple student outcomes. There are also many mediating factors, often unrelated to leaders, which makes disentangling the specific contribution of leadership ever more difficult (Robinson and Gray, 2019).

There is, therefore, a risk that some important outcomes to which leaders contribute may receive less attention. For this reason, the regional editions of the 2024/5 GEM Report cycle explore outcomes such as the development of an inclusive school ethos in Central and Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia, and digital transformation in East Asia.

This edition is the result of a partnership between the GEM Report and the Organization of Ibero-American States for Education, Science and Culture (OEI). It focuses on empowerment and democracy through the exercise of distributed leadership in Latin America, building on three pieces of evidence. First, case studies were carried out in six countries: Argentina, Brazil (two studies), Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica and Honduras. Second, country profiles on school leader standards, working conditions, selection processes and training programmes from all Latin American countries were collected as part of the preparation of the 2024/5 *Global Education Monitoring Report* for the Profiles Enhancing Education Reviews (PEER) website. Third, a survey of ministries of education on their leadership regulations and policies was carried out by OEI with the support of its country offices. Ministerial representatives from 18 Latin American countries responded, providing information on how countries incorporate aspects of distributed leadership, including participation structures in schools, decision making processes, appraisal and accountability mechanisms. In the case of Bolivia, responses were received after the data analysis was completed so could not be incorporated into the report.

The 2024/5 *Global Education Monitoring Report* (UNESCO, 2024a) identified four core education leadership dimensions that school principals, one of several types of education leaders, need to exercise if they are to contribute to any education outcome:

- Set expectations, or *transformational leadership*, which involves behaviours that influence, inspire and motivate school community members to improve the school.
- Focus on learning, or *instructional leadership,* which involves behaviours that influence, inspire and motivate the school community to improve learning outcomes.
- Foster collaboration, or *distributed leadership*, which refers to how leaders interact and collaborate with others and share their responsibilities.
- Develop people, which is not only part of school leaders' human resource management responsibilities but also requires them to further help their teams learn and grow.

The first in a set of well-publicized 'seven strong claims about successful school leadership' stated that: 'Of all the factors that contribute to what students learn at school … leadership is second in strength only to classroom instruction' (Leithwood et al., 2004, p. 70). One reason why leadership has such impact is that 'leaders have the potential to unleash latent capacities

in organizations … educators in leadership positions are uniquely well positioned to ensure the necessary synergy' (Louis et al., 2010, p. 9). But synergy and collaboration are also captured in two of the other 'seven strong claims'. The fifth claim is that the influence of school leadership can be especially positive on school and student outcomes 'when it is distributed', while the sixth claim is that 'some patterns of distribution are more effective than others' (Leithwood et al., 2020).

The concept of distributed leadership, used extensively in the past 25 years (Spillane et al., 2001), recognizes that the exercise of leadership is determined by social relations within schools (Bates, 2010; Bush, 2020). School staff depend on each other and leadership functions therefore need to be shared to achieve education goals, especially as school objectives are becoming ever more complex. Leadership is not just a matter of actions, as it is usually perceived, but also of interactions. As no single individual possesses all the required competences, it is important for school principals to work with their teams, assigning roles and responsibilities but also empowering them through the distribution of formal and informal leadership functions and decision making authority. Under certain conditions, such as trust and a supportive organizational culture, this approach can foster inclusion and innovation.

As an efficient and effective approach to school organization and management, distributed leadership refers to principals' relations not only with their teaching and non-teaching staff but also with students, parents and external stakeholders. In turn, engaging the school community in shaping the school's direction is important for the success of the school project and is also an exercise in strengthening participation, empowerment and democracy. This approach therefore has broader social ramifications. While distributed leadership is not always democratic leadership, the two concepts overlap considerably (Woods, 2010).

Participation in decision making and implementation processes fosters a sense of ownership that has been found to contribute to student performance and well-being (Kilicoglu, 2018). Distributed leadership contributes to enhancing a sense of agency among all individuals (Woods, 2020). This type of school governance recognizes each individual's contribution. The school becomes a space where the members of its community experience communication, reflection and joint action (Murillo and Duk, 2024).

Education and, in particular, schools should be the bedrock of democratic values (Dewey, 1916), providing opportunities of learning about and *through* institutional life. They can help prepare informed, engaged and responsible citizens through civic education, including education that is embedded in extracurricular activities. Schools are spaces where students, in particular, experience collective life, familiarize themselves with diversity, difference of opinion and conflict, learn about rights and duties, participate actively, and learn the language of the community (Cuenca, 2019). Students learn much from what they experience, which makes it critical for schools and their leaders to follow democratic practices on issues such as accountability, values, discipline, cooperation, communication and involvement (Bäckman and Trafford, 2007).

Distributed and democratic leadership in education help strengthen democratic societies. This is important everywhere around the world, including in Latin America, where opinion polls have documented a decline of citizens' support for democracy (**Box 2**).

BOX 2.

Public support for democracy has declined in Latin America in recent years

From the mid-20th century through the 1980s and early 1990s, much of Latin America was governed by authoritarian regimes that curtailed civil liberties, silenced dissent, and undermined democratic institutions (Smith, 2005). The relatively stable democratic systems have made the region an example of democratic resilience. Yet two major, long-standing public opinion surveys agree that support for democracy fell in Latin America in the mid-2010s and has not recovered since to previous levels (**Figure 1**). First, the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP), or the AmericasBarometer, shows that the share of adults who agreed that democracy is the best form of government remained constant at 68% between 2004 and 2012 but fell in 2014 and more rapidly in 2016/17 to 58%, a level that it maintained until 2023. Support for democracy in 2023 was highest in Uruguay (75%), Costa Rica (72%) and Chile (70%) but lowest in Honduras (49%), Suriname (48%) and Guatemala (48%).

Continued on the next page

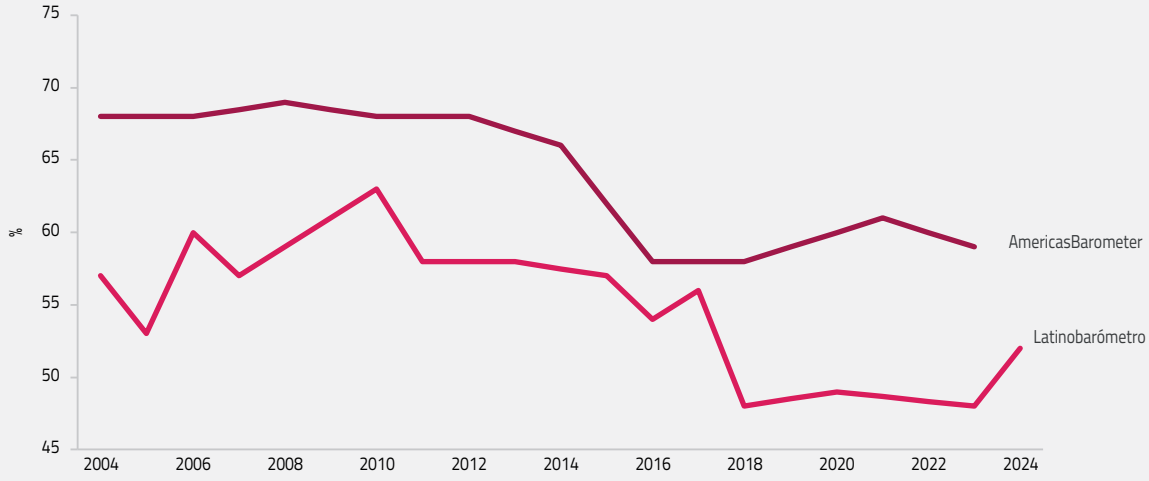
BOX 2. *Continued*

Second, according to the Latinobarómetro, 52% of Latin Americans supported democracy in 2024. While this represented a significant increase of four percentage points compared to 2023, levels of satisfaction remain 11 percentage points below the level achieved in 2010. The results of the LAPOP and Latinobarómetro surveys generally align and are also credited with indirectly predicting the changing attitudes towards democracy that were manifested in the expression of citizens' sentiments in Chile, Colombia and Ecuador in 2019. The second half of the 2010s was also characterized by growing intolerance and cultural clashes over issues of sexual orientation and gender identity and expression, which also affected education.

FIGURE 1.

Support for democracy fell in Latin American in the mid-2010s and has not recovered since

Percentage for adults in Latin American countries who agreed that democracy is the best form of government, 2004–24



Source: Latinobarómetro (2024) and Lupu et al. (2023).

Trust towards democratic institutions is a complex issue. It involves satisfaction with public services, but also perceptions of fairness, equity and transparency, and possibilities of participation in decision making (OECD, 2024). Distributed and democratic school management can also play an important role in strengthening these perceptions and widening these possibilities among current and future citizens. It involves, among many other aspects, preparing the members of the school community to listen to others whose opinions they may not agree with, in a spirit of dialogue and cooperation. It also involves political agency, offering members of the school community the opportunity to voice their opinion.

Under past authoritarian regimes, schools in Latin America served as tools of control rather than of empowerment. With the return to democracy in the late 20th century, education has been a cornerstone for building democratic societies and for raising a new generation of critical citizens who would never again accept authoritarian rule (Cox et al., 2009). Argentina incorporated lessons about the dictatorship into curriculum reforms in the early 1990s (Gonzalez, 2014). Brazil reintroduced civic education in secondary education (Luiz and Barcelli, 2013). Chile promoted decentralized education and a renewed focus on citizenship and social rights (Villalobos, 2016).

However, democracy should be not just taught but also practiced. Hierarchical school structures can stifle student voice and discourage democratic participation. Evidence from the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study shows that students who felt their voices were heard in school were more likely to value political participation and believe they could make a difference in society (Schulz et al., 2018). Unfortunately, traditional hierarchies, where discipline and obedience are emphasized over dialogue and critical thinking, limit such agency.

Distributed education leadership and democracy share core values such as participation, empowerment, shared decision making and collective responsibility. Education leaders have the responsibility to 'take up issues of power, culture and identity'. Their responsibility is to facilitate social relationships where difference does not result in domination and oppression. Leaders need to emphasize 'the importance of being able to identify with the other, to empathize with others' thoughts and feelings' and to 'commit administrators, teachers and students to a discerning conception of democratic community' (Giroux, 1992; p. 7).

Even in education, 'attitudes that validate authoritarian leaders' are a threat to the democratic ideal. The International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS), administered by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) and others in five Latin American countries in 2016 (Chile, Colombia, the Dominican Republic, Mexico and Peru) showed that such attitudes were commonly held by the assessed grade 8 students. For example, 57% of students believed that concentration of power in one person guaranteed order and 67% that a dictatorship can be justified if it brings economic benefits (Miranda et al., 2021). The ICCS regional report also pointed out that the 21% of students in these five countries who (strongly) agreed that it was better for government leaders to make decisions without consulting anybody had much lower civic knowledge scores than those who disagreed, underlining the importance of civic education. The results showed that students who were exposed to open dialogue, debate, and critical thinking had higher levels of civic knowledge and were more likely to believe in the value of democratic participation (Schulz et al., 2018).

Distributed leadership can educate students and teachers of the importance of sharing power and responsibilities, which is precisely the condition under which democracy operates most effectively. Decentralizing authority, fostering collaboration and empowering more voices helps promote inclusive decision making and develop the democratic skills of dialogue, negotiation and consensus building. If leadership is shared, then students and teachers can develop essential civic life habits, such as engagement, responsibility and accountability. Ultimately, leadership that encourages collaboration and shared decision making nurtures the critical thinking and problem-solving skills that are fundamental for a functioning democracy (Universidad Diego Portales, 2021). It contributes to developing future democratic leaders, encouraging them to assume leadership roles. Schools become spaces where students and teachers learn not just *about* democracy but how to *practise* it.

Credit: Escuela 5986 Luis M. Fernández, Santa Elena, Paraguay. ©OEI

Distributed leadership involves participation in setting and achieving common goals

Distributed leadership is based on the premise that the presence of charismatic individuals cannot explain school success on its own (Fullan, 2005). School principals need to tap into collective expertise and strengthen collaboration (Harris et al., 2022). Leadership roles and responsibilities need to be shared and reordered. When principals mobilize the variety of skills in their teams, in a less hierarchical structure, they support school improvement.

Experts agree that there is intrinsic value in a school leadership approach based on distributing roles and responsibilities. However, this is perhaps as far as experts agree on definitions (**Box 3**) and interpretations of the term 'distributed leadership' vary considerably. Many believe that an approach based only on shared roles has limited potential if it does not also address the purpose of education and the goals towards which a school should be aiming. For instance, in countries that hold schools accountable for achieving learning targets, distributed leadership may just be a compliance mechanism that entrenches hierarchies (Mifsud, 2024). Distributed leadership cannot just mean bringing together more than one person in school management, regardless of the objective. Rather, it should be a type of collaborative leadership that contributes to the achievement of broader objectives (Knight Abowitz, 2019), within a vision of strengthening participation, democracy and social justice.

