

The challenges in delivering  
quality education in Thailand:

# **RULES, RESOURCES, AND LEADERSHIP**





**The Asia Foundation    Australian Government**



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Thank you all,

Rattana Lao, PhD.

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# Preface

At the close of 2020, Thailand's economic outlook looks increasingly uncertain. Despite an outstanding record of managing the public health crisis brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, the country is experiencing a once-in-a-generation economic contraction. While the international tourism sector is the most heavily affected, there are clear indicators that the mainstream Thai economy is in crisis, and not expected to rebound for years. After relying on the steady growth of international visitors for two decades, the Thai Government is in the difficult position of trying to find a way to fill a massive gap (15% of GDP) in the national economy.

While many Thai leaders point to the economy's rapid return to growth after the Asian Financial Crisis, this comparison brings a false sense of hope. In 1998–99, Thailand's international competitiveness received a massive boost from currency depreciation, as the value of the Thai baht plummeted from its peak value in 1997. Suddenly, Thai exports were highly price competitive; tourism began a period of dramatic expansion thanks to the weak baht; and foreign investors saw a growth opportunity in Thailand. In 2021, however, the world will be a very different place. With the global economy in contraction from the pandemic, and international travel a fraction of 2019 peak levels, there are very few prospects for growth. Sadly, the economic recovery promises to be a long, difficult struggle for Thailand.

Out of crisis, however, may come opportunity. In 2021, we expect to see new momentum for reform of lagging sectors and underperforming government services. For example, the Thai Government's decision in mid-2020 to remove state-owned enterprise protections for Thai Airways International was an early sign of change. As it becomes clear that tourism recovery will be a long-term process, the government is likely to look for other ways of stimulating new economic activity and addressing the constraints to Thailand's international competitiveness.

Thailand's status as an upper middle-income country is now under threat. As millions of Thai citizens struggle to endure the economic slow-down, many will move back into poverty, and find themselves in very low productivity employment. Unlike after the Asian Financial Crisis, the mass movement back to rural hometowns is very unlikely. "Returning to the farm" is no longer an option for most city dwellers, given the regional inequalities in Thailand, and the lack of opportunities in the rural heartland reeling from a contracting national economy. As such, Thailand is likely to move several steps back toward lower middle-income status before it can resume its quest to raise everyone's income. The goal of reaching high income status by 2035, which is enshrined in the country's 20-year plan, seems more distant than ever.

Thailand's relative lack of high-skilled and innovative workers is regularly cited as a key constraint to foreign investment, and competitiveness in higher value-added sectors. Furthermore, widespread problems in the workforce such as functional illiteracy and massive variance in education quality across the country, create ongoing difficulties for Thailand's move into the digital economy, and developing a labor force suitable for the needs of industry.

Education reform is an enduring challenge for Thailand. For decades, education reform has been a consistent theme of calls for government reform. Yet, despite multiple high-profile efforts to reform the education system, and significant funding, there has been very little progress.

Why do most of these reform efforts fall short? Is there something within the system that prevents well-meaning changes from happening at the school level? This study seeks to answer these questions.

Over the past two years, Dr. Rattana Lao and her team have led a series of consultations and conducted in-depth research to identify possible bottlenecks to education reform. Her team has interviewed hundreds of school leaders, administrators, teachers, senior officials, and education experts, looking for the key constraints. While many education reform efforts focus on a particular policy area, this project focused on the structures and systems through which all reform initiatives must be implemented.

The team identified school leadership, or principals, as the critical bottleneck to improving education in Thailand. Principals are the primary intermediary between the school and the system. They play a crucial, and undervalued role in translating the centrally driven reforms into practical changes in schools. But despite policy rhetoric promising to give schools the autonomy they need to customize education to local students' needs, this study found that due to a needlessly rigid structure, principals have very little agency to shape the learning environment.

This study presents new ideas and ways of thinking about old issues, particularly on the decentralization of education. The research team worked closely with officials in the Ministry of Education, and the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration to understand the trade-offs and drivers of policies that govern principals' scope for improving education quality. The answers are much more complicated than more (or less) autonomy for schools.

The Asia Foundation, with support from the Australian Government, looks forward to supporting our friends in Thai education on the path toward higher quality education. Thailand's children deserve better opportunities to learn and compete with their peers in other countries. And Thailand's future economic success depends to a large degree on the success of today's education reforms.

Thomas I Parks  
Country Representative, Thailand  
The Asia Foundation





# Executive Summary

For Thailand to move beyond the “middle income trap”,<sup>1</sup> it is imperative that the education system adapts and improves to achieve better learning outcomes. Although for the past 20 years, concerted efforts have been made to reform Thailand’s education system, it remains a “black box” because, despite a high level of political will and increasing resources, Thailand’s learning outcomes continue to be considerably below international standards. This has consequences not only for Thailand’s economic competitiveness, but also for its social cohesion.

Understanding the key challenges facing the principals who lead Thailand’s government schools is crucial for improving students’ learning outcomes. First, school principals are the intermediaries between national policy makers and the desired “educational outputs”, i.e. well-educated students. No reform can achieve classroom-level change without school principals’ leadership. They are the ones who receive, interpret, and implement reforms in government schools. Second, insights from international research suggest that of the different types of school leadership, instructional leadership is most important in improving learning outcomes. However, this crucial role of a principal is often diminished by the time-consuming managerial and political roles that s/he must also play, both inside and outside the school.

The study summarized in this report examined leadership in Thai government schools, and how principals cope with the challenges they face. The study was undertaken to propose recommendations for how to improve the quality of principals’ instructional leadership, and the outcomes that their students achieve. The study gathered both qualitative and quantitative data from two government schools systems: those governed by the Ministry of Education’s Office of the Basic Education Commission (OBEC) in three provinces in Thailand’s Northeast, and those governed by the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA).

The findings from the quantitative data reveal three distinct qualities of principals in Thai government schools. First, they have higher credentials than their international peers. Second, both before and after becoming a principal, they receive an above-average level of training on academic and curricular management. Finally, they spend more time on academic and curricular matters than the international average. While these findings suggest that principals in Thai government schools possess a high degree of instructional leadership, the qualitative data in this study suggest that this is not the case.

First, principals’ description of their instructional role differs slightly from the standard description. In the standard description, instructional leadership stresses the principal’s role of instructing teachers so that teachers can deliver the desired learning outcomes for their students. While Thai principals describe themselves as instructional leaders, or at least striving for that, they usually believe that their role is that of ensuring the school’s “academic” achievements, not the role of instructing teachers. Currently, the annual performance appraisal for a government school principal places heavy emphasis on the school’s performance on standardized

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<sup>1</sup> The term “middle-income trap” usually applies to a country that has successfully transformed from an agricultural to an industrial economy because it has cheap and abundant low-skilled labor. But then the country fails to move up the value chain because it lacks sufficient educated and skilled labor. The country also loses much of its low-skilled work to countries that pay lower wages.

tests, and especially on the Ordinary National Education Test—the O-NET. Other measures of a principal's performance are whether they create specialized classrooms and whether their students win prizes in academic contests. In short, there is a discrepancy between the instructional role defined in the code of conduct for principals, which is used to judge their performance, and their actual instructional role. This difference means that in this study, principals' accounts of their instructional leadership role were somewhat misleading.

Second, there is a considerable difference in the instructional role played by OBEC principals and the one played by Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA) principals. In their interviews for this study, BMA principals demonstrated that they spend more time on their instructional role than is the case with OBEC principals. Assuming that a principal's instructional role competes for time with her or his managerial and political roles, this study found that OBEC principals spend excessive time on their managerial and political roles at the expense of their instructional role. Conversely, this study found that due to organizational differences, BMA principals' managerial and political roles place fewer demands on their time, which means that they spend more time on instructional leadership.

There are three key factors that explain the difference in the leadership styles of OBEC and BMA principals—the chain of command, resource allocation, and the principal's relationship with teachers.

First, the lengthy chain of command that structures the work and career of OBEC principals requires them to constantly communicate with the authorities above them. Moreover, there are many layers of bureaucracy involved in making decisions that directly affect OBEC principals and their schools even though these offices and individuals are geographically far away. Also, frequent changes in the Minister of Education and other authorities along the chain of command make OBEC principals' regulatory environment unstable and ambiguous. To navigate and thrive in such an environment, principals must cultivate strong political allies outside of the school. As a result, OBEC principals spend considerable time on their political role, networking with authorities, and they also spend extra time on their managerial role as they must respond to numerous communications from above and prepare extensive reports. The BMA principals, on the other hand, work under a much shorter chain of command, and have a more stable regulatory environment and less paperwork. Their proximity to the final decision maker means that BMA principals have more clarity about to whom they are accountable, and what is expected of them. As a result, in comparison with OBEC principals, BMA principals spend much more time advising teachers and students.

Second, OBEC schools often have inadequate resources, which forces many principals to devote time to fund-raising. The majority of OBEC schools are small schools, so under the government's per-head subsidy scheme, their schools have a smaller budget. Thus, fund-raising is a major part of OBEC principals' managerial role so that they can ensure that their school has enough money to survive. Fund-raising requires principals to spend time developing and maintaining good relationships with parents, alumni, and the community, as these are the most likely sources of additional funding. In addition, the pressure to secure adequate funding pushes OBEC principals to compete with each other so that they are recognized by the Director of the Educational Service Area (ESA) who oversees their school. Principals must also curry favor up the chain of command to the ministry in Bangkok. This is because the principals who develop good relationships tend to get the money if additional funds are allocated.

The situation in BMA schools is quite different, however. In general, BMA schools are adequately funded so their principals do not feel pressured to seek additional resources and, in turn, this reduces the time they spend on their political role. So, although both BMA and OBEC schools receive government funding based on the number of students enrolled, BMA schools are entitled to a more generous top-up that compensates for the resource gap caused by the per-head formula. As a result, BMA principals generally feel that resource allocation is fair, while OBEC principals, and especially those leading small schools, tend to disagree.

Third, BMA principals devote more time to guiding teachers than is the case with their OBEC counterparts. Insofar as a good instructional leader is one who engages with, and monitors and mentors teachers to achieve good learning outcomes, BMA principals spend more time on instructional leadership. Many BMA principals engage with teachers, observing how they teach, checking their lesson plans, and convincing teachers to tailor their instruction to the needs and goals of their students. BMA principals also tend to recognize the important role that teachers play in their managerial success. Conversely, OBEC principals spend relatively little time developing professional relationships with their teachers. Instead, they tend to leave what happens in classroom up to the teachers, and view the role of monitoring and advising teachers as the responsibility of supervisors from the ESA. Also, OBEC principals appear to barely recognize that teachers are important for their management success. This lack of time guiding teachers is likely the result of the time that OBEC principals must spend on their political and managerial roles. Due to these demands, in comparison with their BMA counterparts, OBEC principals spend much less time inside the school, and especially with teachers. This explains why, on average, BMA principals believe that they have more curricular autonomy than is the case with their OBEC counterparts.

In light of these findings, this study proposes three policy recommendations to encourage principals in Thai government schools to adequately perform their instructional role and develop their instructional leadership. First, the code of conduct for principals that is used in evaluating them should reduce the emphasis placed on test scores, and especially their O-NET scores, and instead emphasize professional engagement with teachers and students. The extent that O-NET scores are used to measure principals' performance must be systematically challenged. Human resources management should not be separate from curricular management, as is currently the case in the official categorization of principals' work. Instead, principals should be encouraged to see their professional relationships with teachers as critical for their school's academic success. Second, to prevent principals from spending too much time on their political and managerial roles, the OBEC schools' chain of command should be streamlined. Also, effective communication mechanisms should be established to ensure that rules and regulations are clear, red tape is eliminated, and the paperwork required of principals is far less. Finally, to fill the resource gap currently caused by the per-head funding formula, and reduce the pressure on principals to raise funds, two block grants should be devised and allocated to small OBEC schools for school maintenance and for instructional leadership development.





# Introduction

## *The Middle Income Trap: Thailand's competitiveness and education reforms*

Over the last 50 years, Thailand's economic growth has achieved mixed results. On the one hand, exponential growth since the 1970s has greatly reduced poverty. In 1988, more than 40% of Thais had incomes below the poverty line, but thanks to rapid economic growth, by 2010 this percentage had declined to only 8%. With regard to improvements in people's health and education, Thailand's indicators have been impressive. The economy has also done well over the last five decades. Despite the unprecedented financial crisis in 1997–1998, the economy was growing quickly again by the 2000s, and by 2011, Thailand had moved up the economic ladder to become an “upper-middle income country”—one with an average income of between \$4,086 and \$12,615 per year.<sup>2</sup>

However, although the economic growth rate in Thailand increased more than eight and a half times between 1961 and 2010, with regard to the minimum wage and living standards, widespread inequality still persists.<sup>3</sup>

Despite five decades of successful economic growth, Thailand is now experiencing the “middle-income trap”, which typically occurs when a country's competitiveness reaches a plateau. The term “middle-income trap” usually applies to countries that have successfully transformed from an agricultural into an industrial economy because they have cheap and abundant low-skilled labor, but then the country fails to move up the value chain<sup>4</sup> because they lack the higher-skilled workers needed to achieve productivity through innovation. Also, as a result of the country's higher labor costs, it can no longer compete for low-skilled work. For decades, the Middle East and Latin America have struggled to escape the middle income trap, and Thailand now faces the same problem. Although some suggest that the middle-income trap is a myth, the World Bank uses the term because it pushes policymakers to focus on what matters—productivity, innovation, competitiveness, and technology.<sup>5</sup>

Problems with Thailand's educational system has been identified as one of the main reasons why economic growth has stalled. Although the country has achieved universal primary education and increased the population's level of literacy, World Bank research shows that nearly a third (32%) of those aged 15 are functionally illiterate. Although they can read and write, they do not necessarily comprehend what they are reading,<sup>6</sup> and so cannot develop the knowledge

2 World Bank. (2020). *Country and Lending Group*. <https://datahelpdesk.worldbank.org/knowledgebase/articles/906519-world-bank-country-and-lending-groups> – Retrieved June 24, 2020.

3 Kanapathy, V., Hazri, H., Phongpaichit, P., and Benyaapiku, P. (2014). *The Middle-Income Trap: Economic Myth, Political Reality: Case Studies from Malaysia and Thailand*. Bangkok: The Asia Foundation.

4 Garrett, G. (2004). “Globalization's Missing Middle”. *Foreign Affairs*, 83(6): 84–96.

5 Larson, G.M., Loayza, N. V, and Woolcock, M. (2016). “The Middle-income Trap: Myth or Reality”. Research & Policy Briefs, No. 1. Washington, D.C.: World Bank Group.