This report concurs with the view that distributed leadership should not be seen as just an organizational approach but also as a transformative approach that engages the school community in determining the purpose of education and learning. Leaders should not distribute their functions only to make education delivery more efficient and implement a prescribed curriculum. They should use this approach to develop the curriculum, where possible, and to respond to the diversity of needs of students and educators.

In Latin America, the concept of distributed leadership first appeared in research in the mid-2000s (e.g. Murillo, 2006; Cayulef, 2007), although it took another 10 years for it to be used more regularly. The term has been applied to refer to an organizational approach both for improved effectiveness in teaching and learning as well as for the achievement of broader objectives. However, it has been more frequently used in the context of a formal, hierarchical distribution of tasks and less in terms of leadership capacity development (Maureira et al., 2016).

Distributed leadership is recognized as supporting pedagogical leadership through management teams that democratize the exercise of power and the distribution of roles and responsibilities (Cuenca, 2015). Conditions for school improvement are more appropriate where there are multiple sources of expertise and a culture of collaboration between school staff, whether or not they have formal leadership roles (Weinstein et al., 2016). But various challenges need to be overcome in the exercise of distributed leadership. Mutual trust is needed to strengthen teachers' confidence in assuming shared responsibilities. Interactions and group activities between all teachers need to be facilitated. In particular, teachers need tools that make collaboration possible in co-teaching, sharing learning and planning, investigating together and creating learning communities (Weinstein 2019).

There has been recognition in the region of the importance of framing a discussion on distributed leadership in the context of the political, social and educational purposes to be pursued (Weinstein et al., 2016). Distributed leadership is a way of conceiving schools in more democratic, participatory and collaborative ways, which recognizes the diversity of interests and the search for common ground (Poggi, 2018). Unleashing such organizational and relational dynamics is expected to have a range of positive impacts. First, distributing leadership roles, strengthening synergies in school organization and operations, and emphasizing school improvement processes can lead to more relevant curricula, improved teaching, better learning outcomes, more harmonious yet diverse communities and more involvement of communities. Second, involving management and pedagogical teams in leading educational transformation and ensuring strong communication between schools and communities are expected to lead to higher levels of commitment and well-being (Opertti, 2025). These advantages should be weighed against potential risks, such as delaying decisions, introducing role ambiguity and overburdening teachers with additional responsibilities.

BOX 3.

Many concepts' definitions overlap with that of distributed leadership

Distributed leadership promotes the idea that leadership does not reside in a single person, but is distributed between various actors in the education community. It facilitates a collaborative culture, taking advantage of the competencies and skills of all to improve management and results (Gronn, 2002; Spillane, 2006). Distributed leadership must be complemented with a pedagogical and inclusive approach in its social purposes to support holistic school development (OEI, 2022; Cuenca, 2025).

The elasticity of the concept of distributed leadership opens it up to different interpretations. This is also highlighted by the following terms, whose assigned definitions also overlap with distributed leadership. Each of them implies a focus on learning that is not instrumental, relationships that are not functional, power that is not concentrated and communications that are not unidirectional.

Shared leadership requires all members of the school community to collectively hold leadership responsibilities and contribute to decision making to address school needs (Uhl-Bien et al., 2018). The leader facilitates the process by providing necessary resources and support (Earl and Katza, 2007). Teachers take on various roles and responsibilities, working together to solve problems, share ideas and enhance the school's functioning (Hargreaves and Fink, 2006). This model challenges traditional hierarchies and requires principals to relinquish some control to empower staff and foster a sense of ownership and professional growth (Wilhelm, 2013).

Collaborative leadership is enacted by everyone in the school and works towards inclusive participation. It tries to shift emphasis away from people's dependence 'on being directed, regulated and told what to do … following ideas authorised as correct by others'. Instead, it assumes people have agency and an 'innate capability to actively expand their knowledge and their understanding … rooted in values of social justice and democracy, helping people grow beyond dependence towards co-development' (Woods and Roberts, 2018).

Democratic leadership does not just make 'staff and students … feel consulted and included'. Rather, it 'promotes power sharing and transforming dialogue that enhances understanding … but also cultivates … ethical "citizens" … and relational well-being through a community that fosters both belonging and individuality'. Enabling structures and participative and empowering agency are essential features of democratic leadership (Woods, 2020).

REFLECTING ON MY ROLE

Credit: © María José Juncal

María José Juncal
Vice Director, Instituto Superior Santa María, Argentina

I am an early childhood education teacher and a long-time member of the Varkey Foundation's network of school principals.

I am the Deputy-Principal in a school in Posadas Misiones in Argentina. I work with children of elementary level at the Santa María Higher Institute, where we have approximately 300 students and more than 30 teachers.

In our day-to-day life, one of the greatest difficulties we face in the school management team is the absence of parents in many of the children's lives. Unfortunately, this leads to attention problems, language problems, and behavioral problems.

Involving parents and the community in decision making is critical for us, as engaged parents can help guide schools toward their goals.

What we see in our Institute is many teachers filling this void. Our school has brought together teachers who are focused on their studies, on their education and training. We actively support them to develop their potential and support our children.


Credit: © UNESCO GEM Report/Rooftop

The concept of distributed leadership is not widely used in Latin America

Education policymakers and practitioners in Latin America appear to be less familiar with the concept of distributed leadership, and more familiar with the concepts of participatory or democratic leadership.

Two sources support this conclusion. The first source is responses to a questionnaire on regulations (laws and decrees) and policies (guidelines, performance frameworks and standards) administered to ministries of education in 17 countries, which focused on school leadership in general and distributed leadership in particular. The questions examined the conceptualization of school leadership in these documents (e.g. role, functions, attributions and formal structures), school principal professionalization (e.g. selection, training and appraisal), participation structures for school staff and communities, autonomy and decision making processes (Weinstein et al., 2025a). The second source is findings that have emerged from selected country case studies.

THE POLICY FOCUS ON DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP IS LIMITED

In regulations and policies, almost all Latin American countries adopt a broad definition of the principal's role, which encompasses administrative, pedagogical and well-being tasks, and the maintenance of links with school, community and system actors. This definition combines the traditional view of the role (managing processes and resources and implementing education policies) with a more contemporary view (leading educational projects and improving schools). While this definition opens up the possibility of distributed leadership, it does not guarantee it, as it does not provide information on the responsibilities of teachers and other middle leadership positions.

There are different approaches to the role and definition of the role of the principal:

- In Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay, central regulations and policies do not define the role of principals, although in the first two there are provincial/state provisions, while in Uruguay principals' responsibilities are described in specific regulations. Moreover, in Brazil there are minimum requirements for access to management roles, and the participation of the school community in school administration is promoted.

- In Costa Rica and Ecuador, regulations or policies define a more restricted management role than the tasks and functions associated with the position. They focus on the administration of (material and human) resources and on the implementation of central guidelines. In Costa Rica, the 1954 Teaching Career Law (updated by descriptive manuals in 2021) states that the job requires 'the application of principles and corresponding techniques for planning, coordinating, directing and executing curricular and administrative activities'. In Ecuador, the 2014 Organic Law of Intercultural Education (updated in 2023) states that the principal 'ensures compliance with the educational policies established by the Central Level of the National Educational Authority'.

- In Chile, Colombia, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico and Paraguay, regulations or policies define a similar or broader management role than the tasks and functions associated with the post, including that they ensure school improvement based on the goals of its educational project (Weinstein et al., 2025a).

Overall, participatory leadership is explicitly mentioned in 8 countries, teacher leadership in 5 countries, and democratic management in 5 countries. Only three countries – Colombia, Mexico and Nicaragua – explicitly refer to distributed leadership in legislation, regulations or policy (Weinstein et al., 2025a). Yet some school principal regulations encourage a distributed approach to leadership. In Brazil, the participation of the school community is rewarded with the transfer of resources from the central to the state level. The election of principals, collegiality and participation of different school stakeholders in school decisions have historically been associated with the democratic management of schools (Lima, 2014).

In Chile, principals are expected to 'ensure the participation of the school community' (**Box 4**), while in Guatemala they must 'encourage and support the organization of student associations'. In Mexico, the 2021 Internal Regulations of the Ministry of Public Education define functions for 'educational authorities' but not exclusively for the school principal. In Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Paraguay and Uruguay, policies or regulations mention concepts linked to distributed leadership (Weinstein et al., 2025a).

BOX 4.

Chile has implemented a series of school leadership reforms in the past 20 years

In Chile, a set of governance, regulatory and educational policy reforms over the past two decades have promoted managerial leadership as a driver of school development. In 2004, the Full School Day Law defined the school principal for the first time as an education leader whose main function is to lead the school educational project. The 2008 Preferential School Subsidy Law and the 2009 General Education Law further added to the principal's responsibilities and defined actions in curriculum, pedagogical supervision, teacher professional development coexistence and resource management with the development and implementation of an Educational Improvement Plan.

In 2005, a transparent and competitive selection mechanism for public school principals was introduced, alongside a Framework for Good Leadership (updated in 2015) to guide school principals' actions, professional development and training processes. The framework recognizes principles, skills, knowledge and five areas of action and practice: to develop and implement a shared strategic vision; to develop professional capacity; to lead and monitor teaching and learning; to manage school community coexistence and participation; and to develop and manage the school. Although distributed leadership is not mentioned explicitly, the 2015 update shifted from the original focus on the principal to management teams, emphasizing participatory and collaborative environments based on shared visions and principles.

In 2011, a decree established a publicly funded training plan for school principals, which sought to ensure that they meet certain characteristics to be selected to be able to lead school improvement – and be trained accordingly. In 2014, the Ministry of Education issued its Policy to Strengthen School Management Leadership, which was updated and expanded in 2018. It united the leadership initiatives and regulations, created school leadership centres (i.e. university consortia offering training, capacity development and research services) and reconfigured public school administration to support their transition from the municipal administration to Local Education Services, in line with the 2017 New Public Education law. This change has strengthened local government officials to support schools, promoted collaboration between schools, and delegated more powers for teacher recruitment, school educational projects and improvement plans, and resource management to school principals.

Overall, while these documents represent progress, they have not always been coordinated. But some of their elements have promoted distributed leadership. First, they place emphasis on ensuring the participation of all education community members among the principal's functions (mainly through organizations such as student centres, parent and guardian centres, teachers' councils and school councils). Second, they encourage schools to collaborate with school networks and their local communities. Finally, including with the 2021 and 2023 Indicative Performance Standards, they guide principals and their teams to build a shared vision in their school communities, lead processes in a participatory manner, and promote leadership in other members of the school management and teaching teams.

Source: Weinstein et al. (2025b).

DELEGATING DECISION MAKING POWER AFFECTS THE PROSPECTS OF EXERCISING DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP

When school environments facilitate the exercise of distributed leadership, more decisions can be taken by more members of the school community. This requires governance changes at two levels. First, power is delegated from national, subnational or local educational authorities to schools. School autonomy facilitates the exercise of distributed leadership, even if such leadership can also be exercised in centralized systems. Second, within the school, power is delegated from the school principal to other school actors.

Decisions regarding *hiring and firing teachers and principals* are usually centralized. Some limited form of school participation exists in hiring and firing non-teaching staff, as in Ecuador, Guatemala and Paraguay, where these decisions are taken by the school community body.

School inputs are more common in some other decisions. For example, *student admission* tends to be decided centrally but there are exceptions in Argentina, Chile, Honduras and Paraguay (by the management team), Uruguay (principal) and Guatemala (teachers). In the case of *students with special educational needs*, decisions are largely external to the school except in Chile (management team), Ecuador and Honduras (teachers), and Colombia, Cuba and Uruguay (school community body). Decisions on *student assessment* are also central but there is school input in Chile and Colombia (management team), Ecuador, Honduras,

Mexico and Uruguay (teachers), and Cuba and Peru (school community body).

Yet other decisions tend to have even stronger school input. In *professional development*, teachers participate in deciding their training in Guatemala and Uruguay, and other members of the education community take part in Chile, while principals or the senior management team make such decisions in Argentina, Costa Rica and Peru. As for the *use of resources allocated to the school*, the education community participates in Colombia and Paraguay; management teams in Argentina, Nicaragua and Panama; and principals in Brazil, Costa Rica and Uruguay.