6 Sondergaard, L. M. (2015). *Thailand – Wanted: A Quality Education for All in Thailand*. Washington, D.C.: World Bank Group.

and skills needed to support advances in industrial development. This has had enormous consequences for Thailand's economic competitiveness and its social inclusion. By the mid-1990s, researchers found that the poor results of Thailand's education system were hindering the country's economic development. Thailand could not educate enough scientists, engineers, and technologists to attract producers of the high-end products that would move the country up the economic ladder. In this regard, Thailand's workers compare unfavorably with those in Malaysia, Taiwan (China), and South Korea. Also, Thailand's exports began to decline as it lost unskilled/low skilled industrial jobs to countries paying lower wages such as Vietnam, Myanmar, China, and Cambodia.<sup>7</sup> The relationship between education and the middle-income trap is captured well in the passage below:

*In the education system, although young Thais have, on average, received more years of schooling as the country has developed, problems persist with respect to the quality of education and inequalities in access to education between rural and urban areas. Thailand's education system also fails to produce enough graduates with the skills needed by industry, leading to [a] skilled labour shortage.<sup>8</sup>*

These issues began to surface at the policy level in Thailand in the early 1990s, however, it was the Asian Economic Crisis of 1997–1998 that created the impetus for education reform. As a result of the financial crisis, experts, policymakers, technocrats, and educators identified the crisis as an “opportunity” to undertake broad-based education reform to address Thailand's economic competitiveness.<sup>9</sup> Collectively, they developed the National Education Act of 1999, which has influenced thinking about, and envisioning reforms for the next two decades:

*Thailand's economic crisis in 1997 was a wake-up call to the nation. Suddenly the cost of complacency had become clear. Integration into the global economy would require a better educated citizenry. Subsequently, discourse shifted toward the urgent need for developing capabilities that would enable Thai society to cope with the complex economic, social, and cultural forces and challenges of globalization.<sup>10</sup>*

The National Education Act of 1999 exemplifies how Thai policymakers began to perceive the close relationship between education reform and economic globalization. Thailand could not advance economically, socially, and politically without improvements in the education system, and this has placed heavy emphasis on revamping the system to meet global challenges.

7 King, D. E. (1997). “Thailand in 1996: Economic Slowdown Clouds Year”. *Asian Survey*, 37(2): 160–166.

Montesano, M. J. (2001). “Thailand in 2000: Shifting Politics, Dragging Economy, Troubled Border”. *Asian Survey*, 41(1): 171–180.

Punyaratabandhu, S. (1998). “Thailand in 1997: Financial Crisis and Constitutional Reform”. *Asian Survey. A Survey in Asia in 1997, Part II*. 38(2): 161–167.

Punyaratabandhu, S. (1999). “Thailand in 1998: A False Sense of Recovery”. *Asian Survey. A Survey in Asia in 1998* 39(1): 80–87.

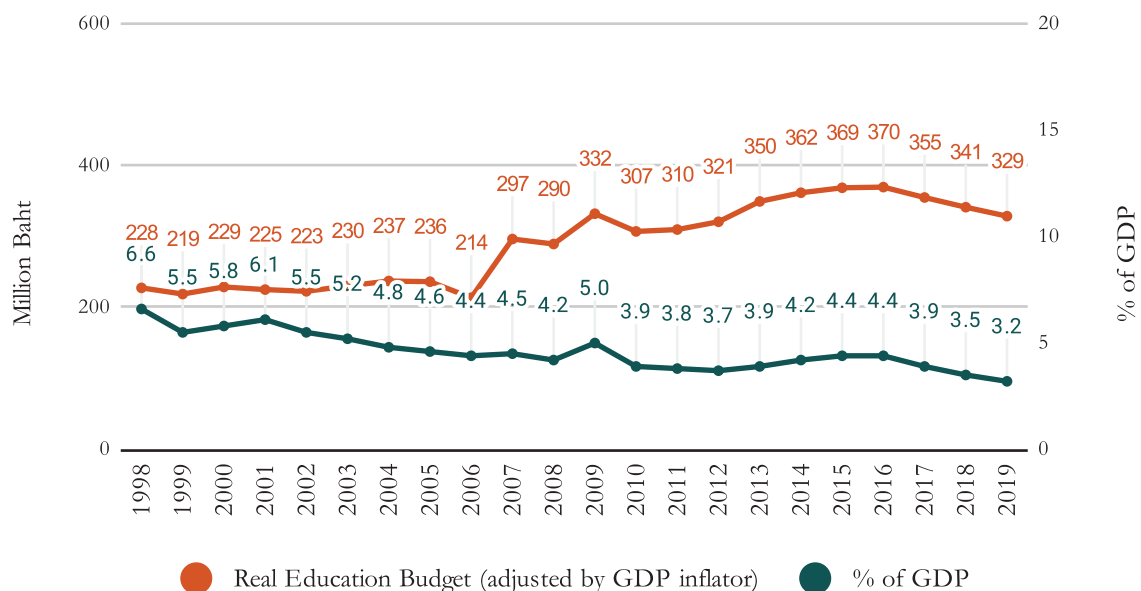
8 Kanapathy, V., Hazri, H., Phongpaichit, P., and Benyaapiku, P. (2014). *Middle-Income Trap: Economic Myth, Political Reality: Case Studies from Malaysia and Thailand*. Bangkok: The Asia Foundation.

9 Fry, G. W. (2002). “Synthesis Report: From Crisis to Opportunity: The Challenges of Educational Reform in Thailand”. Report to the Office of the National Education Commission (ONEC) and the Asian Development Bank, TA 3585-THA, Bangkok: ONEC.

10 Hallinger, P. (2018). “Thailand's Challenge of Systemic Education Reform: Where are the Leaders with ‘The Right Stuff’?”. In Gerald Fry (Ed), *Education in Thailand: An Old Elephant in Search of a New Mahout*. New York: Springer Publishing.

Although many changes have occurred at the policy level to reform the education system, these have not achieved significant results. In fact, many of the changes have been counterproductive and/or had unintended consequences that have prevented education reforms from moving forward. For example, the Education Act of 1999 resulted in structural changes within the Ministry of Education such as converting the single administration office into five pillars. However, unfortunately, these pillars fail to communicate and coordinate with each other and, in some cases, they duplicate each other's efforts.<sup>11</sup> The energy, attention, and resources given to administrative change in the upper echelons of the Ministry of Education illustrate the political assumption that changes made at the top will “trickle down” to achieve school reform and good educational outcomes. Since the reforms began, those in charge have argued that administrative reform is a prerequisite for achieving better learning outcomes. Not only has enormous political attention been paid to administrative reform, Thailand has increased the amount of capital invested in the education system. As a result, the government's annual budget for education has increased more than two-fold from Thai baht (THB) 226,000 million in 1998, to THB 524,000 million in 2018. When adjusted for the gross domestic product (GDP) deflator, the real value of the education budget increased by more than 44% between 1998 and 2018. New policies such as guaranteeing 15 years of free education and increasing teacher salaries have contributed to the rapid rise in the cost of education. However, in terms of its percentage of GDP, the educational budget has remained constant, or even slightly declined, as the GDP growth of Thailand has increased too, exceeding that of the annual education budget.

**Figure 1: Thailand's education budget from 1998 to 2019**

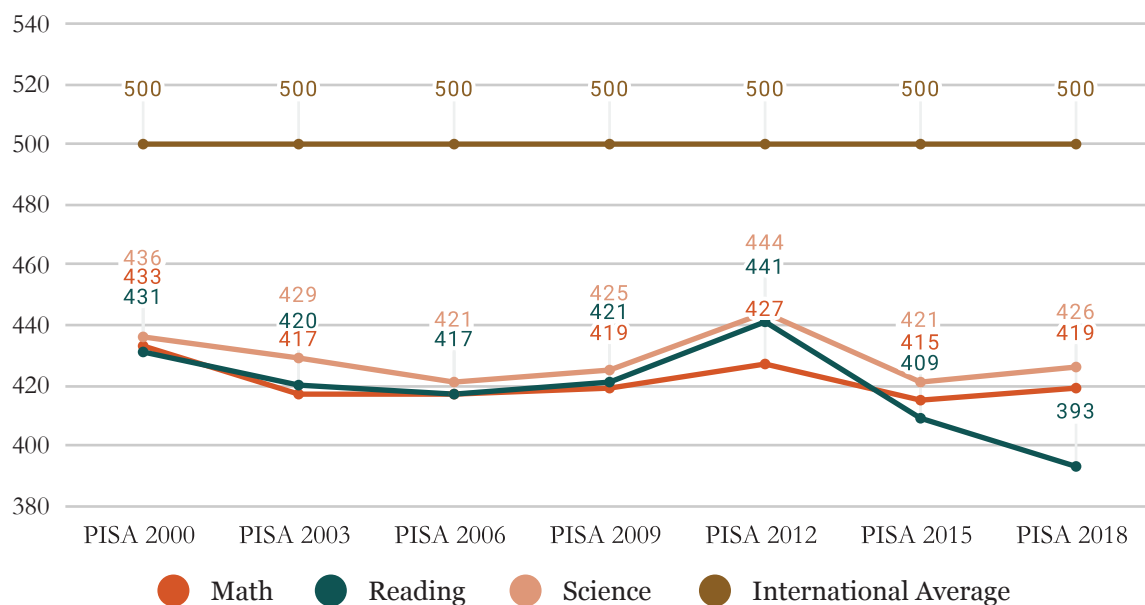


Source: Education Statistics, Office of the National Education Council, 2018.

<sup>11</sup> In 2019, the Office of the Higher Education Commission (OHEC) became a separate Ministry of Higher Education, Science, and Innovation.

Although promulgation of the National Education Act in 1999 has resulted in devoting greater political attention and financial resources to education, learning outcomes have not improved. Instead, Thailand's level of academic achievement has continued to fall in comparison to neighboring countries such as Malaysia, Singapore, and Vietnam. Since 2000, every three years, Thailand has participated in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).<sup>12</sup> Although Thailand's PISA results have fluctuated, overall, the country's scores have declined, and especially so in the last two rounds (2015 and 2018). Reading outcomes have decreased significantly, and they reached a new low in 2018. The mathematics and science outcomes are also slightly lower than their peak in 2012, but overall, they have remained stable for the past 18 years. In general, as indicated in Figure 2, Thai students are still far behind the international average for PISA outcomes (an average of 500, with a standard deviation of 100).

**Figure 2: Thailand's PISA scores from 2000 to 2018**



Source: OECD. 2020. Programme for International Student Assessment, <https://www.oecd.org/pisa/aboutpisa/>

Research shows that international benchmarks for human capital development such as those of the PISA are highly correlated with a country's economic growth. According to some economists' estimates, Thailand's annual GDP would have risen to 5.5% if all students in Thailand attained the PISA's functional literacy level (PISA Level 2, and above). However, as of 2020, nearly half of Thai students (47%) failed to meet this level.<sup>13</sup>

The impact of lagging educational quality in Thailand has also shown up in the annual global competitiveness reports that influence the choices of international investors. These include *The Global Competitiveness Report* of the World Economic Forum (WEF), and the IMD's *World Competitiveness Yearbook*. In 2020, the IMD report showed that of all the indicators of Thailand's competitiveness, the education system trailed far behind other factors such as

<sup>12</sup> OECD. (2020). Programme for International Student Assessment, Organisation for International Co-operation and Development, <https://www.oecd.org/pisa/aboutpisa/>

<sup>13</sup> Hanushek, E.A. and Woessman L. (2015). *Universal Basic Skills: What Countries Stand to Gain*. Paris: OECD Publishing.

“economic performance” and “business efficiency”. On the IMD’s Education Competitiveness Index, Thailand ranked 56th out of 63 countries. In *The Global Competitiveness Report* of the World Economic Forum, Thai education also lagged behind other factors. On the WEF Skills Index, Thailand fell from 66 in 2018 to 73 in 2019, and the teaching of critical thinking in schools was identified as one of the weakest indicators. The World Bank’s *Human Capital Index* (HCI) also reflected the poor standard of education in Thailand. The country’s HCI score of 0.6 means that only 60% of Thai children born today can be expected to reach their full potential by age 18. Although the average number of years of schooling in Thailand is 12.4 years, when the quality of education is taken into account, this average falls to 8.6 years. This is the case, despite nine years of compulsory education, and 15 years of free government-financed education.<sup>14</sup>

The complex interplay between strong political support, increasing financial resources, and low academic achievement has been called “Thailand’s educational paradox”.<sup>15</sup> This paradox has motivated academics and researchers to examine why Thailand is falling behind other countries with regard to its standard of education and economic competitiveness. Many issues such as tightly centralized control by the Ministry of Education, uneven allocation of finance, teachers’ lack of training and poor teaching skills, and administrators’ lack of leadership skills are some of the reasons thought to be impeding education reform. These underlying problems are considered to be systemic and interrelated. With regard to centralization, the ministry’s “top down” management style and rigid bureaucracy limit principals’ autonomy with regard to how they allocate funds, and the extent to which they guide teachers, and adapt the curricula to the local context. With regard to implementing reforms, the ministry’s tight control has made principals passive rather than proactive.

## ***School Principals and Middle Management: Understanding the educational Black Box***

School principals’ leadership is what makes or breaks a policy. Principals are the intermediaries who carry out Ministry of Education policy directives and make changes at the classroom level. They receive and interpret the policies coming down from the ministry and the local Education Service Area (ESA),<sup>16</sup> and then translate the policy directives into action plans at the school and classroom level. Successful principals serve as “brokers” in implementing the policy directives of the ministry and the ESA so that these are effective at the school level. School principals are expected to communicate national policies so that they are understood and followed by teachers and students. Thus, the school principal plays the paramount role in determining the success of ministry policies at the school level.

14 Schwab, K. Ed. (2019). *The Global Competitiveness Report 2019*. Geneva: World Economic Forum. <https://www.weforum.org/reports/global-competitiveness-report-2019>; IMD. (2020). *World Competitiveness Yearbook 2020*. Lausanne: IMD Business School. <https://www.imd.org/research-knowledge/books/world-competitiveness-yearbook-2020/>; World Bank. (2018). *Human Capital Index 2018*. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/data/interactive/2018/10/18/human-capital-index-and-components-2018>

15 Fry, G. and Hui, B. (2013). “The Evolution of Educational Reform in Thailand: The Thai Educational Paradox”. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 51(3): 290–319.

16 Education Service Areas, which are managed by the Ministry of Education’s Office of the Basic Education Commission in Bangkok, are responsible for the administration of primary and secondary education in each district in Thailand (a total of 285 ESAs).



In the case of Thailand, the success of implementing education policies has been uneven due to the combination of repeated changes in who serves as the Minister of Education, and rigid rules and regulations dictated by the ministry. In such an environment, it is challenging for principals to interpret what teachers should be doing in the classroom. One could argue that principals have no choice but to “muddle through” in their efforts to make sense of ministry policies and translate them into something understandable that teachers and students can carry out. Implementation of the Ordinary National Education Test (O-NET) is an example of this. The ministry has used O-NET scores as the yardstick for determining principals’ success. However, despite the universal call to promote O-NET, principals in different school contexts have interpreted the implementation of O-NET differently. This “room for interpretation” makes the principals the missing piece of the puzzle in understanding the education system “black box.” Thus, analyzing principals’ views on leadership enables researchers to examine the macro-micro dynamics of education reforms.

Principals’ leadership matters a great deal with regard to the learning outcomes of students, achieving school goals, and ensuring good relationships within the school, between the school and the community, and with local authorities. There are a number of things that a principal can do to achieve the school’s goals whether these are academic, financial, or concern the well-being of students, teachers, and the local community. According to research undertaken in the State of Texas in United States, over the course of the school year, highly effective principals raise the achievement of a typical student by two to seven months. Conversely, ineffective principals lower achievement by the same amount.<sup>17</sup> In Thailand, as elsewhere, principals are widely recognized as the key factor in achieving schools’ and students’ success. However, due to principals’ varying capacities, incentives, career goals, aspirations in life, and so on, there is no homogeneous group of school principals. Principals vary widely in their focus, expertise, and performance.

According to the publication, *Managerial Imperative and the Practice of Leadership in School*,<sup>18</sup> teachers and principals negotiate and navigate between three “overlapping and complex” agendas: instructional, managerial, and political. Instructionally-oriented leaders focus more on students and their learning outcomes. This framework proposes three dimensions of the instructional role: defining a school’s mission, managing the instructional program, and promoting a positive school learning climate.<sup>19</sup> The principals focused on learning want to improve the quality of teaching, curricula, and the pedagogical approach of their teachers. They often spend time observing the classrooms in their schools, or encourage peer observations, and they use the results to identify how to guide teachers in improving instruction. They also work hard to improve teachers’ professional development opportunities, and make sure that the school environment is conducive to student learning.

17 Branch, G.F., Hanushek, E.A., & Rivkin, S.G. (2013). “School Leaders Matter: Measuring the Impact of Effective Principals,” *Education Next* 13(1): 62–69.

18 Cuban, L. (1988). *The Managerial Imperative and the Practice of Leadership in Schools*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

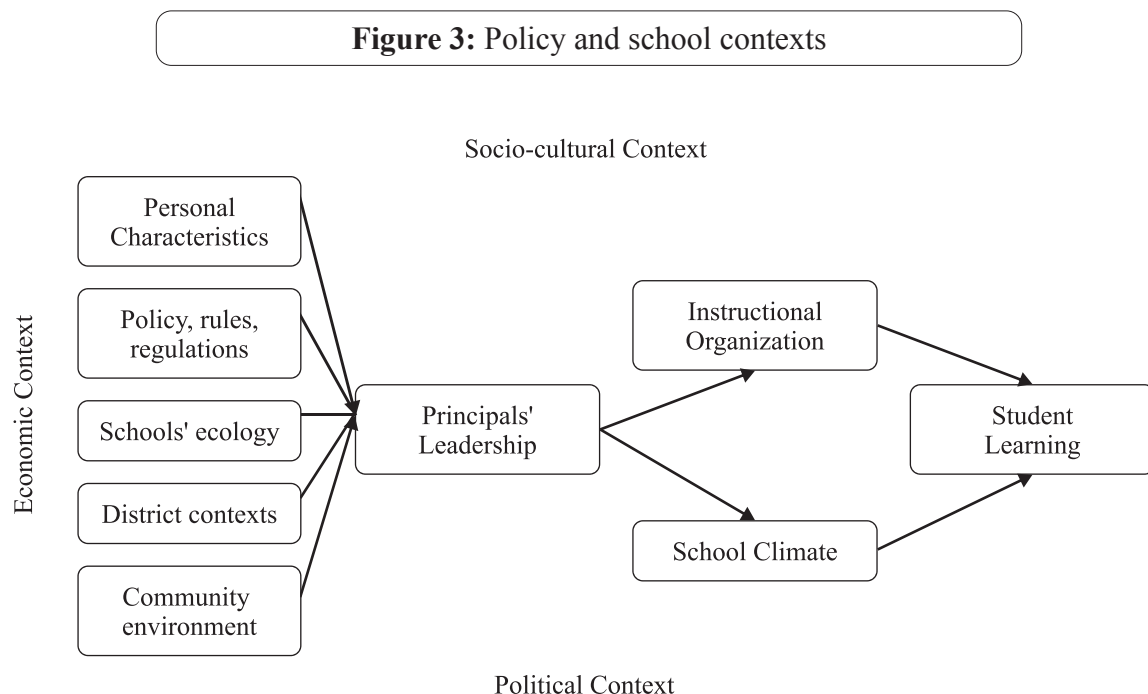
19 Hallinger P. and Murphy, J. (1985). “Assessing the Instructional Management Behavior of Principals”. *Elementary School Journal*, 86(2): 217–248.

The managerial role of principals concerns their management of human resources, financial resources, and the infrastructure of their schools, and the managerial role can take up a large portion of principals' time and energy. Thus, the managerial role is “wired into the DNA of principals”.

Lastly, it is through their political role that principals exercise power, authority, autonomy, and allocate resources in ways that matter.<sup>20</sup> Principals are compelled to play different roles due to the differing expectations of the state, their schools, and their community, and it is essential that principals reconcile their actions with these different stakeholders so that they can access and allocate the resources needed for their schools. To understand the varying roles that Thai school principals play in implementing policy and taking action, this study sought answers to the following questions:

- Do principals in Thai government schools play an instructional role?
- What challenges do principals face and how do they navigate and overcome these?
- Are principals supported by the education system in playing an instructional role?

Figure 3 shows the key forces that influence principals' ability to provide instructional leadership:<sup>21</sup> principals' personal characteristics, Ministry of Education rules and regulations, and principals' relationships with district authorities, community leaders, parents, and students. Figure 3 also shows that the socio-cultural, economic, and political contexts all influence principals' ability to provide instructional leadership and influence students' learning outcomes.



Source: Based on Bossert et al. (1982) but adjusted to suit the Thai context.

<sup>20</sup> Cuban, L. (1988). *The Managerial Imperative and the Practice of Leadership in Schools*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

<sup>21</sup> This has been adapted from Far West Lab's instructional management model to demonstrate the Thai context. Bossert, S.T., Dwyer, D.C., Rowan, B., and Lee, G.V. (1982). "The Instructional Management Role of the Principal". *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 18(3): 34–64.

## Methodology

The study presented in this report took place between July 2019 to September 2020 in Bangkok and Northeast Thailand, and it gathered both quantitative and qualitative data. The researchers who conducted the study have diverse backgrounds: political science, economics, and education, and all have investigated the challenges that public school principals face in Thailand when providing instructional leadership.

For this study's qualitative data, 70 in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted in three provinces in Northeast Thailand (Khon Kaen, Maha Sarakham, and Ubon Ratchathani), and in Bangkok.<sup>22</sup> In addition, the research team conducted focus groups to validate the data collected in the interviews. This study also conducted comparative case studies with principals in the schools governed by both the Office of the Basic Education Commission (OBEC) and the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA). While the OBEC schools are managed centrally by the Ministry of Education, the BMA schools are managed by the city. Comparing these two systems enabled the researchers conducting this study to understand how different governmental structures, rules, and regulations determine leadership patterns at the school level. For the quantitative data gathered for this study, the questionnaires used were adapted from the OECD's 2018 Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS), and translated into Thai. These surveys explored the roles and functions of principals, and the politics and challenges involved in leading a school. The survey for the OBEC school principals in Northeast Thailand was sent to them by their Education Service Area, and in Bangkok, the district offices of the BMA sent the survey to the BMA school principals. In total, 276 principals returned the questionnaires.

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22 The interviews were based on the interview guides taken from Lortie (2009) and translated into Thai [Lortie, D. C. (2009). *School Principal: Managing in Public*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press].



# Overview of Public School Principals: An International Benchmark

This section discusses the key characteristics of school principals in Thailand. As noted above, this study conducted surveys that were based on the OECD's TALIS.<sup>23</sup> These surveys were used to compare and contrast the views of OBEC school principals in Thailand's Northeast who work under the direction of the Ministry of Education (191 respondents), with principals working in Bangkok under the direction of the BMA (85 respondents). The surveys asked principals questions about their characteristics such as their gender, age, educational background, work experience, school leadership training, and so on. The goal in conducting these surveys was to understand how Thailand's principals compare to international standards.

## *Key Findings from the Survey*

Based on the surveys completed by the OBEC and the BMA principals, this study found commonalities and differences between them and their international peers. Also, this study found that although Thai principals have much in common with each other, there are differences between those working in OBEC schools, and those working in BMA schools. The five key findings from the survey are as follows.

- A) Thai principals are appointed at a younger age but retire earlier than their counterparts in many countries. As a result, Thai principals have relatively less experience than those working in other countries, and they work for fewer years. The main reason for this finding is that Thailand's mandatory retirement age is 60, whereas in many other countries, principals can continue working until age 65, and even past age 70.

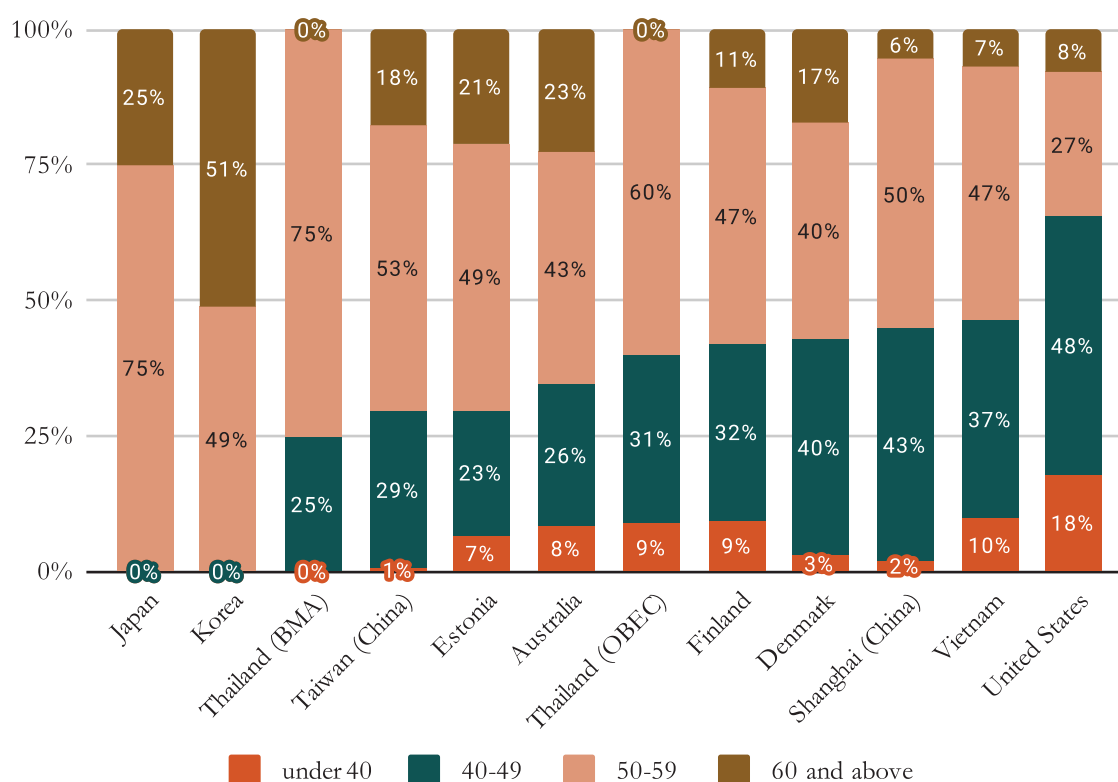
This study also found that the average age of principals in the OBEC schools is younger than that of principals in the BMA schools. In the Northeast, the average age of OBEC principals is 50.87 years, and 8.76% are younger than 40, while the average age of BMA principals is 53, and none of those surveyed were under 40. Conversely, the TALIS shows that internationally, nearly half of principals (44%) are between the ages of 50 and 59, and 17% are older than 60.

<sup>23</sup> The TALIS is a worldwide survey of teachers and principals that is carried out every five years (2008, 2013, 2018), with 6,500 school principals and 100,000 teachers in 48 countries and economies.

The TALIS results show that, on average, 21% of OECD countries have principals older than 60. Examples include Estonia (21%), Finland (10.8%), Japan (51.33%), Taiwan (China), and South Korea (51%). But since Thai principals in both the OBEC and BMA schools are government officers, they are required by law to retire at age 60. This limits the number of years that they can serve as principals, and it creates an incentive for appointing principals at a relatively young age.

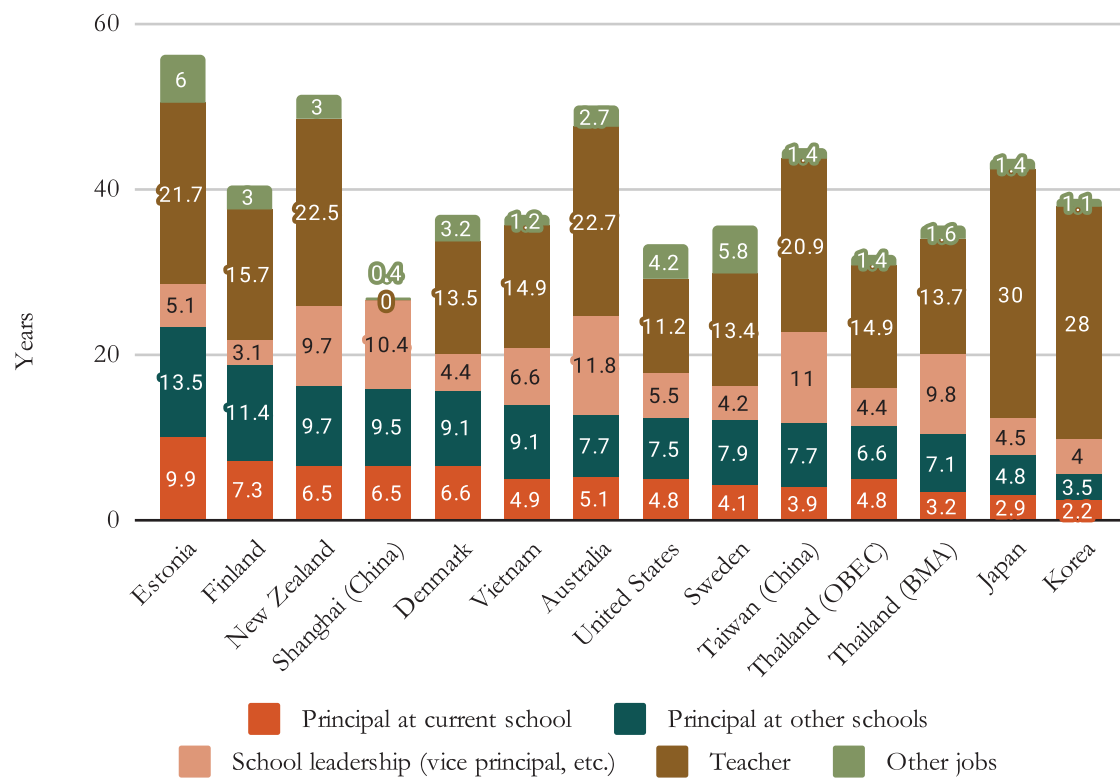
With regard to the age difference between BMA and OBEC principals, this reflects a difference in the size of each school system. The OBEC has more than 15,000 small schools where principals can begin working at a younger age, whereas the BMA has only 437 schools. Thus, almost 9% of OBEC principals in the Northeast are younger than 40, whereas BMA principals are older (75% over age 50).