Decisions taken mainly at the school level include *student conduct norms and rules*, which are taken by or with the participation of school management teams in Argentina; teachers in Chile, Costa Rica, Honduras, Mexico and Uruguay; and, more broadly, the education community in Brazil, Colombia, Cuba, Ecuador, Paraguay and Peru. In the case of curriculum and pedagogy, decisions on the content of courses are taken centrally but schools decide on the *selection of courses*, which involves the school community in Colombia, Cuba and Ecuador; the management team in Argentina, Chile and Mexico; and teachers in Costa Rica and Peru. The *selection of textbooks* is made by the management team in Chile, Colombia and Mexico; teachers in Brazil, Costa Rica, Honduras and Uruguay; and the school community in Cuba and Ecuador.

Finally, *school improvement* decisions tend to be made by schools. However, within schools, there is also greater distribution of decision making power. Only the school principal sets such goals in Brazil and Uruguay. The management team participates in Argentina and Panama; teachers participate in Costa Rica, Guatemala and Mexico; and the school community participates in Colombia, Cuba, Ecuador, El Salvador, Honduras and Peru. In contrast, participation in decisions on *how to allocate resources to school improvement* is more restricted. For example, in Guatemala, Honduras and Peru, it is a decision taken outside the school (Weinstein et al., 2025a).

In short, decision making power consistent with distributed leadership is mainly found in school improvement plans and, to some extent, in professional development, discipline, curriculum and pedagogy, but not in staff management. Looking at all decisions collectively, the Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Panama and Peru assign the lowest degree of autonomy to schools, while other countries have granted greater autonomy by empowering different actors: principals (Brazil and Costa Rica), management teams (Argentina and Chile), teachers (Mexico) or school community bodies (Colombia, Cuba and Ecuador) (**Figure 2**).

REFLECTING ON MY ROLE

Credit: © Félix López Giménez

Felix Lopez
Director, Technical-Agricultural Fabián Cáceres, Paraguay

School life starts when the doors open and the students arrive. The bell rings and the students go to stand in line and sing the National Anthem with the teachers.

I make sure that everyone is present at school before going to confirm receipt of the school meals.

As principals, we carry out multiple roles. We resolve conflicts between students, teachers and parents and work with other institutions in the community. We must also take care of the health and well-being of our pupils and students. As a principal, I must make sure that the classrooms are clean, that there is school furniture, and that the classrooms are lit. I also must deal with administrative tasks that include dealing with requests from higher levels.

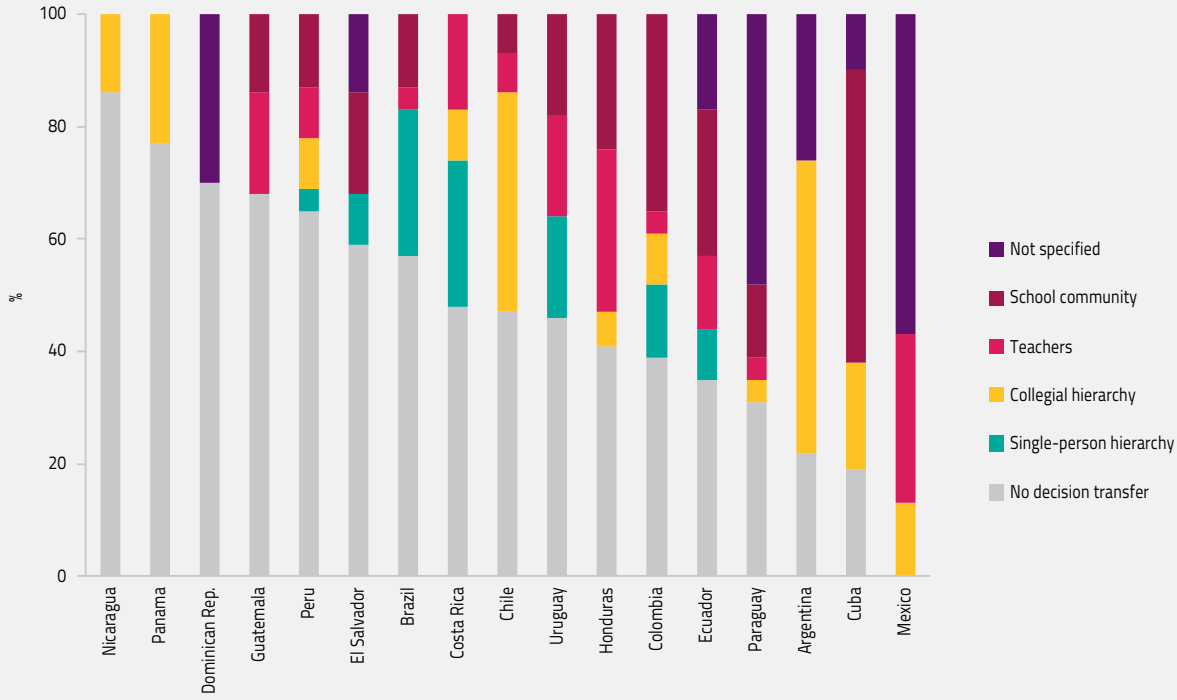
It is quite frustrating when we cannot achieve or develop what we set out to do, mainly due to lack of resources. However, there is satisfaction to be found when we achieve what we planned.

Achieving these tasks is a responsibility that is distributed with the teaching staff and the Management Team, where teachers, students and parent representatives are integrated with the principal. We carry out our work, considering the diversity of the population, inclusion, and respect for people and the laws and resolutions issued by the Ministry of Education itself.

FIGURE 2.

Nicaragua and Panama delegate the least decision making power to schools

Distribution of decision making power to schools, Latin America, 2024



Notes: The Figure is based on responses to six human resource management decisions (e.g. making a teacher redundant), five capacity development decisions (e.g. setting the initial teacher salary level), four school policy decisions (e.g. student admissions), three curriculum and pedagogy decisions (e.g. courses offered), and five school improvement decisions (e.g. deciding improvement objectives).

Source: Weinstein et al. (2025).

SELECTION PROCESSES MATTER FOR SCHOOL PRINCIPAL LEGITIMACY

Countries may centralize school principal recruitment and selection or may leave these decisions to schools. An analysis of PEER country profiles for the 2024/5 *Global Education Monitoring Report* found that in Latin America, 53% of countries organize selection at the central level, 18% at the local government level, 6% at the school level, with the remaining 24% at various levels. There is also an appointment validation stage, which tends to be more concentrated at the central and local government levels. Regardless of the degree of autonomy, what is needed are objective, fair, inclusive, transparent and clearly defined criteria, such as seniority, qualifications, training and experience. These criteria enhance the credibility and legitimacy of the principal's role, helping build trust and respect within the school community, which are necessary for effective distributed leadership.

Further analysis of the PEER country profiles shows that in Latin America, 33% of education systems only require teaching experience from principal candidates, 56% require teaching and management experience, and 11% ask for any relevant experience in education. Assigning a priority to teaching experience aims to ensure that principals understand the educational process and teachers' challenges. While teaching experience tends to be the favourite selection criterion, assessments of skills, competences and other types of experience are increasingly being considered (Weinstein et al., 2014; Weinstein and Hernandez, 2015). Competences linked to the capacity to distribute leadership and engage the school community are not clearly required (Weinstein et al., 2025a).

In terms of selection criteria, all countries in Latin America set minimum academic qualifications or certification requirements for becoming a principal. In practice, there are often departures from requirements as some older principals were employed before stricter requirements were imposed.

Principalship requirements often differ by education level or school type. In Colombia, principals are selected

based on experience and academic qualifications. In preschools and rural primary schools, they need a teacher training college certificate, a bachelor's degree in education or the equivalent, and four years of teaching experience. Other primary and secondary schools require principals to have at least six years of teaching experience (Aravena, 2020; Colombia Ministry of Education, 2022). In Argentina, 82% of private school principals are recruited through an autonomous process, while in public schools 45% of principals are recruited through competition and 32% through an administrative point system that assigns a significant weight to seniority. But there is variation between provinces. For example, the most common mechanisms are competition in Entre Ríos (72%) and Mendoza (69%) and the administrative point system in Tucumán and Santa Cruz (74%) (Weinstein et al., 2025a).

Both internal and open recruitment processes can use competition to evaluate candidates. Internal promotion of vice principals or senior teachers emphasizes knowledge and understanding of a school's culture, operations and challenges. It can reduce costs and increase principal retention but can also limit the candidate pool and be subject to influence and biases. Open recruitment can attract skilled external candidates with fresh perspectives for school growth through a more transparent and objective selection process (Muñoz and Prem, 2024). Merit-based systems can enhance the legitimacy of the principal selection process but can be time-consuming and expensive.

More Latin American countries have been introducing greater transparency and standardization in school principal recruitment, moving away from a tradition of discretionary appointments based on clientelism and towards evaluation of candidates' competencies and skills (Flessa et al., 2018). In total, 13 out of 17 countries have public competitions, although in Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, Honduras and Peru, these coexist with closed competitions and appointment by invitation or personal nomination. But in Cuba, principals are recruited through a process of selection and preparation of cadres and reserves; in Guatemala, there is personal appointment by invitation or nomination; and in Uruguay, there is a closed competition (Weinstein et al., 2025a).

Despite the prevalence of open processes, patronage remains a feature of public sector appointments in many countries, despite the fact that political discretion in appointing school principals can harm school outcomes (Estrada, 2019). In Brazil, political appointment is a recognized process (**Box 5**). In Chile, the competitive selection process introduced for senior public managers in 2011 has enhanced principals' effectiveness (Cabrera, 2022) and education outcomes (Muñoz and Prem, 2024). But there have been significant regional variations in its implementation. In 2016, only 12% of principals in the Arica and Parinacota region, but 69% in the Magallanes region, were selected through this process (Aravena, 2020; Chile Agency of Quality Education, 2016). According to the process, a commission of teacher representatives with the support of an external human resource company preselects candidates. If the mayor voids the selection process, a new competition has to take place (Chile National Congress, 2011); this has cost implications, especially for small municipalities. A study of school principals leaving office after less than two years found that politics had played a key role in their decision (Diaz et al., 2019).

BOX 5.

In Brazil, political appointment is a formal method for principal selection

In Brazil, political appointment, election and open selection are the three main selection processes (Pereda et al., 2019). Under the first process, local politicians may choose principals based on factors other than merit or qualifications. Principal selection processes differ by state and municipality (Ferreira, 2023). Multiple forms of principal selection may exist in each state. Among the 27 Brazilian federative units, only São Paulo exclusively uses public competition to select school directors (Todos pela Educação and Itaú Social, 2022).

In 2022, the most common selection modalities in decreasing order were election (56%), political appointment (48%), and selection based on the submission of a proposal ('management plan') (33%) or on qualifications and certificates (30%). In the case of elections, students, parents, teachers, permanent school staff and, in some cases, community leaders take part – with a quarter of states assigning more weight to teacher and school staff votes. In three quarters of appointment cases, education secretaries were responsible, although education department directors, governors, mayors and political allies were also involved in the choice. Political appointment was less common (35%) in state capitals (Simielli et al., 2023).

Continued on the next page

BOX 5. *Continued*

Data from the 2019 Basic Education Evaluation System, known as Saeb, and the 2020 School Census, along with surveys by state audit courts, show that over half of public school directors are politically appointed (55%), with a quarter being elected by the school community with or without a selection or certification process. Political appointments are prevalent in the North and Northeast Regions and in municipal schools across Brazil. It is the only form of selection in five states and six state capitals. Over 80% of school principal appointments in the states of Amapá, Amazonas, Maranhão, Paraíba and Roraima are political (Simielli et al., 2023). However, only 5% of school principals believe that recommendations from the Department of Education, without a formal selection process, are an appropriate method for choosing professionals for their roles (Todos pela Educação and Itaú Social, 2022).

Some change is underway. Target 19 of the National Education Plan aims to select principals based on merit and performance rather than through political appointments, and involve public consultation with the school community (Pena et al., 2021). The 2023 Law on Education Financing, which permanently established Fundeb – the Fund for the Maintenance and Development of Basic Education and the Appreciation of Professionals in Education – complements subnational resources with federal resources by at least 23%, and mandates that a portion of government funds for education should be tied to education quality indices, one of which is a merit-based system for selecting school principals (Brazil Federal Ministry of Education, 2023). In response, some states are adopting merit-based systems. The state of Paraíba aims to improve governance and enhance teaching and learning in public schools, including through merit-based procedures for selecting school principals (Silva, 2023).

Principals chosen by public examinations or by public examinations and elections have been found to have better managerial characteristics than those appointed by technical staff or politicians (Pereda et al., 2019). Political changes in municipalities have been shown to increase the replacement rate of staff in schools controlled by the municipal government and are even related to a decline in test scores in the order of 0.05 to 0.08 of a standard deviation, which remains statistically significant, even three to five years after an election (Akhtari et al., 2022).

In 11 countries, actors external to schools take part in the selection, for example the Classification Board in Argentina, the Ministry of Education in Brazil, the National Civil Service Commission in Colombia, the National Selection Board in Honduras and the Inspectorates in Uruguay. In two countries, the decision is made by actors internal to the schools: in Cuba, the decision goes through the school community's participatory body and in Guatemala through the teachers themselves.

LEADERSHIP TRAINING PROGRAMMES PAY ATTENTION TO COLLABORATION

There has been a growing consensus that school leaders require specific preparation. Leadership development ideally begins at the initial teacher education level, then focuses on aspiring and/or candidate principals, followed by induction programmes during their first months or first year of service, and then continues with in-service training (Pont et al., 2008). All countries, except for El Salvador, Paraguay and Peru, have one or more mandatory training processes for principals: five countries at the pre-service level (before principals take up their post), nine at the induction level and nine at the professional development level (Weinstein et al., 2025a). Honduras, is among the last group – and runs a training programme that is aimed not just at school principals but also at system leaders (**Box 6**).

In terms of training content, only three countries recognized that distributed leadership or similar approaches should be promoted in their training for principals. In Chile, part of the practices associated with being a principal which guide training processes is to lead 'the construction or updating of a strategic vision of the establishment and its objectives, promoting that this is understood and shared by all stakeholders in the educational community'. In Colombia, collaborative and democratic leadership has been integrated into the induction process. In Nicaragua, elements of distributed leadership incorporated in principals' training include collaborative work, personal development, creativity, innovation and participation (Weinstein et al., 2025a).

Further analysis from 10 Latin American countries of 28 training programmes (of which 6 are pre-service, 21 are in-service and 1 covers both), collected as part of the PEER profile preparation process, found more emphasis on fostering collaboration than what is recognized by government: 18 of those programmes – or 64% – included a focus on fostering collaboration. But even when this dimension exists, training on distributed leadership tends to be theoretical. Continuous professional development

opportunities are limited and participation is mostly on a voluntary basis. Most programmes appear to be carried out through partnerships with international and civil society organizations (Vaillant, 2025).

In the state of Santa Catarina in Brazil, the government has advanced three initiatives. First, under the School of Leaders initiative, staff from the Secretariat of Education organize training in the evening, on a voluntary basis, for those in or aspiring to be in school management positions. The eight-workshop course addresses topics, including strategic planning, pedagogical management and democratic management. Second, the Technical-Pedagogical Advisory Board advises groups of up to 12 schools on school leadership, offering a 'pedagogical walk with the manager'. Through biweekly visits to schools, indicators, such as attendance and organizational climate, are monitored through conversations with the teams. Monthly meetings are also held in which all principals are brought together to exchange information on difficulties and good practices.

Third, an Action Panel is another initiative developed by the Secretariat. Based on a set of responsibilities of each member of the school management team, members are expected to document the activities carried out on a daily basis for the principal to monitor based on a collaborative work logic.

In Colombia, the National Development Plan 2018–2022: Pact for Colombia, Pact for Equity recognized the importance of education managers' personal and professional development and led to the establishment of the Leadership School for Educational Managers in 2019, an alliance between the Ministry of Education, the Inter-American Development Bank, the British Council and the Fundación Empresarios por la Educación. Between 2020 and 2022, the initiative fostered peer learning, established a network of practitioners, and built a learning community. However, those interviewed for this report said the implementation was fragmented and the follow-up limited.

BOX 6.

Honduras trains civil servants to be system leaders with an emphasis on participation

The Ministry of Education in Honduras has introduced a training programme aimed at managerial and technical staff of the Departmental, Municipal and District Education Directorates, as well as the Educational Centre Directorates, which are the management bodies leading an ongoing process of decentralization. The programme's objective is to develop and strengthen skills to promote transformation, accompanying the education community and supporting their participation, based on the collective reflection and analysis of the educational situation.

The programme covers instructional leadership, education management and community participation, addressing gender, resilience, child rights, environment and governance issues. It lasts 250 hours (half of which in person), equally split into five training modules. The first module highlights transformational leadership as 'the creation of teams, motivation and cooperation with collaborators at different levels of an organization to achieve a change that allows for improvement'. Leadership practices are analysed in relation to participatory analysis processes of the educational situation. Within this framework, there is a reference to distributed leadership as a more evolved style, oriented towards achieving results and inspired by a shared vision. Two key elements are action research on problematic situations in their area of management and the documentation of good practices in municipalities that promote shared learning.

Source: Llorente (2025).

PRINCIPAL APPRAISAL SYSTEMS ARE YET TO CREATE ENABLING CONDITIONS FOR DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP

In total, 10 of the 17 countries have a standardized principal appraisal process, although only 6 countries include the encouragement of school stakeholder participation among the appraisal criteria; this removes one of the potential levers for distributed leadership. In fact, countries with established criteria for principal evaluation are not always those where the principal is responsible for promoting the participation of the various actors in the school community.

Countries that include school community participation among the school principal's functions and have a formal school principal appraisal process can be considered as providing favourable initial conditions to promote the exercise of distributed leadership. On paper, Chile, Cuba, Guatemala, Mexico and Paraguay appear to offer those conditions (**Figure 3**).

Countries also differ in terms of the consequences of school principal appraisals. In Chile and Nicaragua, there is no specific focus on professional development. However, Chile has a collective evaluation mechanism (Asignación de Desempeño Colectivo, ADECO), in which management teams and schools can voluntarily apply to be evaluated on their performance according to a set of goals and receive a financial allocation according to their results. In Uruguay, the appraisal determines contract extension or termination and is therefore a stricter form of accountability. In Costa Rica, Colombia, Cuba, Ecuador and Mexico, appraisal is used both to account for the achievement of results to the central government and to provide incentives for principals (training, contract extension or termination) (Weinstein et al., 2025a).

FIGURE 3.

Few Latin American countries recognize stakeholder participation as a school principal responsibility and few focus on evaluation

Distribution of Latin American countries by promotion of participation among school principal functions and existence of formal principal appraisal process, 2024

	School stakeholder participation encouraged	
School principal appraisal process in place	**No**	**Yes**
Yes	Colombia Costa Rica Ecuador Nicaragua Uruguay	Chile Cuba Guatemala Mexico Paraguay
No	Argentina Dominican Rep. El Salvador Honduras Panama Peru	Brazil

Source: Weinstein et al. (2025a).

SCHOOL STAFF PARTICIPATION PROCESSES VARY IN STRUCTURE AND INTENT

School personnel can lead if given formal or informal support and opportunities. Countries in Latin America have developed various ways of formally engaging teachers. The main formal engagement structure is the school management team. A recent classification of such teams in Latin America identified several types of members, in addition to the principal: vice or deputy principal; pedagogical or instructional coordinator; teacher subject leaders; administrative coordinator; school coexistence or discipline coordinator; and technology coordinator (Adelman and Lemos, 2021; Weinstein et al., 2025a). From a global perspective, the 2018 Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS), in which 48 education systems participated, showed that 89% of lower secondary schools had a school management team. Notably, schools in many countries, including in Latin America, have management team members outside the school personnel. On average, among schools with a management team, 8 in 10 had an assistant principal, 6 in 10 had teachers (department heads or other teachers), 5 in 10 had school governing board members, 4 in 10 had financial managers, and 3 in 10 had parent or student representatives (**Figure 4**). Analysis of the PEER country profiles found national regulations which mandate teacher participation in school management boards in 81% of countries globally and in 100% of countries in Latin America.

FIGURE 4.

A variety of stakeholders are represented in school management teams

Percentage of principals who report that their school has a school management team and individuals who are represented in it, selected Ibero-American education systems, 2018

Source: OECD (2020).

While there is considerable difference between education systems and contexts (e.g. school size), in principle these teams offer opportunities for participating in school decision making and the exercise of leadership and initiative. According to the questionnaire administered to 17 countries in Latin America, three broad types of school management teams are observed:

- A nuclear structure, including the school principal, a direct collaborator (deputy or assistant principal) and a pedagogical coordinator (or teacher leader) (Nicaragua and Panama)
- A reduced structure, which lacks one of the two core positions: in El Salvador and Uruguay, there is a direct collaborator, while in the Dominican Republic and Guatemala, there is no direct collaborator.
- An extended structure, which includes more than the three core positions (Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica, Cuba, Ecuador, Honduras, Mexico, Paraguay and Peru). For example, there are 12 members in Ecuador.

Management team structure also depends on school size and education level. For example, in Colombia, there is one administrative coordinator in schools with at least 500 students, two administrative coordinators in schools with at least 900 students, and so on, up to a maximum of eight coordinators in schools with 5,400 students or more. In contrast, in rural Chile, Costa Rica and Ecuador, the functions of the school principal are added to the work of a teacher. In the case of the Dominican Republic, this can also happen in urban areas. In multi-grade schools, the principal's responsibilities are transferred to the teacher who also acts as a manager. In so-called single-teacher schools, the management structure is made up of the principal and the pedagogical coordinator, who is also a teacher: principals carry out their work in another school, from the one to which the single-teacher school is functionally attached (Weinstein et al., 2025a).

Deputy, vice, assistant or co-principals, usually seen as subordinate, mirror the principal's role. These roles tend to be shaped largely by principals' discretion. However, they can and do involve managerial and leadership responsibilities, such as strategy development, resource management, curriculum design and teaching strategies, especially when schools are granted autonomy.

Such principals, however they are referred to, have roles and responsibilities that vary widely, influenced by factors such as school size, educational priorities, leadership styles, district policies and personal expertise (Pont et al., 2008). Their roles can be ambiguous due to

tasks assigned that may overlap with those of principals, leading to unclear expectations that undermine their leadership and can cause stress. Principals can empower assistant principals by providing clear authority and guidance, as lack of support can hinder their ability to establish authority and gain staff acceptance. Structured mentoring, emotional support, ongoing training in real-world challenges and forums for sharing experiences are potential types of support (Cohen and Schechter, 2019). Mentoring and guiding them through management tasks, involving them in long-term planning, evaluating school priorities and engaging them in decision making can improve their leadership readiness and satisfaction. Clear job specifications, regular discussions to develop a shared vision and rotating administrative duties can also strengthen their leadership potential.

Such a position is envisaged in 14 countries with different roles. For example, in Costa Rica, under the responsibility of the principal, they collaborate 'in the direction, coordination and supervision of the curricular and administrative activities'. In El Salvador, they deputize for the principal when needed but they also are involved in 'proposing initiatives to the director to improve the provision of educational services'. In Paraguay, they are responsible for 'assisting and supporting the director in the tasks of planning, organizing, directing and evaluating technical-pedagogical and administrative activities … promoting and encouraging the participation of the educational community' (Weinstein et al., 2025a). However, as the 2018 TALIS suggests, Colombia (21%) and Chile (28%) had the lowest vice, deputy or assistant principal representation on school management teams among all participating countries, compared to 93% in Portugal and 98% in Spain (OECD, 2020).

Pedagogical coordinators and **teacher leaders,** such as subject coordinators, grade leaders, curriculum leaders, department heads and technology focal points (**Box 7**), are middle leaders who typically play five roles: fostering internal collaboration, connecting with external partners, supporting professional growth, guide teaching and learning decisions, and participating in school management (Chen, 2022). In 12 of 17 countries, teachers are formally responsible for some pedagogical aspects, which combine management and teaching leadership roles (Weinstein et al., 2025a).

BOX 7.

ICT is a tool that can facilitate distributed leadership in schools

Most education systems are increasingly emphasizing the application of digital technology, to deliver education *about* or *through technology* and to improve the efficiency of school operations. This is inevitably affecting school principals' work; 12 of the 17 countries assign them formal responsibility for information and communication technology (ICT). ICT can serve distributed leadership by enabling collaborative work and promoting interaction (Choque et al., 2022). Some of the changes to the roles and functions of the principal were introduced as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, in Mexico, school management functions and attributions were redefined to include communication with families and adaptation of study plans.

ICT provides exchange platforms and facilitates professional development through training, networking and mentoring. Virtual coaching has been used to support secondary school leaders and pedagogical coordinators in Brazil on issues such as time management and pedagogical methods (Bruns et al., 2018). ICT has not yet been used extensively as an education management tool in Latin America. Of 17 countries, 11 reported using it in teacher forums and 5 for coordination with the educational community.

In 10 of the 17 countries (Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Panama and Uruguay), new principals were not required to demonstrate ICT skills and/or knowledge. In the case of Chile, this gap is somewhat mitigated by teacher standards and the Good Teaching Framework that establishes competences in the use and management of ICT expected of teachers (and principals) in their professional practice. In contrast, Costa Rica, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Mexico, Paraguay and Peru place specific requirements in this area in principal selection, although the emphasis is more on the use of tools for management and digital collaboration – and less on issues such as content or data protection. Only three countries have established the position of an ICT coordinator on the school management team: Dominican Republic, Peru and Uruguay.