**Figure 4: Comparison of school principals' ages**



Thai principals have between 13 and 15 years of teaching experience, and work for 10 to 11 years as a principal, which places them near the bottom quartile of teachers' and principals' experience on the TALIS. The number of years that principals work is substantially higher in countries such as Denmark (15.7 years), Estonia (23.4 years), Finland (18.7 years), New Zealand (16.2 years), and even Vietnam (14 years). This means that in Thailand, principals do not spend many years teaching before assuming their role as a principal, which means that they have less experience when they become school principals. As previously noted, the Thai government's compulsory retirement age of 60 is an important factor in both principals' recruitment age and their years of serving as a principal.

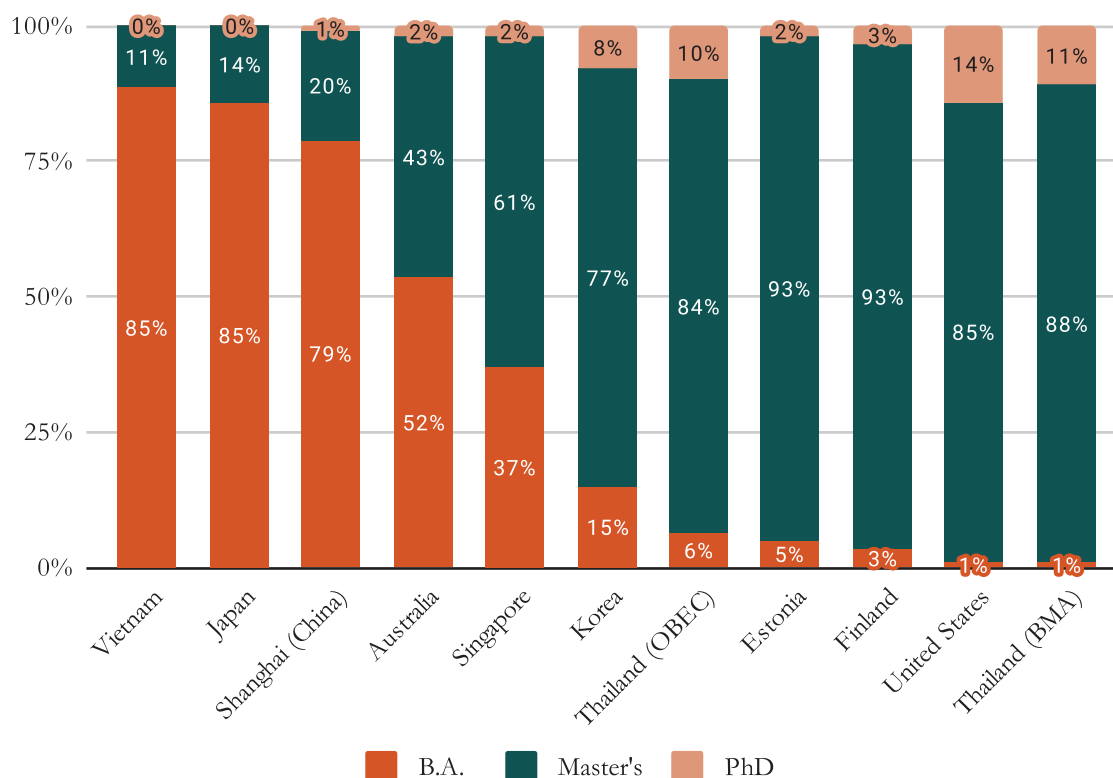
**Figure 5: School principals' work experience**  
(years of working as a principal and other positions)



B) The educational background of school principals: Thai principals have a high level of education compared with those in many countries. But Thai principals' level of education may not matter much if the quality of their education is substandard.

Based on international data, Thai principals have attained a higher level of education than principals in many other countries. In the Northeast, the majority of OBEC principals surveyed (83.6%) had obtained a master's degree, and 10.05% had received a doctorate. The percentages for master's degrees and doctorates are quite similar for BMA's principals (88.2% and 10.6%, respectively). Estonia, Finland, and Korea also have a high percentage of principals with advanced degrees. The United States is the only major country with a higher proportion of principals with doctoral degrees. Conversely, China, Japan, Singapore, and Vietnam do not have a high percentage of principals with advanced degrees, however, their schools are rated as doing well. In Thailand, the Ministry of Education encourages principals to earn higher-level degrees in order to advance their careers. In summary, although Thai principals usually have a high level of education, the quality of their advanced degrees is questionable, and subject to scrutiny by the OBEC. In the past, a number of Thai master's programs in education were closed down due to their poor quality.

**Figure 6:** Education level of school principals

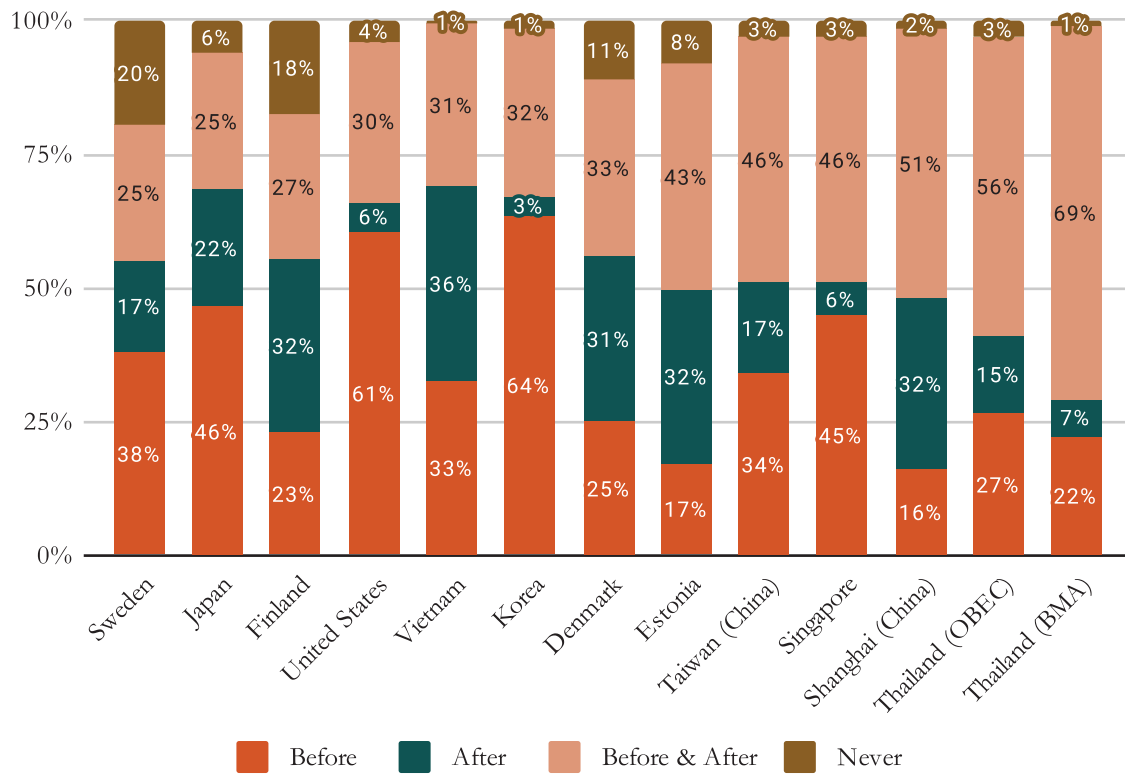


C) In comparison with other countries, Thai principals receive more frequent instructional leadership training, both before and after assuming their positions.

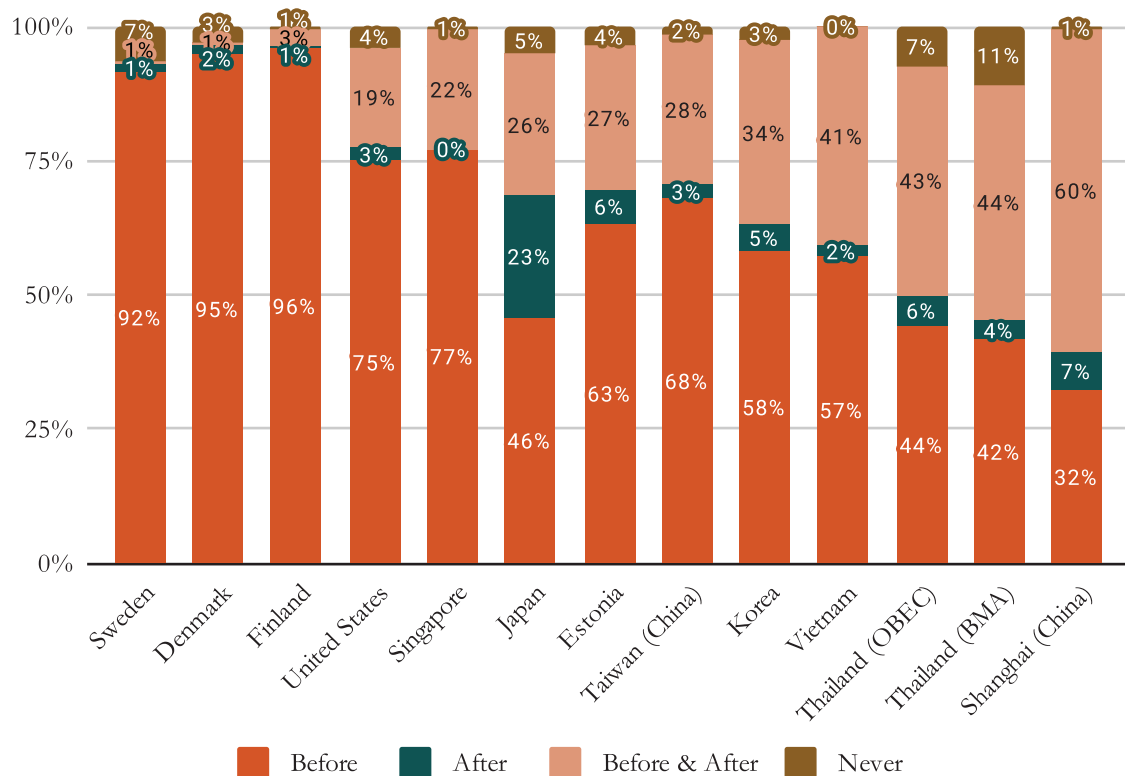
With regard to instructional leadership training, 55.6% of the OBEC principals and 69.4% of BMA principals participated in this training before and after becoming a principal—a higher percentage than in many countries. With regard to training about the curricula and teaching skills, 42.6% of OBEC principals, and 44.1% of BMA principals received both types of training before and after becoming a principal. Overall, Thai principals have successfully completed all the training programs considered essential for serving as a principal. However, this study has no information about the standard of this training, which likely varied in both quality and effectiveness. To develop the capacity of Thai school principals, the Ministry of Education established the National Institute for the Development of Teachers, Faculty, Staff, and Educational Personnel (NIDTEP), which requires teachers and principals to undertake and pass its training courses. However, a number of academics consider the quality and effectiveness of this training to be less than ideal.<sup>24</sup> Another key finding of this study is that certification of their training is extremely important to Thai principals. This is because Thai principals and teachers must have certificates for the required training in order to apply for a promotion. As a result, the certificates that teachers and principals collect are often more valued by them than the skills they gain on the job.

24 Hallinger, P. (2018). "Thailand's Challenge of Systemic Education Reform: Where are the Leaders with 'The Right Stuff'?" In Gerald Fry (Ed.), *Education in Thailand: An Old Elephant in Search of a New Mahout*. New York: Springer Publishing.

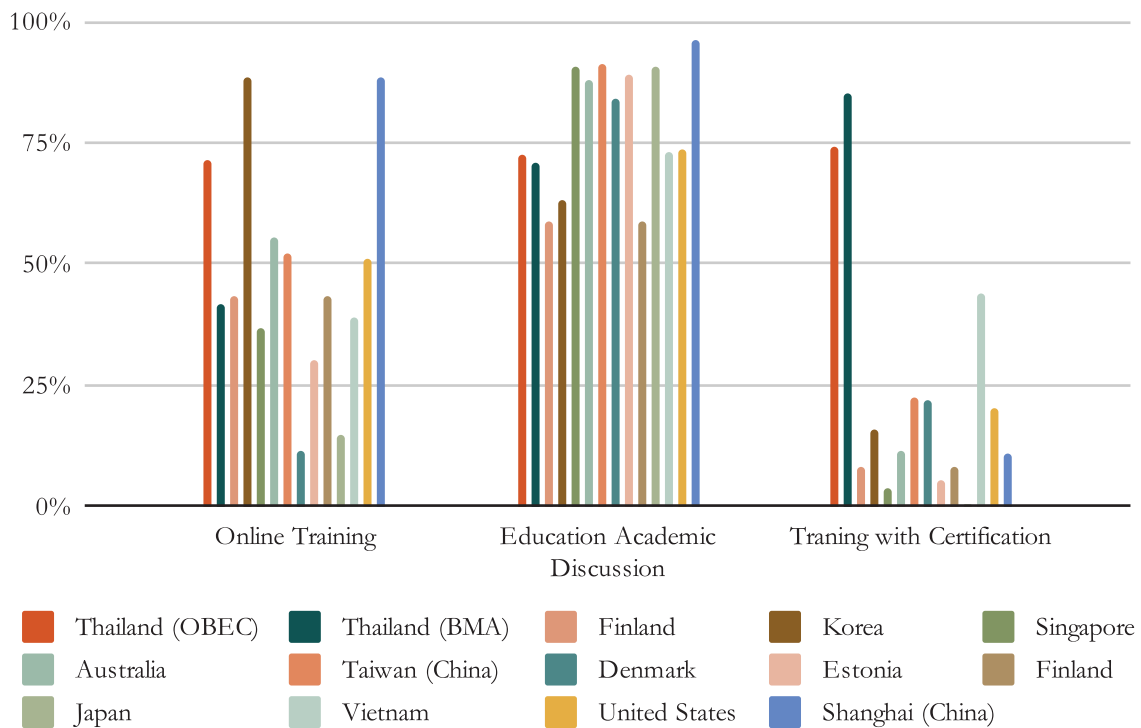
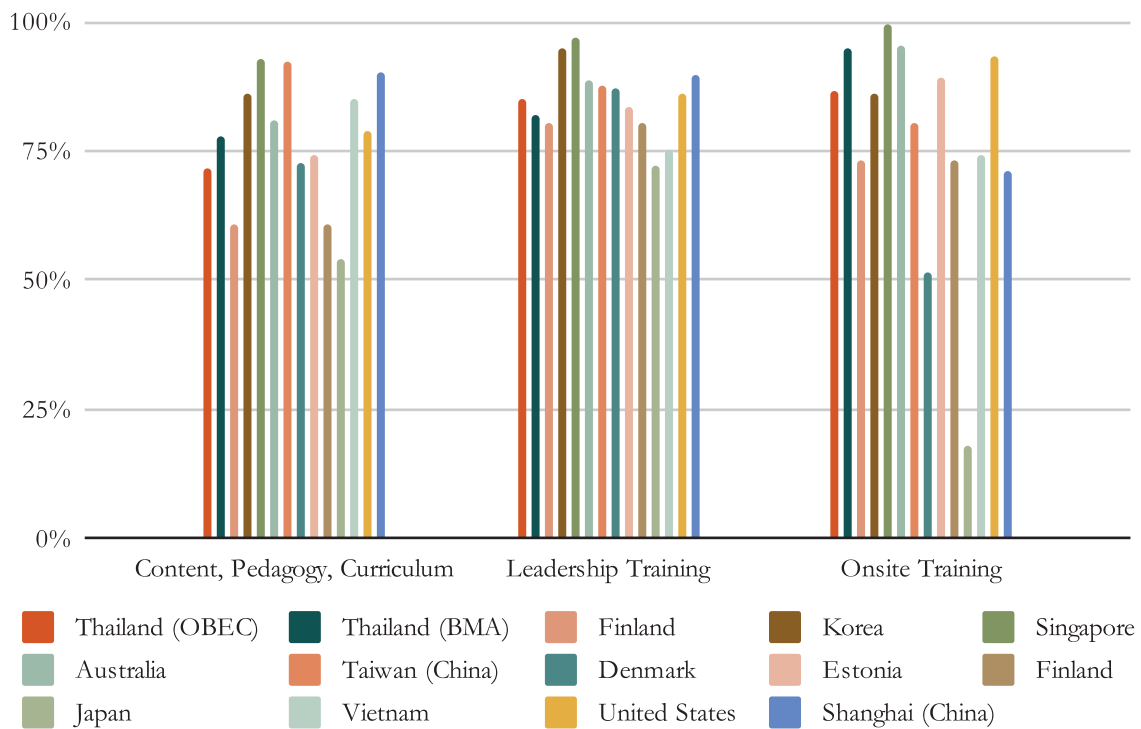
**Figure 7: Percentage of principals who received training on instructional leadership before and after assuming the position**

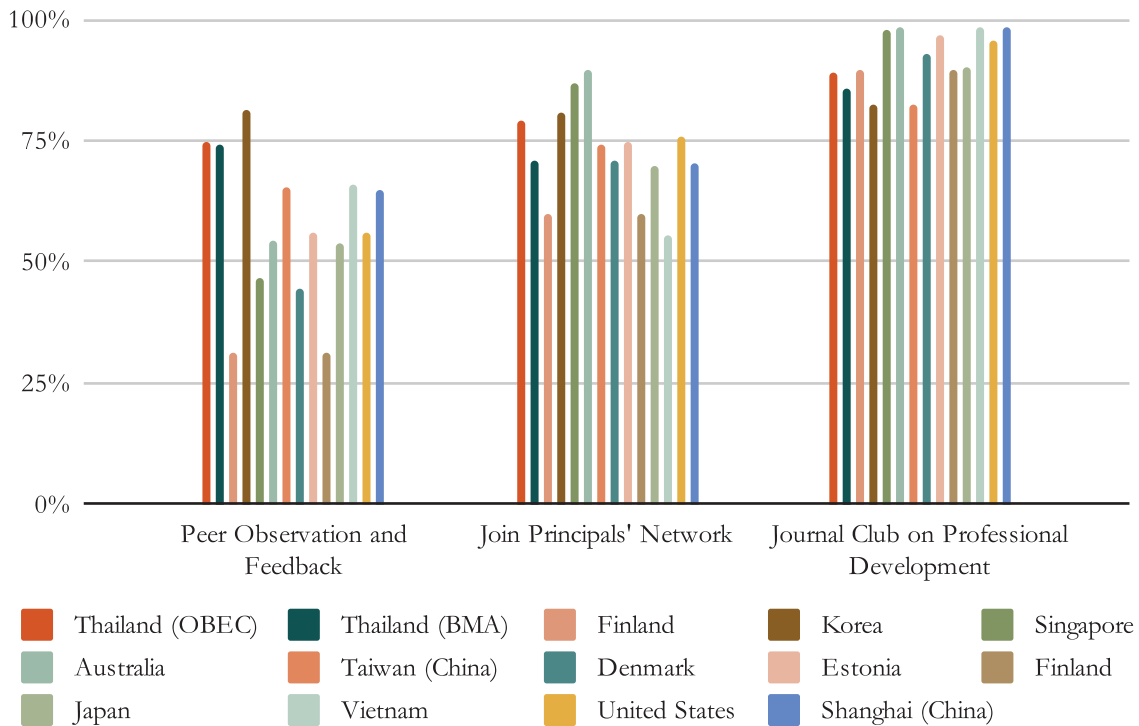


**Figure 8: Percentage of principals who received curricula and teaching skills**



**Figure 9: Percentage of principals who successfully completed training in the past 12 months**



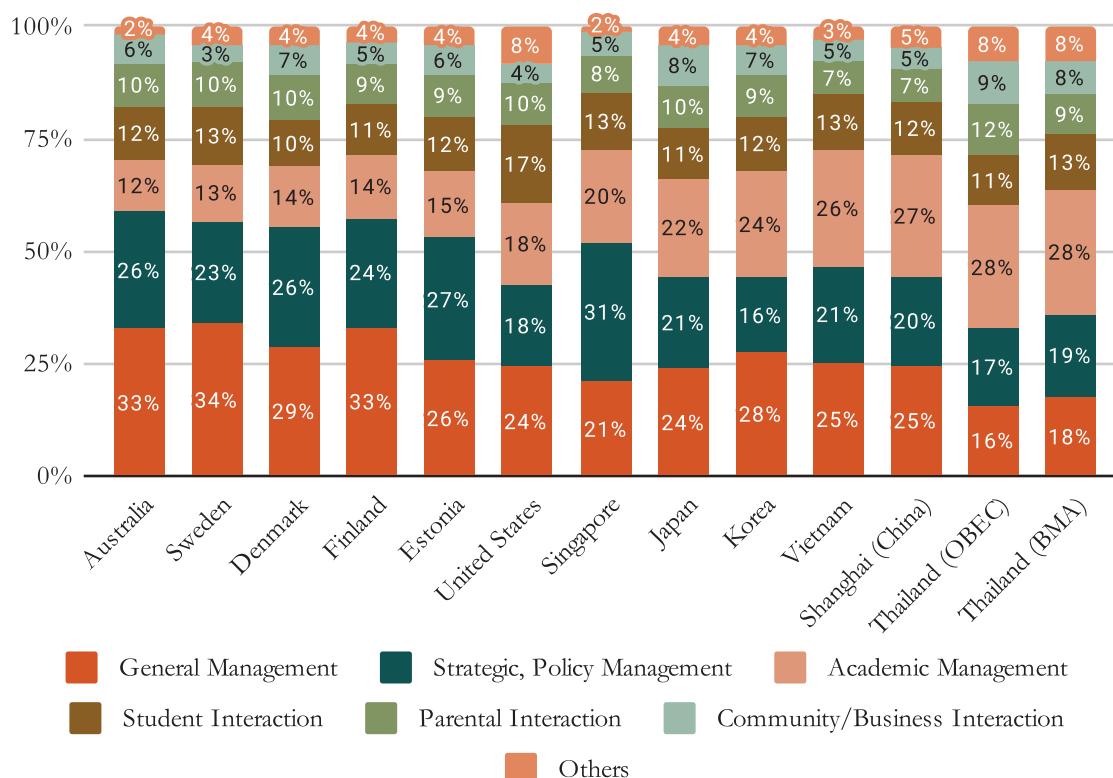


D) Principals in most educationally advanced countries spend the majority of their time on general management and strategic, policy management. However, Thai school principals spend most of their time on academic management. In theory, Thai principals spend more time on instructional leadership than their international peers. However, Thai school principals' understanding of the definitions of instructional leadership and academic management likely differs from their international peers.

According to this study's survey, Thai principals believe that they spend a relatively greater amount of time on instructional leadership when compared with principals in most other countries, including countries with better school outcomes such as Denmark, Finland, and Singapore. Thai principals report that they spend the largest amount of their time (28%) on academic management (curricula and teaching-related tasks and meetings), followed by strategic, policy management. Whereas in most countries, school principals report that they spend the most time on general school management. Even in countries such as Australia, Denmark, Finland, and Sweden, principals spend most of their time on general management, followed by strategic, policy management. Conversely, in Estonia and Singapore, principals report that they spend more time on strategic, policy management.

Principals in BMA and OBEC schools spend almost the same proportion of their time on academic activities (27.6% for OBEC schools versus 28% for BMA schools). However, this study's analysis shows that their conception of academic activities is limited to improving the O-NET scores of their students. The OBEC principals spend slightly more time interacting with parents and the community, while BMA principals spend more time focused on their school. These findings on differing priorities are based on the in-depth interviews conducted with OBEC and BMA principals.

**Figure 10: Percentage of time principals spend by type of activity**



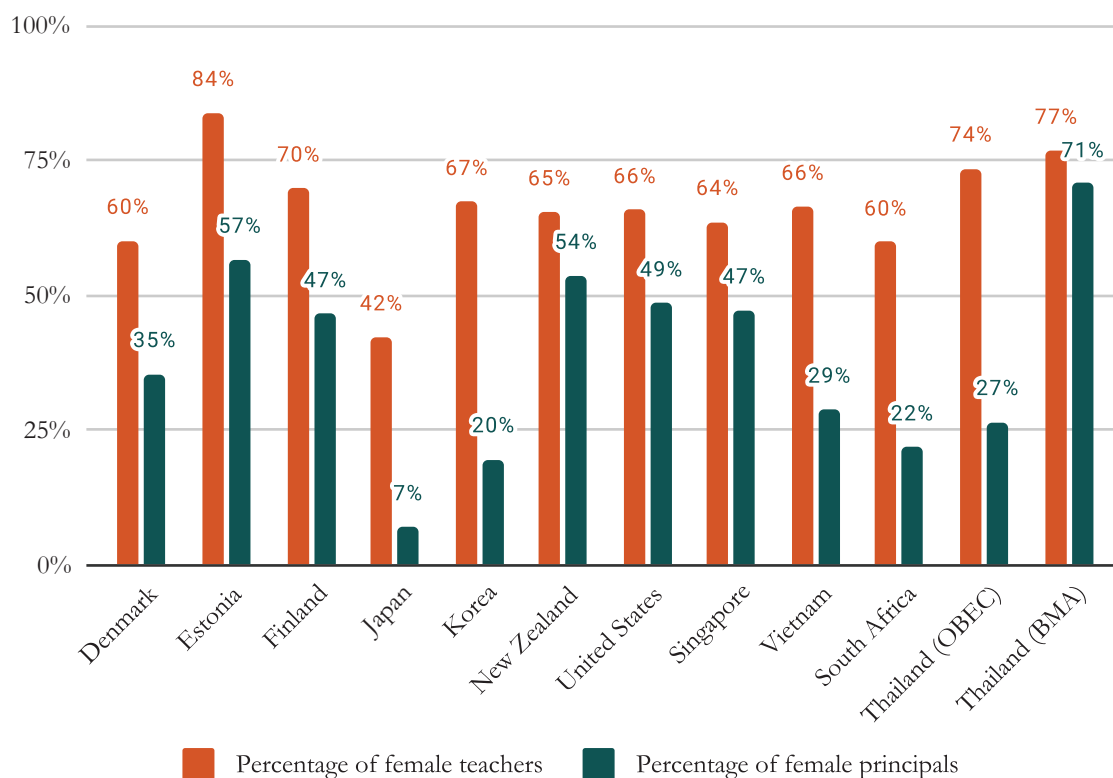
E) Although the majority of OBEC schoolteachers are female, only 27.5% of OBEC principals are female. Conversely, both the majority of BMA schoolteachers are female, and 70.6% of the BMA principals are female. This suggests a considerable difference in the career opportunities that female OBEC teachers have versus female BMA teachers.

In all of the countries participating in the TALIS, with the exception of Japan, the majority of teachers are women, but in half of the countries surveyed, women principals are a minority. In 2018, across the OECD countries participating in the TALIS, on average, only 47% of principals were women, compared to 68% of teachers. In Asian countries with a male-dominated culture, such as Japan and Korea, most of the principals are male, whereas in Estonia, Latvia, and Sweden, and some other European countries, the majority of principals are female.

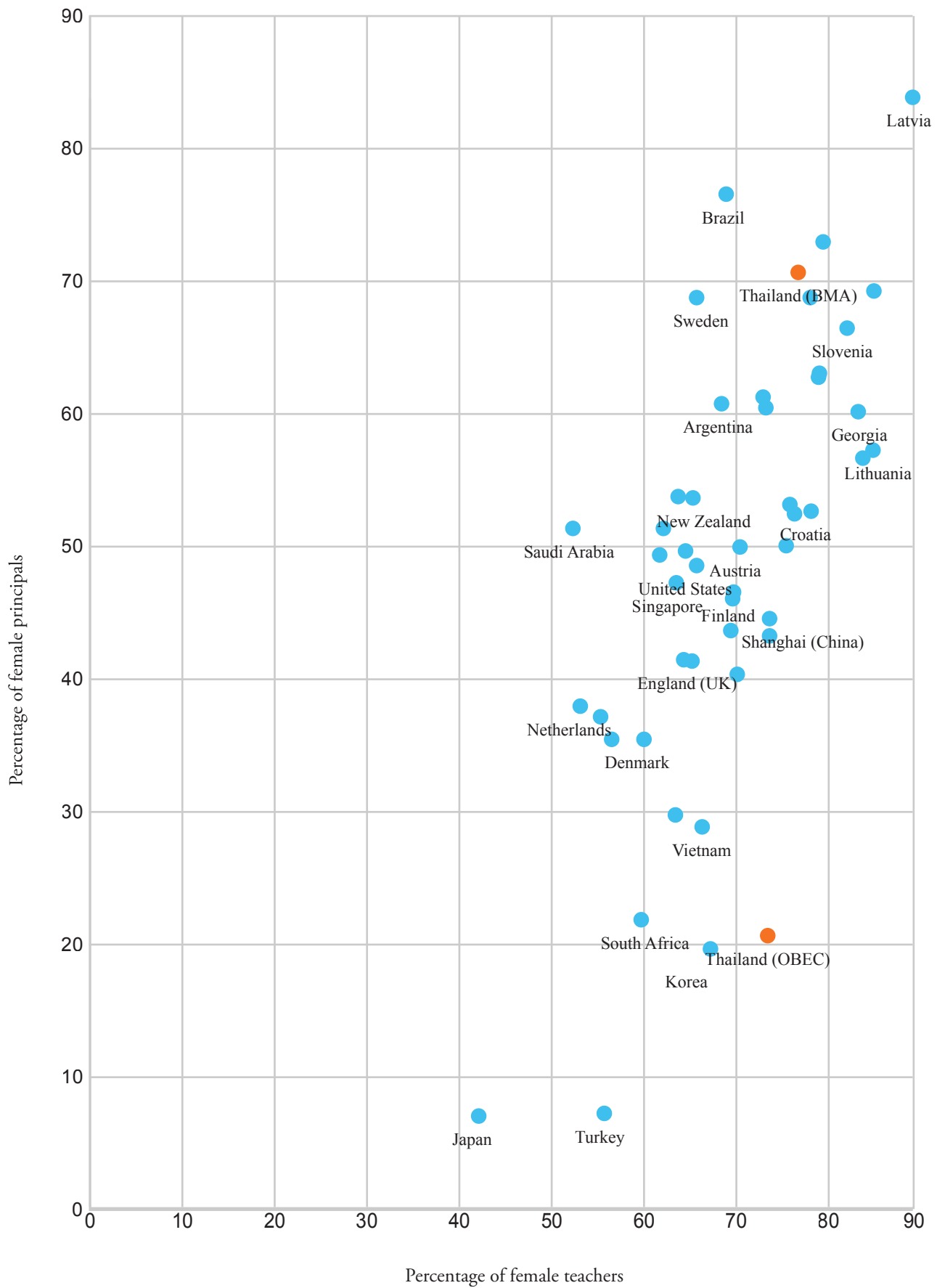
In the case of Thailand, while 73.5% of OBEC schoolteachers are female, only 27.5% of Thai principals, overall, and 20.6% of principals in the Northeast, are female. Conversely, 76.8% of BMA schoolteachers are female, and 70.6% of BMA principals are female.