Going forward, the skills of principals need to be enhanced to address technology-related challenges, which are only going to increase over time. Distributed leadership requires the use of technological tools that promote communication and networking, and these skills should be part of any training package.

Source: Díaz Fouz et al. (2025).

Middle leaders *foster internal collaboration*, balancing daily teaching with strategic oversight. They create a collaborative environment, especially when changes are being introduced. They work to ensure that front-line educators' voices are not just heard but contribute to decisions. They leverage their longer tenure and low hierarchical position (Gurr, 2023) to gradually build trust between teachers and senior management or between subjects (Edwards-Groves et al., 2016). With trust established, they act as a bridge between administrators and educators, addressing real issues teachers face. Teachers in leadership roles must collaborate with teachers, rather than simply act as intermediaries or supervisors, to impact teaching and learning (Lipscombe et al., 2023).

In Cuba, the 'profesor guía' is a middle leader role, selected by teachers and approved by the principal. They act as a key pedagogical leader, integrating school, family and community influences, by collecting and managing student academic information and collaborating with parents, other teachers and student leaders to support student development (Jiménez Guethón et al., 2021). In Ecuador**,** a course/grade tutor is appointed by the principal at the start of the academic year to serve as an academic and personal advisor, coordinating academic, sports, social and cultural activities. The tutor communicates with all subject teachers and is also the primary communication link between the school and student representatives (Ecuador Ministry of Education, 2017). In Uruguay, Article 70 of the 2009 General Education Law requires each school to have a Technical Teaching Assembly to represent teachers, with the right to suggest ideas and provide advice on educational matters (Uruguay Government, 2009).

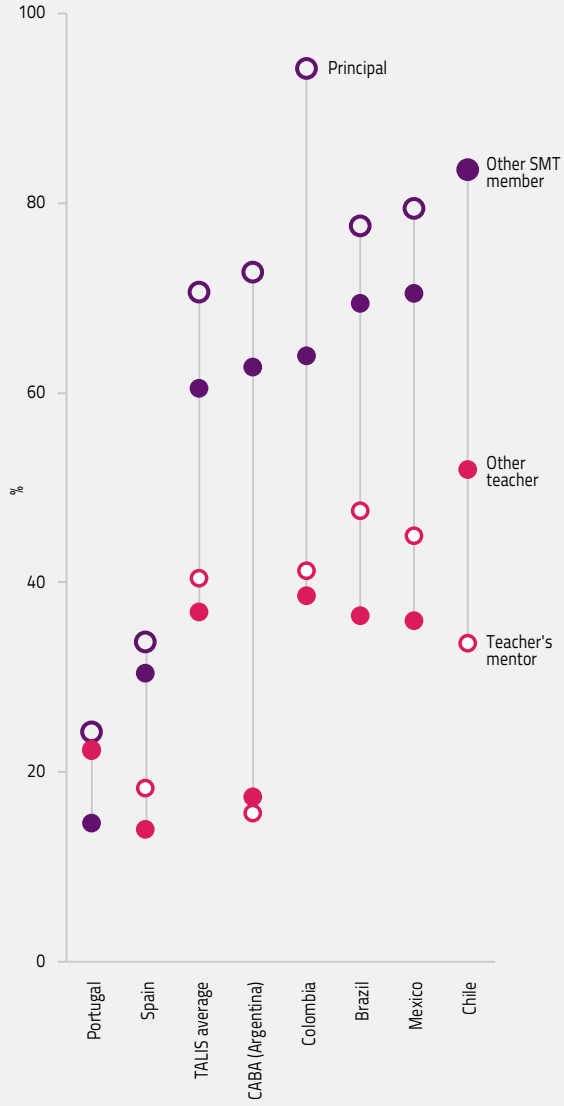
Teachers in leadership roles can *collaborate with external partners*, including with the government (e.g. to revise examination regulations or to promote effective resource use for inclusive education), with students and families (e.g. to support those with an immigrant and refugee background by building relationships and organizing events that boost students' self-esteem) or with external experts (e.g. to bring fresh ideas to schools or to lead school development projects that translate research into practice).

Teachers in leadership roles are in a good position to understand other teachers' needs and *support professional development*. They can mentor beginning teachers and create personalized programmes for them, increasing feedback, motivation and participation, and fostering collegial relationships. Teachers in leadership roles can also support principals in teacher appraisal (**Box 8**). The 2018 TALIS found that 60% of teachers had been formally appraised at least once a year by members of the school management team other than the principal, 40% by a mentor and 37% by other teachers (OECD, 2020) **(Figure 5)**. Whether through delegated authority or, mainly, through spontaneous initiatives, leading by example, collaboration and sharing of expertise, teachers can exercise leadership by influencing student engagement and success (Beteille and Evans, 2021; Leithwood and Jantzi, 1998).

FIGURE 5.

Most teachers in middle leadership positions are involved in teacher appraisal

Percentage of lower secondary teachers whose school principals reported that their teachers were formally appraised, by actor, selected Ibero-American education systems, 2018



Note: SMT is the school management team.
Source: OECD (2020).

BOX 8.

Appraisal and teacher leadership for innovation in Uruguay

Appraisal processes that evaluate whether principals collaborate with school staff and community members can support efforts to popularize distributed leadership practices. Appraisals can be used in a similar way to promote distributed leadership in the case of teachers. Teacher evaluation exists in 13 of the 17 countries. In some education systems, evaluation takes place within the school (e.g. Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Mexico and Peru), and in others, external actors take part (e.g. Chile, Ecuador and Uruguay). In all countries in the region, evaluation results are used to make decisions on training, target policies and provide direct incentives (Weinstein et al., 2025a).

In Uruguay, the teacher evaluation process is high stakes, as it can also lead to salary increases or dismissal. It is primarily conducted by the school director and the inspector. According to Article 44 of the Teacher Function Statute, school principals need to consider teachers' initiative and interest in improving their service, their willingness to collaborate with the school, their contribution to the development of the school community, their interest in the problems of the students, and their contribution to the training of future teachers (Uruguay National Administration of Public Education, 2022).

Uruguay has also developed a process that values and distinguishes schools that strive continuously to innovate and improve in terms of learning, through management oriented to teacher leadership and strengthening of ties with the community. The process is led by Ceibal, a national centre for educational innovation with an emphasis on technology.

In particular, Ceibal has introduced three initiatives. First, the NODO Awards, introduced in 2021, recognize ongoing education innovations and aim to encourage educational communities to lead pedagogical innovation by sharing their experiences with the community. Second, the NODO Fund for innovation in school management finances school project implementation for up to UYU 1 million (USD 22,700). Third, a fund for students finances the implementation of projects led by secondary school students for up to UYU 100,000 (USD 2,270) and aims to promote student participation, involvement and impact on school life through innovation that integrates digital technology. The awards and funds have been promoted jointly with the Ministry of Education and Culture and the National Public Education Administration, with the support of Fundación Ceibal, the Technological University of Uruguay and VisitEDUfinn, a network that promotes the innovation achievements of Finnish schools.

Last but not least, teachers in leadership positions can *participate in school management*, connecting high-level decisions with the reality of the classroom to enhance management. For example, they may serve as welfare (or, as frequently described in Latin America, coexistence) coordinators, enforcing school policies, collaborating with teachers and conducting training sessions to promote a supportive learning environment for all and manage students' behaviour (Robbins, 2021). Among education systems analysed in the 2018 TALIS, at least 56% of school management teams engaged a department head, above the TALIS average. At the opposite end, in Brazil, Mexico and Portugal, only about 20% of school management teams engaged a department head. Teachers need support to play that role (**Box 9**).

A review of over 250 academic sources from 19 countries showed that middle leaders influence teacher quality, teacher attitudes and student outcomes (De Nobile, 2018). Another review of 35 articles from 14 countries highlighted their role in influencing teaching and school improvement mainly through communication, collaboration and professional development, although evidence of direct influence on teacher practice or student learning is limited and mostly based on perceptions (Lipscombe et al., 2023). A meta-analysis of 21 studies found that all 7 dimensions of teacher leadership, as defined in 2011 by the Teacher Leadership Exploratory Consortium, were positively related to student achievement, with the strongest links observed in facilitating curriculum improvements, instruction and assessment (Shen et al., 2020).

According to the questionnaire administered to 17 countries in Latin America, such middle leadership positions are formally envisaged in 12 countries. In Costa Rica, they are defined as teaching staff (full-time or combining teaching with technical or administrative tasks) whose responsibility it is to monitor pedagogical process in their subject. In Nicaragua, they are responsible for pedagogical monitoring as well as for ensuring the proper use of school material and equipment (Weinstein et al., 2025a).

BOX 9.

Teachers in leadership roles need support to reach their full potential

Teachers need development programmes to succeed in their leadership roles (Smylie and Eckert, 2018; Webber and Nickel, 2022), notably teaching and learning management skills, including in areas such as crisis and resource management (Lipscombe et al., 2023). But just a handful of high-income countries integrate leadership into pre-service teacher training, using simulations and teamwork (Acquaro and Gurr, 2022; Webber, 2023).

The International Study of Teacher Leadership, which has been implemented in 12 countries, of which 3 are in Latin America, has advocated for integrating leadership dimensions into initial training for teachers to understand the connection between teacher leadership, school culture and teaching (Webber, 2023). However, challenges persist in defining and integrating leadership into curricula, especially given concerns about overloaded programmes (King et al., 2019). In Spain, teacher training tends to prioritize technical skills over leadership development and often overlooks mentor teachers' leadership roles. Since 2018, the University of Granada has led a project to train future teachers on leadership, increasing their capacities; this has helped align their education with school leadership concepts (Moral-Santaella and Sánchez-Lamolda, 2023).

Teacher leadership training usually occurs during in-service education, although only a minority of teachers receive explicit training in leadership, even in high-income countries. In the 2018 TALIS, 26% of lower secondary school teachers received professional development in school management and administration in the 48 participating education systems (OECD, 2019). Yet teacher leadership can positively impact education practice (Harris and Jones, 2019). Extensive research consistently demonstrates its effectiveness in promoting self-directed professional learning, enhancing leadership skills and improving teaching methods (Campbell et al., 2018; Lieberman et al., 2016).

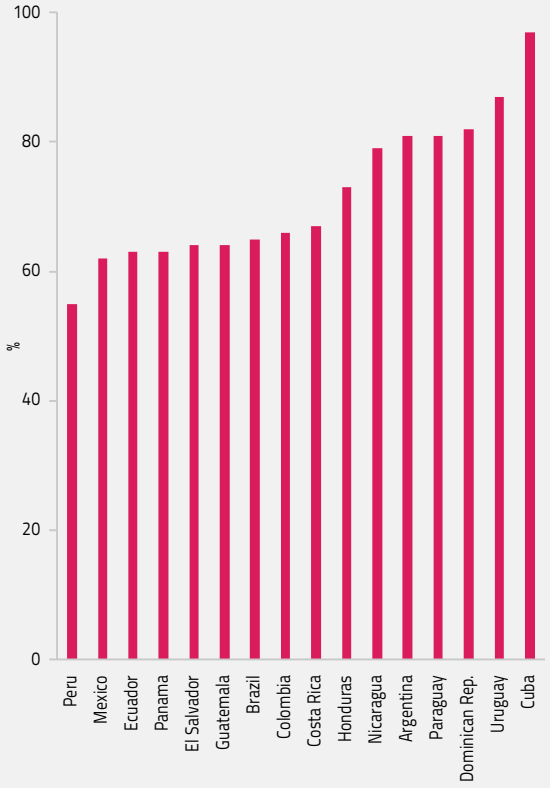
Teachers in leadership roles also need to be supported and empowered by their principals. They benefit from a supportive organizational culture and opportunities to lead professional initiatives (Irvine and Brundrett, 2019). Principals are the initial supporters of teachers in their formal leadership capacities. While some principals empower teachers in these roles, others may restrict their growth by micromanaging, offering limited support or failing to recognize their contributions (De Nobile, 2018; Webber et al., 2024).

Principals should clearly define the roles and responsibilities of teachers in leadership positions. They should also help their middle leaders prioritize leadership over management by distributing the workload efficiently (Gurr, 2023; Teacher Leadership Exploratory Consortium, 2011). In Mexico, teachers with additional leadership responsibilities often found themselves burdened with tasks but lacked decision making authority (Cisneros-Cohernour, 2021). Teachers in leadership positions require supervision, evaluation, and social and emotional support from school principals.

Even in high-income countries, not all teachers in leadership roles receive financial incentives for extra duties. In Portugal, teachers performing formal school management tasks do not get any additional compensation. But in most richer countries, they receive some recognition, for example in the form of a percentage of their statutory base salary in Chile (OECD, 2023a), Costa Rica and Mexico, as compensation for taking on school management tasks. Other measures can also encourage teacher leadership roles, such as certification as highly accomplished or senior teachers, or honourable mentions.

Teachers can even lead effectively without formal roles. They can mentor peers, share expertise and drive classroom innovations. By setting high standards and actively engaging in school initiatives, they inspire and motivate colleagues. Their informal leadership shapes school culture and drives improvements, proving that leadership is defined by impact and example, not just titles (Harris and Jones, 2019; Webber, 2023). Principals can support teachers by involving them in decision making, providing necessary training and resources, and fostering a collaborative environment. According to the 2019 Regional Comparative and Explanatory Study (ERCE) cross-national assessment, 66% of primary school principals reported having 'created opportunities for teachers to collaborate with each other in developing new classroom practices'. Argentina, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Paraguay and Uruguay stand out, as at least 80% of principals reported promoting collaboration (UNESCO, 2024b) (**Figure 6**).

FIGURE 6.
Two in three principals say they promote teacher collaboration
Percentage of primary school principals who claimed to have created opportunities for teachers to collaborate with each other in developing new classroom practices, 2019



Source: UNESCO (2024).

In Colombia, teacher leaders followed under the International Study of Teacher Leadership are driven by a desire to facilitate social change and community improvement. They challenge schools' examination-focused culture, promote alternative curricula that meet local needs, encourage teamwork, and try to motivate peers to change teaching practices. But there are no clear standards for teacher leadership, as leadership roles are typically hierarchical, linked to principals. There is no formal career path for advancement. They therefore prefer to influence schools through teaching rather than seeking formal leadership positions. In Mexico**,** schools often function effectively without formal leadership, relying on a committed three-teacher leadership team to manage operations (Webber et al., 2024).

Whether as part of a formal or an informal arrangement, teachers have significant responsibilities in some countries. For example, in the 48 education systems participating in the 2018 TALIS, most teachers (67%) had an active role in selecting learning materials. The second most significant decision making responsibility of teachers with an important influence on the quality of education was determining course content (44%), although fewer than 20% do in Mexico and Portugal. About one in three teachers had decision making authority on course offerings (33%), student assessment (37%) and student discipline (37%). Teachers were more likely to assume responsibility on curriculum and teaching in private than in public schools (OECD, 2020).

Overall, all countries have **organized structures of teacher participation**, albeit with variation in terms of the opportunities they give, in terms of time, space and scope, for teachers to take decisions and express opinions. In more than half of the countries, whether such a coordinating body exists and how frequently it convenes varies on a school-by-school basis. Other countries have more explicit regulations that stipulate where and when teachers should meet. For example, in Peru, a management week takes place three times a year, while there also weekly work meetings.

Across the region, these bodies address three broad types of issues: pedagogical (e.g. curriculum development, teaching, classroom observations, student assessment, teacher mentoring and teacher professional development); administrative (e.g. policy issues, reporting, school budgeting, timetabling, class composition, strategic planning and responses to district, regional, state or national requests); and school climate (e.g. handling and managing conflict or disciplinary issues). In nine countries, school improvement is also included, which involves defining school improvement goals, strategies, plans, actions and projects. In the Dominican Republic, teacher union issues feature strongly and links with local community social, businesses and political actors are also considered (Weinstein et al., 2025a).

In practice, there is often an important gap between teachers' beliefs in their ability to influence education policy and their belief that policymakers value their perspectives. In Brazil, 59% of teachers feel they can influence policy, but only 7% think their views are valued by policymakers. Large gaps are also observed in Mexico (49% vs 11%), Chile (45% vs 11%) and Colombia (50% vs 17%) (OECD, 2020).

SCHOOL COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION PROCESSES VARY IN STRUCTURE AND INTENT

School principals report that they allocate 38% of their time to interactions, with students (16%), parents (15%) and the community (7%) (UNESCO, 2024b). These interactions are usually informal but can also be formal.

Practically all countries have established organized structures of school community participation. The frequency of meetings varies, from once or twice a month to every three months (and every six months in Mexico). The first structures were created in the mid-1990s in Colombia and El Salvador. Three types of models can be observed of the composition of this participation body:

- Restricted to professional participation (leaders and teachers), e.g. Nicaragua.
- Inclusive of a wide range of actors internal to schools (i.e. also including families and students), e.g. Ecuador, El Salvador and Chile (where non-teaching staff are also included).
- Inclusive of a wide range of actors, both internal and external to schools (i.e. also including the community and/or local authorities), e.g. Brazil and Mexico (which include non-teaching staff); the Dominican Republic, Panama, Paraguay and Peru (which include students); and Costa Rica (which excludes teachers and non-teaching staff). Honduras and Mexico include trade union representatives, Argentina and Colombia include alumni representatives, and Colombia includes business representatives.

Guatemala is a special case, as its structure only includes parents who focus on school feeding.

More than half of the countries (Chile, Costa Rica, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Mexico, Nicaragua, Paraguay and Peru) have established **networks of school principals**. They address multiple issues (e.g. pedagogical and technology) except for Chile, where they exclusively focus on school improvement issues. Networks facilitate collaborative practices and serve as a supportive platform for school leaders (Weinstein et al., 2025a).

STUDENTS CAN EXERCISE LEADERSHIP THROUGH FORMAL CHANNELS AND INFORMALLY

Students exercise leadership formally, through participation in school management committees and student councils, and informally. In both cases, they can influence classroom approaches, promote positive relationships with teachers, enhance self-confidence, improve peer relationships, and strengthen a range of skills such as communication, active listening, responsible citizenship and leadership itself (Mayes et al., 2019). School leaders can involve students in decision making by creating platforms such as advisory committees or focus groups. This approach values student input on school policies, empowers them to shape their educational environment, and enhances their leadership skills and sense of ownership in the school community (Lyons and Brasof, 2020).

In the 48 education systems that participated in the 2018 TALIS, 71% of lower secondary school teachers reported that the school gave students opportunities to actively participate in school decisions. But while Colombia (81%) and Portugal (78%) were well above the average, the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires (Argentina), Chile and Mexico were in the bottom 10% with just over 50% of schools doing this (OECD, 2020). These responses are not necessarily related to the percentage of schools in which students were actually represented in **school management teams**. While the average among participating countries was 32%, the range was from well below the average in Portugal (5%) to well above the average in the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires (Argentina) (46%), Chile (50%) and Mexico (61%). Only in Colombia were the two indicators correlated. In Colombia, student representation on a public school's Board of Directors is mandated by the 1994 General Education Law. Students choose their representatives from grades 9 to 11, as well as an advocate from the highest grade available in the school to uphold their rights and responsibilities, making necessary requests to the school principal (Colombia Government, 1994). In Colombia, principals report the highest level of student participation in school management teams (97%) among OECD countries.

Analysis of PEER country profiles shows that, globally, 57% of countries have regulations for including students on school boards, with Europe and Northern America and Latin America (70%) leading. Participation in school management teams, committees or boards empowers students to cultivate leadership, responsibility and confidence. It also fosters diversity of ideas and encourages teamwork, ultimately enriching the educational environment.

School student governments, such as councils, unions and associations, vary in structure and responsibilities but all provide avenues for students to participate in their school's

decision making. Research indicates that these councils can enhance school climate, boost academic performance, and foster crucial leadership and citizenship skills in students (Griebler and Nowak, 2012; Łukasiewicz-Wieleba and Romaniuk, 2020). Analysis of the PEER country profiles shows that 53% of countries mandate student councils in their regulations, with high-income countries more likely (59%) to have this requirement. Some countries issue guidelines and support materials to assist student councils. Unbalanced representation by gender, class, ethnicity and ability can affect participation and leadership opportunities (Bonnesen, 2019; Mayes et al., 2019). Moreover, although a student council can be elected, it may have limited practical involvement in decision making, which ends up undermining student authority.

Student leadership can occur in **informal** ways. When teachers meet regularly with students to discuss progress, the process can empower them to take ownership of their learning and contribute their insights to influence teaching methods (Binu, 2020). Some governments establish open forums inviting students to express opinions on education. While consulting youth and inviting them to express their views is important, meaningful change also requires educators to genuinely engage and understand them, challenging hierarchical education systems (Fletcher, 2020).

ENGAGED PARENTS AND COMMUNITY MEMBERS CAN STEER SCHOOLS TOWARDS THEIR GOALS

Parents and community members play diverse leadership roles in schools. In supportive environments, they engage in school governance, through membership in school management committees and parent–teacher associations, offering insights and resources to enhance children's educational outcomes (Avvisati et al., 2010). School principals can foster parental involvement in decision making by establishing regular communication channels, such as newsletters and meetings to keep families informed and engaged. According to the PEER country profiles, 64% of countries – and 76% of Latin American countries – have adopted standards requiring school principals to give parents and guardians information on school and student performance. Principals can engage parents in a range of ways including holding annual meetings to communicate school programmes, inviting them to cultural celebrations, encouraging teachers to maintain open communication (e.g. through WhatsApp groups) and greeting parents at the school entrance to create a welcoming atmosphere.

Parents and community members fulfil different **roles**. As school management committee representatives, parents and community members oversee the management of school operations, policies, budgets and resources. In Ecuador, the Organic Law of Intercultural Education grants parents the right to participate in teachers' performance evaluations and educational management (Ecuador Ministry of Education, 2021). Parent–teacher associations and parents in school management teams often engage in maintaining facilities and non-academic services. In El Salvador, participants in the Education with Community Participation programme focused on practical issues, such as school construction, fundraising, food preparation and cleaning (Edwards, 2019).

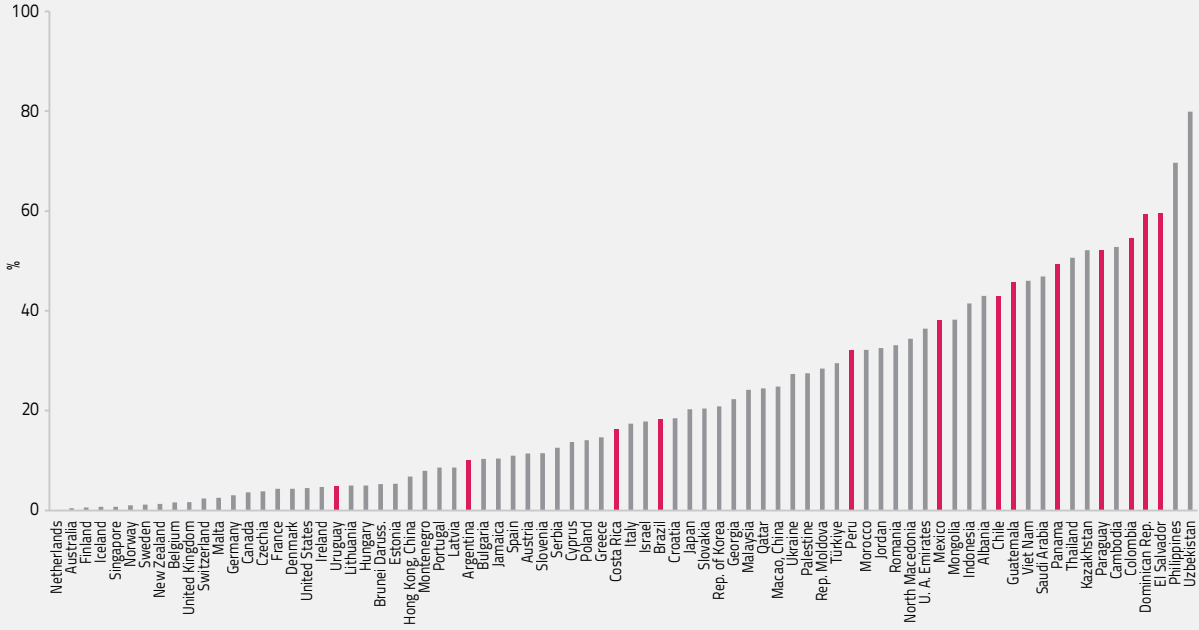
According to the PEER country profiles, 83% of countries have policies or regulations for parents and guardians to be on school management committees and 62% for community members, with Latin America and the Caribbean slightly above the global average in both cases. The 2018 TALIS found that while 83% of lower secondary school principals in participating education systems acknowledged that the school offered parents the opportunity to actively participate in school decisions, only 47% of parents were involved in school activities. The difference between opportunities and activities was even larger in Chile, Colombia and, especially, Mexico, where 82% of schools offered parents the opportunity to participate but only 23% of parents were involved in school activities (OECD, 2020).

A stricter measure of parental participation, based on the 2022 PISA results, indicated that just 11% of students attended schools in OECD countries where over half of parents had been engaged in school governance. But reported parental engagement levels were much higher on average in Latin American countries, such as Colombia (55%), the Dominican Republic (59%) and El Salvador (60%) (OECD, 2023b) **(Figure 7)**.