One possible reason why more women become principals in BMA schools than is the case in OBEC schools, is that working in the rural Northeast is more challenging for women.



**Figure 11: Gender distribution of school principals**

**Figure 12:** Gender balance between teachers and principals



In summary, if the contexts of Thai principals and teachers are examined carefully, Thai principals do not appear to lag behind their international peers in important aspects such as their education level and amount of leadership training. However, the degrees obtained by Thai principals are not necessarily of a high standard. The quality of the training programs for both teachers and principals varies, too, and may prevent them from achieving their professional goals. In general, it appears that the authorities leading Thailand's education system put a great deal of emphasis on principals obtaining credentials, and much less emphasis on achieving quality outcomes. Thus, Thai education system authorities appear to focus more on form over substance, and they also appear to borrow ideas from more developed countries such as the concept of instructional leadership. However, this concept does not appear to be well integrated into principals' training programs, or into how they carry out their work.<sup>25</sup>

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25 Lao, R. (2015). *A Critical Study of Thailand's Higher Education Reforms: The Culture of Borrowing*. Critical Studies in Education. Abbingdon: Routledge.



# Comparative Analysis of OBEC and BMA Principals' Case Studies

This section discusses the findings from the case studies that were carried out to show if differing patterns of leadership resulted from different policy contexts. The comparison reveals that OBEC principals are more political than BMA principals because the former face greater resource constraints. In order to secure resources and sustain the partnerships that provide resources, OBEC principals need to be politically active. OBEC principals also operate within a more complex and unstable policy environment due to their working far from the Bangkok-centered Ministry of Education, and frequent changes in the ministry's leadership. However, BMA principals operate under quite different administrative conditions. The geographic area of the BMA is much smaller than that of the OBEC and, hence, the BMA chain of command is much shorter. The Bangkok Governor leads the BMA, but it is the director of the BMA's Department of Education who controls everyday decision-making related to education. This study also shows that the BMA provides sufficient resources to schools, which allow BMA principals to focus on their instructional role instead of trying to secure and sustain adequate resources.

This study's analysis is divided into three main sections based on the three key roles that principals perform: instructional, managerial, and political. The first section compares the perceptions of OBEC and BMA principals with regard to being instructional leaders. The second section maps out their differing challenges in managing their schools, and the extent to which their managerial role takes up time and attention. The third section analyzes why OBEC principals are more politically-driven than BMA principals.

## *Instructional Leadership in the OBEC: It's mostly about test scores*

This study's analysis shows the extent to which OBEC principals want to become instructional leaders. Being an instructional leader means that a principal plays a hands-on role with the curricula and teaching in order to guide teachers on how to conduct their classes effectively. The broader conception of instructional leadership means that principals understand the nature of teaching and learning, and are able to mentor teachers, as well as create an environment that is conducive to students' success in learning. The results of the focus groups and interviews conducted with OBEC principals suggest that these principals aspire to become instructional leaders. The principals agreed that academic achievement and being student-centered are teachers' essential qualities for ensuring students' successful learning outcomes. The relationships between teachers and principals plays a key role in facilitating students' learning:

*I believe that 100% of principals want to become instructional leaders. We all want to focus on the academic achievement of our students.*

*Instructional leadership focuses on students' achievement. Academic achievement is the priority. To achieve this, it is important to improve teachers' focus. If you get the academics right, everything will follow.*

Some principals argue that being strong academically is the most important factor in principals' success as school leaders.

*The most important responsibility of principals is becoming instructional leaders. If they are not academically competent, they cannot manage an educational institution.*

Some principals suggest that academic improvement is their focal point, and the main objective of their school.

*The most exciting task is academic improvement. It is rewarding to see our students improve and succeed. Academic achievement is the heart of the school.*

*Academic work is especially important. The real question is how to make sure that our students excel. How can we make sure they learn?*

Based on their interviews, principals appear to see that their involvement with teachers and students, and students' academic success, as the way to gain public recognition.

*The most important priority of principals is academic achievement. This is how principals gain public acceptance. Both students and the school must receive awards. Then parents will respect the principal and enable managing this relationship well. Teachers will also then support the principal.*

If academic improvement of the school is taken as the equivalent of quality learning and teaching, why does previously-published research on OBEC principals suggest that they are less likely to become instructional leaders?<sup>26</sup> OBEC principals show that their perception of instructional leadership is limited to improving O-NET scores, ensuring that students win awards, and creating special programs such as those that teach English or STEM (Science, Mathematics, Engineering, and Technology). OBEC principals reported that there is a strong emphasis on O-NET scores as this is the single most important indicator of a principal's success. They said that the Ministry of Education and the Education Service Area use O-NET scores to evaluate a principal's achievement, a school's quality, and its academic improvement. Principals agreed that the overwhelming focus on O-NET scores unduly pressures them in carrying out their work.

26 Hallinger, P. and Lee, M. (2013). "Exploring Principals' Capacity to Lead Reform of Teaching and Learning Quality in Thailand". *International Journal of Educational Development*, 33(4): 305–315.

*Although the overall performance of principals is the most important aspect in their evaluation, it is the O-NET score that the Ministry of Education scrutinizes the most. The score is the key measure of achievement that the school must improve every year.*

*To evaluate whether students are capable or not requires considering more than their O-NET scores. The O-NET test does not assess everything—students must have more than just academic skills. Therefore, focusing only on O-NET scores is not conducive to students' overall success. However, unfortunately, a school's evaluation results depend largely on its O-NET scores as this is the national standard. If the school passes the O-NET threshold, it will be applauded by other schools.*

*The Ministry of Education focuses on the O-NET scores the most. These scores rank every school in the country. Other things are not important. However, I think school quality depends on many factors. For example, the Ministry should also prioritize and evaluate life skills. But only O-NET scores are used to evaluate principals' performance. O-NET sets a clear target for each school to achieve and win awards, but this is a problem.*

O-NET is a “high stakes” exam. For many reasons, it is more important for principals than for teachers and students. As already noted, high O-NET scores are important for a principal's evaluation. Although the results of the O-NET exam are not clearly linked to a principal's salary, the scores do impact the results of a principal's performance review, and her or his prospects for promotion. Principals whose O-NET scores improve are more likely to get promoted from small/medium sized schools to larger ones. They are also likely to receive greater societal support and recognition.

*The most important thing about principals' and teachers' evaluations is the academic achievement of their students. For principals, school quality is assessed based on how many good teachers and excellent students they have. The ministry's evaluation is focused on students' achievement.*

Education authorities' emphasis on O-NET pushes principals to introduce measures to improve students' scores. For example, to prepare students for O-NET, many schools ask teachers to provide extra classes before and after school, as well as on weekends. Some schools even hire external tutors to coach students before the exam.

*Last year, our students received the number #1 award at the national level for their scores on the O-NET and the National Test.<sup>27</sup> Our average scores have been higher than those of other schools for more than four or five years. This year, we scored 3.81% higher than the average. Our teachers and external tutors come in on weekends and stay after school to help prep the students to ensure that we maintain our high standards.*

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27 The National Test evaluates Grade 3 students' literacy and numeracy skills.

A common strategy to improve O-NET scores is to give high-achieving students recognition by posting their pictures and names on a billboard in front of the school. Another strategy to motivate students to study diligently for the exam is rewarding high scorers with money. Some principals even go as far as trying to manipulate their school's O-NET scores by claiming that the school has more students with learning difficulties than it actually does—a strategy that improves the school's mean score on the O-NET.

*Some schools know that their students are academically weak, so they register their students as “LD”—Learning Disabled. This means that the government does not include these students’ scores in the school’s average. This is why principals do not want to use O-NET scores to evaluate their performance.*

The preceding examples call for education authorities to give more attention to the negative consequences of putting so much emphasis on the O-NET scores. These examples of what some principals do to boost their school's scores can have detrimental impacts not only on teachers, but also on students and their families. The heavy emphasis on O-NET scores means that many OBEC principals have too narrow an understanding of good instructional leadership. A key characteristic of good instructional leadership is classroom monitoring, however, many OBEC principals do not engage in this. Because principals do not engage in classroom monitoring, they are not engaged enough with their schools' teachers and students. Given that OBEC principals appear to regard instructional leadership as only about improving O-NET scores, this helps to explain why their survey responses reveal that they think they spend a great deal of time on instructional leadership and academic management.

Another indicator of instructional leadership is the quality of the relationships between principals and teachers. In the case of OBEC principals, they consider that at the school level, there is a wall between academic management and what happens in the classroom. OBEC principals view the latter to be the sole responsibility of teachers, and they appear to be concerned that doing otherwise will infringe on teachers' independence. Rather than be “good instructional leaders” by collaborating with teachers on classroom activities, most OBEC principals leave classroom decision-making entirely up to the teachers. In the name of giving teachers autonomy, OBEC principals prefer to “take a backseat” with regard to what goes on in the classroom.

*I give autonomy and freedom to my teachers to operate independently. I do not monitor the classrooms because I want teachers to succeed on their own.*

*I let teachers make decisions themselves. They are the frontline workers. They know what students need and want.*

This study's school visits revealed another interesting fact about OBEC leadership. OBEC principals have relatively “low perceptions of autonomy”.<sup>28</sup> By law, 70% of a school's curriculum must follow the Ministry of Education's guidelines. Since OBEC schools can only choose 30% of their curriculum, principals say that they lack sufficient freedom and autonomy to implement appropriate action in their schools.

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28 “Perceived autonomy” is a concept that explains the level of autonomy that principals perceive in their jobs.



*The most scrutinized activity in school is how the curriculum is taught. The Ministry/ESA scrutinizes us to see whether or not we follow the rules and regulations of the ministry. Thus, we must follow the rules exactly.*

When a researcher asked a principal which area of work needs the most autonomy, the immediate response was choosing the curriculum and how to teach it.

*The choice of curriculum comes first. Everything else is secondary. The principal should consider the most appropriate curriculum and how to teach it. However, government policy forces us to go a certain way, and we cannot consider the most appropriate curriculum for our students. We cannot change much; we can only alter the curriculum a little bit.*

Although this study's visits to schools showed that some OBEC principals adjust the curricula to local conditions, regardless of the rules and regulations imposed on them by the ministry and the ESA, most principals consider their "perceived autonomy" is limited. They believe that they lack adequate autonomy to operate with the flexibility and freedom that they need to do a good job.

## ***Instructional Leadership in the BMA: A high perception of autonomy***

Similar to the OBEC principals, an important aspect of BMA principals' work concerns the O-NET, the National Test (NT), and special programs. While the BMA principals surveyed for this study consider that preparing students for the O-NET is a critical part of their academic work, it is not everything. Most BMA principals regard the O-NET as an output of school management that is important to authorities. BMA principals also said that they take pride in being able to improve their school's O-NET scores, as well as the scores for other standardized tests, including the NT and the Reading Test. Most BMA principals run O-NET tutorials in their school, which according to one principal, "is required by the BMA's Department of Education."

*O-NET can be used to assess the children. Our school is OK with this because our O-NET score is OK. But actually, we would rather assess whether the children have the required skills.*

*Is O-NET important these days? Yes, but doing well is more a matter of honor.*

*O-NET means that the children are able to win prizes and participate in national and international competitions. In these instances, the authorities regard our students as capable.*

*The achievement of our school's management is students' outcomes—their scores on the O-NET and the Reading Test.*

*The Education Department of the BMA expects a lively classroom. They want a classroom that fosters active learning and lifelong learning. They want classes to be student-centered, and teachers to act like coaches.*

Despite immense effort and focus on O-NET scores, BMA principals know that there is a broader goal, and that the school's and principal's success is not only about high O-NET scores. This is expressed well in the following quotes:

*Because it is the national policy, that is why O-NET is important. But, like the Director of the Department of Education has said, O-NET is not as important as teachers' effort to teach. If, in class, we are 100% focused on the children, but O-NET scores are not good for reasons to do with the children's context or other factors, it is OK. O-NET is not a matter of life and death.*

*In assessing principals, the authorities look at many dimensions such as experience, potential, the outcomes of principals' assigned duties, and how teachers are affected. If teachers improve, does this affect the children? How do children do on the O-NET and the NT? Are children well disciplined? These are all important indicators.*

*In the evaluation of principals, the O-NET scores and educational matters are not the only considerations. Morality and ethics are also important dimensions of assessment.*

As implied in the quotes above, a school's score on the O-NET is only one of a number of measures of a BMA principal's performance. Evaluating principals with the O-NET metric seems successful in convincing them that there is a causal link between their students' learning outcomes (O-NET and NT scores, prizes, skill development, and so on), and the efforts that principals and teachers make. This could be because the current leaders in the BMA's Department of Education communicate that O-NET is not everything. However, the most important factor influencing principals' wider focus than O-NET could be that the scores do not impact BMA principals' pay, or greatly influence their career progress. As stated by one principal, "O-NET has nothing to do with a principal's evaluation". A BMA principal's evaluation is decided by the BMA District Director who views principals not just as educational workers, but also as implementers of local government projects such as narcotics prevention programs. In addition, according to the interviews with BMA principals, their annual pay rise is not 100% performance-related. It depends more on the size of the budget available, and whether a principal has had a pay rise in recent years.

Unlike OBEC schools, BMA schools appear to provide a conducive environment for instructional leadership to flourish. When discussing their instructional role, BMA principals used the term "academic work". For them, academic work is "work related to learning, teaching, and the development of learners at every level". Also, it is work on the "school's development, based on the basic curricula that have been provided". In addition, academic work means "instructing teachers about learning and teaching, and checking on their teaching plans and children's work," as well as "observing teaching". For some BMA principals, academic work is "all planning—appointing teachers to classes, instructing and monitoring teachers' use of the curricula and their teaching, and planning students' activities". BMA principals believe that their academic work will lead to the "success of learners and good learning outcomes". BMA principals are

clearly committed to academic work, and they prioritize it over other areas of management. The priority that BMA principals give to academic work can be differentiated by the time they spend, their goals, and their commitment.