FIGURE 7.

Parental engagement in school governance is high in Latin America

Percentage of students in schools whose principal reported that over 50% of parents were involved in school governance in selected middle- and high-income countries, 2022



Note: Coloured bars indicate Latin American countries.
Source: OECD (2023b).

Diversity in parental and community participation helps ensure varied perspectives are represented. Analysis of PEER country profiles shows that 16% of countries adopted regulations to ensure balanced representation in school boards and committees. In Bolivia, the Juntas Escolares must include equal shares of women and men. The law also recognizes the participation and representation of indigenous and Afro-Bolivian communities in educational policy and management. In Guyana, boards of governors in public secondary schools consist of at least seven members, representing different religious denominations, business organizations and community development groups (Guyana Government, 2014). In practice, the selection of school management committee and board members is influenced by social dynamics, which can lead to exclusion. In Honduras, a study of community-managed schools found that patronage undermined transparency and accountability. Decisions often prioritize political considerations over educational merit, impacting the quality of education and community engagement (Altschuler, 2013).

Parental involvement has a positive impact but needs to be supported. In Spain, the government advises school councils to train members to improve their ability to critically analyse documents so that council decision making processes also reflect their preferences and not just those of teachers and administrators (Bris and Sallán, 2007; Spain State School Council, 2017; Vicente et al., 2019).

DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP CAN IMPACT EDUCATION PRACTICES AND OUTCOMES

Different leadership styles, mediated by various school and non-school actors, lead to a range of education outcomes. All of these are hard to observe, which makes it difficult for researchers to assess the impact of leadership.

Assessing the impact of distributed leadership is even more difficult, as the relevant practices are even harder to observe (**Table 1**).

TABLE 1.
Leadership practices that involve participation, by degree and issue

Decision	Delegated *'We share tasks'*	Collaborative *'We think together'*	Distributed *'We decide together'*
Who decides	The main leader shares authority, delegating specific decisions to experts.	Decision making is shared by key players in the organization.	All members of the organization participate equally in decision making.
What is decided	Decisions are made on specific areas based on individual competencies.	Important decisions are made jointly by leaders and staff, covering both strategic and operational matters.	Everything that affects the school community is discussed and decided collectively.
How is it decided	Delegation is carried out autonomously under clear guidelines, with control maintained by the main leader.	It is based on consensus and open dialogue processes.	Decisions are made by consensus or agreement, with a horizontal structure.

Source: Gvirtz and Abregú (2025).

Shared leadership roles and responsibilities should improve teachers' trust, collegiality, professionalism, commitment and motivation to engage in school improvement – but it is not clear how these relationships work in practice and how research may capture them. A review concluded that studies 'tend to be singular explorations of variables, without clear theoretical threads or empirical connections' (Harris et al., 2022; p. 447). Effective distributed leadership should manifest in senior management teams that are coherent, focus on school improvement and communicate with multiple stakeholders – but all of these can only be observed through small-scale observational research that is difficult to generalize. In turn, attempts to collect large-scale evidence on the impact of distributed leadership on professional collaboration, job satisfaction and school climate also stumble in quantifying such outcomes (Mifsud, 2024).

Teachers' motivation has been particularly well-documented. When teachers are actively engaged in decision making, a typical example of distributed leadership, they experience greater job satisfaction, which positively affects their teaching practices (Bektaș et al., 2022; Tashi, 2015). But some studies, mostly from selected high-income, mostly English-speaking countries, such as Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States, have also linked distributed leadership practices with student learning (Leithwood et al., 2006). Students have been found to perform better when leadership is distributed throughout the school community and when teachers are motivated and supported by school leaders (Mulford and Silins, 2003). In Japan, distributed leadership in schools eliminated low-level academic achievement and promoted academic growth (Tsuyuguchi et al., 2024). Teacher involvement in leadership teams and decision making has been found to lead to commitment and trust, which in turn affect student performance (Grissom et al., 2021; Y. Liu et al., 2021).

Research on school leadership in Latin America highlights the role of some the foundations of distributed leadership, such as principal selection systems (Aravena, 2020) and training (Cuenca and Pont, 2016). Deficiencies in both can probably explain the marginal impact of principal training on improving leadership practices (Weinstein et al., 2018).

Some researchers have tried to unpack these complex relationships and assess the impact of distributed leadership on intermediate outcomes. Most have focused

on the effects on teachers. In Chile, distributed leadership practices led to higher levels of teacher self-efficacy (i.e. a belief in their ability to positively influence student learning) and organizational commitment (Bravo-Rojas et al., 2021), even reducing burnout (López-Alfaro et al., 2022). By feeling that their voices are heard and valued, staff may become more committed to schools' goals (Gallegos Araya and López Alfaro, 2023; Tejeiro, 2024). Instead of relying on a single leader, teams are encouraged to work together to identify problems and design solutions. This shared responsibility enhances the quality of education, leading to more creative solutions (Peña Ruz and Armengol Asparó, 2024; Tejeiro, 2024) and innovative pedagogical strategies (Gallegos-Araya and López-Alfaro, 2023; Pozuelos-Estrada et al., 2024). Distributed leadership also fosters a more collaborative and supporting work environment (Ramírez, 2021).

A few studies have also looked at learning outcomes. In Chile, a study of 69 schools showed that distributed leadership, particularly participation in decision making and leadership teams' cooperation, had a significant effect on student learning outcomes in mathematics, as measured by SIMCE, the national assessment (López Alfaro and Gallegos Araya, 2018). Conversely, schools with higher SIMCE results had a higher occurrence of practices linked to distributed leadership than schools with lower results (Rojas-Andrade et al., 2018). There was also higher incidence of collaborative work among teachers in higher performing secondary schools (Bellei et al., 2020). A review of studies that examined the impact of school leadership found that it influenced teachers' motivation and instructional quality, which ultimately affected student performance. The effect extended beyond academic results to the overall school climate. The greatest impact of distributed leadership, in particular on students' academic achievement, was obtained as a result of enhancing teacher capacity (Cifuentes-Medina et al., 2020).

REFLECTING ON MY ROLE

Credit: © Manuel Ernesto Urrutia Torres

Manuel Ernesto Urrutia Torres

Director of the María Auxiliadora Polytechnic Institute of Puerto Montt, Chile

Fifteen years ago I began my journey as a school principal, with the hope of transforming the lives of children and young people, creating more inclusive, collaborative and innovative spaces. Over time, I understood that leading an educational project involves constantly learning, fostering collaboration and networks, and responding with empathy to the needs of the community.

It's 6:30 a.m. on any given Monday and, while I'm drinking the first coffee of the day, I'm mentally reviewing my day's tasks. At 07:30 I am already at the door of the school, ready to receive students, teachers and parents with a smile. A cordial greeting can make all the difference in someone's day.

The hours pass between visits to the classrooms, meeting different teams, writing reports, ministerial reports and paying attention to the community. At 11:30am, a conflict between students requires my intervention. Although there are protocols and teams prepared to help, my presence seems to provide calm and guidance. It's a reminder that school leadership is also about building trust and security within the school.

At lunch I talk with teachers about joint strategies to improve coexistence and learning, and about supporting each other in difficult moments. Then, in the courtyard, students share anecdotes with me that make me laugh. It is a necessary respite in the intensity of the day.

At 4:30 p.m., students leave, and teachers meet to analyze data, adjust strategies, and reaffirm our commitment to education. It has been an exhausting, but hopeful day. At 6:15 p.m. I leave school content. Being a director is a constant challenge and a privilege. It gives us the opportunity to transform lives and build a better future.

Credit: © UNICEF/UNI632215/Santiago Billy/AFP-Services*

Distributed leadership practices appear in various forms in Latin America

The practice of distributed leadership depends highly on context (Weinstein and Hernández, 2016). How individuals interact is determined by structures, settings, organizational processes and tasks as well as cultural context (Printy and Liu, 2021). This section reviews a range of examples from the focus countries showing how school leaders are expected to or have already implemented a distributed form of leadership in four core dimensions – setting a vision, supporting learning, promoting collaboration and developing people – but also the challenges they have faced.

...TO SET A VISION

In distributing their leadership, principals are expected to involve others in developing a shared school vision (Gvirtz and Abregu, 2025) and in identifying strategies for its realization. In most Latin American countries, identifying improvement goals is a collective exercise that can involve the school board (Argentina and Panama), teachers (Costa Rica, Guatemala and Mexico), and the school community (Colombia, Cuba, Ecuador, El Salvador, Honduras and Peru). Setting strategies to achieve those goals is often delegated to collective bodies within schools (Weinstein et al., 2025a). In Buenos Aires province, Argentina, Decree 2299/2011 promotes the co-creation of an education project with the entire school for a collective vision to improve the school.

Brazil places emphasis on the concept of democratic management of public education in the 1988 Federal Constitution and in education laws. One of the articles of the 1996 Law of Guidelines and Bases of National Education, which was amended in 2023, lists two principles of democratic management. First, education professionals should participate in the preparation of the school's pedagogical project. Second, school and local communities should participate in School Councils (composed of the principal and elected representatives among teachers, counsellors, supervisors and administrators, other civil servants, students, parents or guardians, and members of the local community) and School Council Forums (composed of two representatives of the body responsible for the education system and two representatives of each School Board within the jurisdiction of the School Board Forum). But in practice, despite efforts to balance participation, teachers and, especially, principals have stronger power than other school community members.

In Honduras, school principals are crucial to shaping a school's vision and mission but are also expected to collaborate closely with staff to establish clear goals and direction. According to the 2011 Fundamental Law of Education, they are tasked with creating a shared vision for the school that aligns with educational objectives, overseeing pedagogical management, ensuring quality outcomes, and managing administrative responsibilities such as preparing the annual budget. They are also mandated to engage the school community in the definition of the school's mission and goals, as well as to evaluate educational projects, such as the School Educational Project, the School Curricular Project and the Annual Operational Plan.

...TO SUPPORT LEARNING

Decisions regarding choosing courses and content tend to be made outside the school (Weinstein e al., 2025a). According to 2022 PISA data from 14 participating countries in Latin America, an average of 52% of lower secondary students attended schools where national authorities decide on course content, while 36% were in schools whose principals, teachers or the school management team led choosing course content. Meanwhile, while 89% of school leadership professional standards in Latin America require principals to promote teacher cooperation, only 45% of students in the countries that took part in the 2022 PISA attended a school whose principals promoted teacher collaboration at least monthly (OECD, 2023b). But there can be considerable variation within countries depending on principals' initiative.

In Colombia, school staff and other actors are formally actively engaged in school management, through bodies that promote participatory leadership: the Board of Directors (administrative and financial issues), the Academic Council (schedules, evaluation, conflicts and extracurricular activities), the Coexistence Council (preventive activities, discipline, pedagogical and socioemotional support), the Parent Council and the Student Council. Each school is required to develop an Institutional Educational Project that identifies and adjusts school strategies for the provision of quality and equitable education. However, interviews with schools conducted for this report found little evidence that these bodies support defining school strategic priorities. Challenges, objectives and follow-up actions are rarely set in these meetings.

Although the structure allows for shared decision making with representation from different levels, there is insufficient orientation towards school improvement, and the Institutional Educational Project is reduced to an administrative process.

In Chile, pedagogical decisions are made by a two-headed school structure. Each school has a Principal responsible for administrative issues and a Chief of the Pedagogical Technical Unit responsible for the coordination of academic activities. A survey has shown that 46% of teachers consult the Chief of the Pedagogical Technical Unit to solve a pedagogical problem, 25% turn to other school colleagues, 14% to a member of the management team and only 5% go to the Principal first. This structure presents a clear division between administrative and pedagogical structures. Principals see great value in the possibility of delegating pedagogical tasks to the Chief of the Pedagogical Technical Unit . However, the two-headed structure can only work if the Principal and the Chief of the Pedagogical Technical Unit are aligned on the school vision and objectives. The delegation of roles and functions by itself does not ensure the exercise of distributed leadership and in some cases may even imply either more management complexity or that these roles are not aligned with each other.

Due to the lack of a clear policy norm, schools in Chile tend to create their own system of allocating tasks, which might involve teachers leading a department, a specific pedagogical project or mentorship activities. Some principals also reported setting a weekly meeting to give their views on crucial pedagogical decisions. Intended as a collaborative workspace, it is often led by the teachers themselves. In both cases, initiatives tend to start from the principal; teacher-led initiatives are rare.

Principals interviewed for this report in Argentina said that they often rely on teachers with specialization in particular areas or disciplines to improve teaching practices. Those who take on the role of guiding their colleagues generally possess deeper knowledge of these subjects, as well as a track record in which peers and students respond positively to their authority and influence. In general, these leadership roles are filled by area coordinators in primary school settings and, at the secondary level, by department or subject heads. They guide teachers on curricular alignment or instructional methods. This structure helps raise the quality of teaching by using expert teachers as instructional leaders. An example of high expectations for participation in pedagogical management is Article 11 of Resolution No. 90/87 of Río Negro province, which states that 'all members of the Educational Community through their representatives … must necessarily be consulted on plans, work programmes and everything related to pedagogical action'.

Instructional leadership need not only be exercised by academic staff. In Brazil, the Department of Education of the state of Ceará created a special division focused on student leadership. One of several regional student initiatives, this division encourages student councils to create a unit dedicated to monitoring academic performance. The idea is to foster students' commitment to their own learning, allowing them to track and reflect on aspects like attendance and grades, while taking responsibility for the process. Each school's student council can choose to adopt this initiative. At one of the state schools where the approach has been implemented, the unit encourages students starting upper secondary education to participate in academic activities provided by the school, such as tutoring, extra classes and preparation for competitions.

…TO PROMOTE COLLABORATION

Distributed leadership can also be demonstrated in the degree to which schools actively engage with and bring in the perspectives of teaching staff, students, parents and the community in decision making processes (Nadeem, 2024), for example through the creation of spaces and processes where problems can be addressed collectively (Gvirtz and Abregu, 2025).

…with students, families and communities

Analysis of the PEER country profiles shows that 83% of countries in Latin America mandate the involvement of students in school boards or management committees. The active participation of students in the exercise of leadership at the school is found to contribute to the development of their leadership capacity (Frost and Roberts, 2011).

In Brazil, the 2014–2024 National Education Plan determined that states and municipalities should approve laws regulating democratic management in their education systems by 2016, but only 11 of the 26 states had passed relevant laws by 2018. In some cases, some laws also dealt with aspects of democratic management, such as school principal selection and school councils, although overall the focus of such legislation was on schools rather than democratic management. Of the National Education Plan's 20 targets, two targets focus on democratic management. Target 7 on basic education quality includes 'direct transfer of financial resources to the school' as one of its strategies to develop democratic management, 'ensuring the participation of the school community in the planning and allocation of resources'. Target 19 spells out technical criteria for public consultation with the school community to receive resources, which relate to principal selection based on performance, the creation of collegiate spaces (such as school boards, parent associations and student unions within schools – and education councils outside schools), and the training of their members. By 2023, 42% of schools reported having school boards, parent associations and student unions, with the share higher in state schools (57%) than in municipal schools (37%).

Analysis of the PEER country profiles shows that 76% of countries in Latin America have adopted standards requiring school principals to give parents and guardians information on school matters and student performance. The state of Ceará, in Brazil, has encouraged a stronger relationship between schools and families through the Diretor de Turma (Class Director) programme, which was launched in 2008 and had expanded to 627 schools by 2018. Teachers from any discipline take responsibility for a specific class and closely follow students individually to address their needs. They are also responsible for mediating the relationship between the class and the school community and providing frequent, individualized feedback to families. Class directors are allocated a portion of their working hours for this role and receive specific training from the government on topics such as socioemotional dialogue. Interviewed family members whose children participate in the programme highlighted its relevance in improving communication channels with the school (SEDUC Ceará, 2018).

Costa Rica's decentralized approach to education involves local communities in school management. This structure is exemplified by Juntas de Educación and Juntas Administrativas, which operate under the Ministry of Public Education. Formally established in 1906, Juntas de Educación engages the community in school decisions and oversight. Each junta has five members who meet twice monthly to develop strategic plans and projects for their schools. Principals participate as administrators, offering guidance without holding a vote, reflecting a shared governance model. The structure helps build strong local ownership of education and a more inclusive, community-driven model of school leadership.

...between schools

Distributed leadership can also be exercised through school-to-school networks, which provide communication channels and space to share and create knowledge (Townsend, 2015). National educational policies in Chile have promoted the formation of school networks as meeting spaces between principals. The significance of these networks for school improvement is recognized, especially among struggling schools. However, their effectiveness depends on the scope of action granted to these networks by local authorities.

The Comunidades de Aprendizaje project in Argentina, developed by the University of Barcelona's Community of Research on Excellence for All and implemented from 2015 to 2021, focused on community-based interactions between schools, families and local communities. Supported by CIPPEC, an independent think tank, and Fundación Natura, the project expanded to 37 schools in the provinces of Chaco, Corrientes, Salta and Santa Fe. A network of certified trainers fostered school collaboration, involving universities and other partners. However, the intervention turned out not to be sustainable.

...TO DEVELOP PEOPLE

Analysis of the PEER country profiles suggests that 89% of countries in Latin America mandate principals to support staff professional development. In Honduras, according to the Manual of Classification of Teaching Positions and Salaries, principals and vice principals are responsible for managing professional development actions to improve staff performance, taking into account weaknesses identified during supervision (Honduras State Secretariat in the Office of Education, 2017).

In Colombia, a survey conducted for this report shows that the lack of professional development opportunities, networks or collaborative work within and outside the school are perceived as a barrier to distributed leadership. Since principals do not prioritize teacher training, teachers

end up feeling not supported in their efforts. Moreover, while regional representatives of the Ministry of Education are expected to provide technical support to schools, principals and teachers as system leaders, in practice they limit themselves to administrative interventions.

Teacher professional development can be promoted in various forms, including through mentoring and coaching. Chile's Leadership Strengthening Policy for School Improvement aims to improve the quality of education by enhancing the leadership capabilities of those who lead educational processes. The policy advocates for mentorship programmes to transfer specific experiences or practices. Research has shown that high-performing schools have invested in sharing successful practices and transferring them effectively among teachers.

REFLECTING ON MY ROLE

Credit: © Mabel Elizabeth Valdez Meira

Mabel Elizabeth Valdez Meira

Escuela de Nivel Inicial N° 253 Estado de IsraTucumán, Argentina

Since I was a child I've wanted to be a teacher. I have been a principal for 12 years and in different teaching roles for 26 years.

My day begins with meeting the teachers to coordinate the day's activities. It is a space for lively and meaningful exchange in which teaching staff raise questions and share experiences that enrich our work, including useful reading materials or pedagogical tools.

Then we greet the children in the playground and the day begins. I usually take a tour of the classrooms to see how the students are doing with their teachers and then I return to management tasks to attend to parents and auxiliary staff. I try to spend time communicating with other institutions in the school community to coordinate our activities. At the end of each day, I meet with the teachers to talk, resolve concerns and find solutions to problems.

There are many tasks that fall to a principal every day, including planning the day with teachers, talking with staff and students, fostering a harmonious climate in the school, making sure that the facilities are in good condition and allocating time to train teachers and meet with parents and members of the community.

Much of our success depends on collaborative relationships with parents, teachers, auxiliary staff and the Ministry of Education of Tucumán. We cannot do everything alone and we need to know how to delegate to our teams to have better schools and guarantee better learning results.

Conclusions

Leadership is sometimes thought of as a series of heroic acts. But school leaders are not and should not be seen as heroes; it is not possible for them to do everything and do it on their own. They need to lead through collaboration to achieve common goals so that all stakeholders are motivated to work in the same direction using their respective strengths. Leadership status needs to have deeper roots than a position of power. It needs to be earned through daily practice that demonstrates integrity, commitment, ability and humanity. These qualities are strengthened if leadership functions are shared, formally and informally, with a management team (e.g. the vice principal or heads of department), teachers and school support staff, students, parents and community members.

The concept of distributed leadership has been developed to capture such an approach based on the participation and empowerment of school community members. The concept has been used extensively in high-income, especially English-speaking, countries by researchers and policymakers, even if full consensus on the meaning of the term remains elusive. Interpretations of distributed leadership also vary because of the different country contexts and school cultures. Overall, despite the fact that research in the region is paying growing attention, the concept of distributed leadership is not widely used by policymakers in Latin America. This is despite the fact that, in recent years, Latin American countries have embraced school leadership as a key factor in improving education outcomes. Moreover, as elsewhere in the world, they have generally assigned a large and constantly increasing set of functions to leaders, ranging from administration to well-being and from learning to policy implementation, which can only be fulfilled effectively if shared.

Yet even if on the surface the term lacks recognition, it does not mean that distributed leadership practices are absent. On the contrary, there is a strong current in Latin American educational theory and practice that considers the sharing of leadership roles and functions and the engagement of school actors as a foundation for democratic school management, an education objective that commands respect and attention in Latin American societies. In the case of Brazil, it is even elevated to a constitutional principle. Therefore, concepts which are related, albeit not identical, have deeper roots and currency, such as the notions of participative, teacher and democratic leadership. In practice, whether the term is used or not, promoting the participation of education community actors is a task expected of school principals, albeit through different forms, structures and activities.

There are four common engagement structures in Latin America, at least in larger schools. The first is a management team, in which principals receive the support of a core set of their colleagues, usually including the vice principal and managers for operational, pedagogic and school climate affairs. In several countries, teacher (or middle) leaders, such as heads of subjects, grades or departments play complementary instructional leadership roles. The second is a collective body of teachers who meet to discuss pedagogical, welfare and administrative issues. The third is a collective body of the school community (known as council, board or government), which tends to focus more on school improvement and resource allocation issues. Its membership varies, including the balance between school and external actors. Their role tends to be mandatory (although not necessarily involving decision making), while laws specify their functions in more detail than those of the teacher collective body. Finally, student governments are another feature of the school landscape in Latin America.

The scope for decision making at the school level varies widely by country. For example, schools in Nicaragua and Panama have limited authority to one individual, while schools in Cuba and Mexico have expanded authority within the school community. Leaders contribute to school improvement in all circumstances and contexts, but their influence is greater the more they are trusted to use their skills. The granting of autonomy to schools can strengthen distributed leadership and in return, distributed leadership can trigger approaches to governance that contribute to school improvement (Cuenca, 2025). But introducing autonomy on its own is not enough without support measures. Governments need to be aware of and protect school leaders from the potential downsides of greater autonomy, such as increased disparity in education outcomes between schools.

Even where more decisions are in the hands of school actors (e.g. teacher participation in training, school policies on conduct and discipline, and textbook selection), who decides and how can also vary considerably by country. There are various important signs of a commitment to democratic school management, including the extent to which decisions can be taken at the school level, the extent to which this decision making authority

is shared by many, and how actors are selected for bodies that can exercise leadership. A related, substantive but also symbolic development towards democratic school management is the growing prevalence of merit-based, public and open competitions for principal positions, with only four countries appointing principals based on personal invitations or closed competitions. This is a model for students to socialize themselves with democratic processes, as schools are not just places of academic learning but also serve as centres of civic education.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Distributed leadership can foster democratic values in schools and beyond. Collaborative relationships strengthen governance, improve decision making, enhance accountability and foster inclusion – and need to be encouraged at all levels of education. Distributed leadership is connected with pedagogical innovation, inclusion, educational improvement and, ultimately, educational transformation. Although the concept of distributed leadership is not widely understood in Latin America, relevant practices exist in the region and governments can build on them. School principals need support to use existing structures, such as school management teams and student councils, more effectively for consultation and engagement.

The following recommendations aim to promote distributed leadership in Latin American education systems not just as an end in itself but as a fundamental strategy to strengthen participation and promote democratic values in school communities and beyond.

- Recognize and promote the importance of distributed and democratic school leadership in national and subnational education policies and regulations.
- Clearly describe the functions that all actors need to perform in a distributed leadership model throughout the system: not only within schools, but also in school networks, and beyond schools at local and central level.
- Empower school principals with sufficient autonomy, particularly in financial and human resource decisions.
- Develop a research agenda that systematizes local, subnational or national experiences promoting distributed leadership to better inform the development of policies and regulations.
- Ensure that professional school leadership standards explicitly mention participation and empowerment and are used as basis for recruiting, training and evaluating school principals.
- Develop initial and continuous professional development strategies that foster key skills to exercise participatory and collaborative leadership, including through the use of technology.
- As more and more countries improve their policy and regulatory frameworks, invest in the development of school communities' awareness, preparedness and willingness to work together.

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GLOBAL EDUCATION MONITORING REPORT

REGIONAL EDITION ON LEADERSHIP IN EDUCATION

Latin America

Lead for democracy

Building on the theme of the 2024/5 *Global Education Monitoring Report* on leadership in education, this regional edition is the result of a partnership between the GEM Report and the Organization of Ibero-American States for Education, Science and Culture (OEI). It focuses on empowerment and democracy through the exercise of distributed leadership in Latin America.

This report compiled evidence from case studies in six Latin American countries (Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica and Honduras); country profiles on school leadership from the GEM Report's PEER website; and thematic papers. The papers drew on a survey of the region's education ministries, conducted by OEI, which focused on the conditions for distributed leadership practices, including regulations, policies and implementation, that affect decision making authority and participatory structures.

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