Many principals report that they spend the most time on academic work (28%, according to survey responses). The following quotes illustrate this:

*My work time is devoted to academic work.*

*Eighty percent of a principal's work is academic work.*

*If I had more time, I would like to do more academic work.*

*If I have more time, I would like to spend it on academic management. I want all of the students to master English skills. I am confident that all of my students are literate.*

*Of the four areas of management, I consider academic work the most important.*

*Learning skills and students' literacy are the most important outcomes.*

*Academic work and learning outcomes are especially important. Students' achievement must be higher, and we have to work harder on that.*

*We cannot ignore academic work. It is extremely important.*

BMA principals' commitment to academic work was clearly evident in their interviews. Principals said that academic work is the driving force in their working life. This is plausible because academic work plays an important role in the evaluation undertaken by the BMA's Education Department.

*The most important lesson I learned during my first years as a principal was how to engage in academic work with teachers and students because at the end of every academic year, we will be evaluated on our academic work.*

Overall, BMA principals' engagement with teachers is high. One of the instructional roles that BMA principals take quite seriously, and routinely play, is observing in the classroom. Many BMA principals do this proactively, and not just for the sake of appearances. In addition, they view developing teachers' capacity as their duty. When asked how they would utilize their time if they were granted an extra 10 hours a week, 8 out of the 13 principals interviewed said that they would spend the extra time mentoring teachers. Four out of 8 principals explicitly said they would spend these extra hours with teachers. However, one of the 13 principals joked that she would rather sleep, because if she worked with teachers for an extra 10 hours, the teachers would find it too much. The quotes below elaborate on how BMA principals engage with teachers.

*If we want to achieve good academic results, we have to develop the quality of teachers. Then they can be innovative in developing the capacity of students.*

*My role is to encourage teachers to create attractive classrooms, support them in creating new learning materials and applying them in their class, support them in participating in training, and instruct them on how to provide learner-centered classes.*

*I spend a lot of time on academic work. Every morning, I observe classrooms and spend most of my time on academic-related activities.*

*I try to increase teachers' responsibilities. I observe teachers all the time so I can see how well they are teaching. And I show them that I am ready to help and advise them.*

*Giving teachers autonomy does not mean letting them teach however they want. I monitor teachers at random, with no prior notice. Based on my classroom observations I provide teachers with instruction. Generally, teachers do not know in advance when they will be observed. However, I also schedule classroom observations so that teachers can prepare themselves. Both monitoring approaches are conducted in parallel.*

*Every teacher knows that they must participate in formal instruction, and I provide follow-up after this training. However, I do not rely only on formal training of teachers. I also frequently visit classes, with no advance warning, so I can observe how teachers are doing and mentor them.*

*I want to spend more time encouraging and motivating students to work better.*

*I sit down with teachers and discuss their work to find out whether they are having any problems. I also learn about best practices in instruction and share these with the teachers.*

Importantly, many BMA principals view teachers as the key means of helping students achieve successful learning outcomes, which also impacts teachers' own career success. Also, whether they said so directly or not, most principals indicated that they are aware that they cannot succeed without teachers being successful. Most principals do not see themselves as superheroes who can transform their school single-handedly. Instead, they consider themselves to be leaders and collaborators who convey the goals to teachers and help them achieve these. The following quotes illustrate BMA principals' approach with teachers:

*We are not "hands on" in our academic work; instead, we want to see the outcome. It is up to teachers to encourage students to learn. We just facilitate, observe, and mentor. We manage the instructional process, but we do not do it ourselves. For me, it is important that the actual driver of students is the teacher, and my role is to provide support.*

*How can we make a teacher realize how to be a good teacher when s/he does not know the curricula in detail, and how the government thinks it should be taught? If I can enable teachers to realize the key things, I will be happy. I want teachers to know how to prepare a lesson plan, and how to deliver quality teaching. Achieving this makes me proud as I approach retirement.*

Another significant difference between OBEC and BMA principals is their “perceived autonomy” with regard to the curricula. While OBEC principals say that they can influence the curricula a little, 70% of curricula must follow what the government provides. As already noted, this requirement means that OBEC principals do not view themselves as sufficiently autonomous in their management of the curricula. Although, BMA principals are “required” to follow the BMA’s curricula, a large percentage report that they perceive themselves as having a high degree of autonomy.

*Although the national curricula seem to limit us, there is some room to be flexible. Part of the curricula is standardized, but part of it can vary in order to suit the local context. Ultimately, the curricula chosen is up to the school.*

Strikingly, all of the BMA principals interviewed for this study think that they have full control in determining how teaching and learning should occur in their school. Despite the BMA’s curricular framework that combines the Ministry of Education’s core curricula with Bangkok’s local curricula, which is called “Bangkok Study”. BMA principals feel that this arrangement allows room for them to assert their personal vision and apply their talents. They can initiate special classes, activities, or O-NET tutorial programs, all of which are encouraged and supported by the BMA. Although some BMA principals complained that the curricula puts too much stress on students gaining academic competency, and that this is “too difficult”, these same principals do not view focusing on the O-NET to be a problem. BMA principals still think that they have the freedom to manage their own curricula.

## ***OBEC Managerial Leadership: Struggling to fill the budget gap***

OBEC principals say that they are overwhelmed by their managerial role, and that this impedes their ability to be instructional leaders. “Even though principals want to focus on academic achievement, day-to-day school management requires us to do much more than that.” Managerial leadership includes day-to-day administration, finance, and human resources. Managing day-to-day administration is the main task of principals, and one could argue that this is embedded in the DNA of principals. Limited resources are a major impediment to OBEC principals playing an effective managerial role. Along with resources, factors such as goals and the school’s environment determine what type of leader a principal becomes:

*Principals appear to adapt their leadership practices (e.g. goal setting, instructional supervision, and parent involvement) based on needs, constraints, resources, and opportunities in the school environment.* <sup>29</sup>

OBEC principals made three main points about the issue of resources. First, principals reported that their schools have limited resources.

*The budget is limited. It is not sufficient to operate the school.*

<sup>29</sup> Hallinger, P. (2018). “Bringing Context out of the Shadows of Leadership”. *Educational Management, Administration, and Leadership*, 46(1): 5–24.



*To develop the school, it is important to provide an adequate budget.*

*The state provides a limited budget to each school that does not take account of their diverse needs. There is one standardized amount for all types of schools.*

Second, how a school's funds are allocated is determined by the central authorities, based on a fixed, itemized budget.

*Thai school budgeting is heavily controlled like the growth of a Japanese bonsai tree. Eighty percent of the budget is pre-determined. Instead of resources being directly distributed to schools by the Ministry of Education, they are allocated to the Education Service Area, which then determines the resources provided to each school. There is nothing we can do about it.*

Third, the resources for OBEC schools are distributed unevenly, based on political connections. OBEC principals report that to get sufficient funding for their school, they must develop good relationships with staff in the Education Service Area, and maintain these as ESA personnel change.

*If we stay in the school and do not network with others, we are less likely to receive an adequate budget.*

*Thailand's bureaucracy is heavily influenced by the patronage system. This means that bureaucrats' decision-making is often not fair. If a principal is not part of the right circles, the school will not get the resources it needs.*

*The relationship between principals and those who are responsible for resource allocation is really important. Some principals are closer to the authorities than others, and, as a result, they are better informed. They will know about important new policies before other principals who are not as well connected.*

*Lack of budget is always an issue. For example, when we requested special funds for 30 schools, funds for only 10 schools were provided. We then had to set up a committee to decide which 10 schools would get the funds.*

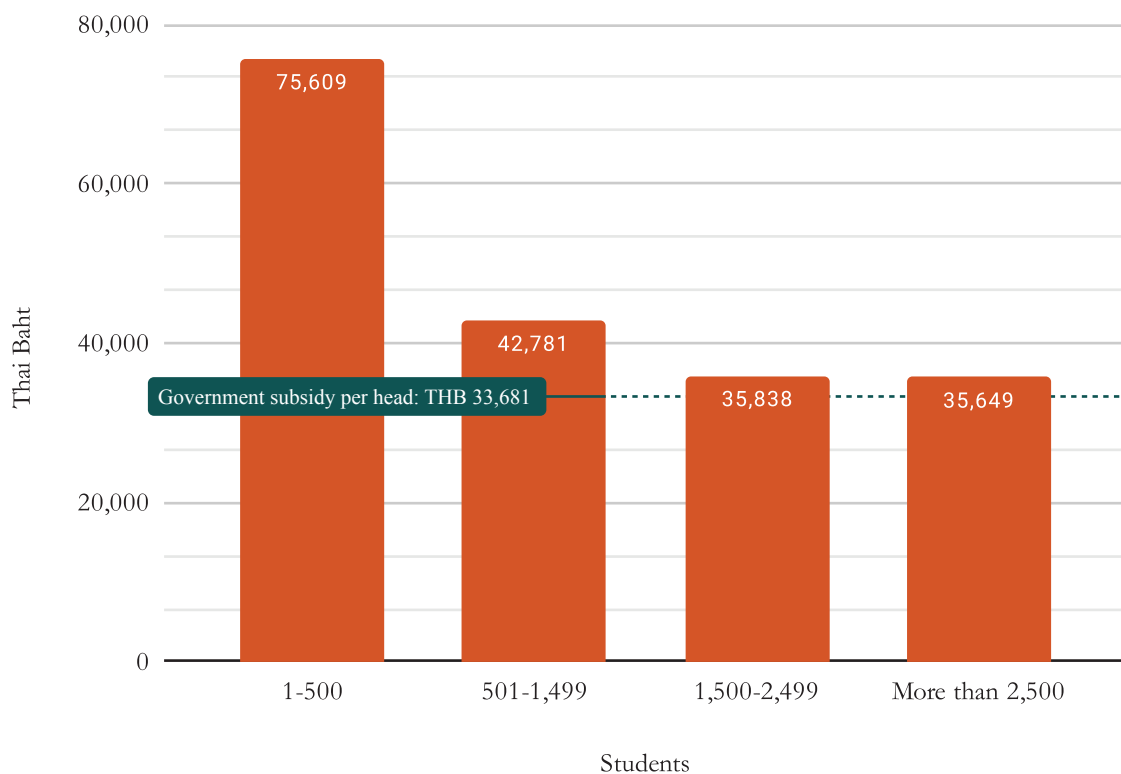
The limited and uneven distribution of resources is one of principals' main concerns with regard to their role in financial management. Principals report that they devote extra time and effort outside their school in order to secure and sustain sufficient resources, and problems are worse for small schools. Principals have different goals, challenges, and access to resources, depending on the size of their school. Due to supply side financing, the budget given to each school depends on how many students they have. This means that due to economies of scale, small schools lack the resources to ensure quality teaching and learning.

*Determining a school's budget based on its number of students is not conducive for small schools' success. The head count means that bigger schools have more resources. Also, bigger schools can raise additional funds from parents and the community more easily than smaller schools. That is because the families of students in the bigger schools are often more affluent.*

*When budgets are allocated, the contextual factors of schools and students are not taken into consideration. A single standard is applied to all, despite the fact that contexts vary widely.*

Based on cost-benefit analysis, the operation of small schools is more costly than the operation of larger schools. Studies show that the expenditure per head in small schools is significantly higher than expenditure in medium-sized and large schools. Official primary school data show that, on average, small school expenditure is THB 53,132 per student, per year, while in large primary schools, the expenditure is THB 30,614 per student, per year. This means that costs in a small primary school are 1.7 times higher than in a large primary school. For secondary schools, the gap between small and large schools is even larger. Studies show that small secondary schools spend THB 75,609 per student, per year, while large schools spend THB 35,649, per student, per year. This means that costs in small secondary schools are 2.1 times higher than in big secondary schools. The costs for a secondary school are likely to be higher for small schools because a large number of students quit or change schools, which reduces the school's head count and, consequently, its funds.

**Figure 13:** Estimated expenditure per student in OBEC secondary schools



Source: Office of the Basic Education Commission, Ministry of Education. 2020. Data compiled by author.

Research shows that bigger schools have better infrastructure and equipment, as well as the capacity to raise more additional money than smaller schools. With regard to operating and maintaining quality, these contextual factors put small schools at a disadvantage in comparison with bigger schools. The discrepancy between the goals, context, and resources of small versus large schools is fundamentally a detriment to Thailand's economic competitiveness, and its social cohesion.

Most OBEC school principals are pressured to raise funds from external sources—the parents’ association, temples, and the community around the school. These additional funds are needed for academic and non-academic activities that are not covered by the government-provided budget. Because they are under pressure to raise additional funds, OBEC principals must become actively engaged with their community.

Since most OBEC schools are located in rural areas, and often within the compound of a Buddhist temple, given the limited funds provided by the state, and the need to raise more funds, principals feel that they must develop strong relations with local monks, community leaders, administrators, and the parents’ association. This means attending all weddings, funerals, ordinations of monks, and other activities in the community, and asking students to help with these events.

While local stakeholders feel they need principals’ endorsement and support, principals need community support to raise the funds needed for school activities, supplies, and hiring teachers. All of the OBEC interviewees stated that fundraising plays a pivotal role in defining their “leadership”. The more money a principal manages to raise, the more s/he is appreciated by the local community. Consequently, principals use a variety of strategies to raise funds, including organizing concerts and special markets. Communities expect that “strong leaders” will leave a legacy for the school such as new fencing, a new gymnasium, a new computer lab, and so on.

*A principal must engage with different sectors in the community such as Buddhist monks, parents, and local administrators. These relationships are especially important for a small school because the school depends on these groups to help raise funds to improve the quality of the school.*

To sum up, this section illustrates that OBEC principals, and especially those who lead small schools, feel overwhelmed by their managerial challenges, and they are unable to provide adequate instructional leadership. These challenges arise from small schools’ lack of resources, which has a greater impact on them than is the case for large schools, which benefit from economies of scale. Large schools can also raise additional funds more easily because they are located in larger, more affluent, communities.

## ***BMA Managerial Leadership: Fund-raising is not essential***

*We receive sufficient funding. We do not need to fund-raise.*

The most important support for instructional leadership in BMA schools is the provision of adequate resources. The BMA is unique because it can collect far more taxes than any other local administration in the country. This is because Bangkok, which is Thailand’s capital, is a much larger city (over 10 million people), with more affluent people than other communities in the country. The following quotes indicate that, unlike OBEC principals, BMA principals do not feel that their schools are underfunded:



*The budget is sufficient to develop the school.*

*The BMA prioritizes the importance of school budgets, and the authorities are quite supportive of the schools.*

*We receive enough budget.*

BMA school principals also reported that resources are evenly allocated across BMA schools. Even principals in small schools feel that resource allocation (the per-head subsidy) is generally fair.

*The distribution of resources is equal across small and large schools. This is based on how many students we have. If the school is larger, with more students, they get a larger budget.*

*Per head budgeting is fair. If we have 1,700 students in an elementary school and 1,900 students in a primary school, the financial allocation will reflect that difference.*

*The distribution of resources according to the head-count reflects the reality of student numbers.*

*The distribution of resources by the head count is fair.*

As noted above, OBEC principals in small schools feel greater pressure from financial constraints than the principals of large OBEC schools. However, BMA principals of small schools also consider that large schools have some advantages due to economies of scale. For example, BMA principals think that the teacher allocation formula, which is based on the number of students, is unfair for small schools. But, overall, the principals of small BMA schools feel less disadvantaged because the BMA provides their schools with an adequate top-up beyond the per-head subsidy. Regardless of their size, all BMA schools receive THB 500,000 for discretionary spending on school improvements.

In some cases, small BMA schools may even have an advantage over larger schools if they are located in a Buddhist temple's compound. This is because temple schools can mobilize additional funds from the temple. However, as noted above for OBEC principals, this also means that the principal is subject to pressure from the temple to participate in temple events and recruit students to help.

BMA principals agree that, in general, BMA schools are equally well-equipped, especially with regard to information technology (IT) and multimedia equipment such as overhead projectors and digital TVs. For example, an extra-large BMA school has installed digital TVs in all 90 of its classrooms. Most BMA principals also expressed a strong interest in using IT and multimedia to drive improvements in students' learning, and some even think that students should have the tools and instruction to create robots. If BMA schools did not have adequate IT and multimedia resources, their principals would not have such ambitious expectations. This is even more impressive because, in general, BMA students come from working-class backgrounds, and most do not have IT equipment and access to the Internet at home.

In summary, unlike OBEC principals, BMA principals do not feel pressured to mobilize additional resources to fund their schools. Although BMA principals report that they have received additional funding from sources such as the parents' association, a temple, or the local community, since BMA schools have adequate funding, their principals do not consider fund-raising as part of their job. Consequently, most BMA principals do not find it necessary to seek allies in the education bureaucracy. As they get adequate funds for their school, they can focus on their instructional role.

## ***OBEC Principals' Political Leadership: A complex chain of command***

OBEC interviewees believe that they must devote time to political leadership, which means that they must engage with external stakeholders such as Ministry of Education and Education Service Area authorities. This study shows that OBEC principals operate at the end of a long, complex, and hierarchical chain of command. The decision-making process for OBEC schools begins in the OBEC in the Ministry of Education in Bangkok, and the ministry is notorious for its highly-centralized and top-down approach to decision-making. Once a decision is made by the OBEC in Bangkok, it then travels down to the Education Service Areas (ESAs). The ESA, which is staffed by the Ministry of Education, interprets policy and makes decisions based on requirements passed down from the OBEC. Due to the long chain of command between decision makers in Bangkok and the OBEC schools, their principals feel that they have little opportunity to exercise leadership.

In addition to the long chain of command, Ministry of Education authorities in Bangkok exercise control over every facet of school administration, including the budget, curricula, and human resources management. As noted previously, funds are allocated to schools based on student numbers, and must be spent exactly as dictated, line by line in the budget. This greatly limits principals' flexibility to allocate funds based on their schools' needs.

OBEC principals report that the policy directives from the Ministry of Education change frequently because the minister keeps changing. There have been 20 Ministers of Education since 2000 until present - an average of one every 12 months. This constant change in the minister creates a volatile environment that principals say impedes successful policy implementation as they have to introduce, implement, and continually change school policy because the policy from above keeps changing. These principals stressed that constantly changing policy wastes time and resources, and distracts principals' attention, which has considerable ramifications. For example, when a policy from the minister required "cutting down studying hours", the schools had to adjust their schedule accordingly. But then everything changed when a new minister took over, and the previous schedule had to be resumed. In some cases, policy has required schools to create special programs to teach English, moral development, or self-discipline, but no extra budget was allocated for these. Thus, to hold these special programs, principals must spend time raising the necessary funds. In some cases, the Ministry of Education requires reporting on the results of its new policies, which means that principals and teachers must take time away from their regular work to prepare these assessments. As the quotes show, the constant change of ministers and policy hinders principals' success in running their schools:

*The administrators who run the Education Service Area expect principals to follow every new Ministry of Education policy. There are so many policies. These require us to create new programs such as ones on Buddhism, producing the tambon's (district's) special product, and promoting public/private partnerships. If the school enrolls in all of these programs, we will not have time to do anything else. But if we do not enroll, the ESA will force us to.*

As noted above, often the new ministry policies do not come with any extra resources to implement them. This means that OBEC principals are caught between their schools' urgent needs, and pressures from the ESA to apply the ministry's constantly changing policies. OBEC principals must also devote time to "competing" for additional resources from the ESA. The extent to which principals are good at developing "political capital" determines whether or not they receive extra resources from the ESA, and how much they receive.

*The more resource dependent a school is, the more time the principal must devote to developing political capital.*

As previously noted, in Thailand, the Ministry of Education delegates legal authority to the Education Service Area to supervise and monitor schools. Therefore, the ESA is the main point of contact for principals, and they attend meetings with the ESA once or twice a month. According to this study, OBEC principals communicate with each other more frequently using LINE, the computer, tablet, and cell phone app. This study also shows that principals receive approximately 15 to 20 official letters per week from the ESA requiring them to follow some instruction, or sign and return some document. This paperwork takes up a great deal of principals' time.

In their interviews, principals said that they feel enormous pressure to establish and maintain good relations with the ESA because it allocates resources, recruits teachers, and monitors the schools. This is a "high stakes" relationship that many principals term "managing up". The intensity of communication upward with the ESA is demonstrated in the quote below.

*Each day, I spend a lot of time responding to orders and questions coming from the Education Service Area. There are four or five of these communications every day, and I have to spend half a day responding to them. In the afternoon, I walk around monitoring the classrooms. To be honest, too much of my time is spent answering letters and reviewing and completing documents. Working on documents is my number one priority, and my second is monitoring the classrooms.*

The time spent on developing political capital with the ESA is seen as “necessary” by OBEC principals. Since principals consider themselves subordinate to the ESA, they feel obliged to do whatever the ESA dictates. The principals are not just the managers of their schools, they are also Ministry of Education “civil servants” or “line managers”—a uniquely Thai role when compared to school principals in the USA and the United Kingdom. Thai principals feel that their subordinate relationship with the ministry limits their ability to be creative and innovative.<sup>30</sup>

OBEC principals overwhelmingly expressed frustration about having to follow strictly enforced rules, and having to lobby the ESA if they want their schools and their careers to be successful. These principals repeatedly stated that the success of their leadership, their teachers, and their students is stifled in all four key areas: management, academics, finance, and human resources. The quotes below express OBEC principals’ dissatisfaction with rigid rules and regulations:

*We want to have the freedom to think for ourselves, but we are stuck in an inflexible system. Hundreds of pages of rules and regulations control everything in our schools from the time we open, to the curricula and teaching methods, to how students wear their uniforms. Everything imaginable is dictated by some rule.*

*We are governed in such a way that if we do not follow the rules and regulations exactly, we will be punished.*

It is clear from the interviews in this study that policies that limit school autonomy need to be reconsidered. Principals clearly want greater autonomy in all realms: finance, human resources, and curricula. Discussions need to take place between leaders in the Ministry of Education and principals and teachers about how to give schools greater autonomy, and the ministry needs to develop and implement a detailed strategy for this as soon as possible.

## ***BMA Principals’ Political Leadership: A short chain of command***

Why is their instructional role so prominent when BMA interviewees discuss their work? Answering this question requires looking at the context of BMA schools, which have a short and simple chain of command that is led by the Director of the BMA’s Department of Education. Between the principals and the BMA’s Director is the District Director, who supervises and evaluates all the principals in the district. In each Department of Education district office there are five to seven staff who coordinate relations between the principals and the department. From the principals’ perspective, they report to both the District Director, who is their direct boss, and the BMA’s Department of Education, which provides policy, goals, and technical facilitation.

Most principals know what they can and cannot do in light of the regulations, and which goals they should meet. For example, all principals know that the BMA’s vision for every school is

30 Hallinger, P. (2018). “Thailand’s Challenge of Systemic Education Reform: Where are the Leaders with ‘The Right Stuff’?”. In Gerald Fry (Ed.), *Education in Thailand: An Old Elephant in Search of a New Mahout*. New York: Springer Publishing.

to make children “literate” and attain high-quality learning outcomes. They also know that the BMA aspires to deliver good special needs education, promote active, student-centered learning, and create bi-lingual (Thai and English) classrooms. BMA principals know, too, that they are accountable to the district office and need to engage in the district’s projects that are not curricula-related, such as narcotics prevention programs. Of course, principals have varying opinions about this, but at least they do not need to waste time trying to figure out what they are expected to do. The interviews conducted for this study found that, in general, the policies and vision of the BMA Department of Education are well regarded by the principals, and there is little tension and disagreement about policy. This alignment is demonstrated in the following quotes:

*When the Department of Education gives us policies to follow, we implement them. The policies they give us cause us little trouble, and most of them benefit the children.*

*Once I became principal, I could make decisions about what to emphasize, and in what direction the school should go. We have freedom to think for ourselves. But we must also align with the policies of the BMA Department of Education. Although we follow directions from above, we do not give up our own sense of direction.*

*The principal must actively seek out the policies set at the higher levels, and then implement them in the school, and lead the teachers in following them.*

In sum, due to shorter chain of command, BMA principals work in a more stable policy environment and a more effective communications structure than OBEC principals. The clarity of organizational goals, and to whom BMA principals are accountable, mean there is less pressure for BMA principals to build political capital with those in authority.



# Conclusions and Recommendations

The study summarized in this report shows how institutional constraints, and the Thai educational context inhibit principals' leadership, which often results in a low standard of education. Comparing OBEC and BMA principals' responses in this study sheds light on the contextual factors that determine how they behave and make decisions. While OBEC principals feel that they have limited space to act as instructional leaders due to constantly changing policies, inflexible rules and regulations, inadequate resources, and excessive paperwork, BMA principals feel that they can provide instruction leadership as they have adequate resources, and operate in a stable, but flexible system, with minimal administrative requirements. Both groups agree that principals in Thai government schools should not just “muddle through” to “survive”, but instead they should “thrive” so that they can achieve quality learning outcomes.

This study shows that OBEC principals are negatively impacted by the competing expectations of their roles and relationships. While their primary role should be to guide and incentivize teachers to deliver quality instruction, and pursue academic excellence, OBEC principals must spend time mobilizing additional resources and dealing with paperwork.

Importantly, to do their job well, OBEC and BMA principals agree they must be guided by a clear vision, goals, and directives, and have the authority to solve problems. They also need to collaborate closely with their communities in a flexible way, and make sure that the school's environment is harmonious, participatory, and conducive to teaching and learning. In addition, principals must have a good attitude, be persuasive and responsive, and adaptable.

Thai principals feel that they are caught in the middle between the competing demands of their instructional role, their managerial role, and their political role. Underlying all is pressure that holds them accountable. The managerial role has legal consequences if documents are not completed correctly and/or funds are misused, while the political role has direct and indirect consequences on the school's funding and the principal's career. A popular principal can raise funds for the school and mobilize other needed resources. Conversely, an unpopular principal creates hostile relations with the community, which can have negative repercussions for their school. Principals say that if they fail in their instructional role, the consequences are much less serious than if they fail in their managerial and political roles.

One of the main characteristics of “successful principals” is their ability to manage, reconcile, and negotiate among their different roles. While the managerial role of principals is ingrained into the DNA of their job, the Thai context illustrates that it is essential for principals to be skillful in their political role in order to be successful in their academic, human resources, and financial management roles. This means that principals must be good at managing their bosses as well as managing their subordinates. Principals also must be able to stay in the “good graces” of the Education Service Area in order to secure adequate funding and human resources. Although the words “politics” and “political role” have negative connotations in Thailand, building political capital is crucial for schools' success as well as principals' careers.



In small schools, limited resources in terms of finance and teachers aggravate inequalities in education and impede achieving good quality education. For example, in a small school, there are not enough teachers to teach each grade in a separate classroom. The goals of the students and the schools also differ between big and small schools. Big schools are found to be more academically driven and competitive than small schools. In most cases, students in small schools face the issue of poverty so they are more interested in attaining the technical skills they need to escape poverty, rather than in acquiring academic skills.

This study's analysis led to the following policy recommendations:

## ***Recommendation 1: Redirect principals' effort from "ends" (testing scores) as the measure of their school's achievement, to "means" (professional relationships with teachers and students).***

The code of conduct that governs principals' instructional roles should focus less on test scores and more on professional engagement with teachers and students to create an incentive and environment that nurture their collaboration. The notion that O-NET scores are a good way to measure a principal's performance must be systematically challenged. This approach not only contradicts the real meaning of instructional leadership, but this is also detrimental to the curricular needs of most schools. Moreover, the current official division of principals' roles into four management areas—financial, curricular/academic, human resources, and general management—is problematic. The idea of human resources management as separate from curricular management forces principals to think about their relationship with teachers separately from the schools' academic goals. Principals should be encouraged to think about these two areas of management simultaneously and, hence, to regard their engagement with teachers as critical to students achieving good learning outcomes. In addition, consider making it officially the role of principals to guide teachers rather than having the ESA Educational Supervisors perform this role, as the latter allows principals to avoid this important responsibility. Perhaps the Educational Supervisors could be accountable to the principals, and act as the principals' facilitator in instructing teachers. The ultimate purpose of these suggested measures is to change the conception of principals' instructional role as the "manager of a school's achievement outcomes" to that of "teacher of teachers".



## ***Recommendation 2: Streamline the chain of command and ensure greater clarity about regulations.***

It is imperative that OBEC principals are accountable to fewer authorities, and that they work within a clearer regulatory framework. This study's data on OBEC schools show that the long chain of command, and lack of clarity about accountability, is the root cause of OBEC principals spending excessive time on their political role outside the school, and on their managerial role reporting to many authorities. A concerted effort should be made by the Ministry of Education to make: the chain of command governing schools much shorter, the rules and regulations clear and consistent, and the authorities accessible and helpful. In addition, mechanisms should be established to ensure effective communication all the way down, and then back up the chain of command, and also reduce the administrative work required of OBEC principals. In short, the OBEC should be more proactive in preventing principals from spending their time on red tape and unnecessary administration. Ultimately, the power to make decisions that affects schools and principals should be geographically closer to the schools. Hence, this study advocates a more decentralized education system that gives principals much greater autonomy in making decisions so these are suited to the context of their school.

## ***Recommendation 3: Provide block grants for school maintenance and instructional leadership development***

The resource gap caused by the current funding formula (the per-head subsidy scheme) must be reformed. This is imperative for instructional leadership to thrive in the Thai education system because, currently, the majority of OBEC principals spend excessive time on fund-raising and networking outside the school so that they can bring in enough money to fill the school's funding gap. This includes funds to pay for electricity and maintaining the school's infrastructure. However, it is important to realize that many OBEC principals fund-raise not just to cover the school's operating and maintenance costs, but also to finance the principal's legacy such as a library, school gymnasium, or playing field. This emphasis on such fund-raising could be curbed if the code of conduct used to evaluate principals was revised to stress their instructional leadership. Also, the OBEC could reduce principals' need to raise funds by providing two separate block grants for small schools: one for school maintenance, and the other for developing the instructional role of principals. However, this study recognizes that resource allocation is a complex matter that cannot be solved by one or two ministerial actions. Instead, the chain of command should be simplified, management of the schools should be decentralized, and principals should be consulted in making these reforms.

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